



THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY CAPSTONE PROJECT

Fostering a workforce of equal opportunity in Alberta: An analysis of adolescent transitional supports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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Scope

This paper analyzes the services provided to Albertans who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The assessment of the services provided will be based on a review of the existing literature. For the purpose of this paper, childhood is defined as the time when someone is eligible for publically funded education in Alberta. The transition to adulthood takes place when the person is no longer eligible for publically funded education. For some students diagnosed with ASD, this can be up to 20 years of age, or grade twelve, whichever comes first.¹

This document aims to make a case for the increase and modification of current services provided by the Government of Alberta for individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Individuals diagnosed with ASD transitioning from publically funded education into the labour market require greater support from our government and community. It is in the best interest for individuals diagnosed with ASD, the greater community, government and economy, to include all productive and capable individuals in the labour market. From a financial perspective, once public investment has been made in the education of a student diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, it does not make sense to discontinue supporting the individual as soon as their education concludes.

¹ Learning Together Public Education in Alberta, Alberta Education, accessed on June 1, 2015, <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Albertas-Education-System/PE-48%20English-Learning%20Together.pdf>.

Reference List

From this point forward, for the purpose of this paper when referring to Autism Spectrum Disorder, the word autism may be used instead. Please note the following references:

- ASD refers to Autism Spectrum Disorder
- PDD refers to Persons with Developmental Disabilities Funding
- AISH refers to Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
- HSAD refers to High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder
- PALS refers to The Participation and Activity Limitation Survey
- LMA refers to Labour Market Availability
- JAN refers to Job Accommodation Network
- CSD refers to The Canadian Survey on Disability
- Neurotypical refers to an individual who does not have Autism Spectrum Disorder
- DSM-5 refers to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
- OECD refers to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development

Introduction: Why is it important, relevant and/or interesting?

Barriers to the labour market persist for Canadians diagnosed with autism. Although participation in the labour market is not a necessary requirement for Canadians diagnosed with autism to live in good health, it contributes greatly to their social, mental and emotional stability.² The number of youth in Alberta diagnosed with, ASD, a neurodevelopmental disability, is increasing. Creating and maintaining pathways of accessibility to the labour market for this segment of the population will become increasingly important in the coming years. “Alberta employers are facing projected labour shortages over the next 10 years and need to begin looking to underrepresented groups to find the workforce of tomorrow.”³

The strategy used towards people diagnosed with disabilities has shifted dramatically since the end of the 20th century.⁴ Gone are the days of a traditional medical model, where a patient is responsible for their well being alone. The collective mindset towards disabilities is no longer only focused on the impairment, but rather centered on the individual. The traditional medical model has been deinstitutionalized through changes in legislation, community awareness and health promotion.⁵ Now, a social model is dominant in “governing disability practice and policy.”⁶ For individuals diagnosed with autism, this shift has changed the way

² Renée Cameto, et al., *The Emerging Independence of Youth with Disabilities*, chapter 6 of *The Achievements of Youth with Disabilities During Secondary School* (Menlo Park: California, 2003).

³ Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 35.

⁴ Renée Cameto, et al., *The Emerging Independence of Youth with Disabilities*, chapter 6 of *The Achievements of Youth with Disabilities During Secondary School* (Menlo Park: California, 2003).

⁵ Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery, “The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals living with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *The School of Public Policy*, (2014): 26.

⁶ Renée Cameto, et al., *The Emerging Independence of Youth with Disabilities*, chapter 6 of *The Achievements of Youth with Disabilities During Secondary School* (Menlo Park: California, 2003), 6.

autism is perceived and accepted, making way for greater integration and opportunity for all people, disabled or not.

In Alberta, ASD prevalence is not fully known, because many older ASD individuals were never formally diagnosed. It is generally accepted that “at the very least, one person in 100 has an autism diagnosis. The total of individuals living in Alberta with ASD is then approximately 36,000.”⁷ Autism is a pervasive neurological disability, meaning it affects every part of the person and is a result of a neuro-atypical brain wiring that takes place during early life stages.⁸ Since autism is a “naturally occurring variation in the human brain”⁹ there have always been people with autism, but only recently have more people become diagnosed. In many ways autism is what people consider an invisible disability, because many individuals with ASD do not present with traditional signs of a disability, such as physical impairment.¹⁰ As we recognize the prevalence of autism we must act to provide support for individuals with the disability.

