



NWT Disabilities Council



Executive Director's Address 2015

In 2001 the Premier of the Northwest Territories set up a steering partnership tasked to develop an interdisciplinary, multi-dimensional framework to develop effective programs and services. It started with over 100 needs and placed these into 5 building blocks, Housing, Education, Employment, Income and Disability Supports. The framework was guided by a vision of full citizenship, the values of equality; inclusion; accessibility and participation. In 2008, the NWT Action Plan for Person with Disabilities was published and presented by the Minister responsible for persons with disabilities, the Honourable Sandy Lee. Within this Action plan there was an update in 2007 regarding progress in the areas. However since 2008, despite the intention that this plan was meant to pave the way to removal of barriers, partnerships between departments, agencies, groups and the community, progress has been slow or non-existent. Since my arrival in 2010 to the Council and prior during my time in Aklavik I was already questioning the plan and progress. In 2012, I asked the Minister and it was the theme of my address at that year's AGM. It was one simple question, where do these 5 domains stand now? For a short period after the initial questioning there seemed to be a bit of a flurry to see where progress in areas appeared and then that fell away. Throughout this period the Council continued to point out the feedback and areas of need that we as an advocacy organization saw in the NT. However, it seemed that these were met with polite nods and understanding catch phrases and counter points of that was not the feedback that was heard elsewhere. Finally, the Council took on the task to actually do an evaluation of the action plan itself and to engage the public and professionals directly affected by disability in the North. So in 2014 the Council ran territory wide surveys for people living with disability, caregivers and professionals. As well, we met with every agency and department that was engaged in action items in the plan. We did so and on the most limited of resources but were still able to engage feedback from every community in the North but Kakisa and over 320 respondents. We thought this would provide crucial information, for us as an organization and was critical to understanding the needs and issues and presenting future plans.

The results were in some ways expected and yet eye opening at the same time. The results would be impossible to go through entirely at this time but are available on our website in full and abbreviated forms. However, it is important to talk about each domain briefly.

Education In the area of education; accessibility and physical barriers, stigma and attitudinal barriers, access to accommodations, mental health and self-esteem and funding and training were identified as the top five concerns. From inaccessible buildings and rooms to lack of training and expertise in the profession it is clear that education is not an equal right for all. Persons living with disabilities and their families are impacted by this lack of access in everything from employment to daily living as a result.

Employment In the area of employment; opportunities, access to accommodations, accessibility and physical barriers, stigma and attitudinal barriers and personal limitations were the top five concerns in this domain. From the lack of accessible workplaces both in and out of government to employers misunderstanding of persons with disabilities and accommodations persons with disabilities and their families bear an enormous impact from lack of employment to being underemployed. The impact thrusts them into a tightrope walk between poverty and living pay check to pay check.

Income In the area of Income; poverty and insecurity, high cost of living and benefits, cost of programs and services, accessible and affordable housing and employment opportunities were the top identified concerns. From the inability to secure a living income to additional costs for “uncovered services and supports” to underemployment and lack of income support/ benefits to cover basic human needs – people living with disability are amongst the highest risk group for living in poverty or borderline poverty. Caregivers and family bear overwhelming costs for the care of their loved ones.

Disability Supports In the area of Disability supports; Access to supports, relocation for services, transportation and community accessibility, stigma and attitudinal barriers, trained professionals, continuity of care and follow up and the five main points of concern. From supports being limited to non-existent in a small community to a lack of knowledge and continuity of care because of retention and enormous pressure is put on people with disabilities and caregivers to “cope” with what you have or leave

Housing In the area of housing, Affordable housing, accessible housing, modifications and renovations, Safety, inclusion, community and long term care were the five areas of concern. From the lack of available units or high costs of renovations to almost zero growth in options beyond living at home, people with disabilities and their families live in fear of losing their independence, their community and their homes.

So what did we learn? Well, we learned that somewhere in the life of this framework interest feigned and other priorities took its place. We see that many of the 100 issues of concern are still present and had not had action since the first review in 2007. In fact when we met with several departments they were unaware of the Action Plan at all. What learned, that the intent that a multi- disciplinary, integrated approach which was the vision of all participants in 2004 has not come to fruition. We also learned as they did then that to attempt to address these issues in a piece meal manner or in isolation is completely ineffective. To not understand that; lack of educational opportunities due to everything from stigma to accommodation leads to poor employment opportunities or that lack of accommodation and accessibility in employment will lead to a lack of income security and poverty or that limited accessible housing/transportation, resources and supports leads to isolation, a lack of inclusion and impact of wellness for the person, family and community is unfathomable.

So what do we know, that just based on national averages approximately 14.6 % of the population has a disability. In the NT that is approximately 6000 people and although specific statistics are not available it can be assumed to be higher based on multiple factors. Of that the split demographically ranges from approximately 2% under the age of 4 years to up to 50 % in seniors. Based on the feedback we obtained

approximately 30% of the people providing feedback seemed to identify that many of the above factors are an issue. I have not included any that did not answer or were unsure. That translates into approximately 1800 people. Importantly, of our respondents almost 47% indicated that they felt their disability would get worse over the next 5-10 years. That translates to approximately 2700 people and that represents only those people directly affected and does not include all those around that are also affected. If 6000 people in a territory of 40,000 don't warrant a high priority and focus I do not know what does?

So what happened when people received this information? Perhaps I am naïve but I thought departments would react but that was not the case. After waiting for almost 3 months for reaction, the time has come to expect action and commitment. There needs to be an immediate commitment by the current legislative assembly to address disability in the North. We need to collect data so that we have numbers to plan appropriately, we need to bring all parties together to establish a new framework and action plan to address each area of concern and to create an effective plan for the future. We need to implement this plan with commitment and on-going assessment and outcome measures to ensure its best practice. People are not something that can be put into a category of "no more money", it's simply not working. Absolutely, utilizing existing resources is crucial but the territory is changing and what didn't work in the past or is ineffective in the present cannot be the foundation for the future. Investment in the health and welfare of people is a social investment that keeps people here. A balanced budget is not the ultimate goal if humanity is sacrificed at its attainment.

Therefore, in the next election I hope that addressing disability in the North is a primary focus on every level from federal; where the commitment and leadership is crucial to territorial where focus and direction is required to the municipal and local levels where implementation is vital. Contact your candidates and ask what their platform is on disability and our commitment both federally and territorially to the UN Convention of Rights for persons with disabilities.