

Canadian Association for Community Living Position Statement on Employment June 2010

Position Statement

Working-age adults with intellectual disabilities, regardless of perceived level of disability, must have choice and opportunity to earn a living through paid employment in the open labour market. For employment opportunities to be meaningful working-age adults with intellectual disabilities require appropriate employment-related supports and job accommodation as needed. Employment rates and compensation must be commensurate with that of people without disabilities.

Policy Context

The current employment picture for people with intellectual disabilities is not something Canadians can be proud of. Despite investment and programmatic efforts, the employment rate for Canadians with intellectual disabilities is only one-third of the employment rate of people without a disability (25.5% compared to 75.5%). For those who are working they are earning less than half of those without a disability.

Discussion

Employment is not simply a means to a financial end. Through work we meet new people and establish new friendships, increase feelings of self worth, enable greater independence, become part of community and contribute to that community. Perhaps more importantly it affects how other people and society in general view us — attributing feelings of value, contribution, ability and capacity.

We know from both research and personal stories that people with intellectual disabilities can and want to work. Yet after decades of concentrated efforts on increasing the employment of adults with intellectual disabilities, less than one-in-five are employed more than 49 weeks of the year – either full or part time. Without concentrated effort this reality will not change.

Currently, youth with intellectual disabilities lack the education and training of their peers without disabilities and are ill-prepared to transition from school to employment. By and large their job prospects are slim and our systems are providing policy and program responses that only perpetuate isolation and reinforce outdated modes of employment. Even labour market measures designed to support inclusion in the workforce are creating layers of disadvantage and multiple barriers to employment. Negative employer attitudes and misperceptions continue to be a challenge. A strategic initiative targeting youth with intellectual disabilities in transition could have transformative impact on the future employment status of working-age adults with intellectual disabilities.

At the individual level, exclusion from the labour market negatively impacts both economic security and belonging. Research demonstrates that when people have access to decent education and training, access to employment supports and access to transportation – the result is meaningful and sustained employment. At the national level exclusion from the labour market is costly to all of us. The International Labour Organization has estimated that the annual loss of global GDP due to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the labour market is over US\$1 trillion. Governments face

lost tax revenue and increased expenditures providing social assistance to people who can – and want – to work. Labour market exclusion is bad for the economy.

A new approach to employment and improved public attitudes is needed. Increased attention must be given to the provision of needed on the job supports – in particular the need for long-term ongoing support - as well as a consideration of the impact of employment on the other aspects of the individual's life (e.g. eligibility for health care coverage, housing subsidies, social assistance clawbacks, etc).

The harsh reality in this country is that a very large percentage of people with intellectual disabilities remain reliant on provincial / territorial income support systems - systems that were never designed nor intended to be used as a primary or enduring source of income. Paradoxically, even at these minimal levels, for many, a transition to paid employment often results in a financial loss. We must be prepared to introduce significant changes to social assistance programs that would allow people to maintain their benefits, combined with a comprehensive program of ongoing disability supports for employment.

Lastly, while once playing a valuable and important role in the lives of people with disabilities, sheltered workshops and segregated employment for people with disabilities have now outlived their usefulness. They are an unnecessary violation of individual rights and a drain on resources which force people into environments that severely limit their ability to choose real, dignified and meaningful employment opportunities. Sheltered workshops segregate people because of disability, and adversely affect the opportunities and status of people because of disability. Research demonstrates that supported employment provides increased income, expanded social relationships, and heightened control of decisions and activities, and adaptive skills.

CACL's Call to Action

The federal government, in partnership with Provincial/Territorial governments, should:

1. Establish a new Federally funded strategic initiative that specifically targets youth with intellectual disabilities in transition from school to employment.
2. Establish specific targets for Canadians with disabilities, inclusive of people with intellectual disabilities in Labor Market Development Agreements and Labour Market Agreements negotiated with the provinces. Having a specific target for Canadians with disabilities should be a requirement of transfer of both EI and Consolidated Revenue Funds to the provinces/territories.
3. Expand and enhance Multilateral Framework Agreement on Labor Force Participation of People with Disabilities and the Opportunities Fund to ensure greater capacity at the provincial/territorial level to address barriers and through the Opportunities Fund to demonstrate innovation in labor force inclusion.
4. Create a funding mechanism to assist Provincial/Territorial governments in transitioning away from existing segregated vocational programs to integrated competitive employment and/or integrated community activity options with appropriate job accommodation, including ongoing support.

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