

THE HIGH COST OF LOW WAGES

Prepared for submission to the Persons with Developmental Disabilities program review

Report prepared by the Alberta Disability Workers Association, 2018

Table of Contents

The high cost of low wages for workers	2
The ability to survive	2
Workers’ families	3
Workers’ health	3
Workers’ feelings of value	4
The high cost of low wages for the profession	6
Wages do not reflect responsibilities	6
The outcomes of low wages	8
The high cost of low wages for the people we support: Quality of service.....	10
An investment in wages for community support workers is a critical piece of the puzzle	12

Over the summer of 2018, the Alberta Disability Worker's Association (ADWA) conducted a survey of workers to get their opinions on several issues affecting disability supports. This was done to prepare for ADWA's participation in the Persons with Developmental Disabilities program review. Many questions were asked, and robust feedback was received from 77 workers. The largest number of those participants worked directly with people with disabilities. One of the questions we asked related specifically to the impact of wage levels on workers and others. Given the responses to this question, we have decided to release a summary of workers' feedback on this question separate from the rest of the report. We are doing this as we see wage levels as a very critical issue, based on worker feedback.

Additionally, we want to encourage workers to come forward to share how wage levels impact their lives with the review team. As a field, we usually ask our workers to put the individuals accessing services first. This is critical to ensure those individuals with disabilities are living their lives successfully in the community. Unfortunately, this has meant that workers are often reluctant to discuss their own needs. Specifically, they have not been very vocal about how the wages in the field directly impact their lives and the lives of the people around them. We are submitting this report to make public how workers are impacted by low wages. We want them to know it is okay to talk about their needs, as well as those of the people they support. Please note that this report also contains a larger than usual number of direct quotations. We did this on purpose as we wanted to share as much of the direct "workers' voice" as possible.

The high cost of low wages for workers

Low wages paid to community support workers have serious implications for the workers' lives, their families, the people with disabilities they support, the services they work for and ultimately society in general. There is a long history behind the low wages paid to community disability support workers. We will not explore the history of how the low wages came about here as that information is documented elsewhere. Instead, we will focus on the cost of low wages to the workers and their immediate families, to the profession and ultimately to the people who are supported by those workers. We will start from the worker her or himself and work outward.

The ability to survive

People do paid work for many reasons. One of the most fundamental reasons is to be able to survive; to be able to purchase the necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter. When wages are low, it is very difficult for people to survive. Low-wage rates, in addition to the lack of regular wage increases for community support workers, makes it a challenge to keep up with the rising cost of living.

"The cost of living has risen every year, yet we haven't seen any increases for four years."

"I have not had a raise in over 4 years and none this year either, so how do I keep up with the rising cost of living?"

In addition to inadequate wages, some of the costs of providing services are temporarily or permanently downloaded onto disability support workers.

"I support 2 individuals in my community where there isn't an option to use public transit. I work Monday to Friday making sure my clients have full access to the community by using my own personal vehicle. Currently I receive \$90.00 a month for "travel allowance". With the price of gas right now, that doesn't even cover my fuel costs for 2 weeks, let alone all the wear and tear on my vehicle. I am literally paying out of my own pocket to ensure my clients have needed access to their community for volunteer placements, doctor appointments, physiotherapy, grocery shopping errands etc."

"Oftentimes accessing community resources requires workers to outlay financially prior to being reimbursed. With increasing costs everywhere from the supermarket to the gas pump, workers can have a hard time budgeting for the additional expenses (even if temporary) of supporting people to access their community."

Workers' families

Staff who are working long hours, sometimes with multiple employers, have little time for their own families. Hence, their family lives suffer.

"I have to compensate for my low wages by taking on extra jobs. This leads to feeling burnt out and limits my family time."

"If I can't pay all my bills or have enough money to do something fun and stress-free outside of work, I will bring that negativity to work. It's hard to watch our individuals having a fun time when all you think is I wish I could have that for my family as well."

This has especially profound effects on women and/or single parents' family lives.

"When I am worried about paying bills, I have to work extra shifts. And as a single mom this has caused huge issues as my children are on their own. (They are older and can stay home). But I can't be involved in their schooling, can't afford and/or no time to take them, as work comes first to make sure that they are fed, clothed, and bills are paid for."

"Many of the staff in the agency I work for are either single parents, work two jobs or struggle from paycheck to paycheck. While this does not prevent them from doing the job of meeting the PDD Mission, it's harder to stay focused and positive when you are worried about bill payments."

