

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of
Social Workers

Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

Written Submission

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Presented to: Honourable Susan Sullivan

Minister Responsible for the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)

The NLASW is the professional association and regulatory body for over 1300 professional social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). The mandate of the NLASW is to ensure excellence in social work. As a profession, social work is committed to improving the well-being of individuals, families and communities through intervention and counselling, collaboration, research, health promotion, policy and program development, and community capacity building.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the profession of social work is diverse with social workers practicing in various settings. Social workers practice within hospitals, community care, seniors' homes, adult and youth corrections, child welfare, addictions, mental health, community based centres, government departments and universities. Social workers are also self-employed in private practice and consulting businesses.

In the pursuit of excellence in social work, the NLASW is actively engaged in social policy analysis. In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations into the development of a provincial strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Background

On March 30, 2007, Canada signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Canada ratified this convention on March 11, 2010. This was an historical moment in Canada. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities sets forth a human rights framework for promoting inclusion among all individuals living with a disability and in building a just society. It is therefore timely that NL is developing a provincial strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The word disability covers the physical, cognitive, and mental aspects of a person's health, and can range from mild to severe. The disability rate in this province increased from 12.3% in 2001 to 14.9% in 2006, with the number of individuals requiring help with daily activities increasing by 3650 (Statistics Canada 2007). A contributing factor to the rising disability rate is the aging population; however, this is not the only factor. Provincial statistics from 2001 showed that approximately 36% of individuals in NL over the age of 65 were living with a disability (Aging and Seniors Division, 2007). According to the discussion paper released by the NL Disability Office, 75,000 people in NL have a least one disability.

Government made a significant commitment to supporting individuals living with a disability in 2009 with the establishment of the Disability Policy Office. It is anticipated that the implementation of a provincial strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities will further this commitment and work to ensure that individuals living with a disability receive optimal services through enhanced legislation and programs at the system and community level.

Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities: A Social Work Perspective

Social workers commend government on the development of a strategy to remove barriers for people with disabilities in this province and to promote inclusion. The discussion paper outlines several core values of the consultations which include equal access, respect, equity, choice, self-determination, autonomy, and privacy. These are the same values that need to shape the development and implementation of a provincial strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities; along with the principles of flexibility, community as expert, dignity, and collaboration. These values and principles are consistent with the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) as outlined in the following excerpts:

- *Social workers respect the unique worth and inherent dignity of all people and uphold human rights;*

- *Social workers uphold each person's right to self-determination, consistent with that person's capacity and with the rights of others;*
- *Social workers respect the client's right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent.*
- *Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits.*
- *Social workers promote individual development and pursuit of individual goals, as well as the development of a just society.*

It is acknowledged that the provincial government is in the process of developing and implementing a number of provincial strategies, in addition to the strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities (i.e., poverty reduction strategy, long-term care and community support services strategy, and the strategy for early childhood learning). Because disabilities impact individuals and families across the lifespan, it is important that each of these strategies, and other on-going initiatives, are linked and intersect with each other to ensure that policies, programs, and services are developed and/or enhanced to promote optimal health and well-being for individuals living with a disability.

On-going community involvement is also important in fostering a province where all individuals feel included and supported. Social workers recognize and acknowledge the on-going work of community, government departments and program areas, and health authorities in meeting the needs of individuals living with a disability. Within the past number of years, there have been a number of initiatives such as the poverty reduction strategy, NAVNET (2009), and innovative community programming through organizations such as Stella Burry Community Services that have had a positive impact on persons living with a disability. It is anticipated that the strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities will support existing services to ensure adequate financial and staffing compliments, and provide opportunities for additional initiatives and partnerships that will enhance quality of life for individuals living with a disability.

In consultation with social workers who work with persons with disabilities, several areas were identified that need to be considered in moving this strategy forward. These areas include: the importance of terminology and meaning, the impact of poverty reduction strategies, the need for supports in education, the significance of employment initiatives, the need for enhanced resources and supports, the importance of system navigation, the value of public awareness, and the importance of a qualitative framework for measuring success.

Issues and Recommendations

Terminology and Meaning

Inclusion and social exclusion are two very important concepts that need to be discussed and highlighted in the strategy. Raphael (2004) identifies social exclusion as a social determination of health, and is grounded in the realities of people's everyday lives. According to Galabuzi, as cited in Raphael (2004), "poor social and economic conditions and inequalities in access to resources and services affect an individual's or group's health and well-being" (p. 235). Therefore, making the connection between inclusion and improved health outcomes within this strategy is important.

