

# Disability Program Public Engagement Report

## Project Overview - Introduction

In October 2019, the Manitoba government announced its commitment to develop a new income support program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities. This program would be separate and apart from the Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) Program. The Department of Families has begun consulting with Manitobans about how they feel the new program should operate and what types of assistance should be provided.

The consultations were held through in-person workshops in November and December 2019, and an online consultation between November 2019 and January 2020. The department received 560 online responses, and 140 people attended in-person workshops.

We would like to thank Manitobans for the feedback they provided over the course of the public engagement process. Their participation in the development of this new program will have a profound effect on the lives of individuals experiencing disability, as well as their family, friends, caregivers, and many other Manitobans.

This report summarizes much of the feedback received during the public engagement process. It will be used to develop program options and inform the next steps in the development of a new income support program.

The report provides an overview of the themes explored, a short description of the EIA program, and information on the ideas and responses to the public engagement questions.

## Most Frequent Themes

Manitobans shared a wide range of feedback from many diverse perspectives during the public engagement process. Individuals shared their personal experiences and those of their families and friends, as well as the experience of advocating for those living with a disability. These perspectives came together in the following major themes:

- Manitobans are overwhelmingly in support of a new income support program for individuals with severe and prolonged disabilities.
- The new program should not just provide financial assistance. It should also include knowledgeable staff who are able to assist program recipients to find the programs and services they require.
- The new program should not include work expectations. For those who are able and wish to work, employment supports should be provided to help those individuals to seek and attain employment or volunteer opportunities.
- As a result of different experiences and abilities, including those related to diet, safety and mobility, persons with disabilities may have unique needs for food, shelter, clothes, transportation, and other items.
- The new program should increase financial benefits above the current amount received by persons with disabilities on EIA.
- Persons with disabilities may need additional medical or mental health services. Accessing these services may require financial support and service coordination, and may interfere with an individual's availability to work.
- A severe disability may result in an individual being unable to support themselves or their family financially through employment. A severe disability may also mean that an individual requires assistance in daily living. Manitobans want the new program to consider both the ability to work and the need for assistance in daily living in eligibility assessments.
- The new program should have clear eligibility guidelines and processes that allow for long-term program eligibility.

## **Manitoba's Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) Program**

The EIA program provides financial help to Manitobans who have no other way to support themselves or their families. All individuals receiving EIA are required to adhere to the same program responsibilities, such as an annual review, reporting all changes in living arrangements and updating financial information.

All individuals receiving EIA must demonstrate financial need, and are subject to income and asset tests. Individuals may also be assessed for eligibility in the disability category.

Currently, individuals in the EIA disability category have a mental or physical disability that is likely to last more than 90 days and keeps the individual from earning enough money to pay for their own or their family's basic needs. These individuals do not have work expectations.

Additional information is requested of individuals applying for the disability category, including medical information, evidence and an EIA Disability Assessment Report, completed by a medical professional. Disability eligibility is reviewed by EIA in consultation with medical professionals and/or a health team.

Individuals in the disability category receive the Income Assistance for Persons with Disabilities benefit of \$105 per month, in addition to their basic needs. This amount is provided to cover the additional costs related to living with a disability. Additional asset exemptions apply to individuals with a disability who choose to save money in an EIA disability trust or a [Canada Registered Disability Savings Plan \(RDSP\)](#).

## Feedback from Manitobans

The in-person and online public engagement processes guided participants through a series of five questions to generate feedback about the foundations of a new program. Participants were also given background information on other income support programs for persons with disabilities, as indicated below, and were asked to consider these programs as they provided feedback about the direction of the new program.

### Question 1: Do you think we should have an income support program?

#### a) We have long talked about a program for persons with disabilities that is separate from EIA. But what does that mean and why do we need it?

Manitobans are overwhelmingly in support of a new income support program for individuals with a severe and prolonged disability (81 per cent of participants). Another 15 per cent were undecided and four per cent indicated they were not in favour.

Manitobans shared a number of reasons why the current EIA Program is not able to meet the needs of individuals living with a disability. As a program with employment-based expectations as foundation, EIA is guided by the assumption that individuals will ultimately enter or re-enter the workforce and no longer require income supports. Manitobans have shared that employment is not a reality for many who experience disability.

The reporting requirements, continued verification of eligibility, and financial requirements of the EIA Program create barriers for individuals experiencing severe and long-term disability, and contribute to a loss of dignity and stigmatization. Manitobans would like the new program to recognize that permanent disabilities are those that do not change, and do not require verification of ongoing eligibility.

