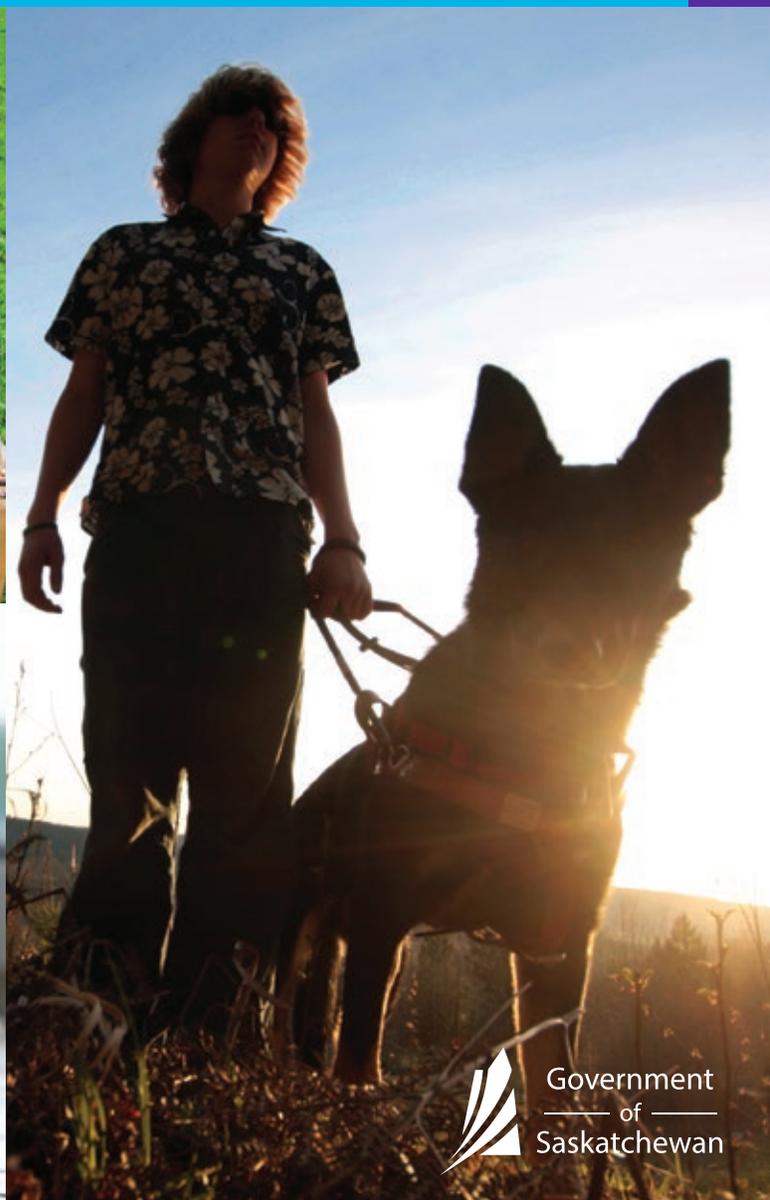


# Our Experience, Our Voice

## The Reality of Today, the Opportunity to Shape Tomorrow

Saskatchewan Disability Strategy Consultation Report  
prepared by the Citizen Consultation Team

December 2014



# About this Report

Stories and experiences are powerful. Yet piecing them together can be a difficult thing. We have done our best to create a report that honours all your stories and experiences and weaves them together to accurately reflect what we heard during the public consultations.

People's perceptions of why current services and programs do not work for them are an important piece of the puzzle. But we would like to note that sometimes we heard or read comments we knew or suspected were inaccurate. That's okay. Our intent is not to spread inaccurate information or embarrass organizations or programs named. Instead, we want to accurately reflect what we heard. We believe there is value in understanding people's perceptions.

We also think it is important to remind the reader that, although this report will be used to help shape the Disability Strategy, it is not the Strategy. The Disability Strategy will be released early in 2015. Your input is being shared as a way for us to show you that we heard you. It is also meant to share your feedback with each other.

We will be closely examining your opinions and perspectives as we move forward in developing our recommendations. We hope you will recognize your feedback in the report as there was remarkable similarity in the issues and concerns we heard right across the province. We also hope you will see new ideas and potential solutions that you'll want to talk about. By continuing to talk to each other, we will find solutions to make Saskatchewan the best place to live in Canada for people who experience disability.

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# Our Experience, Our Voice

On behalf of the Citizen Consultation Team (CCT), thank you to everyone who participated in the public consultation sessions held across the province this spring and summer. Thank you, as well, to everyone who made written submissions, completed the online survey, made comments on our Facebook page, or phoned or emailed us with your thoughts. We truly enjoyed the opportunity to meet you and hear your views on how to make Saskatchewan the best place to live in Canada for a person experiencing disability.

Our team designed a consultation process that was open, accessible and welcoming to anyone who wished to participate. The response was remarkable. More than 1,000 people came out to our 15 public sessions held in 11 communities across the province. We visited eight Aboriginal communities and heard from more than 100 Aboriginal people experiencing disability. We received more than 350 written submissions, phone calls and emails, and connected with almost 900 people through our Facebook page. Thank you to all who helped organize and carry out this work.

We were thrilled to see so many of you participating in this important process. It is clear that people living with disabilities want a hand in directing change and are willing to share personal stories and experiences – good and bad – to help make it happen.

Your passion, your ideas, your solutions and even your frustrations were evident throughout this process. Your contribution and commitment will be invaluable as we work together to make Saskatchewan a province that is accessible, responsive and inclusive for all people who experience disability.

The CCT welcomes this opportunity to create inclusive communities and develop a comprehensive disability strategy for Saskatchewan. Over the next few months, we will examine what we have heard in order to develop a Strategy that brings about positive and permanent change for people experiencing disability in our province.

Once again, thank you to everyone who participated.

Sincerely,

**Amy Alsop**  
Citizen Co-Chair  
Citizen Consultation Team

**Daryl Stubel**  
Government Co-Chair  
Citizen Consultation Team

# Introduction

*“There appears to be a new attitude of inclusion and a willingness to fix what’s broken. The new paradigm welcomes input and seems open to changing outdated policies. I am grateful that this administration has stated its desire to becoming the best province in the country for those with disabilities. It is now time to bravely follow through on this commitment.”*

*– written submission*

The public consultation process brought together an amazing group of individuals with varied backgrounds and experiences with disability. The discussions were lively, insightful and purposeful. Participants knew the subject matter well and willingly shared their frustrations and hopes.

This report summarizes the results of our public consultation process by capturing the ideas, feedback, comments and submissions collected from people across the province. The following sections give some background information relating to the public consultation process for the Disability Strategy.

## Background

The Government of Saskatchewan has publicly committed to making our province the best place to live in Canada for people experiencing disabilities. In order to realize this commitment the Province, together with the disability community and other Saskatchewan citizens, began the process of developing a comprehensive Disability Strategy (the Strategy) with a goal of achieving inclusive communities and full citizenship for people who experience disability.

In the fall of 2013, the Minister of Social Services appointed a 15-member Citizen Consultation Team (CCT) made up of individuals with disabilities, caregivers, service providers and volunteers. This group has two key roles: design and lead a province-wide consultation process; and, together with Government, use this input to create the Strategy.



## The Process

The public consultation process was designed to be inclusive and accessible, as well as to provide opportunities for people to shape the development of the Strategy. It was important for us to make sure there was a variety of methods and opportunities for people to offer their ideas, experiences and feedback. We received input through public meetings, written submissions, online surveys, electronic and regular mail, faxes and Facebook.

