

## Disabilities

### Defining Disabilities

**Disabilities is an umbrella term**, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.

Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives<sup>1</sup>.

#### Defining disabilities under the Alberta Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH):

- "You must have a severe handicap that is permanent and substantially limits your ability to earn a living. Your disability must be the main factor, not your age, lack of education or available jobs. There must not be training, rehabilitation or medical treatment that would materially improve your condition."
- Persons with **physical disabilities**, **developmental disabilities** and **mental illnesses** fall into the eligibility group for AISH<sup>2</sup>.

#### According to Alberta's *Persons with Developmental Disabilities Community Governance Act*:

- "Developmental disability" means a state of functioning that (i) began in childhood, and (ii) is characterized by a significant limitation, described in the regulations, in both intellectual capacity and adaptive skills.
- Significant limitation in adaptive skills is determined using the PDD Adaptive Skills Inventory<sup>3</sup>.

#### According to the Canadian Mental Health Association—Edmonton:

- "People who are mentally ill experience a substantial impairment of thought, mood, perception, orientation, or memory that impairs their judgment, behavior, capacity to recognize reality, and/or ability to meet the ordinary demands of life."<sup>4</sup>

### Disabilities in Alberta

12.5% of Albertans – 354,740 people – have disabilities. This includes congenital anomalies, psychological disabilities, and disabilities related to pain, mobility, and agility. The most prevalent disabilities are related to pain, mobility, and agility; all of these disability types are considered "invisible" (they may not be visible to others). Disabilities are most prevalent among Albertans over the age of 75.

Statistics Canada rates the severity of disabilities by frequency and intensity of limitations. 5.7% of Albertans experience mild disabilities, while 5.3% experience severe to very severe disabilities. Severe disabilities are more prevalent in females<sup>5</sup>.

### Income and Employment

In 2006, 51% of Albertans with disabilities were active in the labour force, compared to three out of four persons without disabilities. The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is 4% higher than the general population, at 10%. One in eight employees with disabilities, and one in four unemployed persons with disabilities, report experiencing discrimination in the workplace based on their disability<sup>7</sup>.

### Income Support

Approximately one-third of persons with disabilities receive some form of government benefit. However, Canada's investment in disability supports is below the US and Europe. While disability spending as a percentage of public social spending in Canada is 7%, disability spending in the US is 10% of public spending, and 11% in Europe<sup>7</sup>.

#### Alberta Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)<sup>2</sup>

The maximum AISH living allowance is \$1188 per month.

Health benefits while on AISH include:

- prescription drugs,
- dental
- optical
- essential diabetic supplies
- emergency ambulance services

#### Registered Disability Savings Plan

The Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP) helps Canadians with disabilities and their families save for the future. If you are a Canadian resident under age 60 and are eligible for the Disability Tax Credit (Disability Amount), you are eligible for an RDSP. Earnings accumulate tax-free, until you take money out of your RDSP. Parents or guardians may open an RDSP for a minor. With written permission from the holder, anyone can contribute to the RDSP<sup>8</sup>.



## Education

The Alberta School Act includes provisions for education supports to ensure that all children have access to a learning program that addresses their needs. These supports can address personal, technological and accessibility needs required for full participation in a learning environment.<sup>1</sup>

High school dropout rates reach nearly one-third for males with disabilities. However, a greater number of males with disabilities complete trades and college education than non-disabled males<sup>9</sup>.

Women with disabilities are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to completing university: 12.7% of females with disabilities complete university, compared to 19.9% of females without disabilities<sup>5</sup>.

## Mental Health Supports

The CMHA Edmonton promotes mental health and supports people affected by mental illness.

CMHA Edmonton organizes programs to support persons living with mental illness, runs suicide awareness, prevention and intervention courses, and organizes events to promote awareness of mental health issues in the community.

Programs include:

- Community Rehabilitation Outreach Program
- Family Support Program
- Challenge By Choice
- Housing Support
- Life Skills and Advocacy Programs
- Social Recreation and Life Skills Program for Children and Youth<sup>10</sup>

## Developmental Disabilities Supports

The Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program (Government of Alberta) funds, monitors and evaluates the provision of specific services for adult Albertans with developmental disabilities. These services supplement the support of family, friends and community members and help individuals to live as independently as possible in the community.

Six regional PDD boards work with individuals, their representatives and families, and service providers to deliver services throughout Alberta.

Services are provided to support individuals in their home, work, and social environments based on individual need. The PDD Program funds four types of services:

- **Community Living Supports** provides assistance to individuals in their home environment.
- **Employment Supports** train, educate and support individuals to gain and maintain paid employment.
- **Community Access Supports** promote community access and participation.
- **Specialized Community Supports** are generally short-term supports provided in unique circumstances<sup>3</sup>.

## Policy Making: Room for Improvement

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2010 report on disabilities in Canada, there are three major issues restricting employment and social supports for persons with disabilities:

- Federal and provincial governments are not streamlined to coordinate employment supports and benefits for persons with disabilities.
- Policy makers have focused on the system rather than the client, resulting in fragmented services and benefits that are difficult to navigate and access.
- Employment programs are not proactive, often resulting in long-term unemployment and long-term reliance on the benefit system<sup>6</sup>.

## Sources

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