



*A Human Resource  
Crisis in the Disability  
Services Field*

**The Alberta Council of Disability Services  
(Formerly known as AARC)  
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# A Human Resource Crisis in the Disability Services Field

## INTRODUCTION

A wide array of community based services are delivered in support of Alberta's most vulnerable, developmentally disabled citizens. These services and personal supports are provided by competent organizations, utilizing committed and well trained staff. It has been estimated that over 15,000 disabled adults and children are supported by about 17,000 part-time to full-time individuals who work for community organizations and service providers. (Source: PDD and AARC – Workforce 2010)

Individuals who receive services through community agencies range from adults and children who have mild to moderate developmental disabilities, to an increasing number of individuals with more significant needs including multiple physical, medical, and intellectual limitations.

The types of support services that are provided by community agency staff range from job placement and training for disabled adults seeking jobs through regular employment; to 24 hour residential care and supervision for individuals who have more complex needs. For many disabled adults and children, access to agency services and community staffing provides them with greater opportunities for meaningful, self-directed lives.

The disability services field offers human resource development and skilled employment opportunities across the province of Alberta. Service providers and their staff are very valuable resources to families and disabled individuals. These organizations and their employees have also proven to be critical assets to the Government of Alberta, and they are strong contributors to the economic well-being and added value within a multitude of Alberta communities.

However, in spite of these successes, **a human resource crisis is developing in the disability services field. Community agencies which support disabled Albertans find it extremely difficult to hire and retain staff.** The reason is that funding for wages is too low. Similarly, wages for community staff are significantly lower than the wages paid for similar staffing positions in government. In spite of the efforts of government to provide wage increases in the past, the actual gap between community and government wage rates continues to expand.

This inequity is evidenced by the fact that during 2005, employee turnover in government positions was about 12.8% while community turnover rates for the same period exceeded 40.4% (Staff Turnover in PDD Services - 2005 Report). Inadequate wages are negatively impacting community workers, community service providers, families, and most importantly developmentally disabled children and adults. The most significant impacts relate to the increased risks that are uniquely being faced by each of these groups.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

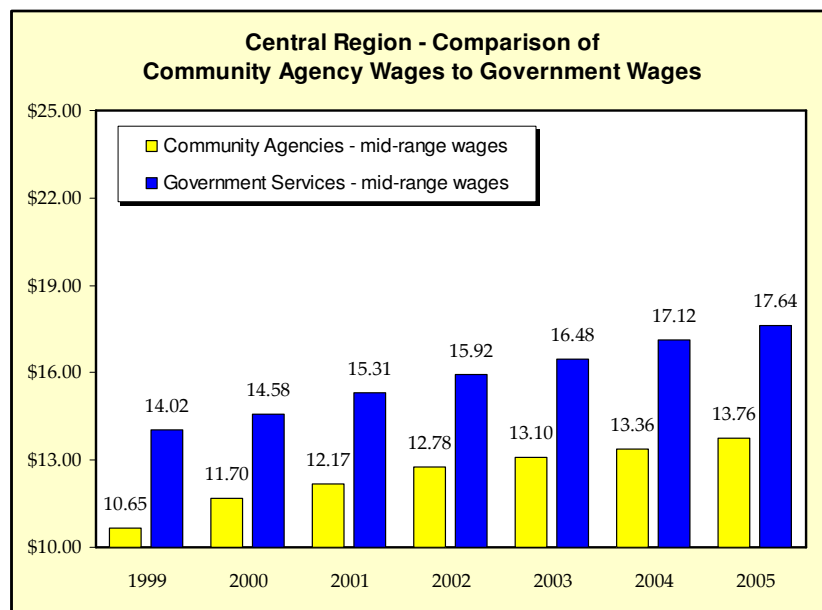
### 1. What quality assurance exists for the care and services that are currently being provided to persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta?

- The majority of community service provider staff are required to obtain comprehensive training which includes, but is not limited to Abuse Prevention and Response, Preventing and Responding to Problematic Behaviour, Medications Administration, Basic Skills Training and Certification, Suicide Intervention, Understanding and Responding to Seizure Disorders, Person Centered Planning, First Aid and CPR.

- Unlike foster care and extended care for seniors, service delivery and quality of care within the disability services sector has never been a political embarrassment to Government. However, this could change in the future as the current human resource crisis worsens.
- All service providers who work with developmentally disabled individuals must comply with a comprehensive set of government approved standards that are regularly monitored and updated to insure both high quality services and high quality service providers. These standards have been recognized by a Premier's Award for Excellence.
- Regular satisfaction surveys indicate very high family and disabled adult satisfaction with the services that are delivered by community service providers and their employees.

