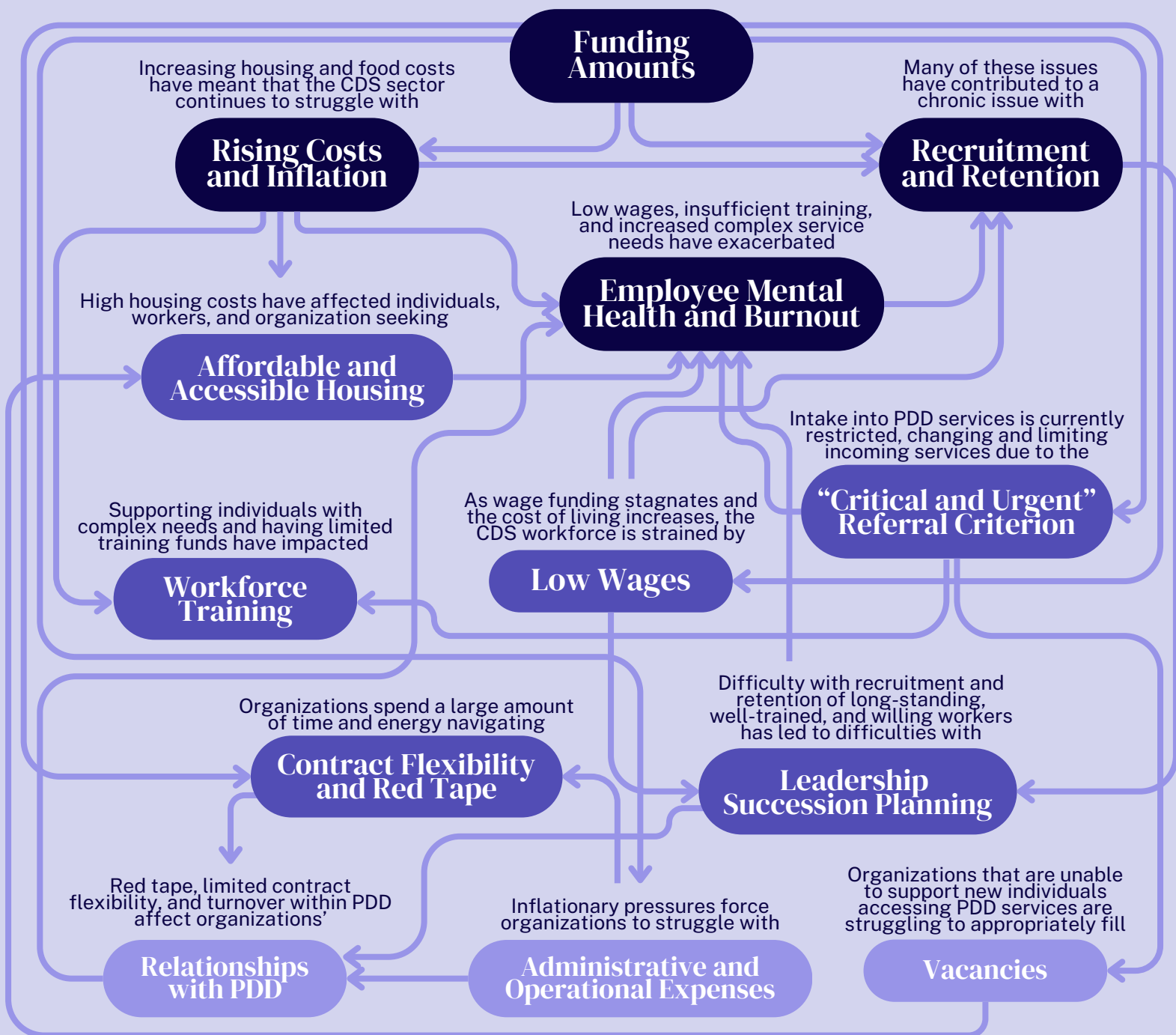


# Cascading Challenges

## What Issues are Affecting the CDS Sector?

Interrelated issues have led to cascading effects for Community Disability Services (CDS) organizations.