Inclusion is a broad concept and may not mean the same thing to all people. While two individuals may be living with the same disability, their needs may be completely different. Choice and flexibility, essential values/principles of the provincial strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, need to be embedded within in the development of policies, programs, and services designed to meet the needs of individuals living with a disability. This is important in terms of client-centred care.

Poverty Reduction Strategies

According to the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (2010), individuals living with a disability in Canada are more than two times likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. Contributing to this poverty rate, as pointed out by Raphael (2007), is that

individuals living with a disability are less likely to be involved in the paid workforce. Where employment opportunities are available, individuals living with a disability often earn less.

The NLASW commends government on initiatives and funding priorities announced in the 2010 provincial budget that impacted on the lives of individuals living with a disability, specifically in the area of poverty reduction. The NLASW recommends that government continue to maintain poverty reduction as a key strategic direction and to develop and evaluate policies and programs for individuals living with a disability through a poverty lens. This is important if we are to address system gaps and enhance services for individuals living with disabilities in this province.

Education

Investments in education programs to meet the needs of individuals living with a disability across the lifespan are needed. From primary school to post secondary education, access to education is a fundamental right.

While it is recognized that the Department of Education has adopted an inclusive lens to the delivery of primary/elementary and high school education, it is important that children and youth have the opportunity to access the education system in a way that best meets their needs. Flexibility based on individual need should be the standard. The need for more teacher assistants within the classroom to assist with academic programming is also important.

The Public Health Agency of Canada identifies education and literacy as a determinant of health, and highlights the relationship between low literacy levels and unemployment and poverty. Therefore, there needs to be more adult basic education alternatives for people living with a disability.

One of the best predictors of employment stability is the level of education attained. Increasing opportunities for persons with disabilities to access post secondary education programs should be an integral focus of this strategy. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) addresses education in Article 24 of the convention. Specifically, the Convention outlines that:

“Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.”

A key word in the above citation is individualized. Supportive education models are necessary for creating opportunities for learning for persons living with a disability. There needs to be flexibility built into post secondary education programs to increase successful program completion that meets a person’s individual needs (e.g., longer time frames to complete programs). This need could be identified through individual assessments. Another supportive factor is financial supports and further examination is warranted (e.g., supportive Canada Student Loan policies).

Employment

Recruitment and retention initiatives to engage persons with disabilities in the workforce are needed. These would include:

- policies and funding programs that are transparent and easy to navigate (e.g., moving beyond the EI eligible criteria);
- funding to ensure that individuals have their care needs addressed within the workplace (i.e., workplace accommodations);
- tapping into the labour force and the skills that are needed to create more opportunities for people and encouraging employer and industry participation;
- flexibility in policies to allow individuals with disabilities to maintain their provincial drug card until replacement coverage is secured through their employer; and
- ensuring that all individuals engaged in the workplace receive just and equitable pay.

For individuals who are not engaged in paid employment and have to rely on income assistance, it is important that government continue to evaluate social assistance programs to ensure that individuals receive financial supports that move them out of poverty. Social workers also advocate for policies and programs that allow for gradual, part-time participation in the labour market without lost benefits or services. Part of building inclusive communities is providing people with the opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the workforce in a way that meets their needs. This requires a shift in looking at someone's ability, rather than their disability, and revamping how we view successful employment.

Resources and Supports

The development and effective implementation of a strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities will require comprehensive investments in financial and human resources and supports. Housing, transportation, as well as health care and transitions are three areas where investments are necessary. This submission will briefly touch on these areas.

Housing

While connected to the poverty reduction strategy, housing for individuals living with a disability requires additional resources and investments. The NLASW applauds recent announcements for affordable housing units, and it is recommended that these investments continue. Social workers recommend that individuals have access to safe, affordable, and high quality housing. This needs to be the industry standard, particularly within the public system. Given our aging population and the potential need for more accessible housing, private industry may also need to develop similar standards.

The lack of accessible and available housing for individuals with complex needs is one gap that has been identified by social workers. There is a need for housing

options for individuals with high risk behaviors. It is recommended that this issue be addressed within the strategy.

