



Hiring People with Disabilities

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Executive Summary

Who we are

The Alberta Disabilities Forum (ADF) is a group of 41 not-for-profit provincial organizations of and for people with disabilities. Together, we speak with a united voice on issues of importance to Albertans with disabilities. Through ADF's member organizations, we represent the perspectives of thousands of Albertans with disabilities.

ADF uses the collective expertise of its member organizations to develop service improvement strategies in a broad range of areas including health, housing, transportation, income supports, employment, education, and community inclusion. Our working groups focus on specific issues and develop strategies to help overcome the barriers that people with disabilities face.

Purpose

The purpose of the *Hiring People with Disabilities* and *Accessing Employment Supports and Services* position papers is to identify and address the issues that Albertans with disabilities face in seeking and maintaining employment.

Each position paper

- Outlines barriers to employment for people with disabilities
- Recommends concrete and practical strategies for addressing these barriers.

People with disabilities want to be able to participate fully in the workforce. Employment contributes to independence, financial stability, and feelings of self-worth and accomplishment. However, as reported by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, "Without the assistance of employment supports, persons with disabilities will continue to be under-represented in the workforce, earn less income than their nondisabled peers, and require ongoing government assistance for funding basic and disability supports required for daily living."

The following barriers affect hiring practices and workplace experiences of people with disabilities and their employers (or potential employers):

- Assumptions and misconceptions
- Lack of employer awareness and education
- Navigating the system

- Inadequate and inflexible employment policies and standards
- Lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement

Employees with disabilities encounter barriers in the following areas when accessing employment services and supports:

- Transitional planning from school to workforce
- Attitudinal barriers
- Accessibility, alternate forms of communication, and assistive technology
- Assessment and intake
- Career development
- Employment supports
- Government policies and procedures
- Ongoing and continuous support
- Information and referral

Solutions

Members of the Alberta Disabilities Forum realize that employment issues for people with disabilities are complex and multi-faceted. However, we also know that people with disabilities must have access to equitable employment in order to maintain an adequate quality of life.

ADF is willing and interested in working with the Government of Alberta to address these issues and in using our network of disability-related organizations to ensure the views of the disability community are represented as we work together to remove employment barriers for Albertans with disabilities.

Hiring People with Disabilities

In 2002, the Premier’s Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities developed the Alberta Disability Strategy (ADS). In the report, the Council pointed out that without proper employment supports, Albertans with disabilities would not be able to participate in the work force. The Council concluded, “Without the assistance of employment supports, persons with disabilities will continue to be under-represented in the workforce, earn less income than their nondisabled peers, and require ongoing government assistance for funding basic and disability supports required for daily living.”

Today—nine years later—Albertans with disabilities continue to face many of the same barriers to obtaining employment and accessing employment supports and services.

The Alberta Disabilities Forum appreciates the Government of Alberta’s commitment to people with disabilities through programs like Disability Related Employment Supports (DRES), Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS), and Canada-Alberta Job Order Bank Service (JOBS). However, we believe the government and employers need to maximize the labour potential of persons with disabilities. In this position paper, we identify five barriers to employment for people with disabilities and recommend concrete and practical strategies for addressing these barriers.

Barriers to Employment

Assumptions and misconceptions

Research, anecdotes, and experiences teach us that an employer’s assumptions are the most significant barrier to employment for people with disabilities. Often, employers (or potential employers) do not understand that people with disabilities are just as capable of bringing the right combination of skills, knowledge, and abilities to a job as their able-bodied counterparts. They do not know that the assumptions they make are inaccurate and perpetuate negative stereotypes of people with disabilities.

Common misconceptions and assumptions:

- Employers often assume that employees with disabilities cannot perform certain tasks and that they have no desire to advance in their positions. Therefore, they do not encourage or motivate employees with disabilities to meet their potential in the workplace.
- Employers often assume it will cost more to employ a person with a disability. For example, they assume that an employee with a disability requires more sick days, and that the company’s benefit plan will cost more.
- Employers often assume that people with disabilities are satisfied with volunteer opportunities and do not aspire to paid work. The consequences of this assumption are twofold: people with disabilities are kept from contributing to society as part of the paid workforce and employers miss the opportunity to fill a position with a skilled worker.
- Employers often assume that an employee with a disability will have a negative effect on workplace morale and/or standards.
- Employers often assume government supports persons with disabilities, and they do not need a job.

