

For December 4, 2019

Committed to supporting Disability Workers, ADWA occasionally shares written articles from professionals in the Disability sector that may be of interest to our membership. While ADWA may or may not support the opinions depicted in all submissions, we recognize that by sharing different points of view and offering information on a variety of topics, we can support meaningful discussions in the sector.

Guest post – Impact of Budget Cuts: What we know so far

All the way back in 2013, the then Conservative provincial government announced \$42 million in cuts to the PDD program, focused on services that helped people live in the community.

There was a clear message with it: *money used to take someone to Tim Horton's for coffee was money wasted.*

Disability Community has a history of challenging cuts

It was easy for the community to rally. Those dollars helped individuals get to doctors' appointments and provided other crucial daily living supports. And why shouldn't someone with a disability be able to get a coffee at Tim Horton's, like any other Albertan?

Those cuts singled people out, they showed a complete lack of understanding disability, and the cost savings wouldn't make a difference to the province.

The community response was such an embarrassment that six years later, it remains a stinging memory for people in government.

Where's the outcry today?

Here we are today, a month after the first budget from a new, UCP-majority government. This government campaigned on spending cuts, but assured the public that we wouldn't see sweeping Klein-era cuts of 20%. Commitments to the disability community and other 'vulnerable Albertans' were made and reinforced.

The comments matched the UCP platform, which included a policy on disability. (p. 75: <https://www.albertastrongandfree.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Alberta-Strong-and-Free-Platform-1.pdf>)

The dust is still settling on the month-old budget, and each day, we're learning that there are cuts, many are significant. The impacts are difficult to fully understand.

For people working in social services, and particularly the disability sector, these are uncertain times. It feels like waiting for the other shoe to drop. Except that feeling is repeated each and every day – that's a lot of shoes!

Some programs are ending on March 31, 2020, but others are ending in December, or they've already ended. Most of these cuts were not in the UCP Program platform, nor are they clear in the Budget.

Death by a thousand cuts

This is a majority government moving quickly, making many changes, often bundling many different topics all in one Bill.

For instance, a Bill that caused an uproar by firing the Electoral Commissioner included cancelling funding to Special Olympics in Alberta. There was no media coverage of the Special Olympics funding cut.

Here are cuts we know about so far:

Alberta Lottery Fund

Major grants to non-profits totalling \$1.5 Billion each year were often used for things like replacing a roof or an HVAC system. They also could be used to pay for staffing and specialty services within agencies, like therapy.

Impact: For many agencies, this ability to cover a major maintenance cost was significant as no other contracts allow for those necessary costs. Also, specialty therapists and other professional services at some agencies are supported entirely by these funds.

Children's Services

The end of Parent Link Centres takes \$77 million out of prevention and education services that supported parents and families. Instead, new contracts worth \$57 million (a 35% cut) will go to Family Resource Centres that will be tasked with covering a broad age range of children, and adding intervention services to prevention services. It was disappointing to have Minister Schulz complain that, "*Some of the money is being spent on newsletters and system navigators.*" We all know that any large system of supports can help people more effectively by communicating with newsletters and providing a resource to help navigate.

Impact: Agencies with active Parent Link Centres will likely issue severance notices in February, hoping they can hire back later in March once they hear if they are successful re-contracting. There will be no other option because of the tight time-frames. Successful agencies will likely be hiring to staff a broader range of programming, and so there may not be an overall, significant loss of jobs.

Children's cut **Financial Supports** to youth coming out of foster care. Young adults were supported with services and financial support from ages 18 to 24. The cut reduces access to the age of 22.

Impact: The 2,200 youth receiving supports will be reduced by 550. Those 550 may have no other avenue of financial or other supports.

Children's also cut or reduced funding to an **Outreach Program** aimed at young women at risk of being sexually exploited.

Impact: This small program intervened to prevent terrible outcomes for young women at risk.

AISH

While not cut, the long-fought for inflation indexing was removed. In 2020, the indexing would have added \$32 per month, bringing basic AISH to \$1,717 per month. Part of these changes to

AISH includes moving the Henson Trust rules out of Legislation and into Regulations. While this move does not remove the benefits that a family could arrange for a son or daughter who has an asset like the family home in their name, it means that changes in the future will be easy to make. There is no clarity on what changes the government is intending to make with this move, but the change would not be made without intending to make changes.

Impact: The cut to AISH is particularly sad because we all know those extra \$32 would be spent every month, and actually boost the economy.

STEP Program

With its long history of funding employers to hire youth, the program gave young people a chance to break into or try a career path.