There is a lack of information about the prevalence of ASD in the labour market in Canada as a whole, and Alberta specifically. As we continue to recognize the prevalence of ASD in the population, qualitative and quantitative information must be collected in Alberta, to assist policy decision-making. Although quantitative information in the area is lacking, the need for adaptive and innovative policy is not. For individuals with ASD, the important transition from childhood to adulthood requires support, which is currently largely absent from provincial

⁷ Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery, “The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals living with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *The School of Public Policy*, (2014): 26.

⁸ Amythest Schaber, “Ask an Autistic – What is Autism?,” Youtube, last modified April 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vju1EbVVgP8>.

⁹ Renée Cameto, et al., *The Emerging Independence of Youth with Disabilities*, chapter 6 of *The Achievements of Youth with Disabilities During Secondary School* (Menlo Park: California, 2003), 6.

¹⁰ Mary Ann, McColl, *A Canadians with Disabilities Act?*, Kingston: Queens University, 2010, Accessed September 1, 2015, <http://69.89.31.83/~disabio5/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/CDA-reformat.pdf>, 4.

policy. It is necessary that the Government of Alberta's policy create the social infrastructure to provide services to accommodate this mental, physical and emotional transition.

This section explained the importance of including individuals diagnosed with autism in the labour market and why collecting more information about labour market participation of individuals with ASD will benefit public policy.

Individuals with ASD in the Labour Market Today

This section outlines the experiences of individuals diagnosed with ASD as they navigate the labour market. It uses data to compare the experiences of individuals with diagnosed disabilities and without; highlighting the challenges individuals diagnosed with disabilities, including autism, encounter while participating in the labour market.

“While many smaller pieces of legislation related to the wellbeing of people with disabilities exist at the federal level in Canada,”¹¹ Canada does not have national disabilities legislation. Alberta has programs to assist its citizens who are diagnosed with a variety of disabilities, and many of these programs are applicable to citizens diagnosed with ASD. All of these programs dictate their own individual eligibility requirements.¹²

¹¹ Mary Ann, McColl, *A Canadians with Disabilities Act?*, Kingston: Queens University, 2010, Accessed September 1, 2015, <http://69.89.31.83/~disabio5/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/CDA-reformat.pdf>, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

The Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD)¹³ was created by Statistics Canada to provide information about the quality of life for Canadians living with disabilities.¹⁴ Although ASD is a unique disorder, and experiences vary greatly between individuals with different disabilities, Statistics Canada data about disabilities is used for this paper to draw inferences between those with disabilities and individuals diagnosed with ASD. The below inferences must be made with caution, and with the understanding that Alberta currently has no qualitative data reflecting labour market participation of individuals diagnosed with ASD.

For the 2012 CSD, “respondents are identified as having a disability only if their daily activities are limited as a result of an impairment or difficulty with particular tasks.”¹⁵ Thus, the information about Canadians living with disabilities in the CSD is comparable only on a case-by-case basis for individuals diagnosed with ASD. According to the CSD in 2012, 12.5 per cent of Albertans were living with a disability.¹⁶ In light of this information, Alberta Works created the Alberta Employment First Strategy, with “the goal of increasing the number of Albertans with disabilities who are employed and have careers that are meaningful to them.”¹⁷ The resulting research revealed information that will allow policy to eliminate current barriers of entry to the labour market for individuals, as well as for employers looking to diversify their work force.

¹³ Statistics Canada (2013), *The 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) and the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS)*, Retrieved at: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/document/3251_D6_T9_V1-eng.htm.

¹⁴ Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 3.

¹⁵ Statistics Canada (2013), *The 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) and the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS)*, Retrieved at: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/document/3251_D6_T9_V1-eng.htm.

¹⁶ Statistics Canada, *A Profile of Persons with Disabilities Amount Canadians aged 15 Years or Older* (Ottawa: Canadian Survey on Disability, 2012).

¹⁷ Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 2.

Despite the negative stigma that commonly prevails, in 2006 according to Statistics Canada people with diagnosed disabilities had attained higher levels of non-university post-secondary certificates than those without disabilities in Alberta.¹⁸ “In 2011, 53 per cent of working-age Albertans with a disability [had] a post-secondary education.”¹⁹ Yet despite high levels of education, the employment rate in Alberta in 2012 for individuals with disabilities was 47.9 per cent, compared to persons without disabilities, whose employment rate in 2012 was 73.9 per cent.²⁰ Although these employment rates reflect all Canadians with disabilities, not only individuals with ASD, they emphasize the range of opportunities provided to different segments of the population.

The National Longitudinal Transitional Study 2 (NLTS2) is an American study conducted in 2009 that provides quantitative data about the experiences of students diagnosed with disabilities as they “transition to young adulthood.”²¹ The NLTS2 interviewed individuals with disabilities that are recognized by the *Individuals with Disabilities Act* (IDEA). IDEA “specifies that children with various disabilities, including autism are entitled to early intervention services and special education.”²² The research found that 47 per cent of youth diagnosed with

¹⁸ Statistics Canada, *2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey Analytical Report* (Ottawa: Canadian Survey on Disability, 2006).