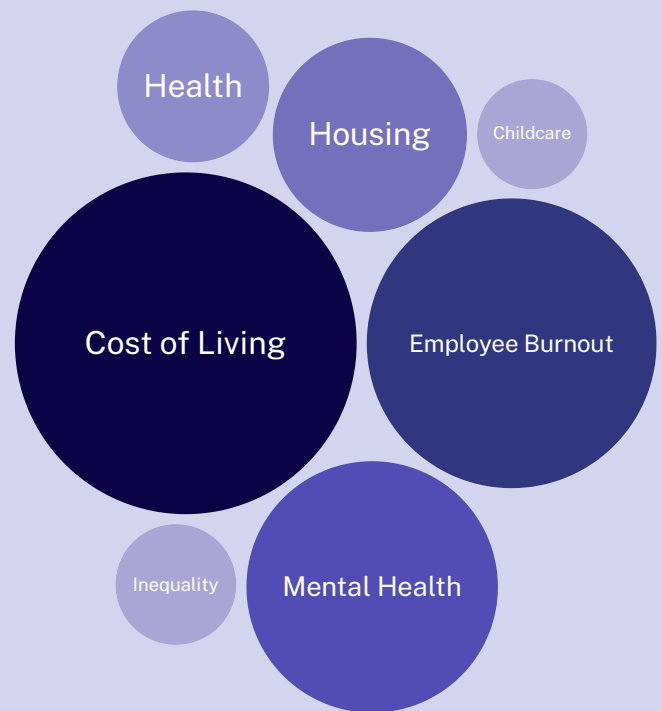
As in 2023, the top challenges mentioned were **funding amounts, rising costs and inflation, recruitment and retention, and employee mental health**. These are deeply linked to other frequently reported issues such as access to **housing, wages, and navigating red tape** due to **inflexible contracts**. In addition, the most independently-reported issue was the **“critical and urgent” criterion** which has been in place since 2019 for individuals seeking PDD services. It has influenced staff training requirements, impacted recruitment and retention, and created wasteful vacancies.



# What Issues are Affecting the Workforce?

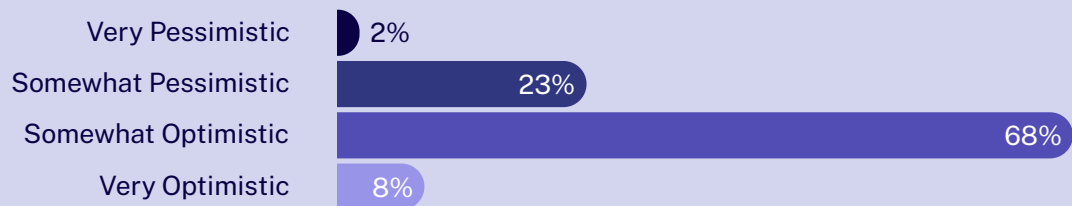
Affordability and cost of living were the most-reported issues affecting the CDS workforce. Coupled with other costs such as housing and childcare, workers are having trouble affording the costs of daily life on the CDS sector's low wages.

With increasingly complex needs of individuals in service coupled with low and stagnant wages, employees continue to leave the CDS sector to find better-paying and lower-stress work in other sectors. For those who remain in the sector, high turnover and demands have created a culture of burnout.



## Outlook for the Future?

Over the next 12 months, what is your outlook for your organization? (n=66)



While a significant majority of organizational leaders expressed a positive outlook for the next twelve months, several challenges remain that organizations are attempting to address. The most frequently cited concerns included funding, cost of living, wages, employee retention, referrals, and organizational relationships with PDD.

Several organizations noted that they have either begun or are planning to explore diversifying their revenue sources due to ongoing financial pressures.

Many organizations noted that their outlook was dependent on PDD funding levels going forward.



SECTOR SCANNER 2024

# Cascading Challenges

Full Report

JANUARY 2025





*Advocating for,  
supporting, and  
elevating the  
Community Disability  
Services sector in  
Alberta*

# Cascading Challenges

Originally created in March 2022 with The Perfect Storm, the now-annual Sector Scanner is an overview of the state of the Community Disability Services (CDS) sector. Answered by 71 senior leaders in the sector for a 55% response rate, the 2024 Sector Scanner is a data source of sector leaders' perspectives on the most pressing current challenges, as well as a forecast for potential forthcoming issues in the CDS sector.

Many issues in the CDS sector have been pervasive for several years, and many continue to compound — whether literally (such as high inflation rates over the past few years creating affordability challenges for workers with low wages), or figuratively (such as the multiplex effects on both organizations and staff of PDD's "critical and urgent" criterion, which has been in place since 2019 for individuals seeking to access or enhance their PDD services).

More importantly, many of these issues are interconnected, with cascading effects throughout the sector. Despite a funding infusion for staff wages (10%) and administrative costs (5%) in early 2023, workers in the CDS sector continue to earn wages that are lower than those for similar positions in competing sectors. Low wages have intensified recruitment and retention issues as agencies struggle to find and keep qualified and invested employees.

Funding and affordability (rising costs and inflation) were ranked as the top two concerns for the past year, and respondents expect them to remain so in the year ahead. With organizations reporting higher levels of staff burnout, whether due to affordability, more complex needs among individuals in service, constant turnover amongst their peers, or insufficient training, these issues are expected to continue through the upcoming year unless purposeful and ongoing action is taken to address them.

In general, though senior leaders are cautiously optimistic about the upcoming year, for many, the optimism hinges on financial commitment and follow through from the government.