## Public Meetings

Public meetings were conducted in communities across the province. The primary goal of these forums was to identify potential solutions to issues affecting the lives of people experiencing disability. We also asked for feedback on our draft definition of disability, as well as the draft vision, values and principles for the Strategy.

Public meetings began on April 28, 2014 and concluded on May 30. We held 15 public meetings in 11 Saskatchewan communities: Estevan, La Ronge, Meadow Lake, Melfort, Moose Jaw, North Battleford, Prince Albert, Regina, Saskatoon, Swift Current and Yorkton. We conducted multiple sessions in Regina and Saskatoon.

We held Aboriginal sessions in May and June 2014 in eight locations: Buffalo Narrows, Flying Dust First Nation, Fort Qu'Appelle, Kawacatoose First Nation, North Battleford, Prince Albert, Saskatoon and Yorkton.

More than 1,000 people attended our public forums in April, May and June. There is a snapshot of the participants on page 12.

In addition to the public forums, we held several focus groups through the summer of 2014 to address important topics not easily handled in a public forum format. We organized separate meetings focusing on women with disabilities, people living in long-term care facilities, the Deaf community and youth. About 150 people participated in these groups.

Meeting and talking to people who live with disability was an incredibly powerful experience for us. Many people came forward and shared their day-to-day experiences, struggles and frustration with the current system. However, there was hope and optimism in the air when the conversation shifted to potential solutions and ideas for change.

## Other Methods

In addition to the public meetings, we received ideas and feedback from:

- **Social media:** With 900 followers, our Facebook page gave people an opportunity to comment on specific ideas for the Strategy as well as general concepts related to disability.
- **Online survey:** Approximately 350 respondents completed the online survey, which was based on information from the public meetings.
- **Written submissions:** We received more than 100 submissions ranging from official documents from community organizations to letters from individuals.

To help make this report clear, we took all issues, challenges and proposed solutions that came up during public meetings and in written submissions and organized them into major themes. If, as you read this report, you feel we have missed one or more themes, please tell us. We assure you, we are considering all consultation feedback in developing the Strategy. Your comments and experiences count!

The quotes used in this report are from written submissions and information obtained during the public meetings. Any identifying information has been removed to ensure anonymity.



The title of this report underlines the fact it is based on what we heard from you during our public consultations. It reflects our conversation about the reality of the current system of disability supports and services in Saskatchewan and how we can work together to make it much better.

We refer to “people who experience disability” throughout this report. The term might seem a little bit long, but it is based on our understanding of disability. The way people experience disability is affected by the interaction between their health condition<sup>1</sup> and their physical and social environment. For example, the experience of disability for people with limited mobility can be improved if the places they visit provide them with easy access.

This phrasing also lets us recognize that it is not just the person with the disability who is affected by it. Disability affects relationships with family, friends, caregivers, educators, employers and others. All of us “experience” disability.

Thank you to everyone who took time to communicate with us. We are confident this report reflects the issues and concerns, as well as the ideas and proposed solutions you shared with us. Your advice will provide the basis for Saskatchewan’s Disability Strategy, which is scheduled to be released early in 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> *Health conditions refer to physical, psychiatric, cognitive, neurological, intellectual and sensory conditions. While most people supported the draft definition shared during the public consultation, a small number of people shared concerns about use of the term ‘health’ in the definition.*

# An Inclusive Perspective

*“We proposed that the standard be the same for all citizens of Saskatchewan; that a person with disabilities, as stated over 30 times in the CRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), be included ‘... on an equal basis with others...’”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

In listening to people across Saskatchewan, it was clear that they very much support the goal of inclusion. They want communities where people experiencing disabilities realize the same rights as those without disabilities and are included on an equal basis with others. We also heard that the path to being included is not even. Certain groups face greater challenges to inclusion than others. People told us that factors like gender, age, geography and ethnicity can affect a person’s experience of disability as well as their ability to be included. Our purpose in this section is not to create separation or distinction among groups. Instead, we want to reflect what we heard to help build an understanding of the unique barriers and challenges some people face in trying to achieve true inclusion.

## Gender

Women and men often experience disability differently, in both the experience of the disability itself and how society interacts with them. For example, women who experience physical disabilities described unique challenges with their physicians’ understanding of disability and its impacts, including the way it affects their ability to have children. In addition, women with disabilities are more likely than men with disabilities to experience violence. During our consultations, women were more likely to describe situations where they felt vulnerable and in need of stronger supports for victims of violence.

## Age

We heard the experience of disability can vary by age. Families told us there are very few disability supports for young children. Often, they have to provide for all of the child's needs without recognition of the extra costs of disability. The transition to adulthood can be a big problem for both adolescents and their caregivers, we were told. Many of the services available to youth during their school years stop when they reach adulthood. As a result, they struggle as they try to figure out a new system of supports and services.

Seniors, too, can experience disability differently. There is an expectation that most seniors will experience some form of disability as they age. Yet, seniors who begin to experience disability are largely left on their own to find age-appropriate supports and services.

## Geography

People who experience disability in rural, remote and northern areas of the province told us they face additional challenges. Generally, their greatest challenge is an even lower level of services and supports than what is available to their urban counterparts. They also told us the quality of service they receive suffers due to problems recruiting and retaining qualified service providers. There is also a lack of basic infrastructure like group homes, care homes and rehabilitation clinics in many of the communities. They told us they frequently have to travel to access services. This can mean people experiencing disability have to leave their families and communities, sometimes permanently, to access the services they need. Also, travelling long distances for some people experiencing disability, particularly children, can be difficult in terms of comfort and fatigue.

## Ethnicity

We were told the experience of disability can vary according to ethnic background, as well. Language is a barrier for many new Canadians seeking disability supports and services. We also heard that some new Canadians hold cultural beliefs around disability, such as shame, that prevent families from seeking assistance. Saskatchewan is expected to continue to see increases in the number of new Canadians. This is creating new and more complex challenges for people experiencing disabilities and the systems that attempt to serve them.

## Aboriginal People

More than any other group, Aboriginal people experiencing disability questioned how the Strategy will help them. We heard cynicism and skepticism that anything good would come of their participation in the Strategy's development. Yet, Aboriginal people who came to the consultations came with a purpose. They wanted their voices heard. They told us Aboriginal people across the province face additional significant challenges in accessing disability supports and services across all the priority areas.

We heard that many Aboriginal people with disabilities have no nearby support system in their communities and have considerable difficulty accessing basic help such as aids and technical devices. Accessible housing, transportation and home care services are also issues. Further, we heard that in many communities, complex social issues and a lack of basic infrastructure compound difficulties in accessing basic support.

“Some reserves do not even have paved roads, let alone sidewalks with fancy curb-cuts,” one public consultation participant told us. “Imagine trying to get around in a wheelchair after it rains.”

Jurisdictional issues pose an additional layer of difficulty for First Nations people experiencing disability who are trying to receive support. We heard that issues over who should be funding programs or services are leaving people without the help they need for daily living. Frustration, sometimes tears, showed us the desperation some First Nations people are experiencing. They feel forgotten and are doubtful they will be able to achieve the same level of citizenship held by all other Saskatchewan people experiencing disability. It was suggested that until First Nations, Saskatchewan and Canada can define roles and responsibilities, issues over jurisdiction will continue to negatively affect First Nations people. Working together was said to be the only way to ensure First Nations people experiencing disability can come to enjoy the same supports and services available provincially.