Workers' health

Many workers commented on their inability to maintain their own health and safety while they are expected to sustain the health and safety of the people they support. In order to be able to pay their basic bills, they are having to work many hours within one agency or have multiple jobs across different agencies to make ends meet. This has implications for workers' physical and mental health. It leaves them exhausted and burned out.

“People work multiple jobs in order to stay afloat – (this) affects personal relationships, as well as physical and mental well-being.”

“Many support workers have to work a FT job in addition to PT to meet their daily needs. This leads to burn out, high turnover and poor quality support for individuals.”

This may be especially the case for workers supporting individuals with more “complex needs.”

“For complex needs and or harm reduction or severely physically disabled, staff DO NOT get paid enough. Consideration for burn out is high behavioral needs and lifting and physical strain, which are a part of support workers every day.”

Workers will avoid taking vacations and time off work so they can make enough money to pay their basic bills.

“As a Program Coordinator and previous Team Leader what I see happen often is employees that are not able to take vacation time because they cannot afford it. At our location we are paid our vacation pay on each cheque and employees are not able to put this away for a vacation as they count on it pay cheque to pay cheque. Our employees do not take enough time for themselves. If our employees are not functioning at their best, the care that they give is affected greatly. Self-care is such a huge part of care giving yet very under-valued by most.”

When wages are low, employers often end up employing less educated and lower-skilled workers. This has a “ripple effect” throughout the organization. Supervisors find themselves taking on responsibilities in addition to their management role that typically would have been completed by those in the direct support worker position. Organizations across Alberta must continually focus on training and accessing where competency gaps occur. Supervisors who have to pick up extra shifts and tasks also burn out sooner.

“Lower wages make hiring employees competent in various facets of their job a challenge. They can be great with the individuals they serve, but not have skills that make administrating the program as functional as possible. This leads to many of us taking on multiple roles above our own job descriptions, having to do extra tasks to fix or do things not being done, and ultimately burning out faster, leading to not doing our own jobs as well.”

Workers’ feelings of value

Workers’ sense of value is often buoyed by feeling they are making a positive difference in the lives of the people they support. Yet, disability support work can lead to both mental and physical health challenges. This partly relates to the actual demands of the work, but it is also impacted by workers feeling devalued for their contributions.

“People feel more valued when they are making a difference in people’s lives, helping them achieve goals etc. To make less than people who work at retail stores makes you not want to take on the role helping people and putting in the long hours.”

"I love what I do and am very passionate about it but feel very, very undervalued!! (In the field since 2002)."

The positive feelings from making a difference in individual's lives are at odds with the feelings elicited from the level of compensation and the recognition workers receive.

"Not earning a fair wage is demeaning and demoralizing - while we may enjoy the work we do and want to make a difference in the lives of others, not being recognized as valued professionals impacts our work. "

"Back in 1993 I worked with youth. My wage was \$20.00 plus in 1993. To be making only minimally more with an additional 20 years of experience and more training is disheartening. Training does not seem to be recognized or valued. As much as we want those we work with to be valued, it would be nice to be valued as well."

"It shows value for the people we support when we value the people who provide the support. We expect a level of skill, professionalism and integrity but definitely do not reflect that in the pay. And a raise after years because of incessant complaining doesn't do much when you get nothing for years after."

As a field we say we want a skilled, trained and professional workforce, but then do not compensate them appropriately.

"The current wage levels affect the ability to hire qualified, invested staff to support the individuals. As the Accreditation requirements with respect to training is so high, staff are expected to work at a highly trained and professional level; however, their wages do not reflect a professional career."

"The wage limit restricts the amount of money a person could be offered to properly care for an individual, especially those with high needs. It also affects the training the worker can get, limiting their ability to properly and effectively help clients."

The feeling of being devalued causes people to question their choice of this profession. Obviously, this has an impact on the ability of community services to retain educated, trained and skilled staff.

"I have been in the disability field for 15 years and have a university degree, along with as many certifications as I can get my hands on. It is still almost impossible to find a job that pays more than \$25.00 an hour, or does not include covering shifts constantly for practitioners that make minimum wage and therefore do not value their positions. I love what I do, but the low wage for the amount of time and experience and education I have committed has me questioning the career I have chosen. The extra hours also lead to burnout."

"People who might be interested in jobs may go elsewhere if wages aren't in keeping with standard of living and a reflection of the value of the job. Higher-educated people may pass

these jobs up. Their education would benefit individuals in several ways, including less job turnover and greater stability in individuals' lives."