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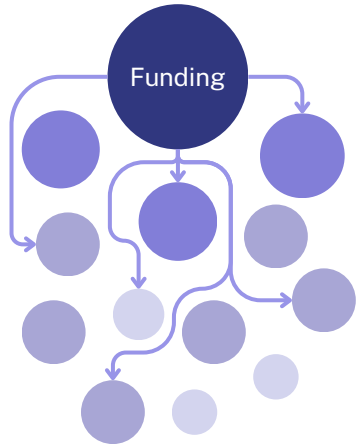
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## Funding

Funding remains the top concern of CDS sector organizations. On average, ACDS members receive 87% of their funding from PDD (Persons with Developmental Disabilities) [1], and are therefore either primarily or fully dependent on this revenue source to address rising financial pressures.

### Administrative and Indirect Costs

The Government of Alberta provided a 5% increase in funding towards administrative costs in January 2023 [2]. However, **inflation has risen 5% since this funding infusion** (January 2023 to October 2024) [3]. Although inflation has been cooling across Canada in the past few months, increases in administrative expenses such as office expenditures, WCB, and legal costs continue to strain organizations.



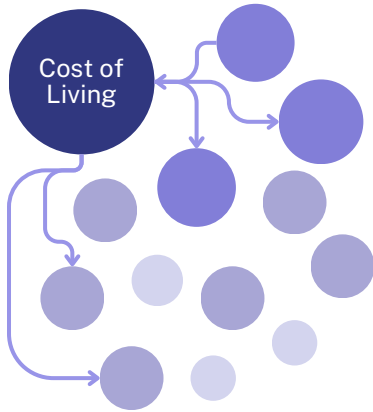
*The underfunding of indirect costs by PDD is creating a crisis. The cost of necessary indirect costs continues to escalate and the number of people being supported has exploded. We have seen a 22% increase in caseloads but no change in Indirect. Administration is stretched to the limits and at some point we will need to stop accepting new individuals into services.*

### Contract Flexibility and Red Tape

Related to funding contracts are the overwhelming amounts of red tape and administrative tasks and documentation required in order to provide PDD services. Time spent fulfilling these requirements is burdensome and expensive for organizations trying to operate with limited resources. The costs of administration, staff training, and onboarding are not fully included in contract funding, hampering organizations' ability to adapt and innovate. Organizations expressed the desire for more flexibility in their funding contracts.

*The standards and the amount of administration processes that are expected with limited manpower - we spend more time administratively where we could put that time and those resources into better service delivery.*





## Rising Cost of Living and Affordability

Inflation and the increased cost of living remain top of mind for CDS organizations and for the CDS workforce.

**96% of respondents stated that the cost of living and affordability were one of the top three issues affecting their workforce in 2024.**

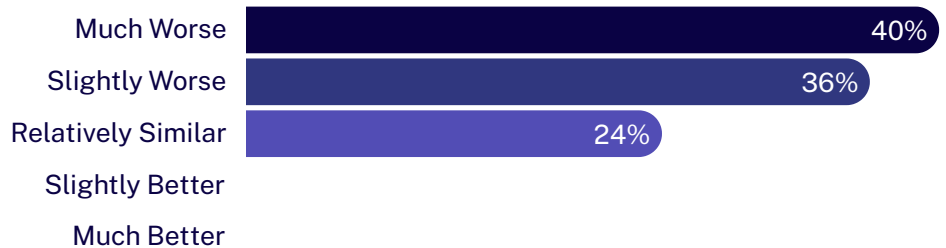
Though inflation has decreased in the past year, prices continue to inch higher in nearly every aspect of Albertan’s daily lives. Overall, inflation has slowed to 3% from October 2023 to 2024 in Alberta, but it remains the highest of any Canadian province. The price of necessities such as food (up 3.8% since last year) and health and personal care (up 1.7%) have slowed in growth [4], but when compounded on previous years of high inflation, financial stress continues to plague CDS sector workers earning low wages.

### Housing Affordability and Accessibility

Although ranked seventh on the list of top issues impacting the sector, access to affordable housing continues to affect organizations, workers, and individuals accessing services.

### Compared to 2023, how have housing costs affected your organization in 2024? (n=58)

This year, the impact of housing costs on CDS organizations has been...



*[I don't think that our concerns will change over the next 12 months], but it is so hard to tell. I think these will still be the issues but anything can happen on any given day that could change this entirely - e.g. all of a sudden someone is in need of affordable / accessible housing which is pretty much nonexistent in rural communities.*



The overall costs of owning a residential dwelling (including costs such as mortgage interest, property taxes, and homeowner’s insurance) have increased by 6.9% in Alberta over the past year, the highest out of any other Canadian province [4]. With an average home price of \$498,000 across the province, potential home buyers were facing prices 10.3% higher in October 2024 than in October 2023 [5].