# Conversations Across Saskatchewan



**1,000+**  
PARTICIPANTS

## WHERE WE MET

**60%**  
URBAN SESSIONS

Saskatoon      Regina      Moose Jaw      Prince Albert

**25%**  
OUTER URBAN

Yorkton      North Battleford      Meadow Lake  
Swift Current      La Ronge      Estevan      Melfort

**15%**  
ABORIGINAL SESSIONS

Fort Qu'Appelle      Buffalo Narrows      Prince Albert      Saskatoon  
Yorkton      Flying Dust      Kawacatoose      North Battleford

## WHO WE MET

**36%**

Community-Based Organization Representatives

**33%**

Caregivers

**31%**

People Experiencing Disabilities

# Global Themes

*“It is my hope that all communities will reap the rewards and receive the attention required to successfully implement this Strategy and improve the lives of those living with a disability.”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

Throughout the consultation process, people from across the province came to us with ideas for improving the lives of people who experience disability. Together, these ideas paint a picture of a more inclusive and accessible Saskatchewan. Yes, there were differences in the details, but there was amazing similarity in the global themes that we heard across all priority areas. These global themes are the common “big picture” ideas that illustrate the values Saskatchewan people hold and want to see reflected in our Strategy: acceptance, person first, co-operation, fairness, help through life’s transitions, and making children a priority.

## Acceptance: Public Education and Attitudes

*“The best, easiest and cheapest way to improve the services to people with disabilities is to know, understand and relate to them as individual people with individual histories, thoughts and feelings and needs – with respect.”*

*– written submission*

As we listened to people from across the province, it became clear that many people with disabilities continue to experience negative attitudes and stereotypes that make them feel devalued and not fully accepted in their communities. While we did hear that some progress is being made with respect to attitudes and awareness, there is no question that people with disabilities and their families continue to encounter misconceptions and ignorance, not only from the public, but also from the service systems that are there to help them.

People with disabilities often described the experience of being viewed only in terms of their disability. They told us they are seen as incapable and lacking in talents and abilities, and unable to contribute to society. Some people experience discrimination and racism in addition to negative attitudes about their disability, making their challenges all the greater. And we heard how fear of difference, and deep-rooted stereotypes, continue to be major barriers.

Many expressed the view that their community does not understand what true inclusion means for people with disabilities and their families. They told us inclusion is a principle that is not often practised and rarely undertaken in a way that shows that someone thought about them ahead of time.

Individuals and families identified many areas requiring increased awareness and education. Bus and taxi drivers need to better understand disability and improve their customer service. Employers need to be made aware of the no-cost and low-cost options for accommodating people with disabilities. They also need to receive training and education about their legal duty to accommodate employees who experience disability. We heard that one of the biggest barriers to hiring people with disabilities is the misconception about the cost of workplace accommodations. In our discussions about education, meanwhile, we were told there has to be more awareness of the needs of students of all ages who are experiencing disabilities. Many people also told us there continues to be gaps in awareness and training for people experiencing “invisible” disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and mental health issues.

We heard proposed solutions, too. One that we heard time and again was a need to improve public understanding about the challenges facing people experiencing disabilities and the contributions they can make to their communities. It was suggested a good place to start would be education and awareness campaigns, created with input from the community. These campaigns would target the public as well as public sector services that support people and families experiencing disabilities. Developing school-based curriculum about disability was seen as a concrete way to create and support generational change in understanding and awareness. Using local events and festivals to raise the profile of disability, and enlisting high-profile spokespeople experiencing disabilities to help promote awareness, are among the interesting ideas we heard.



## Person-centred Approach: People Ahead of Systems

*“In many systems, the ease and convenience of the people providing supports to people who experience disability is prioritized above the needs and desires of those people receiving services.”*

*– written submission*

A strong message that came out loud and clear across all of our priority areas could be summed up with the sentence: “We are not all the same so don’t treat us that way!” People often spoke of being at the “mercy” of the system<sup>2</sup> or being excluded because they do not meet the requirements or demands expected of them. They told us about the rigid nature of service systems that left them feeling helpless or discouraged because it demanded they fit into a category. Personalized and culturally appropriate services and supports that put the needs of the individual and family first are what is needed, many said.

One person told us in a written submission that creativity is needed in developing what might best suit the needs of the individual. Often, we try to mold a person into a support when really it should be the other way around.

We also heard concerns about the portability of services and the challenges people face when they move to another part of the province and try to re-establish their support system. The issue of portability is of particular concern for First Nations people experiencing disability, with very few disability supports or services available on-reserve.

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<sup>2</sup> “Systems” or “the system” refer to the range of government, community and private services and supports for people who experience disability.

We heard that people experiencing disabilities want opportunities and choices, the same as everyone. They told us that in spite of an aim to individualize service, the right to make choices is often not recognized and supported. For example, people receiving home care or living in residential settings told us they have a limited number of choices regarding basic activities such as bath, meal or bed times. They said that is because the service provider focuses on convenience of scheduling rather than choice for the individual. Service providers need to support and encourage self-determination and the right to choose and control the way they want to live.

We heard that the foundation of an effective support system is a strong culture of person-centred services, a culture that recognizes all people and their individual needs. People told us that we can build on the successes that exist in our province by incorporating person-centred planning and best practices in all programs and services. This could involve making programs and services more responsive to gender and culture, too.

People also noted that a person-centred approach will require more flexible service options including developing more personalized supports that are not tied to specific programs.

## **The Ability to Communicate: A Key to Inclusion**

Making one's needs known and understood in order to access supports and services can be a big challenge for people with disabilities. Some people we talked to described communication barriers that were a direct result of disabilities such as cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, or autism. Others spoke of issues with language, such as new Canadians and some northern Saskatchewan residents who could not understand English. The impact of both situations is the same; people are unable to access supports and services and therefore do not have opportunities to fully participate in their communities. The proposed solutions we heard for improving these situations include better use of communicative aids and devices, person-centred planning that gives individuals a chance to describe their needs, and recognition of the need to translate information about programs and services into other languages.

The communication barriers described in our consultation with the Deaf community were much bigger. People who are Deaf attempted to describe their silent world, which for many is incredibly isolating, and they told us Saskatchewan’s system is failing them. Living in a world of silence makes it so much harder to learn any language, let alone communicate in a way that can be understood. Being unable to sign to your teacher, bus driver, caregiver or classmates because they cannot understand or communicate back leaves Deaf people very isolated. Much of the discussion centred on issues such as development of language, availability and quality of interpreters, and recognition of American Sign Language (ASL) as an official language of instruction.

We heard that children who are deaf are not learning how to communicate. The Deaf community told us Saskatchewan is far behind other provinces with respect to Deaf education. There is no longer a school for the Deaf in Saskatchewan, so some parents are sending their Deaf children out of province or even to the United States to attend a school for the Deaf. Most parents cannot afford this expense, and are frustrated with the fact that they have to send their children elsewhere to get an adequate education. They spoke of “lost generations” since the Saskatchewan School for the Deaf closed. They fear that without recognition of their language and culture, young people who are deaf will grow up without developing any communication skills and continue to be isolated and unable to be included in their communities.

## Finding Supports and Services: Navigation and Co-ordination

*“It has been extremely difficult working with ‘the system’ particularly when one doesn’t know how to navigate it. We would learn things as we go. There never seemed to be one major hub where we could get all our information. We would constantly be led from one contact to another, often coming up in dead ends.”*

*– written submission*

At the public forums we frequently heard concerns about the lack of co-ordination of services for people who experience disability. Individuals and families told us they were often frustrated trying to use a service system that is difficult to understand and fragmented. They said the system often seems to operate in silos that do not work together. It could work much better if the focus was on a seamless system of services to meet the needs of individuals and families experiencing disabilities.

