

**Disability Matters Vote Community Report
March 2023**



Prepared by the
Disability Matters Vote Steering Committee

This community report is available in alternative formats.

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Executive Summary: Disability Matters Vote Community Report – March 2023

Background

Launched on December 3, 2015, Disability Matters Vote is a non-partisan public awareness campaign in Manitoba to bring priority attention to disability issues. Disability Matters Vote is a joint initiative of Abilities Manitoba and Barrier-Free Manitoba. It aims to achieve three goals in provincial elections:

1. To ensure all Manitobans with disabilities can participate in election activities. We want everyone who is eligible to vote to do so.
2. To raise awareness of disability issues our stakeholders have prioritized.
3. To support Manitobans to make informed voting decisions.

There are many types of disabilities such as physical, intellectual or developmental, mental and emotional, just to name a few, and close to 25% of Manitobans over the age of 15 live with disabilities (Government of Canada, 2018). Thousands more Manitoba children also live with disabilities.

Disability Matters Vote has spoken with thousands of people about issues that affect Manitobans with disabilities. These stakeholders identified five priority issues that have been the foundation of our advocacy work over the last two general provincial elections:

- Accessibility,
- Fair wages,
- Access to services,
- Employment, and
- Dignified income.

Purpose of this Community Report

The purpose of this report is to update the community about the progress Disability Matters Vote has seen in each priority area since the 2019 provincial election to March 2023.

The Five Priority Issues Updates

Accessibility

Accessibility is a basic human right that not all people get to experience. Manitobans with disabilities often face inaccessible spaces, attitudes, information, and more. At the time of the 2019 election, only two standards had been rolled out (Customer Service and Employment Standards). The Standard for Information and Communication was launched in May of 2022. The Standard for Transportation opened for consultation in February 2023. The Built Environment Standard still needs to be launched. The deadline for achieving substantial progress toward full accessibility is 2023 (Province of Manitoba, 2013).

The Manitoba Accessibility Fund was announced in June 2021. This 20-million-dollar endowment fund will award about \$1,000,000 per year to successful applicants for accessibility projects.

The Accessibility Compliance Secretariat has also been set up. The purpose of this role is to monitor compliance in the community as each new Accessibility for Manitobans Act standard is enacted.

Fair Wages

Manitobans with disabilities deserve to be supported by well-trained and qualified staff who are paid a fair and living wage. Disability support workers are one of the lowest paid human service workers in the province. Their wages are not reflective of the duties and responsibilities of the important role they have in supporting Manitobans with disabilities.

In March 2022, a one-time \$2.5 million Labour Force Support Grant was funded to help recruit and retain support staff. This grant was shared among nearly 100 organizations.

In April 2022, funded wages for disability support workers working in community homes increased from \$13.75 to \$15.11. Funding for supervisors in these community homes increased to \$16.11.

In March 2023, the provincial government tabled the 2023 Manitoba provincial budget. It contained the largest increases of new funding for Community Living and Children's disABILITY Services since these programs began. The new funding will be used to increase the funded average wage of disability support workers to an average of \$19 per hour. The funded average rate for supervisors will increase to \$20.90 per hour.

These are significant and positive steps related to fair wages for disability support workers. Continued progress is needed towards further wage increases and the development of a comprehensive training strategy that is linked to quality standards.

Access to Services

As there are many different forms of disabilities, it is hard to capture all of the unmet needs Manitobans with disabilities and their families face in accessing services. Manitobans with disabilities require a wide range of services that are vital to their health and quality of life. For example:

- Early intervention for children with autism
- Access to mental health services across the lifespan
- Respite services for children
- Substance use disorder supports
- Home care for seniors
- Day services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Hip and knee surgeries
- Psychologists and Psychiatrists
- Clinical services (Physiotherapy, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, seating and mobility specialists, dietitian, feeding and swallowing supports etc.)