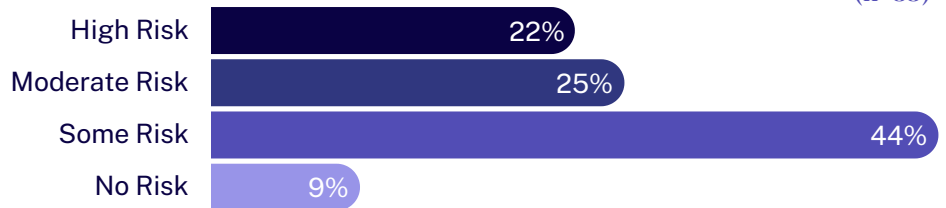
The cost of renting accommodations in Alberta (including rent, tenants’ insurance, and other tenant expenses) has also increased more than any other province at 10.6% from October 2023 to October 2024 [4].



*“Critical and urgent” referrals with PDD have caused some housing challenges (i.e. housing is available but not for super complex individuals so the spaces sit vacant).*

**Do you feel that your ability to provide housing services is at risk in the 2024/25 fiscal year due to increasing costs (utilities, insurance, mortgage rates, etc.)?**

(n=55)



When ranking issues that affected their organizations over the past 12 months, the largest difference between smaller and larger organizations was where they ranked housing among their challenges. On average, larger organizations ranked housing as a greater issue than smaller organizations; whereas housing ranked ninth for organizations with fewer than 50 individuals in service, it was the sixth largest issue for medium-sized agencies (50 to 150 individuals) and seventh for large organizations (150+ individuals).

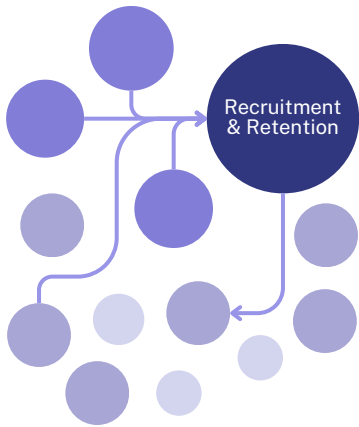
*We are reexamining whether we need to buy properties again to provide more stable housing for people we serve. 15 years ago we got out of being landlords and service provider due to rights and values of empowering people with disabilities to own their own homes.*

*But with the rising costs of living we are reevaluating.*

*We are concerned though about a snap back to large congregate care living models that limit inclusion and connection in community. With all these tensions, we are likely to be designing and purchasing small apartment buildings and such to reduce costs of housing for people we serve.*







## Recruitment and Retention

Multiple factors contribute to the CDS sector’s chronic recruitment and retention challenge, including lack of visibility and buy-in to the value and complexity of the CDS sector, low wages, and competition from other sectors [6].

**Turnover remains high, at 28% overall in 2023 and 32% among Community Disability Support Workers (CDSW).** The vacancy rate in early 2024 was 6.8%, and was felt more deeply in certain regions such as Central (12.0%) and the South region (8.7%) [7].

### Wages

Even after a 10% funding infusion for frontline worker wages in January 2023 [2], the average wage of all CDS sector frontline workers remains low at \$21.77 [7].

**69% of all frontline staff and 89% of all CDSW workers make under \$22.50 per hour.** [7]

While a Community Disability Services Worker (CDSW) working at a community-based organization has an average wage of \$20.20, a government employee working as an Individual Support Worker (a position comparable to a CDSW), has a wage range between \$21.20 (5% higher than CDSW average) to \$25.77 (27% higher) [8].

Similarly, other professions with comparable duties, such as care providers (\$24.29) [9], social assistance workers (\$24.65) [10], and nursing and residential care facilities workers (\$24.67) [11], all also have higher average wages than a CDSW.

Many employees in the sector hold multiple jobs, whether at the same organization or with other employers, in order to support themselves and their families.



*This sector suffers from low wages and that is demoralizing.*

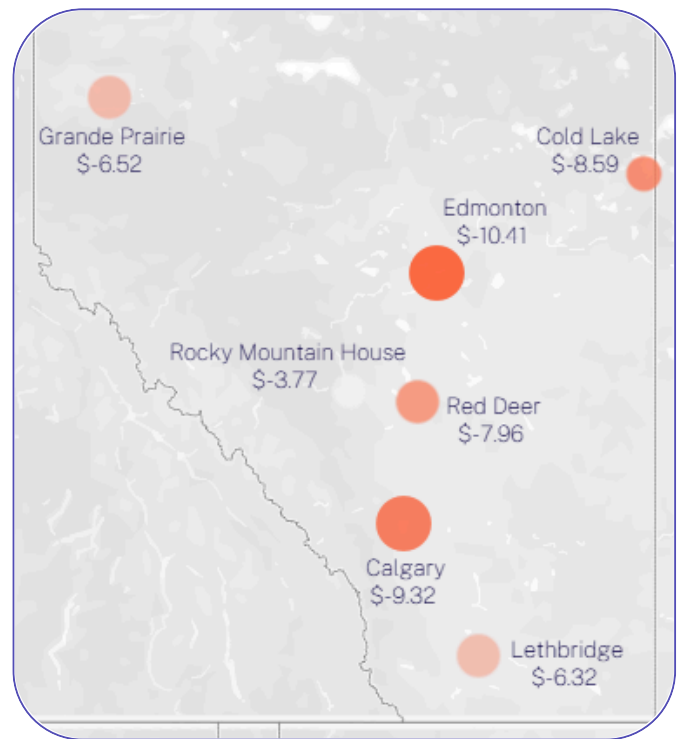
*Single staff are living below the poverty line.*





Compared to workers in many other industries, frontline CDS workers undertake more demanding work for much lower wages. As such, some of these industries (e.g., retail trade, health care and social assistance, accommodation and food services) are attractive alternatives for current and potential new CDS frontline workers. The figure below shows the difference between the average CDS frontline worker wage and the average hourly wage across all industries in some of the main economic regions in Alberta.