We often heard about policies that reinforce an experience of feeling more like a commodity than a person. For example, many people who came to the forums said they were tired of always having to prove their disability and provide all variety of personal information to demonstrate they are eligible for services. They told us this constant repetition of information is burdensome, intrusive and a significant barrier to getting the services and supports they need. A universal eligibility form was seen as a way to reduce this repetition and address information sharing among Ministries.

Service providers realize there are shortcomings with the system and that is frustrating for them, as well. They told us they are often unable to share important information with other service providers that would allow them to better support the people they serve. They told us they would like to be given more time to collaborate with all other service providers to see how they could help each other provide better and faster help.

A consistent message that we heard at the forums was the need to change the service system. People told us the system needs to become much more client focused, collaborative and seamless. A commonly proposed solution was for the provincial government to create a “super-ministry” to co-ordinate and provide all the services and supports required by people and families experiencing disabilities. Others recognized the need to bring together services but felt that putting all disability-related supports in one Ministry did not serve the goal of an inclusive and integrated system.

Probably the most prominent issue we heard throughout the consultation process was the difficulty that individuals, families and service providers have in finding the right supports and services for people at home, school and work. Trying to navigate the system is overwhelming and confusing, they told us, and there are so many organizations and ministries involved that they do not know where to start. Many told us what is needed is a central source for information about all programs, supports and services.

Another commonly proposed solution is to use system navigators to help guide people to the services they require. Still other suggestions include using a telephone service like the United Way’s 211 Saskatchewan service for help and direction, and creating a web portal that could serve as a “one-stop shopping” spot or hub for programs and services.

Information sharing was a valuable, indirect benefit of the forums. We heard and saw people sharing their experiences with the system and offering each other tips on how to navigate it. We think it would be great if this networking process could be supported and continued.

## Fair Access and Eligibility: Challenging Medical Diagnosis and Income-Testing

*“To make Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for people with disabilities, programming must not be delivered solely on the basis of diagnosis. It has to address the functional impact of disabilities on quality of life and community participation.”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

People in all areas of the province told us how hard they struggle to get the support and services they need in order to try to participate and gain acceptance in their communities. Many spoke of exhaustion and disappointment with the process. We were told eligibility factors frequently restrict or even bar access to supports and services. Diagnosis, age, race, place of residence and income-testing are among the most common factors that cause problems, we were told.

Many people said there is a growing problem with inconsistency and inequity within the current disability eligibility processes. One of the more frequent issues in this regard is that of applicants being denied service because they did not meet a specific diagnosis or medical criteria. Community Living Service Delivery (CLSD) and the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living (SAIL) are two programs, in particular, whose disability eligibility criteria need to be reviewed. Many said programs should be based on an individual's needs rather than a medical diagnosis.

People also said they were being denied support or getting only limited support due to personal income levels. They told us income-testing methods for some programs seemed unfair and arbitrary. We were also told it is a process that is both intrusive and a barrier to accessing services.

Proposed solutions for improving access to services focused on minimizing as many eligibility barriers as possible. One suggestion raised in many of the priority areas was to measure disability eligibility based on its impact on the person and family instead of the current system of using medical information. People also told us the assessment process needs to accurately describe the supports required by people experiencing disabilities. Some told us income testing should be removed altogether so it no longer creates barriers to service.



## Life Span Continuity: Support Across Life-Cycle Transitions

*“Saskatchewan is a province in desperate need of a new goal, a complete vision to create effective, comprehensive, co-operative, whole-life strategies for people with disabilities.”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

A recurring concern of people across the province is the lack of a “continuum of care” from the first experience of disability through each phase of life. Gaps in support that tend to occur at consistent transition points leave people feeling vulnerable. Some important transitions include moving from high school to post-secondary education, entering the workforce for the first time or retiring. People are frustrated because services and supports often are not available at life’s critical transition points due to age and/or ineligibility based on medical diagnosis. Parents, friends and community members are often called on to fill in the gaps when services or supports are no longer available. This is a common issue when people experiencing disability age out of high school and they are neither employed nor taking post-secondary education or training. It’s like “falling off a cliff,” according to some people and families who’ve experienced it.

We were told these gaps in the transition process occur in a number of priority areas. The transition from early childhood learning programs to Kindergarten, for instance, is often a problem because the elementary school system does not have the services required to accommodate the needs of many young children experiencing disability. It gets worse for high school students wishing to enter post-secondary educational facilities. We were told post-secondary institutions and training centres lack information to understand or adequately accommodate the learning requirements of students with disabilities. Some people suggested Grade 12 is the highest level of education that many students experiencing disabilities achieve, at least in part, because of these issues.

Getting a job also can be a bigger challenge than usual for these young people. We were told that some high school students experiencing disabilities are not included in work opportunities experienced by their peers, including volunteerism. As a result, they do not receive on-the-job mentoring and have fewer opportunities to develop the kinds of work and social skills employers look for. We heard that this is part of the reason some students experiencing disabilities have difficulty obtaining a job after completing their post-secondary education.

Individuals and families experiencing these issues had strong opinions on how to deal with them. The most commonly proposed solution is a consistent, life-long support and planning process focusing on the needs of the individual. We were told this could be accomplished through a collaborative process in which service providers, individuals, caregivers and agencies develop a plan that supports the needs of the individual and family. Many emphasized that this collaborative process must occur well before the person experiencing the disability reaches 18 years of age, and some suggested transition teams should be directed by the individual or family.

## Building for the Future: Disability Services for Children

*“Pre-school children with disabilities in the North are at a greater disadvantage because there are fewer resources to screen, diagnose and direct them to existing support programs. Without basic screening or early diagnosis, they cannot access support during their most formative years.”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

Issues relating to supports and services for children experiencing disabilities were raised across many of the priority areas. Many families told us how hard it is for them to access services for their children in the right way and at the right time. They told us there should be a way to make sure children get the best start possible. Many praised the support provided through the Early Childhood Intervention Programs (ECIPs); however, they also told us these programs are often underfunded and could be doing more to support children experiencing disabilities. We heard the program should be expanded in order to help more children and that ECIP funding for First Nations children on reserve needs to be restored.



We heard there are significant challenges with the availability of therapies for children. Families often have to pay out of pocket for additional therapy service, which creates another barrier. Many told us this was a short-sighted approach because better access to therapies early on would help improve functioning and reduce costs down the road. Others told us poor collaboration between education and health providers creates additional barriers to therapeutic support.

Families told us children have trouble accessing aids, technical services and human support to help them participate at school and in their communities. We were told it is a challenge getting access to equipment and support from health and education systems. There is also a lack of portability for these supports between home and school.

Many families said they want their children to be able to participate in recreational and leisure activities just like other children. But they said there is lack of support, awareness and training that would allow them to play with their peers. This leaves children who experience disability on the sidelines, they said.

Parents and young people told us Saskatchewan needs to do more for children with disabilities. And most of them said a good way to start would be to improve the availability of supports and services such as therapies and equipment. Some families told us they wanted an option to receive self-directed funding so they could purchase supports themselves. Others suggested Saskatchewan should establish a “children with disabilities program” like the one in Alberta. They said this kind of program could offer a range of personal and financial supports to children and their families.

# Priority Area Themes

## Support for Caregivers

*“If we had daily programming for the person living with a disability, and guidance from a support worker on a daily basis, this will give hope back to the family and to the person who has the disability...”*

*– written submission*

Throughout the consultations, family caregivers openly shared their experience with disability and the impact on their lives. We heard of the incredible commitment and devotion of caregivers. Yet, many people told us they felt unsupported, stressed out and isolated. Families noted the multiple “professional” roles they must play as caregivers – nurse, advocate, counsellor, therapist, taxi, care aide and nutritionist – often leave little time or energy to simply enjoy being a parent or spouse.