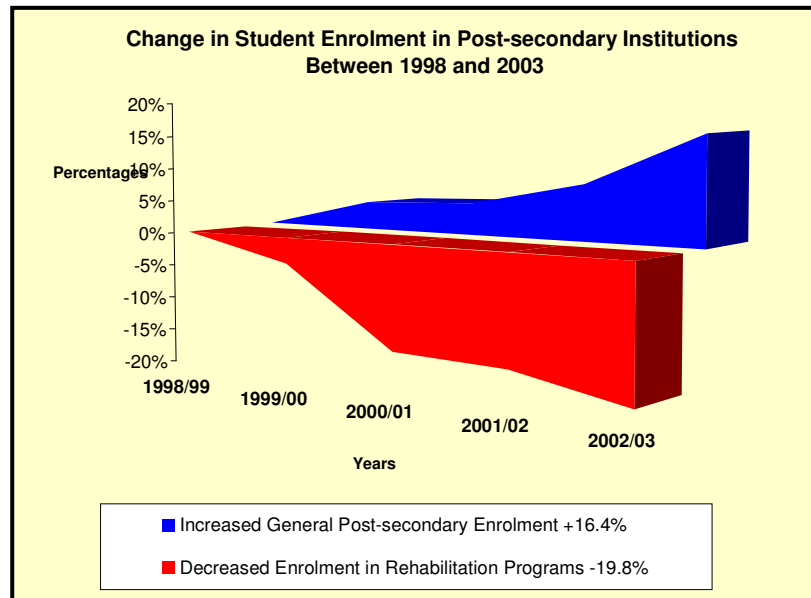
**2. How are inadequate community wage rates funded by government impacting the majority of workers?**

- An increasing number of human service workers who have post secondary training are moving out of the field into jobs that offer higher wages and more benefits.
- An alarming number of workers who have been trained on the job and have gained valuable work experience, are also moving out of the disability services field into jobs in unrelated sectors that pay higher wages.
- Employees who remain, must often work additional jobs in excess of 50 hours per week to earn enough income to support themselves and meet the basic needs of their families. This reality significantly impacts the quality of work and the quality of life, of an increasing number of over-extended and over-stressed employees.
- Employees are demoralized and feel devalued by the inadequate wages they receive and the lack of sufficient wage increases for the important services they provide.
- Human services workers are further disillusioned, they live in a financially successful province and work with our most vulnerable citizens, but they feel that their skills and abilities are not being valued or recognized.



- Between 1998 and 2003, general enrollment in post secondary institutions across Alberta has increased by 16% while at the same time enrolment in rehabilitation programs has decreased by 20%.

- Inadequate wages is seen as the #1 reason why people choose not to pursue an education or career within the rehabilitation field. Adequate compensation is needed to attract and retain workers. (Workforce 2010)



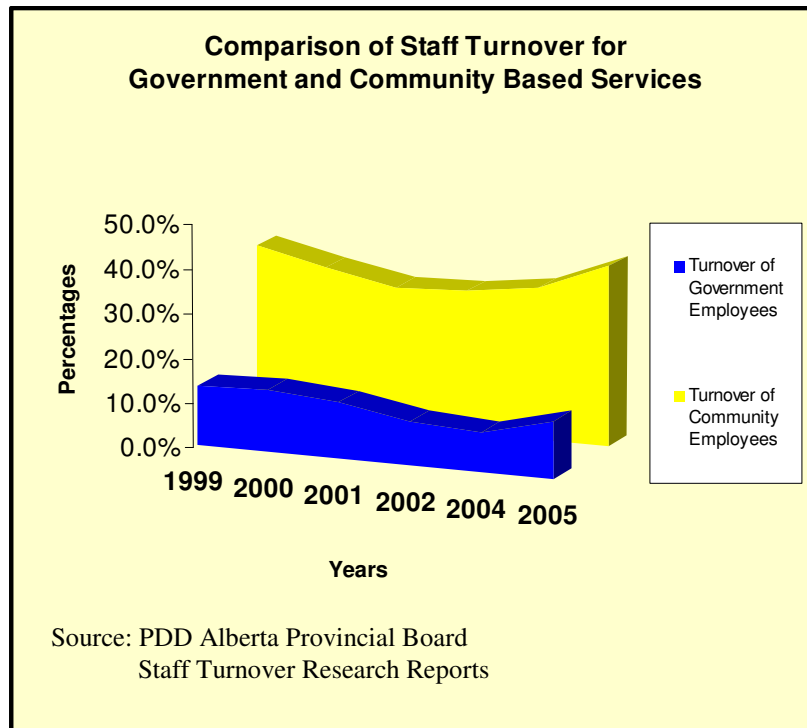
- In addition to lower base wage rates, community staff receive no shift differential, often work split shifts, receive fewer benefits, and are paid significantly lower overnight wages than their government employed counterparts.