**Difference Between the Overall Average Hourly Regional Wage and the Hourly Regional Wage for a CDS Frontline Worker [12]**



Workers also need to ensure that they earn a “living wage” that enables them to cover the costs for food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities such as childcare, transportation, and healthcare to survive comfortably in their communities. In several Albertan cities, the average regional CDS frontline hourly wage is lower than the living wage, for example: Jasper (-\$7.54), Rocky Mountain House (-\$3.01), Calgary (-\$0.91), Airdrie (-\$0.77), Barrhead (-\$0.74), and St. Albert (-\$0.46). In many other municipalities, the average frontline CDS worker wage is very close to the living wage [13]. When other, better-paying options are available, workers will naturally be looking for positions that enable them to earn more than the bare minimum required to live and participate in their communities.



### Employee Mental Health and Burnout

Similar to last year’s survey, 69% of respondents listed employee burnout as one of the top three issues affecting their workforce over the past year, and 52% included mental health.

In Canada, heavy workloads and poor work-life balance are the most likely causes of work-related stress, both of which heavily affect the CDS sector. Workers who are employed in health care and social assistance are more likely than an average worker to cite a heavy workload and emotional load as causes of work-related stress [14]. Compounded by increased levels of complex needs among individuals in service, low wages, and the high cost of living, employees are struggling to remain motivated and optimistic under discouraging circumstances.

After rising costs / affordability, burnout was the second-most often reported issue currently affecting the CDS workforce, and mental health ranked third.



*Wages remain static yet inflation continues – employees [are] working more than 2 jobs/shifts now. [This] equals burnout and [people who are] here for money, not here for value in the organization. [...] There is NO money or time left to work on the organization – everyone must work in it.*

*When the workforce is stretched thin to meet their own basic needs, it is hard to meet the quality of life needs of others.*



*[There is a] lack of perceived value. This is a challenging job and there is a distinct lack of understanding how hard staff work and the daily challenges they face.*



## Leadership Succession

As senior leaders in the CDS sector retire, organizations struggle to identify experienced and willing candidates to take their place. Executive positions are sometimes filled from outside of the CDS sector, which may lead to difficulty adapting to the unique demands of the sector, such as having a knowledge of the ethical practices specific to the disability sector, or learning the administrative details involved with negotiating service contracts with the ministry.

Several organizations noted that they had recently begun succession planning, succession training, or had identified these as an upcoming priority.



*We are struggling with the inability to hire or retain good qualified staff, providing training over and over again due to staff turnover, and staff feeling that they are not valued by the sector or PDD.*

*Very few if any seem to come into the workforce as a calling to support people with disabilities to thrive like 15 to 20 years ago. Deep values that were non-negotiable and helped people move from institutions to community living are being eroded more than ever.*



## Workforce Training

Training tailored to the specific needs of the disability sector can be difficult to find (especially in rural locations), expensive, or nonexistent. Many organizations resort to the costly option of developing their own in-house programs, which may lack applicability across the sector. As workers move across employers in search of slightly higher-paying jobs or better work cultures, training costs are duplicated. The issue is intensified as the sector lacks clear competency criteria or agreed upon standards to enable evaluation of worker qualifications [6].

ACDS' Project Blueprint has identified several recommendations to address the issue of workforce training. Exploration is currently underway with Advanced Education to determine if the Industry Pathways Initiative, which works with industries to establish a province-wide, sector-driven training program, would be an appropriate fit for the sector.



#1 issue  
independently  
reported by  
survey respondents

## “Critical and Urgent” Referral Criterion

In 2019, in the effort to sustain the PDD program while dealing with increasing demand, the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services implemented what was expected at the time to be a temporary measure of only referring individuals into service, or enhancing supports for individuals, if the request fit PDD’s criterion of “critical and urgent”. **This criterion is still in effect and has had several unintended, wide-ranging consequences for organizations.**

Under this criterion, individuals seeking to access PDD services for the first time are evaluated based on: the risk the individual poses to their own safety or the safety of others, their risk of being exploited or harmed by others, and their risk of losing housing [15]. Individuals who meet this criterion typically have high to very high complex support needs.