Here are several of the comments we received:

*“Please develop this program!”*

*“Every human being deserves to live a life with dignity.”*

*“People with severe and prolonged disabilities are more affected by stress, and sometimes the systems and processes that are currently in place can cause them a significant amount of stress. People with disabilities often require funding for transportation, and for a telephone, and this is not always easy to access in the current system.”*

#### b) What would you like this program to do for you or someone you know?

Manitobans would like this program to consider that living with a disability is expensive and increases the likelihood of those individuals experiencing poverty. Manitobans would like this program to provide individuals with funding and support for the unique and additional costs that result from living with a disability, including:

- food
- clothes
- phones
- transportation
- personal support
- daily living
- housing
- physiotherapy
- occupational therapy
- mental health programming
- psychological supports
- prescriptions
- medical equipment and supplies

Manitobans would like this program to be delivered by staff with knowledge of disabilities, experience working with individuals with disabilities, or with lived experience of disability. Manitobans with disabilities shared that they experience poorly coordinated supports across the systems they use. They would like to see this program contribute to improved access, and make it simpler to navigate the government resources and programs they need.

Manitobans with disabilities would like to contribute to their households and communities in a dignified manner. Often, individuals with disabilities feel as though they pose a financial burden for their families and support systems in the absence of appropriate financial assistance. Several Manitobans stated that a basic minimum income would be the most dignified way to support individuals with a disability, reduce poverty and improve the health of all Manitobans.

*“As a disabled person I just want a sense of assurance that my income will not be decreased.”*

*“I would love to have the peace of mind that I am contributing to finances in my household. It would make it so I have one less thing to worry about and I could focus on my health.”*

*“A separate program can allow for specialization of supports, and knowledge of practitioners to be able to effectively arrange supports. The program could also be free of regulations and process that require individuals to continually prove their continued disability and meet EIA requirements. This provides an opportunity for people to be deemed eligible for supports and receive them in an accessible manner requiring a minimum of red tape.”*

## **Question 2: Who would be supported by an income support program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities?**

The following information about the Alberta, Saskatchewan and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) programs was provided to all consultation participants.

Alberta and Saskatchewan have a separate income support program specifically for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities:

Alberta Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH): eligible clients have “severe handicap”, which is defined as an impairment of mental and/or physical functioning which causes a substantial limitation to the person’s ability to earn a livelihood, and is likely to affect that person permanently because no remedial therapy exists that would improve their ability to earn a livelihood. Eligibility is based on employability.

Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability (SAID): eligible clients have a significant and enduring disability that is permanent, substantially limits daily living activities and requires an assistive device, assistance of another person, a service animal, or another accommodation. Eligibility is based on functionality, unrelated to employability.

In addition, the federal government’s Canada Pension Plan - Disability Benefit (CPP-D) Program also supports Canadians with disabilities who have made sufficient contributions to CPP: eligible persons have a severe (prevents them from doing any type of substantially gainful work) and prolonged (long-term, indefinite, or likely to result in death) disability.

**a) Any program directed to a specific population needs to have a defined set of criteria that people must meet to qualify for the program. What criteria do you think people should meet to qualify for a program for persons with ‘severe and prolonged’ disabilities?**

Throughout the consultations, Manitobans expressed the benefits of considering both employability and ability to perform daily functions as eligibility criteria for Manitoba’s new program.

Using employability to determine eligibility would create a new program for individuals who are not able to support themselves through employment earnings. However, even those in favour of this approach often shared that work is important and that all Manitobans should benefit from the positive aspects of employment as much as their ability to participate allows.

The ability to perform daily functions was seen by many Manitobans as an opportunity to recognize hidden or intermittent disability. Manitobans shared that these individuals may be able to perform some functions of a job, but they face overall barriers in meeting their needs, which often create challenges across their lives. Respondents indicated that mental health disorders, intermittent disorders such as multiple sclerosis, and disorders on a spectrum such as autism or fetal alcohol, can be invisible disabilities that affect overall wellness, regardless of ability to work.

*“I think both employability and functionality should be considered in the definition, as one often depends on the other. Many people with disabilities are able to contribute something to society which would make their lives better, but may not be able to do so on an ongoing basis.”*

*“From my point of view, the eligibility criteria should be based on functionality (SAID) since there are people who apparently are able to work but who actually deal with a lot of challenges which can have a huge impact on their daily life. Moreover, a lot of people with disabilities also deal with mental health issues which makes their lives even more challenging.”*

*“I like Alberta's model; as an income assistance program, folks who are applying for income assistance due to disability should be applying for it because it prevents them from earning sufficient income to support themselves and their family.”*

## **b) What makes a disability severe? What makes it prolonged?**

Manitobans would like to see the new program provide income supports to individuals who are unable to earn a stable income due to disability. Many Manitobans also shared that the ability to attend to daily functions does not necessarily mean that an individual is also able to earn a continuous income. Manitobans shared that individuals who are eligible for Community Living disABILITY Services and CPP-D benefits would be experiencing severe disability, though they should not be considered as the only eligible group.