¹⁹ Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 7.

²⁰ Statistics Canada (2013), *The 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) and the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS)*, Retrieved from http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/document/3251_D6_T9_V1-eng.htm.

²¹ National Center on Special Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences, *The post-high school of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school: A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* (Washington, DC: US. Department of Education, 2011).

²² Your Child’s Rights, Autism Speaks, accessed September 11, 2015, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/your-childs-rights>.

autism “were employed for pay outside the home”²³ compared to 66 per cent of youth in the general population.²⁴ When asked how long the youth worked at their most recent or current job, 56 per cent of the youth diagnosed with disabilities “had held their job for 6 months or less.”²⁵ The average duration of employment for youth in the general population is over three times as high, 15 months, as the youth diagnosed with disabilities. Notably, when looking at the results by disability, youth with autism report “the longest average duration of job”²⁶ to be 12.5 months.

Although an American study, these NLTS2 results provide insights that can reasonably be considered indications of the labour market in Canada because of the “integrated nature of the American and Canadian economies.”²⁷ Between February 2008 and June 2014, the “employment rate for citizens aged 25 to 54”²⁸ decreased by 5 per cent in Canada and 6.6 per cent in the United States. The unemployment rate, for the same age group in January 2014 was 6.0 per cent in Canada and 6.6 per cent in the US, and in June 2014 both countries unemployment rates for individuals aged 25-54 leveled at 6.0 per cent.²⁹ This evidence shows that the US and Canada have similar unemployment rates, fluctuation of employment rates; as well as estimates of the number of individuals diagnosed with autism.

²³ National Center on Special Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences, *The post-high school of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school: A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* (Washington, DC: US. Dept of Education, 2011), 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Statistics Canada, *The Labour Market in Canada and the United States since the Last Recession*, (Ottawa: Labour Statistics Division, 2014).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Another factor making the discrepancy in employment of persons with disabilities compared to persons without disabilities unreasonable is a measure of the labour market availability (LMA). Labour market availability is a measure of the number of workers that could be hired from any given segment of the population,³⁰ more specifically “the share of the designated group members in the workforce from which the employers could hire.”³¹ For example, the representation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, especially in specific sectors like “natural resources, agriculture and related production, and art, culture, recreation and sport,”³² is significantly lower than the market availability. People with disabilities are underrepresented at the same ratio as Aboriginal Peoples, and members of visible minorities.³³ The only group that has a higher discrepancy of representation in the workforce is women, who have a gap of available workforce and absence from the labour market.³⁴

This section explained that participation in the labour market is not a uniform experience for all citizens, and individuals diagnosed with autism are not integrated into the workforce in the same way as individuals without disabilities. The data highlights that autistic individuals are not participating in the labour market despite high levels of education and an availability of workers.

³⁰ Statistics Canada, *2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey Analytical Report* (Ottawa: Canadian Survey on Disability, 2006).

³¹ Government of Alberta, *Employment Equity Act: Annual Report 2012* (Ottawa: Department of Labour, 2012), accessible at

http://www.labour.gc.ca/eng/standards_equality/eq/pubs_eq/annual_reports/2012/index.shtml.

³² Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

Barriers to Entering the Labour Market for Individuals with ASD

This section outlines the barriers individuals diagnosed with ASD encounter when entering the labour market. This section also explains that some of the barriers are created because of the existing disability policy in Alberta.

There are various barriers to entering the labour market for persons with disabilities; many of these barriers affect individuals with ASD specifically. The most significant barrier, regardless of disability, is the severity of the disability. Thus, for individuals diagnosed as high functioning autistic (HASD) who “have IQs that fall in the normal or even superior range”³⁵ the barriers are less than for individuals with ASD who have lower IQs. Barriers for Canadians with HASD are more likely found in the form of looking for work and attaining the appropriate training.³⁶ The three most common barriers to employment for all individuals with disabilities in Alberta, including autism, are expected income less than current, loss of additional supports, and lack of specialized transportation.³⁷ The second impediment, loss of other supports, refers to forfeiting eligibility for specific assistance services, if you are earning too much income. In Alberta, the primary income supplement for many disabled Albertans with an IQ above 70, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, contains eligibility requirements

³⁵ How Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome Differ, Autism Speaks, accessed on September 1, 2015, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/asperger-syndrome-and-high-functioning-autism-tool-kit/how-are-and-hfa-dif>.

