

# Alberta Disabilities Forum

## Employment for Persons with Disabilities

### Background

Nearly half a million Albertans – one-sixth of the province’s population - have one or more disabilities. Many of these individuals have the potential to join the labour force, but employment barriers and insufficient supports prevent their participation. A large segment of Alberta’s population is undervalued and underutilized at a time when Alberta employers are desperate for qualified employees.

In 2001, a report to government by the Labour Force Planning Committee stressed the urgent need to supply more skilled workers to meet Alberta’s growth and prosperity through 2005 and beyond. The report stresses the importance of using “all talents available, including those of Aboriginal people, youth, older workers, persons with disabilities and immigrants.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, the Premier’s Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities released the *Alberta Disability Strategy*,<sup>2</sup> which reinforced the need to bring persons with disabilities into the mainstreams of employment and community as full citizens of the province. The Alberta government has accepted the *Strategy* as its direction for the future, creating the Office for Disability Issues in early 2004 to spearhead turning the *Strategy* into action.

The Labour Force Planning Committee offered three key strategies to meet the labour market demand of the future, the first of which is “to increase the skill and knowledge level of Albertans.” Alberta Human Resources and Employment has adopted the Committee’s recommended strategies and has taken some steps to try and fill the labour shortage. Most notable is the introduction of *Alberta Works*, an initiative to “help unemployed people find and keep jobs, help low-income Albertans cover their basic costs of living, and help employers meet their need for skilled workers.”<sup>3</sup> The Employment and Training Services component of *Alberta Works* promises to “assist adults to access the academic upgrading, language courses or job skills training they need to find and keep a job.” This is a worthy and much needed goal.

Persons with disabilities welcome any new venture that enhances their skills and knowledge to a level that will result in gainful employment. The Alberta Disabilities

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Alberta Labour Force Planning Committee; *Prepared for Growth: Building Alberta’s Labour Supply* (2001)

<sup>2</sup> The Premier’s Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities; *Alberta Disability Strategy* (2002)

<sup>3</sup> Government of Alberta, Human Resources and Employment; *Alberta Works: Your Guide* (2004)

Forum believes there are several key areas where government and employers should focus their efforts in order to maximize the labour potential of persons with disabilities.

## **Employment Issues for Persons with Disabilities**

### **Access and choice**

Due to the barriers that they face, persons with disabilities often find themselves unable to access education or employment supports. All provincially funded education, employment training and support programs should be open and affordable to persons with disabilities and should be tailored to people with disabilities reaching their full potential. The April 1, 2004 collapse of ACE for AISH into the Training on the Job (TOJ) program, and later this year the replacement of TOJ into the Workplace Training program, is a good first step in creating more universal programming that does not discriminate.

### **Flexibility**

Education and employment programs often do not accommodate the individual needs and special challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Issues like poor physical access, inflexible scheduling or no accommodation for personal support needs can be key roadblocks. The retention of the Disability Related Employment Supports program as an adjunct to the Workplace Training program is positive but more needs to be done. This includes decreasing delays experienced by individuals and agencies accessing the program. Streamlining the program and making it more community based would result in better responsiveness to the needs of Albertans with disabilities.

### **Geographic differences**

Access to work and educational opportunities in rural Alberta, on First Nations reserves and Metis settlements are limited. The cost to live in booming economic centres like Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray is high. These and other geographic factors affect the suitability of a work environment for any Albertan but are particularly difficult hurdles for a person with a disability to overcome. Training supports, expectations and work outcomes for persons with disabilities outside Alberta's major centres must be adjusted if they are to be fair and equitable.

### **Health benefits**

The loss of health benefits and other critical supports is a major concern and disincentive for many persons with disabilities wishing to make the transition to employment. Further, employers can experience health premium increases related to hiring a person with a disability. This can result in discriminatory hiring practices in order to reduce costs. As recommended in the *Alberta Disability Strategy*, services like health care, career counselling, education and training, transportation and other components must be integrated if employment is to be an attainable goal for many persons with disabilities. People with disabilities and employers would benefit if health related costs

covered through income support programs continue to be paid until benefits are gained through an employer.