Lack of employer awareness and education

Many employers lack the understanding of disability issues to make informed decisions about hiring and supporting employees with disabilities. Sometimes this is because they are too busy with workplace demands to seek out the necessary information. Sometimes they simply do not know where to find the information they need. Whichever the reason, the overall result is the same: fewer people with disabilities are a part of the workforce.

Without disability awareness and education initiatives, employers do not know that

- the supports, services, and strategies are in place to support them before and after hiring people with disabilities, including supports for dealing with human resources issues, such as workplace performance and termination of contracts;
- there is a minimal cost to employers when hiring people with disabilities;
- there are disability awareness training and education programs for employers and employees who work with people with disabilities;
- there are hiring methods that will reach people with disabilities;
- the abilities and skills that people with disabilities have can be an asset to their workplace; and,
- there are accessible transportation systems available to people with disabilities.

Navigating the system

When people with disabilities are hired, they find it difficult to obtain the necessary workplace supports and services (i.e., workplace accommodations) in a timely and efficient manner. For employers, these delays are costly, affecting the employees' workplace performance and the bottom line.

Why is it difficult to find and use employment supports and services?

- Supports and services are delivered through several government departments and programs.
- A program referral assessment may require information from a number of different government departments, such as Health and Wellness, Human Services, Education, and Seniors.
- Employment supports are not consistent and portable across the province. Each employment region sets its own rules and regulations. An employee with a disability cannot keep the same services and supports when moving from one employment region to another.
- Although DRES policies are consistent across the department, procedures across regions vary.

Inadequate and inflexible employment policies and standards

Provincial employment policies and standards have been developed to support employees with disabilities. In practice, however, these policies and standards are often inadequate, inconsistent, and inflexible. As well, processes are not always in place to ensure employers abide by these policies and standards.

Troublesome employment policies and standards:

- Before being referred to an employment agency, Albertans with disabilities must meet the criteria outlined in the *Ready, Willing, and Able* assessment. The assessment, however, is inflexible and many people with disabilities are unable to meet the criteria. As a result, they are disqualified from receiving employment supports and referrals.

- The *Ready, Willing, and Able* definition consists of two levels of definitions that lack consistency and clarity, and is open to regional and personal interpretations.
- Employers can be exempt from providing workplace accommodations because the employment standards allow for flexible interpretations of the Duty to Accommodate and Undue Hardship requirements. For example, if an employer deems that the provision of accommodations causes undue hardship (due to financial cost or other reasons), the Duty to Accommodate standard is not applied and enforced.
- Employers can apply for a *Minimum Wage Exemption* when employing people with disabilities. This policy means people with disabilities are paid less, which perpetuates the myth that employees with disabilities are not as valuable as employees without disabilities (Alberta Employment Standards Division 10, Section 67(1)).
- The DRES program often does not assist employees to access appropriate workplace accommodations prior to employment. Employers want to hire job seekers who have the skills and accommodations in place prior to the job offer.
- The DRES program assists employees to access appropriate workplace accommodations. However, DRES funding applications can take up to 30 days or more to be approved and require employers to pay for some or all of the accommodation costs. Employers often feel they should not have to spend additional money to accommodate an employee.

Wages and career advancement

People with disabilities earn less than other Albertans, and since they are more likely to be placed in training programs than coached along a career path, people with disabilities are less likely to have the support they need to advance within a career.

Wage and advancement statistics:

- People with disabilities earn approximately 35% less than their non-disabled peers (<http://www.seniors.alberta.ca/premierscouncil/ads/Summary.pdf>).
- 52% of Albertans with disabilities aged 15 to 64 are employed. In comparison, 79.3% of Albertans aged 15 to 64 without disabilities are employed, a difference of 27%.¹

From Challenges to Solutions

Members of the Alberta Disabilities Forum believe that a collaborative approach to addressing the employment barriers encountered by thousands of Albertans with disabilities will benefit employers, employees, and the province of Alberta. In the tables below, the ADF Employment Working Group outlines practical and creative solutions for addressing these barriers.