³⁶ Employment and Other Options, Autism Speaks, accessed April 1, 2015, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/transition/employment.pdf>.

³⁷ Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 10.

that prohibit recipients from earning above a certain amount per month.³⁸ The details of AISH will be discussed in a different section.

Another prominent barrier is the employer attitudes that traditionally dictate hiring best practice. The challenge and simultaneous benefit of finding work for individuals with ASD is re-defining the perception of such individuals by neurotypical individuals.³⁹ A 2006 qualitative study performed in Calgary, Alberta and Regina, Saskatchewan found “a need for greater collaboration between policy makers and employers to better promote the success of persons with disabilities in the labour market.”⁴⁰

Through the Government of Canada’s 2012 Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, employers identified the barriers to hiring and including Canadians with disabilities in the work force. One significant hurdle identified was a general lack of knowledge and understanding about various disabilities and the steps required to create a safe and accommodating work environment.⁴¹ This is a problem that can be resolved by increasing awareness and understanding in Alberta of what ASD is, and how it varies greatly between all individuals who are diagnosed.

This section described some of the barriers faced by individuals with ASD as they make efforts to enter the labour market. This section also briefly described how collaboration

³⁸ Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, RSA 2000, c A-45, <<http://canlii.ca/t/j8x7>> Accessed April 4, 2015.

³⁹ Government of Alberta, *Employment Equity Act: Annual Report 2012* (Ottawa: Department of Labour, 2012), retrieved at: http://www.labour.gc.ca/eng/standards_equality/eq/pubs_eq/annual_reports/2012/index.shtml.

⁴⁰ Michael Shier and John R. Graham, “Disability and Society, Barriers to Employment as Experienced by Disabled People: A Qualitative Analysis in Calgary and Regina,” *Disability and Society* 35, no. 1 (2009): 63.

⁴¹ Alberta Works, *Calgary and Area Labour Market Report Recruiting and Employing Persons with Disabilities* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 7.

between policy makers and employers could greatly improve the experience of individuals with ASD as they enter the labour market.

Alberta's Current Support for Students with ASD Seeking Employment

This section provides the reader with an understanding of the support provided to individuals diagnosed with autism as they transition from childhood to adulthood in Alberta. This section outlines the supports provided by the Government of Alberta, as well as other private companies and organizations.

A. Funding Provided by the Government of Alberta

Alberta's challenges are not unlike other provinces in Canada. The transition from childhood to adulthood for individuals with ASD is dictated by eligibility for specific forms of funding. Funding for children under age 18 is provided through *Family Support for Children with Disabilities*.⁴² After a child turns 18 they are automatically ineligible for support through the *Family Support Program*, and must apply for adult funding. Adult funding in Alberta is provided through the Ministry of Human Services and is called PDD (*Persons with Developmental Disabilities Funding*). Additionally, at the age of 18 individuals may apply for AISH (*Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped*).

Funding for autistic individuals under 18 through the *Family Support for Children with Disabilities*, as well as for individuals over 18 through PDD or AISH, is the most financially generous of all provinces and territories across Canada. AISH in Alberta provides a maximum

⁴² Family Support for Children with Disabilities, Government of Alberta, accessed on April 1, 2015, <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/disability-services/15663.html>.

monthly living allowance of \$1,588.⁴³ This living allowance carries with it stipulations on the amount of additional income that can be earned monthly by the recipient through employment. The program makes it possible for many disabled Albertans to continue living independently; thus the program proactively decreases the likelihood of people using more expensive social services in the long term.⁴⁴ The increased use of the service is proportionally consistent with our population trends in Alberta. The AISH program is both legislated and run by the Province of Alberta. The program has flexibility to be changed without legislative amendments because it has components laid out in regulation, called the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped General Regulation (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped General Regulation, Alta Reg 91/2007). There must be coordination between the Canadian Old Age Security (OAS) program as people transition from AISH to OAS at 65, as well as Family Support for Children with Disabilities, for the individuals under 18 that are not yet eligible for AISH. The Alberta Supports Contact Center exists to assist people with their applications, and AISH offices exist throughout Alberta to process and assist clients.

Although AISH is an important program to support individuals with ASD in Alberta, its processes and work stipulations have created a barrier to the labour market for many autistic Albertans. AISH was established to support Albertans who are unable to solely support themselves through work, but the policy makes it difficult for those with a disability who may be willing and able to integrate into the workforce to do so. Living unemployed with a severe disability in Alberta is more costly than living unemployed as an able-bodied individual, and so

⁴³ Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), Alberta Human Services, Accessed April 4, 2015, <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/disability-services/aish-faq.html>.