Restricting intake only to individuals who meet the “critical and urgent” criterion has created a reactive versus proactive model of service provision. Many organizations have found themselves at a crossroads where they must decide if they want to overhaul their services and change their long-standing client base to one that is much more complex, or if their organization can continue to provide sustainable services without taking in new clients.

Choosing to expand services to individuals with more complex needs involves greater accreditation requirements, more training, and a workforce willing and able to adapt to the challenges involved. At the same time, organizations have to balance how to meet these demands while struggling with low wages, difficulty finding and/or affording training, and high turnover.

One organization noted that they have seen an increasing number of employee injuries due to the complex needs of individuals coming into service.



*The complexity of being pressured as an agency to welcome new clients with complex needs, knowing very well we don't have the expertise and the resources to manage such severe behaviors.*

*The lack of referrals of clients who want to live in a community setting and family-oriented environment, where people are recognized for all their abilities - those people are no longer promoted by PDD, and they are forgotten. They live with their elderly parents and their needs are not labeled as urgent, imminent, and critical - WHY?*



## Outlook for the Future

Respondents listed several challenges that organizations expect to encounter and attempt to address in the upcoming 12 months.

The most frequently cited concerns for 2025 included:

- Funding
- Cost of living
- Wages
- Employee retention
- Referrals
- Organizational relationships with PDD

Though the CDS sector is continuing to cope with these ongoing issues,

# 76%

of organizations have an optimistic outlook for the next 12 months.



*We have made some very positive internal changes over the past year - and we expect to see the positive effects next year - however, this is always tempered by the constant struggle over funding for the agency at all levels.*

*I believe that we will be able to handle the challenges - we always do - but the support from the Government of Alberta cannot be relied upon. I am very pessimistic about not only funding, but policy direction and changes to the PDD and other programs for people with disabilities.*

*Concerns about decreasing funding levels or lack of funding for individuals in certain codes, means that some individuals are unable to access services, or cannot access the support they require. Low wages continues to impact recruitment and retention issues in the sector. Inability to recruit qualified workers means that existing employee workloads are high. That being said, existing employees are committed to providing high quality services.*



Several organizations noted that they have either begun, or are planning to explore, diversifying their revenue sources due to ongoing financial pressures.

Many organizations noted that their outlook was dependent on PDD funding levels going forward.

*We have a new Strategic Plan, a good buy in from all staff and Individuals. We have increased training, and will be rolling out a mentoring program to better support staff work with complex needs individuals; this is already leading to better retention rates and job satisfaction!*



*Although we always are faced with challenges, we somehow find ways to overcome them. We just don't want to risk reducing quality of services because we cannot retain staff, afford to offer programs, or obtain and maintain housing options.*

*Our sector and agency have a never ending optimism of getting through hard times and succeeding. We have some key forces within that help drive us to keep moving forward - that force is serving those who are vulnerable and deserve a chance at a quality and meaningful life.*





## Appendix A: Detailed Statistics

The Sector Scanner survey was sent to ACDS members October 16th through November 3rd, 2024, via SurveyMonkey. The response rate was 55% (71 of 130 ACDS full organizational members).

### What types of supports/programs does your organization provide? (n=71)

PROGRAM TYPE PROVIDED	PERCENTAGE
Community Access and Recreation	86%
Overnight Staffed Residences	76%
Supported Independent Living	73%
Out-of-home Respite	61%
Support Homes	59%
Employment Supports	58%
In-home Respite	58%
Supportive Roommate Living Arrangements	31%

Other supports and programs offered by respondents included CAPCC (Community Access for People in Continuing Care), FSCD (Family Supports for Children with Disabilities), ABII (Alberta Brain Injury Initiative), FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), CDSS (Cross Disability Support Services), services through AHS (Alberta Health Services), and programs on parenting supports, mental health services, vocational programs, out of school supports, and adult literacy.