"The expectations put on staff are continuously increasing - but we are not able to offer wages to match the expectations. It is very difficult to attract good staff at the wages we can offer. Staff retention is also very difficult - we provide training but cannot increase people's wages to reflect their increased ability to do the work."

The high cost of low wages for the profession

Wages do not reflect responsibilities

Many workers commented that the low wages do not reflect the levels of job responsibilities.

"We deserve to be paid a much higher wage than minimum wage! We are often put into stressful / dangerous situations. Why would someone want to go and work with a person who has a disability and could be unpredictable and put their safety at risk, when they can be a cashier at any supermarket for almost the same price."

"I feel that the level of responsibility in dealing with behaviors and mental health issues with persons with disabilities requires a skill set that cannot be obtained by paying minimum wage, especially if you can work at McDonald's with no stress for the same wage."

"I also have a degree in teaching and a lot less risk to me and the individuals I serve. Direct support workers are not paid enough while supporting individuals and families. As minimum wage goes up the wages for front line has not gone up."

Overall, workers commented they are not getting fair compensation given the challenges that are faced by them.

"Support workers need to be paid fairly for what they do. Many situations include health, safety, medical and community inclusion. It seems like anyone we deal with to support the clients to live independently as possible are all paid higher than the front-line workers."

"Anyone that works in the industry knows at times it can be very demanding and challenging. The level of stress that front line workers experience can be high. Depending on the individual, it's difficult to get staff to remain with an agency when the wage is only \$16.77."

"As a supervisor I have had many staff find another job and state that they would rather work elsewhere as their pay is more or similar and they don't get spit on, hit, pinched etc."

Agencies want to hire educated, trained and experienced staff, but do not have the ability to compensate them properly for the demands of the work.

"The people working in this sector are professionals and should be paid as such. The better the wages are, the more it will attract those with post-secondary experience which in turn will

provide better support and care to citizens that are vulnerable, need advocates, have severe trauma backgrounds, are dealing with a disability and mental health concerns, etc.”

“Wages are a barrier to hiring credentialed and experienced people.”

“I took a two-year diploma course called "rehabilitation practitioner" and paid back tons of student loans to make soon just higher than minimum wage. It causes stress and anxiety about living and I hate it!!!”

When people are not paid properly for the job expectations, it has a negative impact on employees agencies can hire and manage to keep as community support workers.

“When well-qualified people apply there is always a hesitancy to hire because of the likelihood that we are a timely stopgap until they find their desired job, role or work.”

“As an agency, we do not find competent staff with the wages given. It is hard to build a team to support individuals to live their best lives when the quality staff that could assist in accomplishing this are deterred due to a minor (and major) thing as funding. It is a disservice to the individuals that we serve.”

“The current wage levels attract employees that are only "temporary" until something better comes along. Temporary staff means that there are staff shortages, many turnovers and high training costs.”

The low wages in the sector have a greater impact on women as the sector employs more of them.

“We all work to better ourselves and that includes earning a decent wage for what we do. The highest wage at our agency is \$18.17. That requires at least 6 yrs of service before you get that wage. I believe that is where a new front-line worker should start at. Not many stay to wait 6 yrs to get \$18.17. Most are women that work in this field. It's time for equality. If the industry was more men than women it would be totally different. 90% of our staff are single mothers. It's pretty hard trying to be single mother on \$16.77.”

Respondents acknowledged the need to professionalize the workforce as a way to move forward.

“Those practitioners making minimum wage who do not see this as a permanent career path are not invested in providing the best care and cause disruption to routine and stability for those we serve by not taking their commitment seriously. Better wages would make people see that this can be a career with which they can provide for their families.”

“I think that an individual that is employed in a fast food restaurant sometimes is making the same or slightly less than a person who is responsible for human life. A professional designation for disability service workers is necessary to keep employees accountable and well trained and employers accountable to ensure they are hiring the most qualified and keeping them trained.”

The outcomes of low wages

It is very difficult to keep workers when there are many other job opportunities available in the province.

“People do not stay long or begin to express frustration for the low income they earn compared to the cost of living and compared to what other options are out there for great income potential.”

“It’s difficult with current wages for staff to make a long-term commitment to full time work. This is a second job wage.”

Low-waged jobs are not confined to this sector. That being said, workers feel that the wages in this sector do not reflect the skills, training and experience needed to do their jobs well.

“Can’t retain experienced, long term workers at current rate. Minimum wage or low (wage) gets minimum experience.”

“After 15 years my wage has followed minimum wage plus \$2. No extra for 15 years of experience. No extra for abusive placements, complex needs, medically fragile.”