Transportation

Social workers recognize the need for enhanced transportation services; both in urban and rural settings. Industry partners, government and community need to collaborate in building inclusive policies and services (in addition to Wheelway and Metrobus) to ensure that transportation does not remain a barrier for individuals living with a disability in accessing education, health care, recreation, and community supports, or from participating fully in their communities. This may also include funding programs that allow for private vehicle adaptations.

Health Care & Transitions

One of the major issues pertaining to health care is home care. Having access to home support is often necessary for individuals living with a disability to participate in their communities and to access services; and is important in terms of quality of life. This issue also was addressed in the NLASW written submission for the long-term care and community support services strategy. The community applauded government's decision to increase the rate of pay for individuals providing home care services in the 2009 provincial budget. However, because the ceiling threshold on the amount of funding available to those needing this service did not increase, individuals applying for home care today, may not receive the same number of hours as they would have previously. It is recommended that this ceiling threshold be increased. It is also recommended that those providing this service have the appropriate education and training to provide quality care and support.

Many individuals living with a disability require the use of specialized equipment, and the technology continues to improve and advance. It is recommended that individuals have access to necessary equipment that is high quality and based on best practice. Accessibility to specialized equipment is also important in the delivery of

essential health services as barriers do exist (i.e., women not being able to have regular pap tests due to lack of accessible beds). It is important that policies, programs and services in the delivery of health care services be developed and continuously evaluated through a “disability lens.”

Transitions that impact on a person’s overall health (mental, social and physical) can be a stressful time for individuals living with a disability and their families (e.g., clients moving from the Janeway to acute care; an adult with a disability turning 65, a young adult moving from home to a long term care facility, etc). A review of program guidelines is necessary to ensure an integrated, continuum of services that is flexible and client centred. It may also be necessary to re-examine thresholds for funding to ensure that individual client needs are met.

Navigating Complexity

Navigating through complex federal and provincial programs and services can be a daunting experience for many individuals living with a disability. There is a need for coordination between all government departments and community to ensure that clients have access to the services and programs to meet their individual needs, at the right time and in the right place. It is also important for this strategy to examine and address the barriers and gaps that exist in programs and policies that impact on quality care and support for persons living with a disability.

The integration of system navigators in areas of health care play a key role in the model of care for individuals with complex needs and could be broadened to include all individuals living with a disability (across the lifespan). NAVNET (2009) is a good example. NAVNET is comprised of government departments and community partners that work together to “address system wide gaps and barriers and to coordinate the services and support that those with „multiple and complex“ needs require.”

It is recognized that there are numerous resources and community supports available to individuals living with a disability and their families. Yet, there is no centralized listing of these services. A resource directory developed and updated by the Disability Policy Office may also be appropriate.

Public Awareness

Building socially inclusive communities needs to be a priority of this strategy. This includes heightened public awareness of the contribution that persons with disabilities make in our communities, schools, workplaces. It is important that we begin working with children at an early age to challenge and change attitudinal barriers. Programs such as “I Can To” offered by Easter Seals should be integrated within the primary and elementary school setting.

Measuring Success

As with any strategy, it is crucial that an evaluation component be attached to the strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. An evaluation serves several purposes. These include a) fiscal and program accountability, b) partnership building, and c) community awareness.

The evaluation for this strategy should measure not only quantitative data, but also qualitative success. One of the guiding questions for the evaluation should include: “How has the quality of life for individuals living with a disability improved as a result of this strategy”? Qualitative data can be collected to measure success and improvements across all of the social determinants of health that have been outlined by Raphael (2004). These social determinants of health include education, employment and working conditions, social exclusion, housing, and employment security to name a few. This evaluation needs to happen on a regular basis and at specified intervals, to ensure that policies, programs and services are continuing to meet the needs of individuals. Community consultation is also a crucial part of this evaluation.

Conclusion

The NLASW commends government on the commitment to develop and implement a strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Newfoundland and Labrador. While coordinated through the Disability Policy Office, this strategy needs to support and intersect with other provincial strategies that impact on persons living with a disability (i.e., poverty reduction strategy, strategy for early childhood learning, long-term care and community support services strategy, provincial wellness plan, etc). It is imperative that programs and services for individuals living with a disability are adequately resourced to achieve equity, dignity, and inclusion for all persons. On-going collaboration with the Federal government is also important in informing and enhancing social programs that impact on the lives of persons with disabilities.

As a profession, social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development in meeting the needs of individuals living with a disability and in moving this strategy forward.

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