

2022

A Crisis in Community Disability Services

Essential but Forgotten

The Alberta Disability Workers Association (ADWA) is a professional association established in 2010. It is our vision to see an Alberta where people with disabilities are supported by a valued, skilled and certified workforce. Our full membership includes people employed by organizations and family-managed services to support Albertans with disabilities and full-time students in disability-related studies. ADWA is also supported through associate memberships including organizations, self-advocates, families and corporations. There are over 15,000 people employed in Community Disability Services in a variety of roles relating to direct service, administration, and management. While our members primarily support people with developmental disabilities, they also support people with brain injuries, FASD and other disabilities.

ADWA is a professional association, not a union. ADWA does not intervene in employee-employer situations nor does it negotiate with employers regarding wages and working conditions.

Community Disability Service Workers are multi-skilled and fulfill demanding and often varied roles including that of facilitator, advocate, employment counselor, researcher, social worker, administrator, community developer, personal care provider, emotional and behavioural supporter, and more, in order to carry out their work competently.

Since the 1980s, and especially in recent years, the demands of the work have become more complex. While at the same time the education options have become more limited. The annual turnover rates are consistently above 20%, and the recruitment, training and retention of a skilled and experienced workforce has been an increasing concern. Community Disability Services have now hit a crisis point in Alberta.

How Did This Happen?

Up until the early 1980s, community-based disability worker wages were comparable to wages in other social services sectors and equivalent government positions. Over time, community wages failed to keep pace with inflation or wages in government and other sectors. In 2021, "54% of the workforce make under \$20.00 an hour. The average hourly wage for a Community Disability Support Worker is \$18.76." According to a recent compensation review (2019) by Korn Ferry, the average wage paid for positions outside our sector that are comparable to a Community Disability Support Worker was \$26.56. A difference of \$7.77 per hour based on a 40-hour work week.

Figure 1: cycle of impact of low wages



Comparatively poor wages created a vicious cycle of working multiple jobs to make ends meet, having less time and energy to seek education that did not produce enough income to pay student loans, and post-secondary programs closing due to low enrollment. With a less educated workforce, employers had to supply more on-the-job training.

In 2022, Community Disability Service employers find that they cannot compete in the job market to recruit and retain workers with the necessary skills, experience and training to provide quality supports to people with disabilities.

What is the Solution?

A key part of the solution is compensation that reflects the skills required by the workforce. Community Disability Service Providers have not received funding to increase wages since 2014. This valuable and already underpaid workforce has fallen further behind in the last eight years, and recruitment and retention issues are now at a crisis point. Unless government funders of these essential services recognize the professionalism of disability workers through appropriate and increased compensation, the sector will continue to struggle.

A professional, skilled and experienced workforce is critical for quality services for people with disabilities, ensuring community inclusion, safety and quality of life. Professional compensation breaks the cycle and changes everything. Appropriate compensation and supporting education and training opportunities for Community Disability Service Workers will lead to a stable, competent professional workforce and quality outcomes for people with disabilities.

Essential but Forgotten

ADWA is leading a public awareness campaign to bring attention to the critical need for increased funding from the Government of Alberta to provide competitive and fair compensation for Community Disability Service Workers. The workforce has not seen a wage increase in eight years, while cost of living has steadily increased, the inflation rate has hit an all-time high and competition for skilled and experienced workers is fierce.

Skilled and committed long-time workers are being forced to choose other careers where they will be paid higher wages. They are leaving because their current wages are not enough to cover their daily living expenses or support their families. ADWA is calling on the Alberta government to increase funding for wages of people employed in Community Disability Services by 25%. There is an immediate need to increase the wages to attract and retain workers for community disability services. Only by paying a proper wage will these essential workers be able to commit long-term and provide continuity in service to Albertans with a disability.

ADWA needs all workers, in all types of community disability service positions to get involved and have their voices heard.

Go to www.adwa.ca and click on “Essential but Forgotten”. You will find regularly updated information about this campaign, with information about the issues, how to write your government MLA, and how to meet with your MLA. For more information or to share actions you are taking, you can email campaign@adwa.ca.

This is an updated version of information provided by ADWA in 2018 in a document titled “ADWA and the Professionalization of Disability Workers.”

March 2022

ⁱ Alberta Council of Disability Services. (2022, Feb.). *Community disability services workforce: An essential foundation for quality supports.*