### 3. How are inadequate community wages impacting disabled individuals and their families?

- Families are alarmed that they are regularly losing skilled and qualified staff due to low wages and better employment opportunities outside of the disability field.
- Developmentally disabled individuals achieve higher levels of skill development, self-determination, and increased quality of life when there is consistency in their staff supports. This however, is not possible with constantly changing staff.
- Labour shortages and the inability to find replacement staff to work with disabled individuals, results in less community inclusion, increased isolation, and decreased quality of life.
- Skilled and qualified staff are required to carry out complex programs in support of individuals with developmental disabilities. The increasing need to hire unskilled and frequently rotating staff diminishes pro-program effectiveness and increases risks to all involved, which again is a disservice to the individual.
- Behavioural issues on the part of some individuals receiving support services, actually increase in the face of high staff turnover and the use of unskilled replacements.
- As a result of staff turnover, disabled individuals are being forced to subject themselves to allowing a revolving stream of strangers respond to the individual's most intimate areas of physical care which negatively impacts their dignity.
- Insufficient remuneration makes it very difficult for families to find short term relief or respite care for their disabled family member, and this increases stress within the home.

**4. How is inadequate community wage funding impacting organizations which provide services to developmentally disabled individuals?**

- Employee satisfaction is rapidly declining. An employee satisfaction survey of over 500 community staff recently reported that employee satisfaction around wages has fallen 22% in the past two years.
- Employee retention is falling and the extraordinary rate of turnover is unacceptable. The provincial average turn-over rate during 2005 was 40.4%. However, in one region the annual turnover rate exceeded 70% for direct service workers. This is compared to the turnover rate for similar positions in government at 12.8% for 2005.



- As previously reported, there are 17,000 individuals who work in disability services. With an average turn-over rate of 40.4%, Alberta service providers are having to recruit over 6,800 individuals to fill reoccurring staff vacancies each year. A total of 20,400 new recruits will be needed over the next three years, just to maintain the status quo.
- By the year 2010 the number of adults receiving services will increase by 8% while the projected number of children receiving services will increase by 8.2%. In order to meet this increased consumer base, a further 2,000 additional new staff positions will have to be created and filled. (Workforce 2010)
- Alberta Human Resources and Employment confirms that there are significant costs incurred by Alberta employers every time they replace a lost employee. These costs relate to recruitment, both formal and on-the-job training, increased staff supervision, and lost efficiencies within the organization.
- Past agency investments in staff training and skill development are being lost with every individual employee who leaves the field because of the wage issue.

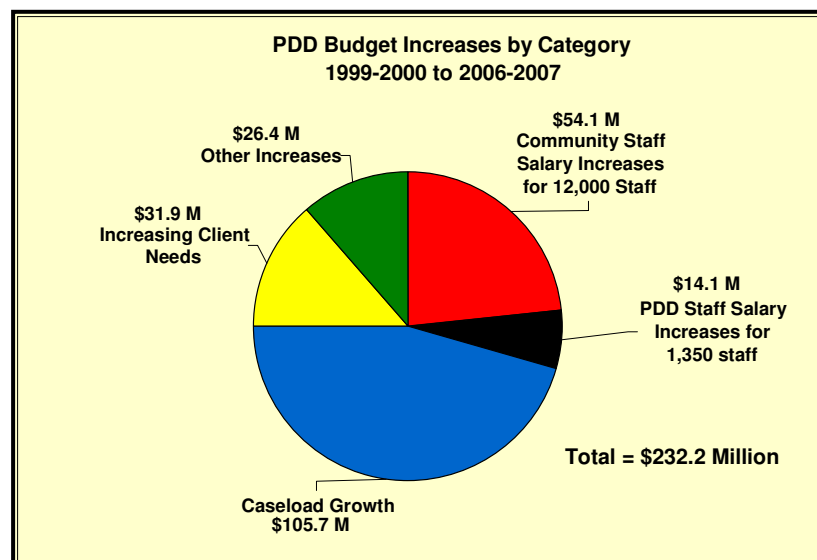
- The added financial burden of endless recruitment and staff training is placing a significant strain on community service providers. On an increasing basis, newly trained staff members are the first to leave the field, thus compounding the problem.
- The inability to deliver all contracted services to individuals, the implications of frequent staff turnover, and the extended timelines in training replacement staff are all increasing the risk and exposure of liability to both service providers and government funders.