¹ Alberta Employment and Immigration. (2006). *2006 Census Analysis: Persons with Disabilities Profile*. Retrieved on November 15, 2011, from http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/LMI/LMI-LFP_profile_disabilities.pdf

<i>Assumptions and misconceptions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate and fund ongoing awareness campaigns that direct and support a philosophical shift in attitude of employers toward people with disabilities. • The Government of Alberta should serve as a role model for hiring people with disabilities and allow access to information about the percentage of government employees with a disclosed disability. • Utilize worksite assessments conducted by community organizations to assist employers in creating positions to be filled by people with disabilities. These assessments would facilitate compatible matches between employers and employees with disabilities.
<i>Lack of employer awareness and education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate and fund campaigns that increase employer awareness of the supports that are available when hiring people with disabilities when dealing with human resources issues, such as insurance coverage, benefits packages, and terminating employment. Sessions would be delivered through programs such as Business Liaisons Services, Regional Partnership Consultant, and Disability Specialists. • Encourage employers to consult with disability-related community organizations when seeking information and supports about employment issues. • Encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities by providing an overview of available employment supports, accommodations, and answering any questions employers might have about employees with disabilities. • Promote and provide existing recognition awards for employers who hire and retain employees with disabilities. • Educate Business Industry Liaisons so they can effectively represent and market employees with disabilities to employers.
<i>Navigating the system</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve employer access to supports and services that promote and assist with the hiring of people with disabilities. • Improve consistency in processes used to deliver DRES and the timeliness of providing disability-related employment supports to new employees. • Improve access to reasonable workplace accommodations for job seekers in the hiring process, new employees, and existing employees with disabilities. • Consult with community organizations to eliminate duplication of assessments and applications and to ensure a seamless flow of ongoing services. A more coordinated, cooperative, and collaborative approach across ministries (AISH, DRES, PDD, Family Support for Children with Disabilities, and student funding) will allow for smoother transitions to employment and fewer disruptions to job seekers and employers. • Increase cross ministerial collaboration and cooperation to streamline access to disability programs and services
<i>Inadequate and inflexible employment policies and standards</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure a continuum of funding and service employment options for employees with disabilities who move from one job to another or from one employment region to another. • Develop integrated long-term programs (e.g., life skills training, counselling, job search skills) that support both the education and employment needs of people with disabilities. • Address staffing, resource distribution, and access to services in rural areas.

- Improve hiring processes to ensure job seekers with a wide range of learning styles, languages, educational levels, and abilities will be able to apply. Online applications tend to create barriers for people with disabilities.
- Support individuals to reach employment commensurate with their abilities and potential. This can be accomplished by offering individualized (rather than generic) supports. Individualized employment supports will assure higher success rates and long-term outcomes.
- Develop services and programs that support the transition from education to employment.
- Extend the maximum length of time employment programs are offered.
- Extend the maximum length of time with supports in the workplace and acknowledge the need for intermittent services for employees with disabilities who are dealing with changes in the workplace.
- Increase access to government supports and workers through the use of alternative communication tools such as email and text messaging, and extend hours of services to after 6:00 p.m., especially in rural areas.

***Wage and
career
advancement***

- Educate Career Development Centre staff so they have the knowledge and expertise to provide effective services for people with disabilities.
- Include people with disabilities as a targeted group in workforce diversity planning.
- Support individuals who lose employment to access services and supports that will help them upgrade and enhance work-related skills.
- Abolish the Alberta Employment Standards Division 10, Section 67 (1) (a), which permits employers to apply for a Minimum Wage Exemption when employing people with disabilities.
- Expand the opportunity for employees to benefit from job coaches who can assist them in maintaining employment. Collaborate with community organizations about how this initiative could best be delivered.

Conclusion

Members of the Alberta Disabilities Forum realize that employment issues for people with disabilities are complex and multi-faceted; however, we also know that people with disabilities must have access to equitable employment in order to maintain an adequate quality of life.

The Government of Alberta plays a crucial role in supporting people with disabilities in their career aspirations and reducing barriers to employment. If the above recommendations are implemented, people with disabilities will be able to achieve their employment potential.

We believe equitable employment can be best achieved through stakeholder engagement. To ensure the best possible outcomes for people with disabilities, we need to be included in the development of policies, supports, and services that affect our lives.

ADF wants to work with the Government of Alberta, to address these issues and use our network of disability-related organizations to represent the views of the disability community as we work together to remove employment barriers for Albertans with disabilities.