“I just want to be a dad,” one father said.

Some family caregivers told us they worry they are not spending enough time with the rest of the family. They also said they are often exhausted and worry about how their own health might affect the rest of the family.

The financial burden of caregiving was another common challenge identified by families. We heard most families are required to pay out of pocket for a lot of disability-related expenses. Some said they had to quit their jobs or take low-income or part-time work in order to have enough time to care for young and adult children. Lost income is a challenge to these families. We heard over and over again that some type of financial benefit or tax credit would greatly reduce the financial burden on families. Greater flexibility by employers is also needed to accommodate their caregiving role. Families provide a very valuable service by caring for their family members. Better recognition and financial support is needed, as this is much less costly than other residential options, they said.

“I just really need a break!”

That is our way of summing up one of the biggest and most commonly heard needs of family caregivers. One mom told us she cannot even get away for a weekend without checking her son into the hospital due to his complex medical issues. A vacation is completely out of the question.

Although the need for that level of care is exceptional, it became very evident to us that options for respite are very limited, expensive and require a lot of planning to succeed. And in any event, the eligibility requirements for receiving respite support are restrictive. The problems relate to diagnosis requirements, a complicated process and the threshold for income testing. And while there was a lot of praise for respite workers, some people reported inconsistent or poor quality service.

Clearly, improvements to respite care would go a long way toward improving life for caregivers. We heard several ways to accomplish this, including:

- providing greater financial support to families for purchasing respite services;
- improving the range and availability of respite options, including “emergency” respite options;
- revising eligibility rules so more people can access the service;
- creating more flexibility in who can be paid to provide respite, in particular family members; and
- improving the consistency and quality of respite services by supporting training, standards and accountability.

In addition to respite, parents told us they often have trouble finding a licensed child care centre that will accept their child. It can be even tougher if the child is older. Eligibility for programs like the Child Care Subsidy have age cut-offs that exclude older children even though some still require after-school care.

Many family caregivers also told us they would like to receive training just like paid caregivers. They said training would help them better understand, manage and support the person they are caring for.

Some family caregivers, and caregiver groups like Approved Private Service Home (APSH) operators, also identified issues with basic funding. Payments made to

caregivers on behalf of individuals who require care (for example through the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability program) were said to be too low. Potential solutions included calls for essential funding and greater recognition of the extra costs of disability.

Paid caregivers have their own challenges. Many spoke about the shortage of support workers, heavy workloads and high staff turnover. Low wages and benefits are a significant part of the problem, they said, adding a certification program and competitive salaries would help attract and retain skilled staff. We also heard that paid caregivers could benefit from more training and knowledge of other programs and services.

Caregiver accountability is an issue, too. A safe and confidential client grievance system could be useful in promoting the accountability of caregivers, we were told.

## Accessible Housing

*“Accessible housing is key to creating an inclusive community. Regardless of the disability, if your community does not have appropriate housing that is providing supports, it will always be a struggle to feel part of the community. I could talk for hours on this topic but the summation is – you have to be allowed to live in a community to be a part of it.”*

*– paraphrased from online survey*

Our public meetings made it evident that finding an accessible home in the community is not easy for people experiencing disability. Most available housing simply does not accommodate their needs. Finding accessible properties to rent was especially challenging. There is a shortage of these properties in safe and secure neighbourhoods.

One young man with a disability chose to move from his reserve to Regina where he is hoping to find employment. His experience is telling.

“I really want to work so I moved into Regina to look for a job,” he said. “I found a place to live that I could afford, although it is in a rough area of town. Within the first two weeks of being there, someone broke into my place and stole my TV and video games. This wasn’t the worst – the door was broken such that it can’t be locked now. My landlord hasn’t fixed the lock yet (10 days later) and I feel scared at night because I am in a wheelchair. But I really want to work.”

There is a need to increase the supply of safe, affordable, accessible housing throughout the province and we heard suggestions on how this could be done, including:

- providing incentives to builders to create more accessible homes;
- revising social housing policies so that the percentage of accessible housing units matches the percentage of low income people experiencing disability;
- promoting the development of new housing designs, including units that have living space for caregivers;
- requiring new housing projects to have a portion of their homes be accessible; and
- locating new accessible properties close to transportation hubs and/or services.

We also heard it would be helpful to have information available through a “one stop shop” where people can find out what kind of accessible housing is available in their location.

Another idea was to set standards for accessible housing design. People told us about common accessibility requirements when looking for housing, including no stairs, low counter tops, wide doorways and hallways, and adapted bathroom fixtures. However, we were told these accessibility features often are not even standard in “accessible homes” and that it is very frustrating seeing housing advertised as accessible when it is actually far from it.

We heard it would be helpful if accessible building designs and codes were standardized to give builders and contractors clear guidelines for creating accessible homes. Accessible design, some pointed out, should also set standards and guidelines to accommodate a variety of disabilities such as people experiencing sensory and cognitive disabilities.

When it comes to making existing homes more accessible, we heard it can be very difficult to hire a contractor to complete these kinds of modifications and some projects can be very expensive. Some told us they would need financial help to make their homes more accessible, but pointed out the programs designed for such help are difficult to access and provide too little money. We heard a number of suggestions about how home modification support could be improved, including:

- enhancing the provincial home modifications program by increasing funding for the program, simplifying the rules and paperwork and developing more flexible income testing thresholds;

- providing incentives for landlords to make their properties more accessible; and
- creating a “one stop shop” to provide information, but also to prioritize applications for home modifications and identify contractors that are affordable and have experience with these types of modifications.

It was pointed out that modifying personal homes would make them more functional, which would allow people experiencing disabilities to stay in their homes longer. Others suggested having a subsidy or access to funding for ongoing maintenance for accessible homes would help people to stay in their homes even longer.

## Supported Housing Options<sup>3</sup>

*“If we had an apartment or some place they could live with the assisted living program, this would give the person with a disability a chance to move one step ahead rather than one step back.”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

Finding a home that meets the individual’s needs and preferences is one of the common challenges we heard during our consultations. Individuals and families told us there are limited options and significant gaps in the types of homes and related supports available to people experiencing disability. This is even more of a problem for First Nations, northern and rural citizens. Some individuals are forced to leave their family, community and support network to live in another community where supports are available. One woman wrote of her struggle to find a local, accessible home and personal care services for her husband after he required the use of a wheelchair.

“In our case my husband had to be housed away from his wife (me) and the children for whom he used to be the primary caregiver, he became depressed and only survived 17 months,” she wrote.

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<sup>3</sup> *Supported Housing Options, formerly Supported Accommodation. Feedback received during the public consultations suggested the term “supported accommodation” is unclear. A decision was made to use a similar and simpler term in hope that the underlying concept would be more obvious to the reader. Supported Housing Options is also the term used in the Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan.*



Others shared stories of young adults forced to live in seniors homes when no other accommodations could provide the level of care they needed. We heard about individuals living in hospitals for long periods because there were no available in-home care services. That is not only the wrong service for the individual, it is also more costly.

“Individuals living in hospitals could have funded a home by now with the amount of money spent on housing them there,” one person told us in a written submission.

We also heard concerns about home care programs. Many people told us they are not getting enough support or the right kind of support to remain in their home. Often there are rigid limits on services such as homemaking and personal care. They also noted issues with availability of the service, particularly in rural and northern areas where even personal well-being can be compromised.