Waitlists for many of these services are not publicly available. In addition, the pandemic created increased needs for some of these services such as mental health supports, and also suspended others like in the case of hip and knee surgeries. A first step towards progress in this area would be transparent and accountable dashboards like the one launched October 27, 2022 for surgical and diagnostic services (Province of Manitoba, 2022). Similar dashboards for other

health and social services are needed to know the extent of unmet needs in our community.

Timely access to services is Manitoba's obligation under Article 26 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Employment

More than 40% of working aged Manitobans with disabilities are not employed (Government of Canada, 2014). At the same time, research shows both employees and organizations benefit from hiring persons with disabilities. There is a lot of employment potential among Manitobans with disabilities.

The Accessible Employment Standard of the Accessibility for Manitobans Act is the only major legislative progress related to employment for people with disabilities since the last election. Implementation of the Accessible Employment Standard has been phased in. As of May 1, 2022, all Manitoba employers need to comply with this standard.

Dignified Incomes

Many Manitobans with severe, profound, or permanent disabilities are unable to work. Those in need of financial help have to apply for Employment and Income Assistance to meet their basic needs. Employment and Income Assistance was not designed to provide a dignified income for people with disabilities. Employment and Income Assistance rates force adults with disabilities to live in poverty.

In October of 2021 the Disability Support Act received Royal Assent. The Disability Support Act will create a new source of income for Manitobans with severe and prolonged disabilities. Many questions remain about implementation of the new Disability Support Act, including if the income amount provided will meet the criteria of "dignified".

What's Next for Disability Matters Vote?

Disability Matters Vote is completing a stakeholder engagement process to assess whether the five priority issues still reflect what is most important to Manitobans with disabilities. We are actively seeking new partnerships to expand our reach

and representation. We have also asked Manitoba's political parties for their accessibility policies in an effort to hold them accountable to full access and inclusion for all Manitobans in this election.

Disability Matters Vote Community Report – March 2023

Background

One in five Canadians 15 years of age or older had at least one disability in 2017 (Morris et al., 2018). There are many types of disabilities such as physical – moving, seeing, hearing, and also learning, sensory, intellectual or developmental, emotional, or mental. Some disabilities can last for a short time, long time, or for a person’s whole life. Some disabilities can be seen by others (e.g., a person using a wheelchair) and some are not seen (e.g., mental illness). More than 234,190 (24.8%) Manitobans over the age of 15 live with disabilities (Government of Canada, 2018). Thousands more Manitoba children also live with disabilities.

These people have families, friends, support networks, and allies. Together we represent a large community that can help advocate for meaningful changes for Manitobans living with disabilities. This vision to make positive changes for Manitobans living with disabilities led to the creation of Disabilities Matters Vote.

Disability Matters Vote is a non-partisan public awareness campaign in Manitoba. Non-partisan means we are not associated with any political party or provincial candidate. We take a human rights approach to advocate with people living with all types of disabilities.

Disability Matters Vote is a joint initiative of Abilities Manitoba and Barrier-Free Manitoba. We launched our awareness campaign on December 3, 2015 at the Manitoba Legislative Building to a crowd of more than 1,600 people. Disability Matters Vote aims to achieve three goals in provincial elections:

1. To ensure all Manitobans with disabilities can participate fully in election activities. We want everyone who is eligible to vote to do so.
2. To raise awareness of disability issues our stakeholders have prioritized.
3. To support Manitobans to make informed voting decisions.

Since our launch in 2015, we have made history in both the 2016 and 2019 provincial elections. Disability Matters Vote has spoken with thousands of people about issues affecting the lives of Manitobans with disabilities. The following five

priorities have been identified by our community and have served as the foundation of our advocacy work:

- Accessibility
- Fair wages
- Access to services
- Employment, and
- Dignified income.

Purpose of this Community Report

In this report to the community, we:

- Outline the five priority issues that have guided the work of Disability Matters Vote to date,
- Describe the progress we have seen in each priority area since the 2019 provincial election,
- Share some of the impacts we have seen from the Covid-19 pandemic in the priority areas, and
- Share some next steps for Disability Matters Vote in preparation of the next provincial election (set for October 2023 at the time of writing this report).

