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## **“Essential BUT Forgotten,” yet again: Community Disability Service Workers have been left out of this year’s budget**

I was disappointed to see that Community Disability Service Workers (CDSW) were left out of this year’s budget and the detailed outcomes for the Community and Social Services Ministry. As the President of the Alberta Disability Workers Association (ADWA), I have heard disappointment and frustration from CDSWs from across Alberta as they were, once again, not recognized. Workers have struggled to survive on low wages for very demanding work for 10+ years and are continuing to face a mountain of challenges in keeping the people they support safe from COVID. CDSWs have had to fight to be recognized as essential workers all while continuing to work at full throttle throughout the waves of the pandemic. They have successfully managed to assist the majority of the people with disabilities they support through the cycles of COVID and did this even when they often could not see their own families in an effort to keep everyone safe.

**Community Disability Service Workers are ESSENTIAL but the government continues to FORGET who they are and what they do.**

The only way a CDSW can receive a wage increase is when their employer receives increased funding from the government. It has been eight years since the sector has seen an increase for wages. It is now beyond the cracking point. Community services and families are not able to hire new workers to a decimated sector. The average wage of \$18.76/hour for this skilled and demanding work is not cutting it. In a recent survey conducted on the workforce, 90% of respondents were not satisfied with their current wages. Almost 30% had to work two or more jobs to be able to make ends meet.

Additionally, the entire workforce was originally excluded from receiving the essential-worker top-up last spring, all the while providing around-the-clock supports to people with disabilities who relied on them being there, in person, every day. When the sector was eventually recognized, not everyone was included. Workers told us that it felt like no one noticed or appreciated the sacrifices they made. Now, they are not even mentioned in the presented budget. As one worker stated, “The wages are low for the expected job responsibilities. It feels like a slap in the face to barely be making more than minimum wage.” Another dedicated worker stated, “The majority of the staff I know who work in this industry work two jobs minimum because they cannot make ends meet. The amount of responsibility put on frontline staff is far greater than the

compensation we receive. Isn't someone's life, their physical and mental health, worth far more than minimum wage? Isn't it worth a raise for those of us who have committed our lives to making someone else's better? ... 24 years of service and I make \$20.10 an hour awake, \$15 overnight and no shift differential. I have no pension plan. I work two jobs and I average more money an hour serving beer than I do ensuring that someone gets the correct medical attention. It really makes no sense."

As a family member and an educator, I have seen firsthand the valuable and essential roles workers play in the lives of people with disabilities. As a leader in the professional association, I have had many discussions with government to present worker concerns, to inform them of the work and to open opportunity for change. This was done with the desire to mitigate a crisis in the community disability sector.

The people who chose this career are passionate about providing critical services to Albertans with disabilities. They want to support people with disabilities to live their best lives and be active citizens in their community. That being said, this committed workforce also needs to be able to eat, have a place to live and be able to afford transportation, which is often required in their support roles. With the drastically increasing cost of living, even these basic needs are beyond a worker's reach.

The government has for too long relied on the good hearts of the people who work in community disability services. While people love their work, they need to be able to raise a family and live too. As the increasing price of oil is improving the financial position of Alberta, why are essential Community Disability Service Workers continually being forgotten?

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