⁴⁴ Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, SA 2006, c A-45.1, <<http://canlii.ca/t/kxcx>> Accessed April 4, 2015.

the AISH program provides both financial and health support to eligible participants. A significant benefit of the program is the health coverage provided.

For single Albertans on AISH, up to \$800 of income can be earned each month without this affecting their AISH payment. Earned income between \$800 and \$1,500 is subject to a 50 per cent claw back of the AISH benefit. Income earned in excess of \$1,500 results in a 100 per cent claw back of the AISH income benefit. For a single person, then, earned income in excess of \$2,737 per month means that person no longer receives a monthly income benefit from the AISH program. What's more, any earned income above \$1,150/month discontinues their eligibility from health coverage completely. Albertan families with children face a 50 per cent claw back on earned income in excess of \$1,950 per month with a 100% claw back after earned income exceeds \$2,500 per month. For a family, therefore, earned income in excess of \$3,812 per month means the family no longer receives a monthly benefit from the AISH program.⁴⁵

On average, the cost of living with ASD for someone between the ages of 18-64 can range from \$30,711/year to \$158,359/year, depending on the type of support required.⁴⁶ People not working and receiving AISH are provided an annual income of \$19,056.⁴⁷ This annual income does not provide enough money for individuals with ASD, because even those who require the lowest level of support face costs of \$30,711/year. The annual income of \$19,056 covers only 62 per cent of the expenses faced by individuals living with ASD; this calculation modestly shows the comparison because the cost of support can increase depending on the severity of

⁴⁵ Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, SA 2006, c A-45.1, <<http://canlii.ca/t/kxcx>> Accessed April 4, 2015.

⁴⁶ Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery, "The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals living with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *The School of Public Policy*, (2014): 16.

⁴⁷ This figure was calculated by multiplying the monthly AISH amount of \$1588 by 12 months.

ASD. The cost of support required by many individuals diagnosed with ASD is “well beyond what the individuals with ASD and their families could pay for out of annual income,”⁴⁸ giving many people no choice but to stay on AISH simply to have their medical expenses subsidized. Yet, AISH does not cover all methods of treatment, making it nearly impossible for AISH recipients to work toward trying new methods of experimental medical treatments. This component of the AISH program creates a barrier to entry into the workforce because some Albertans with ASD are forced to remain in a cycle of dependency on the government, as opposed to fully integrating into the work force.

Both AISH and PDD maintain strict rules of eligibility, and rigorous application processes. Eligibility for PDD requires an IQ under 70 and proof that a disability severely impacts means of earning income. PDD is the only primary adult funding agency in Alberta for disabilities. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) the autism spectrum disorder diagnosis incorporates a wide range of neurodevelopmental disorders, including Asperger disorder.⁴⁹ A diagnosis of ASD does not manifest itself the same way for each individual, and the severity of symptoms will be significantly different for everyone. Some individuals diagnosed with ASD have milder symptoms and are higher functioning than others. Individuals on the autism spectrum present with a wide range of capabilities, skills and consequently some are more employable than others. As a result, eligibility for PDD and AISH is determined on a case-by-case basis for individuals in Alberta diagnosed with ASD, a positive

⁴⁸ Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery, “The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals living with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *The School of Public Policy*, (2014): 17.

⁴⁹ American Psychiatric Association, ed., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (World Health Organization, 2013), accessible at: <http://dsm.psychiatryonline.org/doi/book/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.

element of disability policy in Alberta because it recognizes that every individual's needs are different.

The Government of Alberta states that 60% of their PDD funded individuals have been assessed as having low needs, meaning, "most of these people are probably employable to a certain degree."⁵⁰ The two greatest impediments employers face are that the cost of accommodations are too great, and it is difficult to find persons with disabilities who are qualified. Policy must combat these challenges, and facilitate entry into the work force for these individuals.

B. Job Training Provided by the Government of Alberta

Ministries involved in the *2004 Canada-Labour Agreement* concluded that involving more Albertans in the labour market is an important goal. "Increasing persons with disabilities' contribution has been identified as an important aspect of labour force development by Alberta's 10 year labour force development strategy from 2006 to 2016, *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce*. Approaches to support this important aspect include increasing access to training and education, increasing employers' awareness of this pool of skilled labour and improving programs and networks supporting integration into the workplace."⁵¹

The Ministry of Human Services provides the *Disability Related Employment Supports* (DRES) program. DRES "provides individualized employment and training supports"⁵² through public and privately funded post secondary institutions and other training institutions. A main

⁵⁰ Government of Canada, *Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector* (Ottawa: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013), 29.