### Approximately how many individuals does your organization provide services to? (n=71)

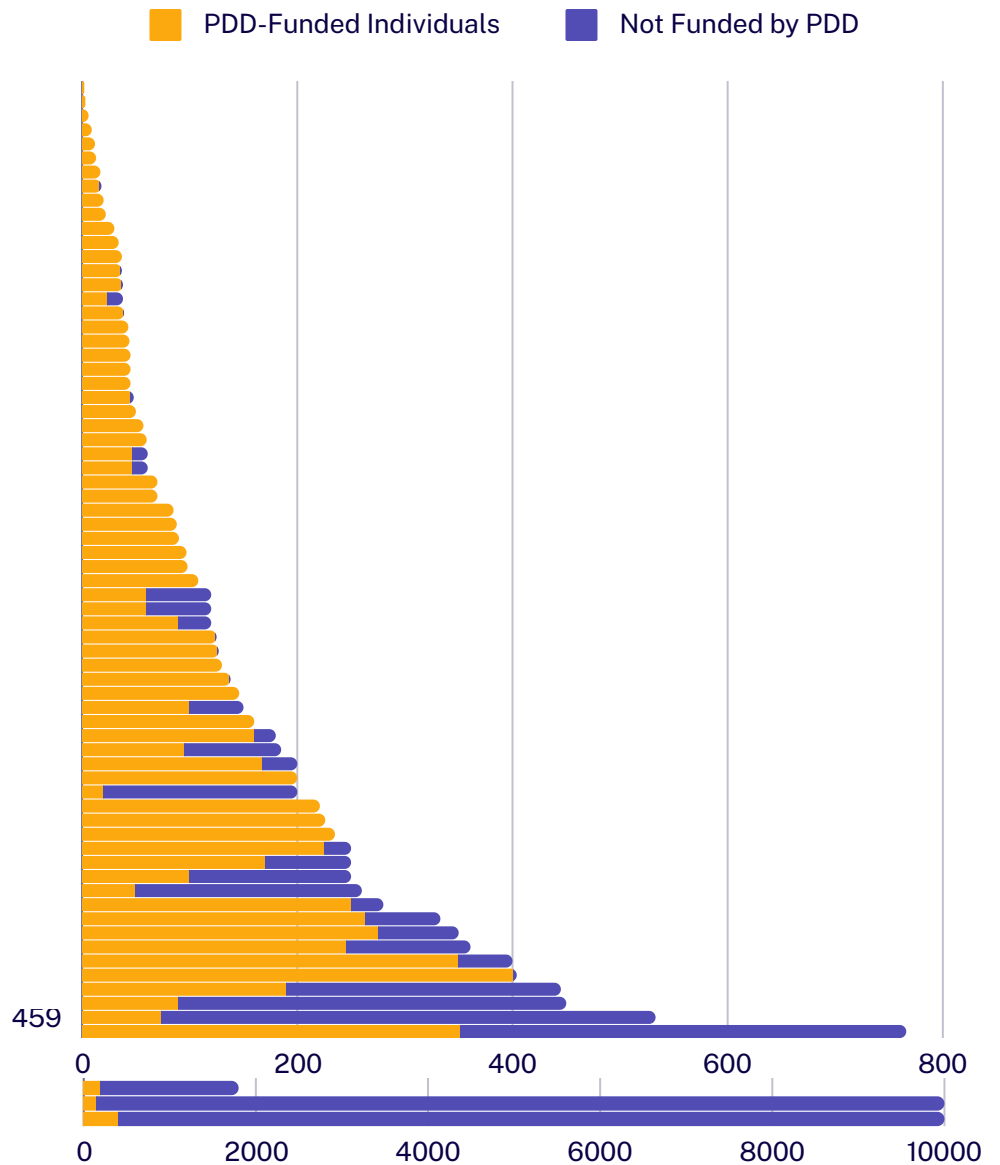
INDIVIDUALS ACCESSING SERVICES	SUM	AVERAGE	MEDIAN
Total Individuals in Service	31,752	447	108
PDD-Funded Individuals in Service	7,824	110	85





Many ACDS members provide primarily PDD services. Though PDD-funded individuals made up only 7,800 of 31,700 in the survey sample due to a few large outliers, on average, individuals funded by PDD made up 82% of organizations' total individuals in service.

**Approximately how many individuals does your organization provide services to?**  
(n=71)





**Please rank the following issues and concerns from:  
1 - most concern for your organization over the past 12 months, to 13 - least concern.  
(n=70)**

RANK	ISSUE	AVERAGE RATING
1	Funding amounts	2.5
2	Rising costs / inflation	3.5
3	Recruitment and retention	3.8
4	Employee mental health or burnout	4.3
5	Contract flexibility	5.3
6	Workforce training	5.9
7	Affordable, accessible housing	6.9
8	Leadership succession planning	7.1
9	Digital technology	8.3
10	DEI capacity building	10.0
11	Political polarization	10.2
12	Crime and safety	11.2
13	Extreme weather events	12.0

When asked to identify any additional issues that were impacting their organization, funding and wages were often reiterated or expanded upon. Other issues brought up independently by multiple organizations included the following:

- “Critical and urgent” referral criterion
- Vacancies
- Red tape
- Relationship with PDD
- Administrative and operational expenses
- Aging individuals in service



The vast majority of respondents reported that their current issues were expected to remain the same in the upcoming 12 months. The few organizations that foresaw changes in the next year remarked on areas such as:

- Wages remaining the same while cost of living increases
- Leadership succession becoming a greater concern over the upcoming year
- The ongoing narrowing of services to more and more complex needs due to the “critical and urgent” criterion

**Please select the top 3 issues you have seen affecting your workforce over the past year.**  
(n=67)

ISSUE	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO INCLUDED TOPIC IN TOP 3 ISSUES AFFECTING WORKFORCE
Cost of Living / Affordability	96%
Employee Burnout	69%
Mental Health	52%
Housing Affordability and Accessibility	31%
Health	19%
Social Inequality	12%
Finding or Affording Childcare	10%
Crime and Safety	3%
Extreme Weather Events	1%

Similar to organizational barriers, additional workforce issues mentioned included wages, the impact of higher complex needs on employees, a limited labour pool impacting workload, succession planning, travel demands, and language learning barriers.