Others suggested some people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and mental health conditions are being housed in correctional facilities due to a lack of supported housing options. We heard that without proper community support to address their disabilities, people can end up in jail.

Many people said they have limited choices in other aspects of life, not just housing. Imagine having no choice about the food you eat, the movies you watch, what time you go to bed, the people you live with or those who provide you with personal care. People told us they want more control over their lives and described feeling powerless and disrespected. These issues were particularly challenging for people receiving homecare or living in institutions. They feel they are constantly at the mercy of someone else’s schedule. This means having to wait for things most of us take for granted, like going to the bathroom, bathing, and even changing the television channel.

It became clear to us that many people want more personalized care that would help them stay in their own home or a home within their community. Suggestions on how to do this include greater flexibility in funding and eligibility requirements, strengthening existing support models, and developing creative housing options. Basically, people told us a change in philosophy is needed so that housing and support services are built around the needs of the people served rather than the needs of the system.

We heard many interesting ideas for improving supported housing options, including:

- separating support services from residential ones to give people more choice in where they live and/or the support services they can access;
- locating a number of people close to each other so they can share a nearby hub of services – this is a model used in some seniors communities;
- providing flexible funding to support semi-independent apartments in parents' homes or community living arrangements similar to the Community Living Service Delivery (CLSD) model; and
- creating more homes where individuals can share with a roommate who can provide some support, instead of having a service provider for all supports.

To summarize, people told us they want more say in how funding for them is used (self-directed funding) and they want living arrangements that are better tailored to their personal needs.

## Education

*“Publicly funded education is intended to meet the educational needs of all children in society. Educational opportunities should be equitable for all students and not limited by a where a student lives, their ability to learn or the school division’s ability to pay...”*

*– paraphrased from written submission*

People across Saskatchewan told us they believe it is important to provide education to all students regardless of where they live, the school they attend or their ability to learn. However, many told us they feel this ideal vision for education is more of a goal than a reality.



We heard stories from parents who are struggling to get the help their children need to learn and be included in the classroom. One mother described how difficult it is getting supports for her children who have Attention Deficit Disorder.

“I just have to get them through the K-12 system, as difficult as it will be, since it is not well suited to kids with learning disabilities. I will continue to advocate for my children to make sure they get what they need, but it is an uphill battle in the school system. It takes all the strength that I have just to get through the tears and frustration that my kids experience every day.”

Many people told us school administrators, teachers, education assistants and students need to be educated on disabilities to help them better understand and support students with disabilities. Children who experience disabilities are too often forced to try to adjust to the school system instead of the system providing the supports they need to help them learn and feel like they belong.

“It is like putting round pegs in square holes,” one parent said.

Many people saw teachers as strong advocates for students with disabilities. They are not limited in their knowledge of how to support children with disabilities, we were told, they are limited by time and access to supports.

“Teachers have identified there is a lack of the necessary time, resources and supports available to directly impact children and youth with learning, cognitive, or physical disabilities,” was stated in a written submission to our team.

Smaller classroom size, greater access to educational assistants, using supportive technology and equipment, and improving accessibility inside and outside of schools, including playgrounds, are some of the proposed solutions we heard.

Another commonly raised issue is the shortage of diagnostic and therapeutic services like occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech-language pathology and psychology. Educators and parents told us they are frustrated by long wait times for assessment and treatment of children. Some school division representatives said they are frustrated that the health system is unloading some responsibilities to school divisions. They said this is forcing school divisions to hire their own occupational and physical therapists because students are waiting too long for help from health region professionals.

We were told that early years interventions, particularly for children with neurodevelopmental disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or FASD, are critical to effective treatment. The reality, according to parents, is that services in this province are inadequate and far behind those in other provinces. They report that there are long waiting lists and a lack of choices in treatment options.

We heard a lot of support for the creation of an “advocate” role, someone who could help families determine which supports their children need and make sure they get them. Parents told us that advocates could be helpful mediators between families and school boards and would be well positioned to recommend improvements to government.

Here, too, we heard resources and supports need to be individualized. While this already is policy direction from government, we were told some schools are doing a much better job of it than others. We heard that support for the individual student should include more involvement by the student as well as from parents, teachers and other professionals, support staff and service agencies. Several people noted co-ordinated planning has to be more than the Inclusion and Intervention Plans (IIPs) used by schools. Some told us IIPs are too complicated – trying to understand the information and fill out the forms can be overwhelming. Some also wondered whether plans are being implemented.

Interestingly, we heard from many who said the needs of some students could be better served in separate learning environments. Many people in the Deaf community, in particular, strongly support a school for the Deaf or, at least, more opportunities to develop cluster programs that focus services within one school. Some parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder told us the cluster program approach would also be beneficial for their children. We heard cluster programs provide an option for specialized learning but also promote inclusion and opportunities for the children to learn from each other.

As mentioned earlier in our report, we heard a good deal about issues surrounding life's transitions. From one level of school to the next or from an educational institution to the working world, transitions are very complicated and stressful for people experiencing disabilities. We heard that transitions are poorly planned and often involve a breakdown in communication.

The transition from high school to employment or post-secondary education is one of the most difficult, we heard. High school is the highest level of education for many people experiencing disabilities. We were told that is at least partly due to the lack of help available to those preparing for this major change. The suggested improvements we heard include an earlier focus on work and life skills, job interview and resume-building skills, and learning how to apply to post-secondary institutions. People told us they would like to see a transition plan in place for each individual moving toward adulthood. They said the plan should focus on the needs of the individual and be created through the co-ordinated efforts of all service providers, caregivers and agencies.

Post-secondary institutions require much better supports for students with disabilities, we heard. This is a particularly important area because many of the supports and services students receive in elementary and high school end when they finish high school. Many people we talked to had suggestions regarding how post-secondary institutions could improve the way students experiencing disability are supported during their education, including:

- educating instructors and school administrators on their duty to accommodate students with disabilities;
- educating instructors on appropriate accommodations for a range of disabilities;
- improving physical accessibility at educational institutions, including washrooms and transportation options;
- increasing student access to disability supports such as specialized devices and accessible course materials; and
- creating more peer support groups, tutors and mentorship opportunities specifically for students experiencing disability.

# Employment

*“(My son) would love to lead a successful, independent life in Saskatchewan. His disabilities present some barriers that impact type, location and environment of work, limiting him to an office environment with a scent-free policy. Intelligent, educated, with a lot to offer an employer, he just needs a chance to show an employer what he can do.”*

*– written submission*

People experiencing disability want to be independent and contribute to their communities through volunteering or working. Our team heard similar sentiments at every public consultation across Saskatchewan. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities are finding it difficult to secure meaningful work. They told us about the frustration they feel when they cannot find work or when they find a job that leaves them under-employed. Some believe negative attitudes and misconceptions about disabilities are barriers to employment. And they see this discrimination not simply as a barrier to a job, but a barrier to feeling included in a workplace or workforce. They told us some employers are fearful of hiring people with disabilities because they see them as an extra expense rather than an opportunity. This, we were told, in spite of the fact there is increasing evidence that people with disabilities make very good employees.

We were not surprised to hear there is a need to educate employers about the benefits of hiring and including people with disabilities. And we heard some good ideas about how to do that, including:

- building a business case showing the benefits of hiring people with disabilities;
- educating employers on the range of disabilities and their impacts, and how to appropriately accommodate;
- working with unions to make hiring policies and job descriptions more flexible and accommodating to people with disabilities; and
- developing employer networks to share and exchange information on policies and best practices on recruiting and accommodating people with disabilities.