**5. What additional pressures and impacts are going to be experienced within the disability service field in the future?**

- Families and individuals are becoming more vocal, actively advocating for better standards, better services, and increased personal supports; all of which will translate to more frontline jobs.
- The physical, medical, and developmental needs of disabled individuals are increasing in complexity which will require a far more skilled and better trained work force in the future.
- If staff cannot be attracted to work in community based services, individuals with disabilities could be forced to live in larger congregate settings with lower staff ratios. This would increase risk and decrease quality of life.
- Colleges and other post secondary schools will continue to reduce or eliminate rehabilitation education programs due to a lack of interest and demand of the part of potential students.
- There is a potential threat of unionization across the disability services field which cannot be ignored. This would have a significant financial impact on government and service providers as wage and benefit parity becomes the major catalyst for unionization.
- The potential threat of unionization would also significantly impact families and individuals with disabilities through unexpected work stoppages and labour unrest.

**6. Over the past seven years, the Provincial PDD Board has received an 84% increase in funding from \$277 million to over \$509 million for adult services. Why has this injection of new funds failed to resolve the wage issue?**

- While provincial funding to PDD Boards has increased 84% over the past seven years, during the same time community wages have only increased 23% – 30% depending on the region of the province. Employees in some regions, such as Calgary, have only received a 3% to 5% wage increase over the past 4 years.



- The majority of past PDD funding increases have gone to respond to the uptake of new individuals coming into services, the increased needs of some individuals who are already in service, and government employee wage increases. After these allocations, there was little left to pass on in the way of wage increases for community based employees.
- At the end of the last fiscal period, the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports announced a 3% increase in community wages for the 2005 – 2006 budget period. At the same time however, government staff wage rates for similar positions were also increased by similar percentages over the same period. Thus, the wage gap will actually grow due to the higher base wages currently being paid to government staff.
- The validity of the community wage issue has long been recognized by the provincial government as supported by past ministers.

Examples of government recognition are found in the Honourable Roy Brassard's "Claiming My Future" and the Honourable Gene Zwozdesky's "Building Better Bridges" reports.

**7. Are the employment issues in the Disability Services Field impacted by the general employment environment that exists in Alberta?**

- Agencies are increasingly competing with employers in the hospitality and retail service sectors for new employees. The gap in entry level wages is closing between unskilled positions in the service sector and skilled positions within the disability services field.
- The general lack of "moderately" skilled workers in many industries will continue to impact the province in the future. The disability services field is no exception.
- Alberta's economic boom and declining unemployment rates have decreased the ability of community service providers to recruit replacement workers which is a hidden cost associated with the province's prosperity.
- A major investment in wage levels, recruitment, and skill development is needed in the human service field to compete with other sectors and insure that the critical needs of disabled children and adults are being addressed.

**8. Are there any health and safety issues that arise through this labour market crisis?**

- New and younger employees lack the experience to recognize all workplace hazards in the same way as seasoned employees, and injuries to employees are at record highs.
- As a result of the higher frequency of workplace accidents, WCB rates have increased by 257% for the "rehabilitation sector" since 2000.
- Individuals with disabilities are also placed at risk due to inexperienced caregivers. These risks relate to both safety issues in the community and the new employee's inability to adequately respond to behaviour and individual health emergencies.

**CONCLUSION**

There is a significant human resource crisis facing the disability services field. Community organizations which provide direct supports to disabled Albertans are finding it extremely difficult to hire and retain staff, primarily because wages are too low.

The actual employee turnover rate for community agencies was a record high of 40.4% for 2005 and the situation is worsening. If these rates remain constant, over the next three years 20,400 new employees will be needed just to address staff turnover.

This is a formidable, if not impossible, challenge which has negative implications for government funders, service providers and families with disabled children and adults.

If the wage issue is not addressed, the field will witness an increase in risk and injury for both those receiving and giving service. At the same time there will be a decrease both in quality of care and quality of life of individuals with disabilities.

**No matter who you are, you can help make a difference.** Please write a letter expressing your concerns to your MLA, the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, the Minister of Alberta Children Services, or the Premier of the Province of Alberta and ask them to immediately review and address this very serious issue.

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**The Alberta Council of Disability Services**  
**Bay 19, 3220 – 5 Avenue NE**  
**Calgary, Alberta, T2A 5N1**  
**(403) 250-9495**