⁵¹ Alberta Human Services, *Canada-Alberta Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities 2013/2014 Annual Report* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

component of the DRES support is their ability to fund “costs associated with assistive technologies such as specialized computer software, assistive services such as tutors and job coaches and worksite modifications.”⁵³ In 2013-2014 a total of 125 Albertans benefited from the program, a small number relative to the number of Albertans living with disabilities.⁵⁴ The number of individuals with ASD that received this training is unclear, and further information about who is utilizing these assistive services would be helpful to determine how to increase utility of existing programs.

As a participant in the *Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program* persons are able to access employment supports that involve a two-step process: Employment Preparation Supports and Employment Placement Supports. The employment definition is fulfilled when the individual receives remuneration for work, an employer/employee relationship exists and the Alberta Employment Standards Code applies. A total of 11,000 Albertans with developmental disabilities who received PDD support in 2013/2014 were eligible to receive these employment supports.⁵⁵ What is noteworthy is the eligibility of the PDD program, which you must be a part of in order to receive these employment supports. The IQ test stipulates anyone with an IQ above 70 is ineligible to participate, and consequently also ineligible to receive any employment training or assistance when entering the labour market. This means not all individuals diagnosed with ASD are eligible.

⁵³ Government of Canada, *Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector* (Ottawa: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013), 29.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Alberta Human Services, *Canada-Alberta Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities 2013/2014 Annual Report* (Edmonton: Alberta Human Services, 2014), 3.

Other programs such as *Training for Work* and *Work Foundations* are programs open to all Albertans, including Albertans diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Although these programs are open to Albertans diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, they do not address the specific needs of individuals with ASD that must be considered when undergoing skills training.

C. Community Programs and Private Companies

Innovative community lead initiatives are paving the way for students with ASD undergoing job and skills training. Alberta itself is home to The Ability Hub, a clinic operating the program *Launch*. This program is designed to deepen the understanding of transition planning for adolescents and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder across their lifespan.⁵⁶ The goal of *Launch* is to understand and work with participants' strengths to develop goals for individuals and their families to guide their efforts toward meaningful community engagement.⁵⁷ The transition planning that is undertaken at "the Ability Hub, is a process that uncovers, develops and documents the skills, challenges, goals and tasks that will be important for moving through school, leaving school, and entering the adult world."⁵⁸

The work done by The Ability Hub is setting a precedent that illustrates the importance of transition planning that looks over the course of the lifespan. Examples of successful programming across Canada all retain this aspect, including *Thrive* in Manitoba, which will be discussed in a later section.

⁵⁶ Launch Program, The Ability Hub, last modified January 2015, <http://www.theabilityhub.org/programs/launch>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

How Disability Policy Can Better Facilitate Labour Market Participation

This section begins by outlining how the current disability policy in Alberta hinders individuals with autism as they attempt to enter and remain in the labour market. Then continues to explore how policy can be designed to support individuals diagnosed with ASD as they enter the labour market, and participate in it.

In 2003 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) studied the disability policies of its member countries. The study concluded that there is currently no disability policy that has effectively generated “substantial economic and social integration of citizens with disabilities.”⁵⁹ The OECD concluded, “in most countries, people who enter disability-related programs remain there until retirement. This is expensive, inefficient and encourages segregation.”⁶⁰ The OECD recommends countries “disentangle eligibility for support from work ability and work status: make cash benefits a flexible (in-work) tool that covers extra costs and the labour market disadvantage.”⁶¹

Although not only specific to individuals with autism, but all disabilities, Rick August assessed disability policy in Canada and its impact on individuals receiving it. August’s assessment of disability policy is that it forces individuals to “sacrifice employment

⁵⁹ Rick August, “Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Passive Disability Policy in Canada,” *Caledon Institute of Social Policy* (2009): 14,

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1475&context=gladnetcollect>.

⁶⁰ OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, “From Disability to Ability, Policy Challenges and Trends in OECD Countries,” The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), January 19, 2007, <http://www.oecd.org/social/soc/38196029.pdf>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

prospects.”⁶² August argues the importance of “not displacing human capacity, but in restoring or developing it.”⁶³ Citing that “Canada faces human resource development and utilization problems that threaten our capacity to remain a prosperous society.”⁶⁴

August believes policy must “assess the impacts of a disability on a person’s life”⁶⁵ and provide support accordingly. The trade off between equity and equality in disability policy is to “provide social protection without limiting human potential.”⁶⁶ August uses the concept of a welfare wall to describe how disability policy is discouraging Canadians with disabilities from participating in the labour market. The disability welfare wall refers to the challenges welfare recipients encounter when they enter or re-enter the labour market. The “wall arises from the impact of direct and indirect taxes that welfare households face when they supplement their benefits with earned income.”⁶⁷ In the case of Alberta’s disability support program, AISH, these taxes are the claw back mechanism that occurs if earned income surpasses a specific threshold. The other component of the welfare wall that is especially detrimental to disability policy “is the potential loss of ‘income-in-kind’ such as supplementary health benefits.”⁶⁸ This “potential loss of income-in-kind”⁶⁹ in the form of health benefits exists in Alberta’s current AISH policy.