“This field has a huge burn out rate. It can be very emotional, and physically draining. The staff that work in this field have a huge heart and take a lot of baggage home that they have to keep in confidence. A little financial boost would help to keep everyone motivated and encouraged.”

If support workers cannot make a living working a reasonable number of hours on a job, there are a number of possible outcomes. The most obvious and often expedient option given the lesser requirements of other jobs with similar pay is to leave the profession.

“Workers are stressed out, overworked and underpaid. Come October one can flip burgers at a fast food restaurant for \$.75 less and avoid the headaches, heartaches and tiredness that come with this job.”

“It is difficult to want to stay in the field with low wages when you can go work somewhere else.”

Workers who love their jobs often find themselves having to make such difficult choices.

“This field that we work in is a very difficult field to work in. It takes a certain type of person to do the job we do but if you can get a job with less stress, better wages and better hours it makes it hard to stay. I love the job that I do but when it makes it hard to make ends meet with the wages we are paid I find myself looking elsewhere even if it’s a job I enjoy.”

Another outcome is to work as many hours as possible, or work for more than one agency.

“In larger centers employees work more than one job to make ends meet. Some of our employees do that but most will try to pick up extra shifts within the agency to make more money which leads to employees being over worked and tired.”

“Current wage levels negatively affect me with staff retention. Staff will work more than one job to supplement the low wages which can cause staff burn out. The cost of living is expensive and at times people cannot afford the things they want or need due to low incomes. It seems that raises are never coming in effect and this can be a deterrent to staying in this field of work.”

More educated, trained and skilled workers may leave community agencies to work in government or other sectors requiring similar job skills, all of which compensate workers more appropriately. Workers will stay in community agencies to get the skills and experiences they need and then move to better-compensated sectors when opportunities arise.

“I often see that as good people are trained and educated in the field, they tend to seek positions in the government where their skill set is needed, appreciated, and well compensated.”

“Our government pours their money into programs such as safe consumption sites that work to help people who DON'T WANT TO help themselves and give squat to programs that help people who CAN'T help themselves. We have lost many good staff members to our new safe consumption site based on the fact that they get paid way more.”

“Lower wages affect the caliber of staff that we can both attract and retain. The complexity of supports has increased significantly in the last three decades and this sector is now partnering with various departments in health services, community teams such as COAST/CONNECT/CAST/CATALYST, as well as, justice. Our strong staff are quite often poached by other entities when they see the skills the staff possess. The partnerships are a necessity for best services for the citizens we support so it is a double-edged sword for many agencies. We are not funded the same (even though in many aspects we provide the same services) and cannot compete.”

“Low wages can result in increase in turnover as people move into higher paying positions or into other industry. (Higher wages) would help stabilize staff turnover and promote the overall professionalism of the industry.”

Workers often believe that the wages paid are a reflection of how they are viewed by the agencies who employ them and the government who provides those wages. This can have a negative impact on their relationships with their employers.

“Staff are devalued. Supporting people to build a life is challenging and rewarding work. The pay scale is horrible and impossible to live off of. Working FT still need another job. Why?”

“If PDD gives bonus money for support staff, make sure it will end up to the one that deserves and/or to all support staff, not to agency's other project. In my experience, we know PDD gives

bonuses to all agency and we in our agency ended up not getting it and being thrown a bunch of reasons why. Not fair.”

It can also have a negative impact on their view of the government.

“The current wage level does not attract staff who want to work in the field and stay in the field of Disability Services as a career. Staff people who work for community-based organizations do not appear to be as valued as their government employee counterparts in terms of compensation they receive for their services and dedication.”

“Minimum wage is going up. Pretty soon people are going to be making the same amount of money stocking shelves as they would be starting at a day support program. At our agency we have had to turn people away during interviews because the applicants are OVER qualified for the amount of money they would be making. How sad is that that these people, who need the best care possible don't get the quality people they need because their workers aren't valued enough by our government to get a fair wage?”

“Contracted wages/budgets have been the same values since 2014 and most agencies are in wage freezes. Plus, the 30% promise turned out to be 25% or less depending on the agency. Supervisors/admin didn't receive any part of the 25% for an unknown PDD reason.”

“The only employees to receive any increase in pay since 2014 have been sleep night staff. Other employees are feeling devalued as sleep rate creeps closer to direct awake support.”

The high cost of low wages for the people we support: Quality of service

It is not only the workers, their families and community agencies who are impacted by the inadequate compensation in the profession. As has already been alluded to, this has a profound impact on those who receive the supports, the whole purpose of PDD services. Exhausted, stressed and preoccupied workers may find themselves having little left to give.

