

OPINION

Canada Disability Benefit needed now

By [DAVE STARRETT](#) APRIL 27, 2022

Such a benefit would lower poverty rates among Canadians with disabilities, but only if there's no inter-government squabbling or clawback on provincial disability benefits.



While direct financial relief through a Canada Disability Benefit was promised by the federal government in 2020, further mention of it was glaringly and disappointingly absent from Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland's 2022 federal budget. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sam Garcia

•

Arguably, our country has made great progress over the past century with respect to disability rights, accessibility, and inclusion.

For 100 years, Easter Seals has been advocating for progressive change that creates opportunities and strengthens independence for people living with disabilities from coast to coast to coast, from helping families obtain mobility devices for their children, to developing vocational training programs for young adults, to helping develop the Accessible Canada Act.

But a global pandemic changes so much, and every Canadian living with a disability knows that the fight for full inclusion has gotten even harder. Without meaningful partnerships with government and corporate Canada, the fight will be tougher, longer, and more desperate.

We have 100 good years behind us. Now we're fighting for the next 100.

The estimated 6.2 million Canadians living with disabilities are at risk of being left behind in the post-COVID world. Socioeconomic issues affecting Canadian children, youth, and adults with disabilities were serious long before the pandemic. There was already a housing crisis and a lack of accessibility in Canadian communities. Those with disabilities already struggled to gain employment and were represented poorly on boards of directors in our country, both public and private.

COVID-19 has highlighted what really matters, including the need for swifter progress. Other geopolitical conditions have also created a perfect storm for individuals living with disabilities. Inflation has seen the cost of such essentials as housing, food, and medication at all-time highs. Supply chain obstacles have made acquiring accessible vehicles more difficult than ever. The compounding effects of COVID, the disrupted supply chain, inflation, and economic worries mean that policies to support those living with disabilities are needed right away.

While direct financial relief through a Canada Disability Benefit was promised by the federal government in 2020, further mention of it was glaringly and disappointingly absent from the 2022 federal budget. Such a benefit would lower poverty rates among Canadians with disabilities, but only if it does not come with a prolonged back-and-forth between various levels of government and a clawback on provincial disability benefits.

We know what Canadians living with disability don't need: another tax credit requiring those with a disability—who are two to three times as likely to be living in poverty than those who are non-disabled—to pay out of pocket for the things they need and then fill out cumbersome reports to be reimbursed weeks or months later. That approach isn't equitable and doesn't provide support to those who need it most.

Rather than replace the current Disability Tax Credit (DTC), the Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) would augment it by providing a monetary allowance in the form of a monthly payment to eligible recipients. This payment would top up any amount provided by provincial disability support programs sufficiently to provide a guaranteed livable income. Eligibility for the DTC would automatically confer eligibility to apply for the CDB, and the application process would be concise, straightforward, and non-cumbersome.

Information about the benefit should be well publicized, readily available, and clearly communicated in plain language in order to be accessible to all Canadians who need it. In addition, the federal government and its provincial counterparts would need to work together to ensure that CDB payments remain non-taxable and exempt from any provincial program clawbacks.

Properly planned and administered, the Canada Disability Benefit would not only provide much-needed financial relief to people with disabilities, but could also, ostensibly, take some of the strain off the mental health system by removing a significant amount of financial stress on individuals and families, much as the

Reprinted with permission of the Hill Times

recently announced introduction of national pharmacare and dental programs are expected to do.

With the welcome advent of these two programs, Easter Seals Canada and its provincial member organizations are hopeful that the federal government will take the next step in making life more affordable for Canadians by following through on its commitment to the Canada Disability Benefit. Easter Seals will be watching closely to ensure these and all other pieces of legislation are developed with inclusion and the needs of all persons with a disability—whether physical, cognitive, or developmental—in mind.

Canada is at a crossroads. The time for action is now if we truly wish to make our country a global leader in policymaking, development, and leadership for real and meaningful inclusion.

Dave Starrett is president and CEO of Easter Seals Canada, the country's largest local provider of programs, services, and issues-leadership and development for the disability community.

The Hill Times

Subscribers to The Hill Times may read this opinion piece online at:

<https://www.hilltimes.com/2022/04/27/canada-disability-benefit-needed-now/357839>