The Five Priority Issues

Accessibility

The first Disability Matters Vote priority issue update is related to accessibility. Accessibility is a basic human right that not all people get to experience. Manitobans with disabilities face barriers that prevent them from participating in everyday activities such as recreation, shopping, work, and learning. Disability Matters Vote and our allies are advocating for a fully accessible Manitoba.

Accessibility for Manitobans Act

The Accessibility for Manitobans Act was passed in 2013, and outlined five standards that are to be established to achieve major progress toward full

accessibility by 2023 (Province of Manitoba, 2013). The proposed standards include:

- customer service,
- Employment,
- information and communication,
- built environment, and
- transportation.

Slow pace of implementation

At the time of the 2019 election, only two standards had been rolled out (Customer Service and Employment Standards). The Standard for Information and Communication was launched in May of 2022. All Manitoba organizations need to comply with the new Standard for Information and Communication by May 2025.

The Standard for Transportation opened for consultation in February 2023. The Built Environment Standard still needs to be launched. As these two Standards have yet to be enacted, it is unlikely that a full consultation process, implementation and province-wide compliance deadlines will be achieved by the Accessibility for Manitobans Act deadline of 2023.

Implementation requirements downgraded

As mentioned, the Built Environment Standard has not yet been launched. There are also concerns about downgrades to the Built Environment Standard. The Built Environment Standard was renamed the Design of Public Spaces. This change means that buildings are no longer included in this accessibility standard. This is a frustrating and ill-advised change that severely limits accessibility in the province now and in the future. New buildings being constructed will remain inaccessible for decades to come as the lifecycle for each new building is about 70 to 100 years.

The province has also reduced other compliance requirements. For example, the Standards no longer require businesses with 49 or fewer employees to write down their accessibility and training plans. This means that about 95% of companies and organizations do not have to have a documented plan for accessibility. We believe that without a mandate to plan for accessibility, much of the province will remain inaccessible to Manitobans. Likewise, the province, while

attempting to “educate into compliance”, does not have a plan, the resources, or the manpower for a broad accessibility education campaign.

Manitoba Accessibility Fund

Despite these concerns, there has been some good news. Resource investments are needed to bring about change and the Manitoba Accessibility Fund was announced in June 2021. This is a 20-million-dollar endowment fund that will make about \$1,000,000 available per year to successful applicants for accessibility projects.

Accessibility Compliance Secretariat

The Accessibility Compliance Secretariat has also been set up. The purpose of this role is to monitor compliance in the community as each new standard is enacted. The Accessibility Compliance Secretariat can be contacted by persons with a disability when a lack of compliance is noted. Although the Accessibility Compliance Secretariat does not have the financial or human resources to educate into compliance, the creation of the secretariat is progress towards supporting accessibility.

Accessibility - Next Steps

In summary, there are still numerous hurdles and barriers to be addressed before the Accessibility for Manitobans Act can be considered a success. The government must prioritize action in support of the Accessibility for Manitobans Act. More rigorous consultation efforts with persons with disabilities and those with lived experience of accessibility barriers is needed as they are the people most impacted by an inaccessible Manitoba.

The Manitoba Accessibility Office and the Compliance Secretariat need to be fully resourced in order to be effective. These initiatives play an important role in educating Manitobans about their responsibilities under the Accessibility for Manitobans Act so that barriers to accessibility can be removed. Advocacy for a rigorous enforcement strategy for the Accessibility for Manitobans Act Standards needs to continue.

Fair Wages

The second Disability Matters Vote priority update is related to fair wages for disability support workers. Many people with disabilities need assistance from caregivers and support staff to live their best lives. Manitobans with disabilities deserve to be supported by well-trained and qualified staff who are paid a fair and living wage.

