



The Disability Without Poverty Network

MEDIA RELEASE

for immediate release

BC's Ten-Year Accessibility Plan

Incremental changes are steps in the right direction but much more is still needed

Vancouver, BC, June 17, 2014 – The *Accessibility Plan 2024* announced yesterday by the provincial government is welcome, but further funding and support is needed if the Plan is going to deliver on its promise.

Members of the Disability Without Poverty Network (DWP) are pleased that the provincial government has identified accessibility and inclusion as a priority, but clear goals and benchmarks are needed to ensure BC becomes the most progressive province in Canada for people with disabilities.

We are also encouraged by the level of engagement and input from across the province as well as the broad building blocks that have been identified as key elements in the plan. The initial consultation report released by the government is a good reflection of the voices of British Columbians living with a disability and their support networks.

While *Accessibility 2024* places a strong emphasis on accessibility related to service delivery, the built environment, housing, and employment, there is no direct mention of the critical need to enhance accessibility and reduce barriers for British Columbians living with mental illness and addiction. Given that over 50% of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) recipients live with a mental illness, this is a striking omission in *Accessibility Plan 2024*.

“The Plan is silent on the needs of individuals who have a mental illness,” says Bev Gutray, CEO, Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division. “We know that many people who have a mental illness rely on income assistance to help meet their basic needs. If we don’t plan to improve accessibility and reduce barriers, the ability of those with mental illness to contribute and be a part of their community is severely compromised”.

DWP is disappointed that the Plan only commits to increasing disability assistance rates for people with disabilities *as the fiscal situation allows*.

“The Plan certainly contains positive elements that we are pleased with; however, without making changes to the disability assistance rates, we will continue to see people with disabilities living in poverty” says Jane Dyson, Executive Director of the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities.

“I share the concern that government did not make a clear commitment around increasing income assistance rates” says Lorraine Copas, Executive Director of SPARC BC. “The emphasis on access to employment is no doubt important as a way to provide financial and economic security. However, those who are cannot work will slide deeper and deeper into poverty.”

“BC is already far behind other provinces. Income assistance rates in BC have not increased since 2007 and improvements are long overdue,” says Faith Bodnar, Executive Director of

Inclusion BC. “People with disabilities who rely on income assistance are being forced to choose between rent and food – this is simply not right and is something that I had hoped would be part of the Province’s considerations in defining its Plan.”

“As a member of the Minister’s Advisory Council, it is important to see that government has developed a Plan and is committed to moving forward,” says Neil Belanger, BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS). “It is important however that we make sure that as government moves forward, we move forward together as a society and that traditional patterns of inequity and inequality are addressed.”

The Facts

- Over the last decade the cost of living has increased dramatically in BC but disability benefit rates have not kept pace.
- Since 2001, the PWD rate has increased by only \$120 per month, while the cost of basic essentials such as food, shelter and basic communication has continued to increase. This means that there is a growing gap between the basic cost of living and what a PWD recipient can afford.
- A person receiving PWD benefits receives \$375 per month for housing and \$531 per month for basic living expenses such as food, clothing, housing, and personal care. As shelter costs increase, people are forced to use an even greater portion of their support to pay for housing leaving them increasingly unable to afford basic necessities.
- A significant percentage of those receiving PWD benefits have been diagnosed with a mental illness.
- BC has continued to fall behind other provinces in terms of the level of assistance provided to persons with disabilities with a number of other Provinces including Alberta, the Yukon and Saskatchewan taking measures to increase income assistance rates in recent years.
- Research produced by the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary observed that the level of assistance available to a single person with a disability in BC is \$300 per month below the amount that a low income senior would receive under the Federal OAS/GIS programs.
- The Disability Without Poverty Network proposes an increase to the PWD rate to a minimum of \$1,200 per month, and indexing against the cost of living, to better reflect the actual cost of living in BC and to bring the rates in line with other vulnerable groups such as seniors.

The Disability Without Poverty Network is a network of organizations including Inclusion BC, the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities (BCCPD), Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division, Community Legal Assistance Society (CLAS), the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC) and BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS).

For media interviews, please use the contact information below:

Bev Gutray, CEO, CMHA BC - contact Jennifer Quan at (604) 688-3234 (Ext. 224)

Jane Dyson, ED, BC Coalition of People with Disabilities - (604) 875-0188 or (778) 895-6150

Faith Bodnar, ED, Inclusion BC - (604) 764-2591

Lorraine Copas, ED, Social Planning and Research Council of BC - (604) 718-7736

Neil Belanger, ED, BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society - (250) 381-7303