Many also told us there is a need to educate employers on their legal duty to accommodate people experiencing disabilities and respect their human rights. A common suggestion we heard in this regard is that employers be more flexible by creating jobs that make the best use of the skills and abilities of people experiencing disability. Supports such as job developers, who work with people experiencing disability to find or develop jobs for them, and advisors to help employers create such jobs, were also suggested as ways to promote employment of people with disabilities.

There was also lots of talk about direct support to help people with disabilities get jobs. Some of the key suggestions here included using navigators or job coaches, and providing more opportunities for people with disabilities to get job site experience through volunteering work terms and job shadowing. For those who already have jobs, meanwhile, mentorships and peer support groups could promote understanding and belonging. Many people told us the attitudes and misconceptions of employees – not just employers – need to change in order to achieve inclusion and acceptance in the workplace.

On the other hand, we heard some employers are models of accommodation and inclusion for people with disabilities. These “champion” employers have developed new or flexible ways to identify, recruit, interview and support people experiencing disabilities. A number of people said the Government of Saskatchewan should lead by example, become an employer champion and encourage other employers to do the same.

## Transportation

*“It is almost impossible to get dropped off and picked up at the times and places you want... I gave up phoning (accessible transit), because the answer was never ‘Sure we can get you there and back no problem.’”*

*– online survey*

Effective transportation is crucial to people with disabilities trying to live their everyday lives. That was a resounding message we heard at consultations around the province. Transportation is a necessity not only for accessing services and supports, but also for getting to work, school and moving around the community.

“If I can’t get there, I can’t work. I can’t have a job,” is how one man put it.



One of the greatest transportation challenges we heard about is the limited availability of accessible transportation for people experiencing disability. Whether it was accessible buses and taxis or the paratransit system, people told us there is never enough. They also said there is not enough funding available to modify their own vehicles and that this is another limitation. Many explained how frustrating it is trying to participate in the community while being entirely dependent on someone else for transportation. One woman told us in a written submission her son is severely restricted in his activities because paratransit in her community operates for a very limited number of hours.

“I am tired of my son spending every evening in his bedroom,” she wrote.

We also heard how difficult it is having to plan everything far in advance and having limited flexibility to change the time, date or route with paratransit. This sometimes forces people to use accessible taxis instead, but we heard they are expensive and in short supply.

Many told us the capacity of the transportation system for people experiencing disabilities could be greatly improved by increasing funding and subsidies for personal vehicle modifications and by requiring taxi companies to have a number of accessible taxis available.

Some also suggested regular city buses could be modified to be more accessible to people experiencing disabilities. That would also relieve pressure on the other systems, they said. We heard several ideas on how this could be achieved, including:

- making all buses “low floor”;
- putting more accessibility features on buses such as audible announcements for stops and door openings;

- improving infrastructure such as drop off points, curbing, and walkways; and
- improving snow removal.

Having people in place to teach individuals how to use the bus system would be helpful as well, we heard.

Working together to create new transportation options was a key idea we heard. One possibility discussed would see public and private community-based organizations create co-ops to share accessible vehicles, make better use of funds and provide more service. Another suggestion is for communities to develop networks of volunteer, on-call drivers and/or vehicles.

The lack of available accessible transportation and operators is particularly apparent in northern and rural communities. Most people in those areas told us there is a critical need to develop a strategy to address transportation issues specific to rural and northern communities. We heard the Strategy should address capacity, accessibility, maintenance of vehicles and roads, operating costs, and a reservation system that includes a co-ordinator to schedule medical transportation needs.

Drivers are a critical part of any transportation system. And while several people told us stories about their favorite transit drivers and described them as patient and supportive of their needs, most told us all public transportation drivers could be more understanding and accommodating. There were many suggestions on how to improve the relationship between drivers and riders experiencing disabilities. The most common proposal is for drivers to receive sensitivity and safety training in order to better meets the needs of people experiencing disability.

A few people said drivers should offer door-to-door service to assist people with disabilities. The story below highlights the additional service that is sometimes required in order to make sure all passengers are treated safely and respectfully.

“I need assistance to unlock the door at my house, so when the transit driver dropped me off on the ramp and it was 35 degrees below zero out I knew I was in trouble. Most drivers do not feel it is their responsibility to ensure that I am inside safely as he left me on the ramp, which was covered in snow and therefore very difficult for me to get to my door. I sat outside for about 20 minutes before someone came by and helped me the rest of the way up the ramp and opened the door. Surely we can have better support than this!”

# Community Inclusion

Many people we talked to during our public consultations talked about all the challenges and barriers they experience in being included in their communities. We heard many possible solutions, too. Community inclusion is a broad priority area that includes areas such as accessibility, public education and awareness, aids and technical devices, and access to recreation and leisure activities.

## Accessibility

*“I can’t even get a proper exam at the doctor’s office because they don’t have any examining tables that are accessible. Medical offices should be required to have at least one adjustable bed to accommodate people who (because of limited mobility) cannot get up on a standard exam table.”*

*– stakeholder meeting*

Accessibility is simply a fundamental need for people experiencing disability. Yet repeatedly we heard stories about buildings and community spaces, as well as information, communications and services that are not fully accessible. Many individuals told us they often do not have the choices and opportunities people without disabilities typically take for granted.

In addition to problems finding accessible examination rooms at health facilities, for instance, we heard that treatment and laboratory areas are often inaccessible and so are parking spaces near hospitals. The broader public may assume these services are fully accessible but often, we were told, they are not.

We heard about buildings that barely meet minimum standards of physical accessibility even though some of them have accessible washrooms. And accessible washrooms are not so accessible to people with certain disabilities. For example, a bathroom may be marked as accessible, but it may have an incorrect toilet height or the doorway is too small to accommodate a larger wheelchair. And it may not be marked with proper signage for people with vision disabilities.

Accessible communications and information are particularly significant issues for people with vision, hearing and speech disabilities. A number of people in the Deaf community told us the lack of sign language interpretation services continues to exclude and isolate them from the greater community. People who travelled to other provinces told us Saskatchewan is significantly behind in providing accessible environments.

The topic of universal design came up in many forums. Universal design involves designing products and spaces to be accessible to as many people as possible. It is a good idea, we heard, and the concept should be further defined by all levels of government and industry in order to revise building codes and standards in Saskatchewan. A good starting point for the application of universal design would be new public facilities such as clinics, hospitals and other government buildings related to healthcare.

Another commonly proposed solution is development of a strong, effective and enforceable accessibility act or a “Saskatchewan Citizens with Disabilities Act” to ensure the province becomes truly accessible and inclusive for all citizens.

## Availability of Disability Supports

*“People with disabilities in our society are over-represented amongst the poorest citizens. It is important that the evolving Saskatchewan Disability Strategy recognizes the substantive economic hardships that people with disabilities endure.”*

*– written submission*

The lack of many types of disability supports for daily living and community participation was raised by many. This includes gaps in the availability of aids and devices for a range of disabilities and as well as gaps in the availability of human supports such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, mentors, job coaches, and educational assistants. Many spoke about the importance of these supports for daily functioning and independence, and thereby achieving a better quality of life.

A number of participants expressed concerns with the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living (SAIL) program. The issues we heard include:

- underfunding and inability to meet demand;
- difficulty accessing equipment that meets individual needs, choices and options;
- equipment maintenance takes too long;
- no eligibility for First Nations people living on reserve; and
- aids and equipment not available to people living in residential care.