⁶² Rick August, “Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Passive Disability Policy in Canada,” *Caledon Institute of Social Policy* (2009): 1,

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1475&context=gladnetcollect>.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁶ Sherri Torjman, “Breaking Down the Welfare Wall,” *Caledon Institute of Social Policy* (1993), 1, <http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/488ENG.pdf>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁸ Rick August, “Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Passive Disability Policy in Canada,” *Caledon Institute of Social Policy* (2009): 1,

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1475&context=gladnetcollect>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

To overcome this wall, the “work incentive/disincentive threshold”⁷⁰ must be changed, and in-kind benefits like health should be provided to citizens receiving disability supports according to need, not level of participation in the labour market. Instead of increasing resources, the current resources should be better managed.

(An) “alternative should place significantly less emphasis on passive compensation for adults with disabilities...and much more emphasis on practical measures to reduce disability impacts, by using subsidy strategies and encourage employment and active involvement in the economy, at whatever level or intensity is possible for each individual.”⁷¹

August argues providing in-kind benefits that are designed to “reduce disability barriers”⁷² is the best way to move away from passive benefits. Passive benefits “are intended to contribute to living expenses rather than specific needs, and that are paid either without behavioural conditions or expectation, or through delivery models like welfare that do not effectively enforce conditionality.”⁷³ August believes disability policy in Canada continues to “displace human capacity because it is created with the assumption of dysfunction rather than a goal of functionality.”⁷⁴ Some individuals receiving AISH could benefit from their passive benefits transforming into active benefits such as skills training or assistance finding employment. By including more active benefits, August sees Canada achieving greater quality of life for all its citizens with disabilities.

⁷⁰ Rick August, “Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Passive Disability Policy in Canada,” *Caledon Institute of Social Policy* (2009): 8, <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1475&context=gladnetcollect>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 16.

⁷³ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.

This section explored the rationale behind moving away from passive benefits for individuals receiving support for a disability, but who are also able to participate in the workforce. Augustus' argument does not decrease total welfare by creating conditionality on income supports, because it creates economic freedom for citizens by allowing them to maximize their potential in the labour market, while still receiving the necessary health and supplementary supports to manage the cost of living with a disability. Moving away from passive benefits all together is not justified; because many individuals diagnosed with disabilities are unable to work, and their economic utility is maximized by individually choosing how they spend wish to spend their money. Therefore, it is important that AISH moves further toward a system that will allow individuals to further maximize their economic utility through employment but that still recognizes AISH must also accommodate individuals unable to integrate into the labour market. AISH provides assistances to a very wide variety of people diagnosed with ASD, and passive benefits allow the program to accommodate the spectrum of needs presented by recipients.

Financial Incentives for the Integration of Individuals with ASD into the Labour Market

This section will outline for the reader the cost of living with autism, to help explain the importance of finding meaningful, appropriate employment for individuals with autism.

“Hiring people with disabilities is good for business. We heard this from senior and experienced business leaders who recognize the value of an inclusive work environment. Although mainly intuitive their beliefs are supported by the performance of corporate diversity leaders on the capital markets, as well as data on employee retention and productivity.”⁷⁵ – Business Owner

Awareness and support for individuals with ASD has never been greater as evidenced by increasing government research in the area. Looking toward the future, the increasing prevalence of ASD diagnoses poses difficult questions, many of which are financially driven. With increasing diagnostic rates and strains on available services, Alberta must adopt innovative means of ensuring all citizens receive the support they deserve. This section will look at financial incentives for increasing labour market participation of individuals with ASD.

Recent research has provided accurate estimates of the costs of autism. Ganz’s 2007 research deconstructs the costs of Autism into direct medical costs, direct non-medical costs, and indirect costs.⁷⁶ Anecdotal evidence suggests that of these three types of costs, indirect costs are often the least recognized by the state and lack formal support structures to

⁷⁵ Government of Canada, *Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector* (Ottawa: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013), p.8-9.