Manitobans believe the program should include disabilities affecting mental, physical or intellectual well-being. Manitobans are less concerned with eligibility based on specific types of disability, and would prefer to see eligibility determined by professionals, based on a combination of employability, ability to perform functions, and duration of disability.

Manitobans consider a prolonged disability to be one that will last an individual's lifetime, either from birth or when acquired, with no prospect of improvement. Shorter durations of 90 days or longer were not generally seen as an indicator of severe disability, though some Manitobans would consider a duration in that range.

## **Question 3: What kinds of employment support, social support and requirements should exist within the new program?**

### **a) How could this new program best support people's right and desire to work?**

Manitobans would like this program to allow, but not require, individuals to work. Many Manitobans shared that individuals who receive employment earnings should not have these earnings affect their financial eligibility for the new program or its ongoing benefits, to an upper limit. They feel this would empower individuals to work without fear of reducing or losing benefits, and allow individuals to benefit from the social and mental rewards of work.

Manitobans would like the new program to allow individuals with disabilities to receive training and employment services that are tailored to their needs, if they wish to seek employment. Manitobans would like to see employers become more knowledgeable about the benefits of employing individuals with disabilities, and are in favour of education and incentives for employers that provide employment opportunities for individuals with a disability.

*“Clients should not be required to look for work, but have opportunities to access employment supports. These supports may help individuals in accessing part-time and volunteer opportunities that can improve quality of life and mental health for these clients. There should also be a threshold of earning, under which, individuals do not see their financial benefits cut back.”*

*“The program should work with employers to encourage them to hire people with disability. Work places should be inclusive for all, Orientations for companies who are willing to employ people with disabilities. Also make a sort of subsidy for organizations that are willing to work with people with disability.”*

## **b) What kinds of social supports should be provided by the new program?**

Manitobans would like the new program to recognize the social barriers faced by individuals with disabilities living in the community. These individuals experience unique challenges to participation in social activities that other Manitobans take for granted. Some may require assistance and considerable planning to attend social gatherings, and many face significant transportation and mobility barriers. Manitobans shared that individuals with disabilities should have financial resources and social supports to help them participate in activities and connect with their communities.

Manitobans frequently shared that although services for individuals with disabilities are available through many programs, providers and agencies across the province, these systems can be difficult to navigate. Manitobans envision the new program enhancing system navigation for disability supports and services. For individuals who are not supported by community and health agencies, Manitobans would like staff within the new program to perform a navigator role to ensure individuals are able to access available services and supports.

*“I believe that supports should be in place if clients would like to be part of the community, even if it is in a volunteer capacity. To feel [like a] part of society is important for many of these individuals.”*

*“People with disabilities are often isolated, and have difficulty in getting their social needs met. People would benefit from having a place to be able to connect with others who may be able to offer them support and friendship.”*

*“Social isolation is a real concern for individuals with disabilities, loneliness affects health...referrals to social supports would contribute to overall well-being. Individuals could be given the option of having a social work liaison for support.”*

## **Question 4: How should the new program be delivered?**

### **a) How could we best offer this service in an accessible and dignified way?**

Manitobans shared that separating disability income support from employment supports would make the new program more accessible and dignified for individuals with disabilities. A separate income program recognizes that individuals with disabilities have unique barriers to participating in the labour market. In addition, although many will seek

and attain employment, permanent employment with adequate pay may not be possible. A new program that provides an income to cover the increased costs of living with a disability, and reduces reporting requirements, was frequently described by Manitobans as dignified.

Manitobans would like the new program to be delivered in accordance with [The Accessibility for Manitobans Act](#). The act sets accessibility standards for service delivery across the province. These standards range from meeting the communication needs of clients, to allowing assistive devices and adaptations, and training staff in reasonable accommodations.

Manitobans would like the delivery of this program to be equitable across the province. They would like the development of the new program to consider that medical services, mental health supports and employment opportunities vary across the province, with rural Manitobans frequently having to travel to receive the services they need.

*“Having a support program separate from EIA makes sense. EIA is meant to be a last resort program, [for people that have] the potential to work one’s way off of it, and into employment. People who are, and will continue to be, unable to work, have EIA as their only resort. That means that these people will never have any more than a bare minimum of resources, as EIA is a subsistence level income. This has a bad effect on people’s dignity, and on the quality of their lives and health.”*

*“Please provide a basic livable income to persons living with severe and prolonged physical and mental disability that have no ability or hope for employment, so they can live with dignity.”*

*“Clients living in rural and remote areas face even more challenges, due to lack of services, costly transportation and less employment opportunities.”*

**b) Should services be delivered in the same offices as EIA? Should there be case management or should the role of the new program be to only provide financial benefits?**

Manitobans would like the new program to provide both financial assistance and case management. As noted above, most Manitobans would like the new program to be delivered by staff that have knowledge of disabilities, experience working with individuals with disabilities or lived experience of disability. Many Manitobans feel there should be a range of case management services available to meet individual client needs, delivered by an assigned caseworker whenever possible.