Disability support workers play an instrumental role in the lives of Manitobans with disabilities and contribute to their overall health and quality of life. Despite this importance and the responsibilities of their role, disability support workers are among the lowest paid service providers in Manitoba. In April 2022, wages for some disability support workers were as low as \$12.47 per hour. This wage is less than childcare and homecare staff.

Low wages results in high staff turnover, staff shortages, burnout, high vacancies, and no continuity of care. These challenges translate into staff providing vital services with decreased knowledge, skill, and experience that put people with disabilities who are in need of supports at high risk of abuse and neglect and unable to live their best lives. Manitobans with disabilities deserve better, and disability support workers deserve better.

Labour Force Support Grant

In March 2022, a \$2.5 million Labour Force Support Grant was distributed to agencies providing supports for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This one-time fund was for recruiting and retaining support staff. This grant was shared among nearly 100 organizations. The grant was helpful but it did not resolve the recruitment and retention challenges faced by agencies.

Increased Wages

In April 2022, funding for disability support workers working in shift staffed community living homes increased from \$13.75 to \$15.11. Funding for supervisors in these homes increased to \$16.11. The increase to wages was appreciated. The new wages did create compression issues within organizations between disability support worker and supervisor wages and it did not apply to all disability support workers.

In March 2023, the provincial government tabled the 2023 Manitoba provincial budget. This budget contained \$79.7 million dollars for Community Living

disABILITY Services and \$2 million dollars for Children’s disABILITY Services. This new funding will be used to increase the funded average wage rate of disability support workers supporting people who are funded through these services to \$19 per hour and to increase the funded average wage rate of supervisors to \$20.90 per hour.

These increases are the largest increases of new funding since the Community Living and Children’s disABILITY Services began. This is a significant and positive improvement for disability support workers.

Fair Wages – Next Steps

The disability sector is experiencing an urgent staffing crisis and the people receiving support are at risk due to high staff vacancies, lack of training, and staff exhaustion. Community living organizations are experiencing high staff vacancy rates never seen before. Organizations are feeling hopeful that once they receive this new funding, they will begin to be able to recruit and retain more qualified disability support workers.

The goal of this priority issue is to ensure that there are professional and qualified disability support workers who support people with disabilities throughout Manitoba to live their best lives. Supports to people with disabilities have been chronically underfunded for decades while at the same time community disability support needs have increased in response to full inclusion.

People with disabilities deserve to be able to hire disability support workers who are skilled, competent and who choose disability support work as a career. Next steps will include advocating for continued professionalization of disability support workers through further increases in wages to 60% above minimum wage and the development of a comprehensive training strategy that is linked to quality standards.

Access to Services

The third priority update is related to access to services. Manitobans with disabilities and their families require a wide range of services and supports. Timely access to these services is part of Manitoba’s obligation under Article 26 of

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Waitlists for disability related services can last for years and sometimes even decades. This leaves thousands of Manitobans in crisis and unable to access critical and essential services. Living with a disability impacts multiple aspects of one's life, all of which contribute to quality of life.

When you consider the many different forms of disabilities it is hard to capture all of the unmet needs Manitobans with disabilities face in accessing services. This is not a complete list, but some of the most common examples of unacceptable waitlists shared with Disability Matters Vote include:

- Early intervention for children with autism
- Access to mental health services across the lifespan
- Respite services for children
- Substance use disorder supports
- Home care for seniors
- Day services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Hip and knee surgeries
- Psychologists and Psychiatrists
- Clinical services (Physiotherapy, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, seating and mobility specialists, dietitian, feeding and swallowing supports, etc.)

Access to Services – Next Steps

Waitlists for many of these services are still not publicly available. In addition, the pandemic created increased needs for some of these services such as mental health supports, and also suspended others like in the case of hip and knee surgeries. The first steps towards progress in this area would be transparent and accountable dashboards like the one launched October 27, 2022 for surgical and diagnostic services (Province of Manitoba, 2022). Similar dashboards for other health and social services are needed to know the extent of unmet needs in our community.

