

Community Disability Services Workforce: An Essential Foundation for Quality Supports

About Community Disability Services

Community disability service organizations are vital partners with the Government of Alberta in the delivery of supports to facilitate the citizenship of individuals with developmental disabilities.

Funded by the Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) program, community-based organizations provide adults with developmental disabilities with home living, employment, community access, and specialised supports in their local communities.

In 2020/2021:

- **12,578** Albertans received supports and services from the PDD program. An additional **2,000** are planning or waiting for services ¹
- **10,670** (85%) PDD-funded individuals received supports from community disability service providers. The rest were served in government-operated facilities or via Family Managed Supports (FMS) ²
- **171** community disability service agencies provided essential PDD supports across Alberta. Several agencies operate in multiple regions ³

About the Community Disability Services Workforce

Community disability service workers are essential for the delivery of quality supports. People with disabilities have the right to a skilled, professional, and sustainable workforce.

A skilled, professional workforce:

- Helps individuals with disabilities find meaningful opportunities in their communities and be contributing citizens of our province
- Supports the development of skills so that individuals can work, volunteer and build a better quality of life for themselves
- Helps keep individuals healthy and connected, reducing costs associated with hospitalization, premature institutionalization, or involvement with the justice system
- Supports families to navigate complex systems, provides respite, and helps keep families together
- Supports the Alberta Human Rights Act enshrining the rights of all individuals to opportunities to live and participate in their communities

Community Disability Services (CDS) sector workforce 2020/21:

- As many as **15,000** workers are employed in the community disability services (CDS) sector ⁵
- **73%** of workers identify as female, **60%** of workers are under the age of 45 ⁵
- **89%** of the CDS workforce are frontline workers. ⁶ COVID-related staff shortages forced many more employees in supervisory roles to take on frontline work ⁷
- **27%** of employees work multiple positions within one organization; many more hold multiple jobs across different organizations ⁵
- **62%** of employees work full-time hours ⁶
- The average hourly wage across the entire CDS workforce is **\$21.50** ⁶
- **54%** of the workforce make **under \$20.00** an hour. The average hourly wage for a Community Disability Support Worker is **\$18.76** (approx. \$39,000/year) ⁶
- **47%** of employees have been in their position for under 3 years ⁵
- Turnover between January and October 2020 (10 months) was **17%** (excluding employees who were rehired or still on the payroll but working 0 hours due to COVID-19). Turnover was as high as **50%** during this period in positions supporting individuals with complex needs ⁶
- In 2019, the CDS sector had a **26%** turnover rate ⁵
- **51%** of employees who left between January and October 2020 resigned voluntarily; 31% of employees leaving their organization were laid-off temporarily (24%) or permanently (7%) due to the pandemic or the economy ⁶

Chronic issues exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic**Staff compensation has been below market value for a long time**

- Funding contracts have not provided wage increases since 2014
- Frontline staff in the CDS sector earn significantly less than nurses, homecare workers, and teaching aides who do similar jobs
- The average hourly wage across all positions in the CDS sector in 2020 was \$21.50,⁶ compared to \$25.42 in non-profit social service organizations, \$28.21 in the for-profit sector and \$39.17 in the public sector ⁸
- On average, CDSW wages in 2020 (\$18.76) are comparable to Alberta non-profit sector wages in 2019 for occupations classified as care providers (NOC-44) (\$18.44); however, they are notably lower than public sector wages (\$26.38/hr in 2019) for equivalent roles ⁸
- Low wages have a significant negative impact on workers' health and well-being. Low wages also have serious implications for the quality of service for people with disabilities; they can result in poor support, or create a safety risk for individuals, staff, and public ⁹

*"[The sector needs] wages and benefits that mean an employee can commit to one job and know they will have some security without having to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet."*⁶

Most post-secondary disability programs have been discontinued

- Since 2008, most post-secondary disability programs have been discontinued due to low enrollments
- Low wages and demanding work have made the sector less attractive to students
- As older workers retire or reduce their work, there are few qualified young people to hire

Training needs have increased but funding and availability of training have not kept up

- With few post-secondary disability programs, service providers are forced to provide training in some of the basic skills needed to work in this sector
- Staff also need a wide range of mandatory training and specialised training in complex supports
- Training budgets are inadequate and access to training varies greatly across the province
- Time to train staff directly impacts service provision and quality of life of individuals in service
- Once trained, new workers often move to better paying jobs in healthcare, continuing care, and homecare

There is no established certification system to assess and compare staff qualifications

- Since most new workers do not have formal disability service qualifications, credentials are difficult to assess. Different organizations and training bodies have different competency criteria
- A formal certification system is needed for positions across the community disability sector
- Family Managed Services currently do not have to adhere to the same professional standards and worker training requirements as community-based agencies

COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and created new, deeper issues

- The pandemic has increased work demands and risk of exposure to COVID-19 for frontline workers, making many question whether the low wages are worth it ⁶
- The workforce is mentally and physically exhausted, not only at the front lines, but increasingly at supervisory, middle, and upper management levels ⁷
- Between January and October 2020, the CDS workforce shrank by 7%. In October 2020, 51% of service providers reported staff shortages compared to 30% in pre-pandemic January 2020 ⁶
- 37% of the CDS workforce is employed on a part-time or casual/on-call status. These workers are more likely to leave their jobs for personal demands or to seek more stable employment. With 27% of employees working multiple positions within the same organization, any turnover in these staff impacts more than one position ⁶
- Public health directives limiting workers to single sites have led to loss of staff to better-paying organizations and sectors such as health care. 44% of service providers reported single-site staffing restrictions had a major effect on their organization; 20% of service providers reported offering wage top-ups to encourage staff to return ⁶

A comprehensive multi-stakeholder workforce strategy

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded longstanding, complex, and systemic issues in the CDS sector workforce. We believe that addressing them requires a coordinated effort across multiple stakeholders for a comprehensive, evidence-based, multi-prong strategy that includes:

- Labour market intelligence, with trends and forecast of workforce supply as well as projected changes in individuals' support needs (demand shifts)
- Immediate measures to stem urgent retention concerns (e.g., wage infusions)
- Mid-term solutions to drive recruitment and skill development (e.g., role of post-secondary programs, access to ongoing training)
- Longer-term solutions to develop a vibrant and sustainable workforce (e.g., professional standards and certification system or credentialing mechanism)

Sources

1. Alberta Community and Social Services. Alberta Government Open Data: PDD Data Visualization – to December 2020. Last updated April 1, 2021.
2. Alberta Community and Social Services. Alberta Government Open Data: PDD Caseload by Service Delivery Model. Last updated April 1, 2021.
3. Alberta Council of Disability Services. Internal Accreditation Data 2020 as supplied by PDD; includes multi-regional sites, minus PDD-funded AHS sites.
4. Alberta Community and Social Services. Community and Social Services 2020–2021 Annual Report. Voted Actuals. 2021.
5. Alberta Council of Disability Services. ACDS 2019 Workforce Survey. March 2020. Actual figure is difficult to estimate due to many workers holding multiple positions within and across organizations.
6. Alberta Council of Disability Services. ACDS Survey 2020: COVID-19 Impact on CDS Workforce. February 12, 2021.
7. Alberta Council of Disability Services. COVID-19 Pandemic Year 2: Stories from Summer 2021 in Alberta's Community Disability Services Sector. November 2021.
8. Alberta Ministry of Labour. 2019 Alberta Wage and Salary Survey: Nonprofit Sector Summary Report. October 2019.
9. Alberta Disability Workers Association. The High Cost of Low Wages. 2018.

Community Disability Services Workforce in 2019-2020



there are an estimated*

15,000

workers in the community disability services workforce¹

between January and October 2020, the size of the workforce **shrank** by **7%**¹

89%

of staff work in **frontline** direct service positions¹



*workforce estimates lie between 12,000 to 15,000 workers

73%

of workers identify as **female**²



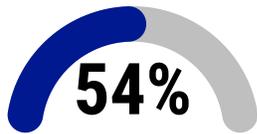
60%

of workers are under the age of **45**²



62%

of employees work **full-time** hours¹



of the CDS workforce have an **hourly wage** of under

\$20.00

¹

the average **hourly wage** across the entire CDS workforce is **\$21.50**¹

community disability services workers have an average hourly wage of

\$18.76

community disability services practitioners have an average hourly wage of

\$21.59

¹

26%

turnover rate²

5.9%

vacancy rate¹

*A number of our staff have gone through major mental health breakdowns [and] we have experienced people needing time off due to depression/anxiety. [...] We are also experiencing a shortage of staff and increased workload for current employees.*³

Many staff put in long hours in very difficult situations in order to keep clients safe.

*The management team spent many hours and sleepless nights trying to figure out how they would fill shifts and keep some residential programs open due to the depletion of available staffing.*³

as of October 2020:

51%

of organizations were experiencing **staff shortages**

48%

of organizations felt that **staff burnout and fatigue** were having major operational effects¹

Sources:

1. ACDS Survey 2020: COVID-19 Impact on CDS Workforce

2. ACDS 2019 Workforce Survey

3. COVID-19 Pandemic Year 2: Stories from Summer 2021 in Alberta's Community Disability Services Sector