Most respondents felt that services should not be delivered by the same staff delivering EIA, as this new program will have different eligibility and program requirements. The new program should not result in a duplication of services already provided by other government programs and external service providers.

Manitobans are generally supportive of the program being delivered by the Department of Families at sites co-located with other health, wellness and social services. Many

respondents indicated that they would like a variety of service delivery modes such as in person, online and telephone.

*“Great steps were taken to create community area offices, clients can seek services within their neighborhood. They are often accessing more than one service in the same building, and staff have created and maintain relationships amongst other programs (public health nurses, community mental health, child and family services, and primary care) in order to provide the best possible service to clients.”*

*“Staff working in this program should have knowledge and experience in the disability field - ongoing professional development and training should be provided.”*

*“Stability in the support staff for the participants. Participants have a hard time coping with staff turnover and sometimes get lost in the shuffle of the staff.”*

*“Many existing disability clients have been on caseloads with the same worker for considerable lengths of time. Please do not underestimate the importance of the relationship building that occurs to support and assist individuals. Clients vocalize how difficult it is for them to change workers and deal with someone new. Maintaining this consistency and familiarity is so important. Having this approach facilitates good relationships, accountability progress, and the client feels respected. Being assigned to one person who knows your history, your challenges, strengths and weaknesses is very important, and the benefits of this would be completely lost if a person is just calling and speaking with someone different every time.”*

**c) What kind of services do persons with severe and prolonged disabilities need?**

Manitobans shared that individuals with severe and prolonged disabilities require services or funds to receive services related to health needs, daily supports, transportation, communication, and assistance to participate in social activities. Although many services are already available, Manitobans feel there are challenges with access, coordination and availability, as well as appropriate funding levels to individuals with disabilities. Accessing transportation, mental and physical health supports, prescriptions, and medical supports and supplies, were frequently shared as challenges within the current system.

Manitobans frequently stated the value of the current Disability Health Supports Unit within the Department of Families, and the need for this program to continue being available to clients of the new program. Currently, individuals enrolled on EIA are able to have health professionals submit requests on their behalf for disability-related medical supplies and equipment. The Disability Health Supports Unit determines eligibility based on each program’s policies and legislation, and works to procure and deliver products directly to the individual. Manitobans feel that these services ensure accessibility for those with a severe and prolonged disability, and that the additional costs of living with a disability are not borne by the individual.

*“A separate program can allow for specialization of supports, and knowledge of practitioners to be able to effectively arrange supports. The program could also be free*

*of regulations and processes that require individuals to continually prove their continued disability and meet EIA requirements. This provides an opportunity for people to be deemed eligible for support and receive them in an accessible manner requiring a minimum of red tape. As money alone cannot ensure equitable access, the addition of non-financial supports is key. This should include things like health care, but also supports available to navigate the system, as, depending on the nature of the disability, it may be difficult for an individual to do this themselves.”*

*“I would not like to see any services lost in the transition of supports. Financial and health benefits need to be maintained and transportation funds should be provided to ensure access to community!”*

*“I think housing, CFS and health care sectors need to be intimately connected to this type of program, such that coordinated efforts can be made to help people in this population and to prevent redundancy and gaps.”*

**Question 5: Are there any other supports or features that have not yet been mentioned that you would like to see included in an income support program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities? Do you have any additional comments?**

Manitobans would like the new program to also consider:

- the role of employers in providing appropriate employment to individuals with disabilities
- transitions into and out of the new program
- the treatment of eligibility, benefits and savings for individuals in common-law or other long-term relationships
- the availability of funding for training and education
- the inclusion of lifelong episodic disabilities, such as multiple sclerosis or severe mental health disorders

## **Next Steps**

The Department of Families will now focus on developing the major components of the new program, guided by the feedback provided by Manitobans. We will provide Manitobans with updates, including more opportunities to provide feedback on program options. If you would like to provide your contact information to participate in future public engagements, or provide feedback in the development of the new program, please contact [EIA@gov.mb.ca](mailto:EIA@gov.mb.ca).

To all Manitobans who participated in this process, thank you for sharing your knowledge, experiences and recommendations to help guide our work.

The department will be designing the new program throughout 2020 and will engage with Manitobans to inform aspects of program design.

## Questions?

For more information about this document and the public engagement process, please contact:

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