“When someone is living paycheque to paycheque and often holding two jobs their full attention isn't on the client.”

“The stress of realising that you have to work far in excess of 40 hours a week to make ends meet, means you aren't fresh and well rested. It leaves you without the energy to go the extra mile.”

“When workers are focused on making ends meet, they lose focus on the individuals they support. This can impact the ability for workers to support individuals in accessing their community.”

The quality of supports people receive will clearly be impacted by the many concerns mentioned above.

“Simple logic: if staff have no funds for gas, safe vehicle maintenance and repairs to take individuals to appointments or outings to enhance quality of life & build connections; the individuals become secluded from their community.”

“Not having gas, activities cost included in staff’s wage makes it hard to involve clients in the community as some staff refuse to pay or drive.”

“When a worker is worried about paying bills or has to work two of three jobs to make ends meet, they cannot effectively give their support to their clients.”

“The term “you can only give what you have” comes into play. If staff are burning out, and not having the time to re-energize and self-care, the quality of care for the supported individuals decreases.”

“Because staff often have to work several jobs to survive, they are often not motivated to explore community engagement opportunities.”

People with disabilities who receive supports regularly comment on the negative impact staff turnover has on their lives. When a worker gets to know them, and they develop a good working connection, it can be very disheartening for that staff member to leave.

“The staff turnover rates are high. I have heard self-advocates complain about their workers always changing because they can get a better paying job elsewhere. Self-advocates are frustrated by this.”

“When wages are low, employees begin seeking out alternate employment, whether full or part time. This can mean that individuals see staff members come and go (high turnover), or that experienced staff limit their availability due to secondary employment. This creates the effect that vulnerable individuals see themselves as a burden or not worth people’s time to devote. In essence it can break down relationships.”

Constant turnover of staff can also disrupt the stability many individuals require for success.

“Stability and balance for the people receiving services as their lives are always full of change and transitions and people they have grown to trust can’t afford to remain.”

“Many people do not make enough money in this field to stay in this industry as they cannot support their families on this wage and end up taking other jobs. This means the client is constantly getting new staff. People with disabilities need things to remain the same so that they are comfortable and happy. With the constant change of staff, they end up not being able to develop life-long relationships.”

It also impacts the ability of individuals to get the support they need to meet their goals.

“We understand that the funding is based on the individual needs. However, with more and more individuals coming in to service, that requires front line staff. In order to keep staff after

putting them through training they usually leave because of the low earning. We aren't doing a good service to the individuals that keep getting a large turnover of front line workers."

"There is so much staff turnover that supported individuals constantly have staff that are just getting to know them and who are learning the best way to provide community support. This holds supported individuals back because they have to keep waiting for new staff to "get it."

"People with disabilities deserve high quality care and not staff that are checked out just waiting for a better job or something with similar pay and less stress comes along."

An investment in wages for community support workers is a critical piece of the puzzle

Given the challenges of low wages to workers, their families, the agencies they work for and the people they support, many workers believe that an investment in the wages paid to workers is necessary to keep good workers and to provide good quality services.

"I believe that a competitive wage would attract more educated, experienced and passionate workers to work in this field. This would ensure that individuals and families get the best decision makers and people who can make a connection and make a difference in the lives of their loved ones."

"The people working in this sector are professionals and should be paid as such. The better the wages are, the more it will attract those with post-secondary experience which in turn will provide better support and care to citizens that are vulnerable, need advocates, have severe trauma backgrounds, are dealing with a disability and mental health concerns, etc."

"Investing more in the workers means they are going to be more invested! They are going to give more, have more ideas etc... They will be more involved, less stressed and can focus on the client."

"A wage that reflects how much effort and extra work we provide will positively promote harder work and make us see that our efforts are being recognized."

We will leave the final words on the issues related to low wages and the implications for the workers and the people they support to one of our respondents.

"There are a few issues here; one is that by not providing a livable wage, many direct care staff are working multiple jobs, impacting their ability to get training to improve their skills and exposure to new ideas in the field. Additionally, it impacts their energy and stress levels, reducing their ability to focus on providing the best supports and doing so with enthusiasm and joy. Further, it can be difficult for direct care staff to adopt a mentality of supporting those that they serve to have fulfilling lives of quality when their own lives are marked by poverty and stress. More money doesn't equate more happiness, though it does allow workers to work reasonable

hours that in turn allows them to provide for themselves and their families and enjoy a reasonable quality of life themselves.”