Impact: Combined with cuts to post-secondary education, and the high potential for increased tuition and fees, the loss of student employment is significant.

Alberta Seniors Drug Benefit

This program suffered a small cut that may directly impact families with developmental disabilities. Drug coverage for non-senior dependents ends, and income-testing for seniors is coming in.

Impact: We know that there are many ageing parents with adult sons and daughters with developmental disabilities who are not linked to services and supports. These families are at risk as the parent ages and can no longer manage.

Rental Assistance Program

A 24% reduction in this program.

Impact: This may result in individuals and families no longer able to afford housing, and it puts significant pressure on Municipalities who share responsibility for affordable housing.

Legal Aid Society

A \$5 million cut to the program, plus the small team of social workers in Calgary and Edmonton offices were laid off.

Impact: This is a significant loss for adults with developmental disabilities who encounter the justice system, but often struggle to understand their rights and the processes that affect them.

Arts Funding

Cuts indirectly affect disability services, with cuts to projects like Picture This! Festival.

Impact: Many arts programs, like festivals, were made available to people with disabilities and often were free for all and/or for people with low incomes.

Daycare Subsidies

A specific area of subsidy was cut: \$400 per month kin subsidy, allowing parent working or going back to school to pay a family member for childcare. As well, a \$1,200 per year stay-at-home parent subsidy was cut for preschool costs for a parent attending school or working part-time.

Impact: Young and single parents are particularly hurt by this cut, and their longer term prospects are significantly limited.

Seniors Advocate

Added to address significant housing and seniors' facility issues, this program ends on December 31st. Seniors can go to the Health Advocate to address their issues.

Impact: With a growing seniors population, it seems like system problems will only increase. An Advocate could be valuable as programs have to grow and be added to meet the population demand.

Community and Social Services

Ministry staffing - A reduction of 220 full-time equivalent jobs is slated.

Impact: If government processes remain the same with fewer staff, decisions may take even longer.

Human Rights Education Multiculturalism Fund

A cut of \$1 million per year in grants went to special projects.

Impact: Disability has such a long way to go in Human Rights in Alberta that any loss of funding to human rights education is a concern.

Alberta Sport Connection

A cut of \$8 million per year that went to high school sports and additional funding that went to Special Olympics, plus other sports funding across Alberta.

Impact: Disability community will feel the effects of a reduction in Special Olympics programming. A loss of high school sports programming is sad for young people who may only be motivated to be in school by their participation in sports, as well as the potential for additional fees to be paid by the parents in order to sustain sports programming.

Alberta Historical Resources Foundation

Glenbow Museum in Calgary has lost \$3.6 million in funding, and other organizations have also been affected.

Impact: Glenbow and other organizations are good about offering free entry, and this kind of access is important for those with low incomes.

What can we do?

This list of cuts is overwhelming, but there are things we can all do that will help our entire community get through.

First, for individuals, now is the time to be extra attentive to doing your job well. We'll all get tired of hearing 'do more with less' and that is seldom even possible. But we can do our best to follow-through and be careful when referring someone to other services that those services are still there. We can help to prevent people from 'falling through the cracks' that may be greater in number.

Share within your agency and your networks information about changes in services. Has that community resource individuals found useful close? Make sure others in your organization and those involved in advocacy are made aware.

Everyone working in social services and the disability sector will be absorbing the worry of program cuts. As workers, we need to support each other and do our best to recognize that the

threat of cuts hits us all, differently and at different times. Let's not make this a race to the bottom, but let's wish for and focus on protecting the best services, quality jobs, and quality working conditions for our entire sector.

Particularly for individuals and families, we support, the uncertainty of today's and future cuts is worrying. As professionals, we can help by not adding to their stress. Let's not spread rumours or speculate about cuts that haven't happened. For instance, a great deal of social media chatter is about AISH being cut, but that is not what took place. If you don't know the details or who exactly is affected, don't guess. Offer to find out an answer or connect someone to a resource that will have the details.

This is a lot to ask of all of us, who have our own jobs and families to worry about. But we'll do a better job, and we'll all enjoy being around each other more – and that is where we can stay focused. We can be proud of our community and hang onto the reality that we're stronger together.

ADWA thanks Erin Waite, for contributing this E-Bulletin.

Building a Valued, Proud and
Professional Workforce

Connect

Email: disabilityworkers@gmail.com

Phone: 587-288-0909

PO Box 83029 Canyon Meadows, Calgary, AB T2W 6G8

www.ADWA.ca