

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:

- As many as **15,000** workers are employed in the community disability services (CDS) sector ⁴
- **73%** of workers identify as female, **60%** of workers are under the age of 45 ⁴
- **89%** of the CDS workforce are frontline workers. ⁵ COVID-related staff shortages forced many more employees in supervisory roles to take on frontline work ⁶
- **27%** of employees work multiple positions within one organization; many more hold multiple jobs across different organizations ⁴
- **58%** of employees work full-time hours ⁵
- The average hourly wage across the entire CDS workforce is **\$21.50** ⁷
- **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) ⁷
- **47%** of employees have been in their position for under 3 years ⁴
- In 2021, the CDS sector had a **23%** turnover rate and an overall vacancy rate of **7%** ⁵
- **79%** of employees who left between January and October 2021 resigned voluntarily; ⁵ in 2020, voluntary resignations only made up 51% of turnover as workers were laid off due to COVID-19 and economic concerns ⁷

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 \$21.50,⁷ 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 ⁶
- Between January and October 2020, the CDS workforce shrank by 7%. ⁷ Though the CDS workforce was slowly regrowing in 2021 (2% larger workforce in October than January 2022), 83% of organizations were still struggling with increased workload and 76% reported continued issues with staff burnout and fatigue ⁵
- 42% of the CDS workforce is employed on a part-time or casual/on-call status. ⁵ 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 ⁷
- 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 ⁷

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 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.
5. Alberta Council of Disability Services. ACDS Survey 2021: Organizational Wellness and Workforce. February 2022.
6. Alberta Council of Disability Services. COVID-19 Pandemic Year 2: Stories from Summer 2021 in Alberta's Community Disability Services Sector. November 2021.
7. Alberta Council of Disability Services. ACDS Survey 2020: COVID-19 Impact on CDS Workforce. February 12, 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



there are as many as

15,000*

workers in the community disability services workforce¹

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

89%

of staff work in **frontline** direct service positions²



58%

of employees work **full-time** hours²

73%

of workers identify as **female**³



60%

of workers are under the age of **45**³

Many employees are working in isolation and/or restricted to cohorts. Employees have expressed increased feelings of isolation which is impacting mental health and morale.²

54%

of the CDS workforce have an hourly wage of **under \$20.00**¹

the average **hourly wage** across the entire CDS workforce is

\$21.50¹

community disability services workers have an average hourly wage of

\$18.76

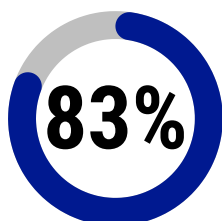
community disability services practitioners have an average hourly wage of

\$21.59¹

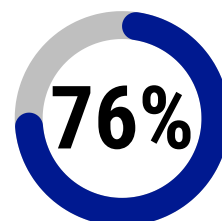
23% **turnover** rate²

7.4% **vacancy** rate²

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.⁴



of organizations are struggling with **increased workload**



of organizations feel that **staff burnout and fatigue** are posing a significant operational challenge²

Sources:

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

2. ACDS Survey 2021: Organizational Wellness and Workforce

3. ACDS 2019 Workforce Survey

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