It was suggested SAIL be redesigned to provide individual choice and more up-to-date technologies. Other suggested improvements to the program include providing funding directly to individuals and families so they can access the equipment and technology they choose, and developing a pool of equipment and supportive devices that could be made available to community-based organizations for use by clients. People called for better services and supports to address equipment repair and that these services be available after hours and on weekends for urgent repairs to wheelchairs and other essential equipment.

A related issue here, as in other priority areas, is the need to improve access to rehabilitation therapies including physical and occupational therapies, speech and language pathology, as well as psychological services. People are experiencing problems with the funding, availability, and timeliness of these services. Proposed solutions for improving access to rehabilitation services went beyond increasing the number of available therapists. People told us policies must be changed to provide more individualized levels of service in order to meet people's needs.

## **Social Isolation**

Isolation is another common problem. We were told it is often due to a lack of opportunities to participate in social activities and a limited availability of attendants or others required to accompany individuals on social outings. Of course, location can be another factor where there are even fewer supports available for participating in the community.

At the public consultations one individual described her isolation: "After finishing high school and as I get older my world just gets smaller and smaller."

## **Sports and Recreation**

People experiencing disabilities – both people with disabilities and their supporters – share a desire to participate in social and recreational activities with their peers and say they would like to have more chances to do so. They want more opportunities to create friendships and say recreation programs should be adapted to include people with disabilities. A good place to start, they told us, is to give coaches the tools and supports that would allow them to include people with disabilities in sporting activities. Awareness education for teammates would help promote their participation and inclusion on sports teams.

Another common suggestion was that playgrounds, parks and recreation facilities be made more accessible so that everyone can enjoy them together. There also needs

to be greater promotion of existing sports and recreation opportunities so people understand how to get involved in community programs such as Special Olympics and Saskatchewan Wheelchair Sports Association. Reducing associated costs would help as well.

## Safety, Security and Justice

### *Excerpt from United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*

*Article 1: The purpose of the present Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.*

*Article 4: States Parties undertake to ensure and promote the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind on the basis of disability.*

The priority areas for the Disability Strategy consultations were first identified in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth*. However, we were open to the possibility that additional areas of focus might come to light through the consultation process and that is precisely what happened. We heard a number of issues related to the rights of people experiencing disability and concerns about their personal safety. As a result, we decided to create a new priority area, Safety, Security and Justice, to ensure this area receives the attention it deserves.

## Rights of People with Disabilities

At many of the forums, we heard about the lack of respect and support for the rights of people with disabilities. People often spoke of instances of discrimination and situations where human rights were not respected or where they were not able to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens of our province. They told us they are exhausted in their struggle for equal or fair treatment. They often feel powerless and defeated.

Concerns about rights and systemic barriers to equality arose in many of the priority area discussions. We were told there is a need for employers to recognize the “duty to accommodate” employees with disabilities. The duty to accommodate was also a focus of discussion with respect to community inclusion. Because facilities and services are not fully accessible, activities like eating in restaurants, participating in community programs and attending public events can be very challenging. People needing assistance from service dogs also described being denied access to public buildings and to transportation.

We heard from several people about the importance of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. They pointed to the Convention as an instrument to help ensure that people with disabilities fully enjoy their rights and freedoms and fully participate in their communities “on an equal basis with others.” One submission suggested the Convention provides a “standard of inclusion” that can help shape Saskatchewan’s Disability Strategy.

Many people told us how difficult it can be to advocate for themselves or their family members. We heard that people who experience disability often have to complain about unfair treatment in order to have their basic human rights met. They told us they are tired of fighting and want some help to address issues with the system. The solution most often suggested as a means to address and support the rights of people experiencing disability is the establishment of an advocate or ombudsman. Many saw this role as providing support and advocacy, thereby ensuring fairness and oversight in services. Many also noted the complaint system currently used to deal with issues of fairness can be costly and time-consuming. They said there could be a role for this office in creating awareness and understanding of people experiencing disabilities and dispelling myths about disabilities. Additionally, some saw the advocate as becoming a central point of contact for people looking for supports and services.

While we heard there is a general need for greater education and awareness of the rights of people experiencing disability, we were also told of a specific need for understanding in the justice system. Some types of disability are not well understood by police and corrections staff. This can affect how people with disabilities are treated and result in their rights not being recognized. More training is needed on the range of disabilities so these professionals can recognize disabilities that may not be obvious. This would improve their response, for example, to individuals with mental health issues, FASD or cognitive disabilities, regardless of whether they are victims or offenders. Similarly, better understanding within the corrections system could bring better communication with offenders experiencing disability and improve rehabilitation results.

One woman with a neurological disability described her struggle to get police to investigate her allegations. She was told she was not considered credible, but she believes her disability was the real issue.

“The police did not understand what I was saying and I could not get the support I needed,” she told us.

Overall, it was felt that raising awareness about the rights of people experiencing disability is critical to changing the current culture and becoming a more inclusive province.

## **Safety and Security**

A concern raised through the consultations was that people experiencing disability are more likely to be victimized than those who are not. Among Saskatchewan people who experience disability, women and people of Aboriginal ancestry are proportionately more vulnerable. Unfortunately, people told us, there is not enough support from the justice system to protect them.

Of concern, as well, is that there are very few truly accessible shelters for women experiencing disability. For example, if they require personal care, they must bring an attendant with them in order to gain admission to the shelter. Many Aboriginal people we spoke to also described unsafe living situations where abuse and neglect of people experiencing disability are common. But there are few options for help because of a lack of services in remote locations.

Solutions suggested for improving safety ranged from creating laws to protect people experiencing disability to calls for a provincial strategy to address violence. Other suggestions we heard include improving accessibility of women's shelters and working with First Nations to improve the safety of reserves for those experiencing disability.

## **Legal Rights of People with Intellectual and Cognitive Disabilities**

A complicated issue that came up in discussions focused on the ability to make important decisions for oneself. There are those who believe people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities need assistance making some decisions. Their friends and family will not allow them to make choices for themselves because they are worried they will be hurt or someone will take advantage of them. On the other hand, many believe all people have some ability and right to make decisions for themselves and take the view "there is dignity in risk."

Ideas on improving this situation include providing better education and more opportunities to support people making choices and decisions. And we heard that some people could benefit from legislation that lets them name someone they trust to help them make decisions, without giving away complete control.

# Conclusion

It has been an honour and privilege for us to participate on the Citizen Consultation Team. The most rewarding part of this process has been hearing from the passionate people whose voices can and will make a difference.

We met people who face many challenges as they experience living with a disability. We heard their frustration, anger and sometimes even despair that comes with day-to-day living. But we also heard loud and clear stories of success in overcoming barriers to a better life. And we heard strong words of hope for continued progress.

We talked to family members and friends who also experience frustration. They are weary of feeling that their own lives are on hold as they try to navigate a system that is often much less than user friendly. Yet these parents, siblings and friends also told us how their lives have been enriched by those they support.

We talked to people who experience disability in their working lives, including educators, caregivers, health personnel, employers, agency staff and businesses. Here, too, we heard of daily frustrations, but also of positive developments and optimistic views that things will get better.

And we talked to many people who proposed solutions, ideas for change that we will use as we work together to develop the Disability Strategy. Central to this process will be the understanding we gained through all the stories and experiences shared with us during our consultations. This critical information is the guide we will use in our journey to create inclusive communities.

Thank you again to all who have shared with us. Your ongoing support will be a key element to making Saskatchewan the best place to live in Canada for people experiencing disability.

This report is available in alternative formats upon request.  
Please contact the Office of Disability Issues to make a request:

## **Office of Disability Issues**

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