

Canadians with disabilities need real work, real pay, real leadership

By Michael Prince

August 29, 2016 – *The Globe and Mail*

More than 400,000 working-age adults with physical or mental disabilities are currently unemployed in Canada, despite being willing and able to participate in the labour force.

Strong federal leadership and intergovernmental co-operation are needed to ensure that more Canadians with disabilities have access to real work for real pay, and that their rights are protected by labour legislation and safety standards equal to that of other workers.

Many aspects of social policy were highlighted in the 2016 federal budget, but people with disabilities were not.

The federal contribution to the Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities (LMAPDs) has declined in real terms over the past decade.

For years, existing agreements have been renewed one year at a time, which undercuts long-term planning. To substantially improve labour-force participation of people with disabilities, larger federal transfers are essential. A case can be made for using the federal spending power in a purposeful and focused manner for these forgotten 400,000.

A new national policy framework should help enable people with disabilities to attain postsecondary education, to participate in training and vocational rehabilitation and to obtain and hold gainful employment in inclusive workplaces, on an equal basis with other people.

Greater attention is needed on workplace practices and the role of disability management, bolstered by federal investments through intergovernmental agreements, grants and tax measures.

In a recent study published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, I propose a six-point action plan for both orders of government: (1) Renew the Canadian vision on disability and citizenship; (2) improve transition planning for youths with disabilities; (3) expand postsecondary education; (4) foster improvement in workplace practices; (5) enhance employment services and supports; and (6) modernize labour market agreements.

It's time to develop a new generation of LMAPDs, by investing in targeted areas.

Ottawa could offer to share the cost of provincial programs that offer students with disabilities co-operative placements, work terms, summer jobs in the private sector or in social enterprises with inclusive work settings.

Enhancing the array of employment services should not mean simply filling in gaps by adding resources to the existing ones delivered.

A more basic requirement is to modernize the range of services available. This means re-examining community-based day programs, facility-based day activities attached to residential facilities, sheltered workshops and similar segregated forms of employment.

The Council of Ministers of Education must identify students with disabilities and postsecondary education as a new priority.

Ministers should focus on students' transitions from secondary schools to postsecondary institutions; make financial assistance available to students with disabilities; and examine best practices on reasonable accommodation and inclusive education at colleges and universities.

The Canada Social Transfer should address the learning needs and opportunities of people with disabilities. In education and employment, Canadians with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged citizens relative to the general population.

Therefore, the equity aim would be to increase the number of men and women with physical and mental disabilities who participate in postsecondary education.

To promote meaningful self-employment and business development, the federal government should consider extending the Entrepreneurs

with Disabilities Program beyond its current scope of Western Canada.

Renewed federal leadership can provide provinces and territories with some flexibility to tailor programs to local circumstances.

It is equally important that the federal government promote real employment and foster compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

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