Employment

Related in part to the accessibility priority, the fourth priority update is unleashing the employment potential of Manitobans with disabilities. Manitobans with disabilities continue to face extensive barriers when seeking a job, and once employed, in keeping their jobs and advancing in their careers. Accordingly, persons with disabilities have among Manitoba's lowest employment rates and highest unemployment rates.

More than 35,000 (40%) of the 87,000 Manitobans with disabilities in the prime working ages (15 to 64) are not employed (Government of Canada, 2014). Meanwhile, research shows both employees and organizations benefit from hiring persons with disabilities. Employees benefit from a better quality of life with improved confidence, a source of income, and participation in their community (Lindsay et al., 2018). Employers experience improved profits with better retention and lower turnover, punctual and dependable staff providing quality work, and an improved organizational culture when their workforce includes persons with disabilities (e.g., Lindsay et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2019).

When you consider:

- the extreme staffing shortages throughout the province,
- the high proportion of unemployed and underemployed persons with disabilities, and
- the many benefits of hiring persons with disabilities,

there are many potential solutions with inclusive hiring of Manitobans with disabilities.

Accessible Employment Standard

The Accessible Employment Standard of the Accessibility for Manitobans Act was passed in 2019 and is the major legislative progress related to employment since the last election. Implementation of the Accessible Employment Standard has been phased in. As of May 1, 2022, all Manitoba employers need to comply with this Standard.

Although the Accessible Employment Standard is progress since the last election, there has been little impact for Manitobans with disabilities in finding employment. Barrier-Free Manitoba did a study in March of 2022 to see if

persons with disabilities had experienced any changes after employers were required to comply with the Accessible Employment Standard. The study found:

- Most people reported that the Accessible Employment Standard did not have much of an effect on their experience when applying for jobs.
- The Accessible Employment Standard did not help people find work.
- People were not provided with accessible application materials.
- Employers were rarely familiar with the Accessible Employment Standard.
- Typically, the Accessible Employment Standard was not used in relation to disclosing information about a disability.

Employment – Next Steps

Study respondents also shared ideas about how to improve employment opportunities for Manitobans with disabilities. Their suggestions included:

- Addressing attitudinal barriers by promoting education on disability matters and reducing stigmatizing language in the workplace.
- Enhancing Human Resources by ensuring personnel are trained on the Accessible Employment Standard and accommodation requests.
- Ensuring the built environment is accessible.
- Increasing supported employment.

What we have learned from the Barrier-Free Manitoba study will help inform advocacy for meaningful changes to unleash the employment potential of Manitobans with disabilities.

Dignified Income

The fifth priority issue update is about dignified incomes. Many Manitobans with severe, profound, or permanent disabilities are unable to work. As a result, they cannot enjoy economic independence and their quality of life is negatively affected. The barriers Manitobans with disabilities face often force them to depend on financial assistance from the province to meet their needs.

Employment and Income Assistance

Manitobans with disabilities in need of financial help have to apply for Employment and Income Assistance. The Employment and Income Assistance

program was designed as a short-term, last resort option for Manitobans who have no other way to support themselves financially. Employment and Income Assistance is intended for transitional periods of employment. As such, the basic need benefits are intentionally kept extremely low, partially to encourage people to obtain paid employment and no longer require government support.

The Employment and Income Assistance program was not created to provide a dignified income for people with severe, profound or permanent disabilities. This means that Manitobans with disabilities who are unable to work are forced to rely on a program that was not designed for and is not sufficient to meet their needs until they are old enough to be eligible for the more generous funding available through Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Changes to Employment and Income Assistance

In October of 2021 the Disability Support Act received Royal Assent. The Disability Support Act created a new income support program designed for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities called Manitoba Supports for Person with Disabilities (Manitoba Supports). This new program is separate and distinct from Employment and Income Assistance. The details and regulations of the new program are being developed and rolled out, but at present they include:

- Eligibility is for those with severe and prolonged disabilities. How this will be assessed is not yet known.
- No requirements to look for work but there will be an active offer of community navigation supports, including employment support if desired.
- Benefits that are higher than current Employment and Income Assistance rates.
- Shelter benefits indexed to at least 77% of median market rent.
- The basic needs benefit indexed to the rate of inflation on an annual basis.
- Decisions appealable to the Social Services Appeal Board.