### **Employer needs**

Perceived and real barriers in the workplace are often reasons why employers are unwilling to hire a person with a disability. Once on the job, both employers and persons with disabilities may encounter workplace attitudes or problems that they are not able to deal with. The result is a lost opportunity to fill a labour gap with someone who is otherwise qualified, capable and willing. In order to better serve employer needs, employment support services among community agencies should be strengthened. At the same time, disability awareness and support programs should be enhanced to meet current and future needs.

### **Community-based program delivery**

Experience and a 2000 research study by the Canadian West Foundation shows that non-profit community-based agencies have many service delivery advantages over other types of service providers.<sup>4</sup> Government does outsource some of its program delivery but strict funding criteria, narrow client eligibility rules and administrative bureaucracy often combine to smother agencies' advantageous traits. Non-profit organizations have proven they can be much more flexible, innovative and responsive to their clients and communities than government. However, they need some ability to adjust programs and services to meet changing circumstances in order to do so.

## **Solutions to resolve issues**

To resolve outstanding education and employment issues facing persons with disabilities, the Alberta Disabilities Forum makes the following recommendations to government. These solutions are not listed in order of importance.

1. Involve non-profit, community-based organizations in the development of criteria and procedures, setting of standards, definition of successful outcomes, and other key factors before introducing new or expanded employment programs.
2. For a person with a newly acquired disability, include vocational training and career counselling at an early stage in the process of their rehabilitation and reintegration into the community.
3. Link educational activity to vocational and career planning as soon as possible.
4. Use more young people with disabilities as role models for others who require encouragement to pursue educational and employment opportunities.
5. Allow training programs to occur for fewer hours per week over a more extended period of time.

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<sup>4</sup> Canada West Foundation; *Building Better Partnerships: Improving Relations Between Governments and Non-Profits*, Alternative Service Delivery Project Research Bulletin (2000)

6. Offer tuition free grants to help persons with disabilities offset higher education costs resulting from disability and more limited opportunity for summer earnings.
7. Provide adequate supports to meet basic needs. This ranges from an appropriate level of income support to transportation subsidies. The *Alberta Disability Strategy, the Report from the MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs*<sup>5</sup> and the Alberta Disabilities Forum's November, 2003 *Making AISH Better*<sup>6</sup> policy paper sets out specific recommendations regarding changes that should be made in this area.
8. When appropriate, recognize the attainment of part-time work as a successful outcome.
9. Increase funding support for on-the-job coaching of both workers and employers.
10. Coordinate employment support services among community agencies to assist employers.
11. Introduce a proactive, formal sensitivity and awareness training program for employers that communicate accurate messages about the ability of persons with disabilities to do the work and to "fit in" to various work environments.
12. Provide a tax benefit to employers who make physical adjustments in the workplace in order to hire persons with disabilities.
13. Continue to work with federal and provincial counterparts to ensure that Aboriginal people with disabilities living on reserve have access to benefits and opportunities comparable to those of other Albertans.

The Alberta Disabilities Forum Employment working group believes we can aim higher in supporting persons with disabilities in their efforts to enter the labour market. Persons with disabilities continue to encounter employment barriers and are not seen as a viable source to meet labour demands. Improved career and employment supports for persons with disabilities would contribute to the Alberta government's efforts to fill the major labour gaps, reduce pressure on government income support programs and would result in more independence and self-sufficiency. The Alberta Government plays a critical role in supporting people with disabilities in their career aspirations and reducing impediments these Albertans face. By implementing these recommendations to provide comprehensive training and improve education and other disability supports, people with disabilities will be able to achieve their employment potential.

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<sup>5</sup> Government of Alberta, MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs; *Low-Income Programs Review* (2001)

<sup>6</sup> Alberta Disabilities Forum; *Making AISH Better* (2003)