## CDS Frontline Wages Compared to the Living Wage and the Overall Average Regional Wage

CITY	REGION	AVERAGE CDS FRONTLINE WORKER WAGE - REGIONAL [7]	LIVING WAGE [13]	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CDS WAGES AND THE LIVING WAGE	OVERALL AVERAGE WAGE (ALL INDUSTRIES) [12]	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CDS WAGES AND OVERALL AVERAGE WAGE
Airdrie	Calgary	\$23.53	\$24.30	-\$0.77	-	-
Barrhead	Northeast	\$23.76	\$24.50	-\$0.74	-	-
Bonnyville	Northeast	\$23.76	\$23.60	\$0.16	-	-
Brooks	South	\$20.91	\$18.50	\$2.41	-	-
Calgary	Calgary	\$23.53	\$24.45	-\$0.92	\$32.85	-\$9.32
Cold Lake	Northeast	\$23.76	\$19.55	\$4.21	\$32.35	-\$8.59
Drayton Valley	Central	\$20.74	\$19.85	\$0.89	-	-
Edmonton	Edmonton	\$21.29	\$20.85	\$0.44	\$31.70	-\$10.41
Fort McMurray	Northeast	\$23.76	\$23.50	\$0.26	-	-
Grande Prairie	Northwest	\$23.86	\$18.85	\$5.01	\$30.38	-\$6.52
High River	Calgary	\$23.53	\$21.50	\$2.03	-	-
Jasper	Northwest	\$23.86	\$31.40	-\$7.54	-	-
Lethbridge	South	\$20.91	\$20.00	\$0.91	\$27.23	-\$6.32
Lloydminster	Central	\$20.74	\$18.75	\$1.99	-	-
Medicine Hat	South	\$20.91	\$17.55	\$3.36	\$27.23	-\$6.32
Red Deer	Central	\$20.74	\$18.90	\$1.84	\$28.70	-\$7.96
Rocky Mountain House	Central	\$20.74	\$23.75	-\$3.01	\$24.51	-\$3.77
Spruce Grove	Edmonton	\$21.29	\$20.65	\$0.64	-	-
St. Albert	Edmonton	\$21.29	\$21.75	-\$0.46	-	-
Stony Plain	Edmonton	\$21.29	\$21.30	-\$0.01	-	-



## Appendix B: References

- [1] Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS). November 2024. Data for ACDS membership and accreditation statistics. Unpublished raw data. Note: data on PDD funding percentage was available for 117 of 130 full ACDS organizational members.
- [2] Government of Alberta. December 21, 2022. “Investing in Alberta’s social sector.” Alberta.ca. [alberta.ca/alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=86201231FB305-D17A-EFB5-D07B72C7BEC9CE0E](https://alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=86201231FB305-D17A-EFB5-D07B72C7BEC9CE0E)
- [3] Statistics Canada. November 21, 2024. “Table 18-10-0004-01 Consumer Price Index, monthly, not seasonally adjusted.” [doi.org/10.25318/1810000401-eng](https://doi.org/10.25318/1810000401-eng)  
Note: The CPI was 153.9 in January 2023 and 161.8 in October 2024, the most recent as of writing.  $(161.8 - 153.9) / 153.9 = 5.13\%$  inflation
- [4] Statistics Canada. November 19, 2024. “Latest Snapshot of the CPI, October 2024.” [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/2018016/cpi-ipc-eng.htm](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/2018016/cpi-ipc-eng.htm)
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- [8] Government of Alberta. Subsidiary Agreement #009. “Subsidiary Agreement between the Government of Alberta and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees representing Health and Therapy & Institutional and Patient Support Services.” [collective-agreement.alberta.ca/Pages/My-HR/Collective-agreement/Subsidiary-Agreement--9.aspx](https://collective-agreement.alberta.ca/Pages/My-HR/Collective-agreement/Subsidiary-Agreement--9.aspx)  
Note: Wages effective September 1, 2023.
- [9] Statistics Canada. January 2023. “Table 14-10-0306-01 Employee wages by occupation, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality, inactive.” [doi.org/10.25318/1410030601-eng](https://doi.org/10.25318/1410030601-eng)  
Note: Average hourly wage rate is for NOC 44 Albertan employees in December 2022. Though this data has since been updated, the 2023 data combined NOC 44 and NOC 45 (student monitors, crossing guards, and related occupations).
- [10] Statistics Canada. November 19, 2024. “Table 14-10-0206-01 Average hourly earnings for employees paid by the hour, by industry, annual.” [doi.org/10.25318/1410020601-eng](https://doi.org/10.25318/1410020601-eng)  
Note: Average hourly wage rate is for NAICS 624 Albertan employees in 2023.
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