The Disability Support Act will create a new source of income for Manitobans with severe and prolonged disabilities. This Act is a good first step and represents progress since the 2019 election. We still have work to do to advocate for an income that is “dignified”.

Dignified Income - Next Steps

The steps taken by the province reflect some of the changes Disability Matters Vote asked for with the Dignified Income priority. However, the monthly income amounts shared publicly so far do not reflect what anyone would call a dignified income. The Disability Support Act will provide people with about \$100 - \$144 more than Employment and Income Assistance disability benefits. This still leaves people living in poverty. Information about eligibility and assessment tools are also unknown at this time.

While progress has been made, much more needs to be done on this priority. Disability Matters Vote continues to speak with the province and advocate for an income that is dignified and that will free people with severe and prolonged disabilities from poverty.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted many of the Disability Matters Vote priority issues. Not all impacts were negative. In the case of employment, some of the adaptations employers made were positive changes for workers with disabilities. For example, working from home, using technology such as Zoom to connect, and having more flexible work hours were inclusive practices that benefited some Manitobans with disabilities.

On the other hand, the pandemic had a detrimental impact on the community living sector. The devastation crosses over a number of the priority issues. Community organizations experienced and are still experiencing vacancies and staff shortages never seen before in their history. Many Manitobans with intellectual and developmental disabilities remain at home, unable to access day and employment services due to a critical staff shortage. There is a lack of applicants and rates of burnout have grown significantly, which adds to the number of people in need of mental health services and supports. Organizations are seeing staff leave at all levels due to the impacts of the staff shortage and high levels of stress. Skeleton staffing, staff doing lots of overtime, and the pressures of the pandemic have been harmful to people receiving services. These conditions have contributed to a reduced quality of care for people supported in community living.

The Project Group Consulting Cooperative's 2021 Pandemic and Disabilities Issue Survey Report highlights many positive and negative experiences of survey participants. Over 400 people participated in the survey, which included staff (40%), families (31%) and persons with disabilities (16%), among other stakeholders. Many comments shared relate to the Disability Matters Vote five priority issues. The rising cost of living and added protection needed, such as face masks and hand sanitizer, have left many Manitobans with disabilities making hard financial decisions. Some have been forced to choose between healthy food and cheaper options, or even miss meals in order to afford other things.

Isolation has contributed to mental health concerns, and limited resources results in limited options available to cope. As many Manitobans turned to virtual methods to connect with loved ones, many other Manitobans with disabilities remain without the technology, software, and high-speed internet access needed to connect due to their financial situation. The five priority areas are interconnected in a lot of ways and thus, immediate remedies are needed in all five of the priority issue areas.

What's Next for Disability Matters Vote?

Disability Matters Vote is completing a stakeholder engagement process to assess whether the five priority issues still reflect what is most important to Manitobans living with disabilities. Work is already underway to fundraise, find new supporters to expand our reach and representation, and help get the word out. We have also asked candidates for their accessibility policies to hold them accountable to full access and inclusion for all Manitobans in this election.

Resources

Email: info@dmvote.ca

Website: <https://www.dmvote.ca/>

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To get involved with Disability Matters Vote find us on social media:

<https://twitter.com/DMVoteMB>

<https://www.facebook.com/DisabilityMattersVoteMB/>

<https://www.instagram.com/disabilitymattersmb/>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6OfXHQyPxVuOPNgtp2LNCw>

Donate at: <https://www.dmvote.ca/get-involved/donate>

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