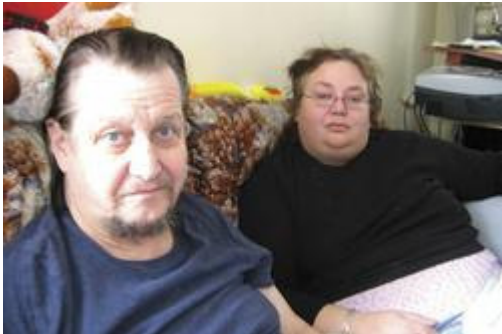


‘Enough is enough,’ say disability groups

Underfunded agencies won't renew contracts during election campaign

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Disability activists Murray Crosby and Tammy Poirier want better supports and services for people with disabilities

Jeremy Klaszus

Almost 20 disability service agencies in Calgary are refusing to renew their annual government contracts in the midst of a provincial election campaign, saying inadequate funding for services and staff wages has forced them to request an extension until they know what's in the next budget.

“For the first time probably collectively around the province, we're actually saying, ‘enough is enough,’” says Ryan Geake, executive director of the Calgary Scope Society, one of the agencies requesting an extension. “We can't continue to do the work based on the money you give us.” The sector's wages have stagnated as wages skyrocket elsewhere, sparking a mass exodus of staff who can earn more in the energy industry, or even at fast food restaurants. “The people that are suffering here are disabled people who have a really high turnover of staff — who don't get the kinds of services we promise,” says Geake.

Christina Stebanuk, a Calgary disability activist, is one of many people directly affected by the staff shortage. “If I don't have my staff to take me grocery shopping or whatever, then I don't do it,” says Stebanuk, 34, who lives in subsidized housing with her 11-year-old son, who also has a disability. Stebanuk used to have a residential worker visit her place five days a week to help around the house, but now a worker only comes once a week — “if I'm lucky,” says the single mother.

Tammy Poirier, another disability activist who lives with her partner Murray Crosby in a subsidized apartment, also says she's had residential staff visit her home less frequently. “They need more front-line workers,” says Poirier, 36, who has borderline personality disorder. Because of her mental illness, Poirier often has to deal with long waits in hospital emergency rooms. “It's very frustrating... to be in the hospital, and you've got no staff there to support you,” she says.

About 15,000 adults and children with developmental disabilities use services from Alberta agencies, and the sector employs about 17,000 Albertans. The agencies have contracts with six government Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) boards. Those contracts expire at the end of March. Geake says in recent years, agencies have signed contract renewals knowing the funding is too low to provide adequate services. However, this year many agencies around the province — including 19 in Calgary — are refusing to sign the one-year contract renewal and are asking for a three-month extension until the new government is elected and lays out its budget. “We felt we have to be true to the people we support,” says Geake. “This is the time to stand up and say, ‘We can't do it, and we're not going to sign our contracts.’”

Last August, the Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS) — an umbrella group of about 120 agencies serving people with developmental disabilities — gave a policy briefing to the Alberta government warning that the staffing crisis is “seriously undermining client service levels.” “As the situation stands, we are no longer just managing risk,” says the briefing. “We are facing the prospect of determining whether we are a party to negligence.” The briefing speculates that in future, agencies and the province could face “harsh legal consequences” for the current situation. “It will only be a matter of time until a serious incident occurs,” the briefing says.

The ACDS also commissioned a Hay Group study into sector wages earlier this year. The report found that a competitive midpoint wage for a disability support worker in the public sector is over \$21 an hour; in the non-profit sector, it's just over \$14 an hour. The report says the non-profit sector needs \$182 million to boost wages to competitive levels. “We need time to look at that Hay report and understand what the implications are so that we can pay our staff competitive wages,” says Odette Dantzer, CEO of the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary (DDRC) — another agency requesting an extension.

Ken Chapman, a policy consultant for the ACDS, says some agencies could be forced to close their doors if nothing changes. “That means the government’s going to have to pick up the slack and pay union wages anyways,” says Chapman, adding that if agencies close, it will put “people who are vulnerable through a lot of fear and pain and anxiety for no good reason.” (Some staff have already gone to unions seeking help; earlier this month, staff at one agency in Red Deer joined the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE).)

Agencies and disability activists are hoping to make the PDD crisis — as well as living allowances for people with disabilities — an election issue. The Alberta Liberals say they would review the PDD program “to ensure that the funding provides quality services and care to adults with developmental disabilities.”

The party also says it would boost living allowances for people with disabilities, tying them to Statistics Canada’s “average weekly earnings” the same way MLAs formulate their salaries. (Currently, people with severe disabilities get a maximum \$1,088 living allowance each month.) “The greatest shame that I experience in the legislature is that we vote ourselves a cost of living increase every year, and we fail to do the same for the most vulnerable people in our society,” says David Swann, the Liberal incumbent candidate in Calgary-Mountain View.

The NDP also says it would boost agency funding and raise living allowances, tying them to a market basket measure to keep people with disabilities out of poverty. “It is an issue that, I think, needs attention during this campaign, and it’s not getting the attention it deserves,” says Tim Stock-Bateman, the NDP candidate in Calgary-Varsity. Stock-Bateman, a former operations director at CUPS Community Health Centre, says the pinch is affecting not only disability agencies, but other human service providers as well. “[Staff] do extremely important work in extremely resource-thin environments,” he says. “The critical thing that makes that work successful is the relationship that gets built between the caregiver and the user of that service.... It’s an unfair disadvantage to the user of the service when we have to keep cycling in new people with whom they don’t have a relationship.”

The Conservatives, says Stock-Bateman, should be held accountable on voting day for cutting funding to social services. Stebanuk doesn’t know yet who she’ll vote for, but she won’t vote Conservative. “He’s another Ralph Klein,” she says of Conservative leader Ed Stelmach. “I don’t see the government working [alongside] people with disabilities, nor are they talking to or asking people with disabilities what they think.” Poirier and Crosby don’t know who they’ll vote for, either. “But I know it’s not going to be Ed Stelmach,” says Poirier.