⁷⁶ M.L. Ganz, “The lifetime distribution of the incremental societal cost of autism,” *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 161, (2007): 131-349, quoted in Carolyn Dudley And Herb Emery, *The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (The School of Public Policy: 2014), 9.

compensate for these costs.⁷⁷ Indirect costs include lost productivity of both the primary caregiver and the individual with autism him/herself.⁷⁸ This lost productivity manifests itself in a variety of ways, including choosing jobs that accommodate flexible time schedules for caregivers, or the inability to find meaningful employment for individuals with autism. “The substantial cost amounts were primarily in the area of adult care and lost productivity of both the parent and the individual with autism”⁷⁹ according to Gantz’ research. The cost of autism is very large for many families, leading to crippling debt and an inability to provide adequate care. Given the substantial cost that lost productivity adds to the price tag of autism, programs that attempt to combat this lost productivity are an important step towards bettering the support system for individuals with autism and their families. By enabling more individuals with ASD to join the labour market, the factors contributing to indirect costs will decrease.

Jarbrink’s research highlights the amount of money that is being foregone because we are not fully integrating individuals with ASD into the labour market.⁸⁰ It is important to note that the lack of entry into the market place is not because of a lack of job opportunities in Alberta, but because of a lack of training and understanding amongst both employees and potential employers of ASD individuals. Not only is participation positive for individuals with

⁷⁷ M.L. Ganz, “The lifetime distribution of the incremental societal cost of autism,” *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 161, (2007): 131-349, quoted in Carolyn Dudley And Herb Emery, *The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (The School of Public Policy: 2014), 9.

⁷⁸ Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery, “The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals living with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *The School of Public Policy*, (2014): 9.

⁷⁹ M.L. Ganz, “The lifetime distribution of the incremental societal cost of autism,” *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 161, (2007): 131-349, quoted in Carolyn Dudley And Dr. Herb Emery, *The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (The School of Public Policy: 2014), 9.

⁸⁰ K. Jarbrink et al., “Cost-impact of young adults with high functioning autism spectrum disorder,” *Reach in Developmental Disabilities* 28, (2007): 99.

ASD and their families, but it is positive for the employers themselves. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN)⁸¹ conducted a study from 2004 -2012, sampling approximately 2,000 employers. The results found that “hiring persons with disabilities was economically advantageous for the companies”⁸² both directly and indirectly. Benefits included increases in employee productivity, overall company moral, interaction with customers, and increased workplace safety.

Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery calculated the life span costs of autism. The costs of autism were separated into two age brackets, 14-17 and 18-64. These life stages were used because of the current lack of information, and lack of support for these specific age groups. The relevant stage that can be most easily influenced is Life Stage 2: (ages 18-64).⁸³ The estimated cost per year for individuals in life stage 2 ranges from \$30,711 per year for supportive, occasional support to \$158,359 per year for a non-verbal Autistic individual with “limited understanding of community and home.”⁸⁴ Reducing costs in this area is the most realistic; and could benefit both individuals with autism, as well as their families. When individuals lack options to become independent, costs are compounded onto the traditional family unit to continue supporting the individual with ASD.

Throughout the transition from childhood to adulthood, many individuals with autism face challenges, as publically funded education is no longer provided. Without a means to enter the labour market and find meaningful employment, many individuals with autism are

⁸¹ Job Accommodation Network, US Department of Labour, accessed June 19, 2015, <https://askjan.org/>.

⁸² Government of Canada, *Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector* (Ottawa: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013), 15.

⁸³ Carolyn Dudley and Herb Emery, “The Value of Caregiver Time: Costs of Support and Care for Individuals living with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *The School of Public Policy*, (2014): 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

left with few options because of the lack of available programming. Additionally, such individuals are left with even fewer options because of the lack of available government funding in the realm of vocational training for individuals with developmental disabilities.

This section explained how the transition from childhood to adulthood can be especially costly for individuals diagnosed with autism, when there are no formal mechanisms in place to assist the individual in finding work or setting up a support structure.

What is the Transition into Adulthood for Individuals Diagnosed with ASD Today?

This section shows the lack of resources provided during the transition into adulthood for individuals diagnosed with ASD. The importance of this transition is emphasized, particularly as it affects ASD individuals in a unique way. This section also introduces effective programs that plan for the future of individuals with ASD that could be introduced in Alberta, to assist with the transition.

ASD, relative to other neurodevelopmental disabilities, physical and mental disabilities has the proclivity to cause individuals to lack the means or tendency to explore and seek out opportunities for their future.⁸⁵ Given the temperament of many individuals with ASD, it is necessary to provide an avenue to success through early intervention and planning for the future. Manitoba introduced *Thrive*, a five-year program aimed at helping students with ASD become independent through a combination of strengthening life skills, communication,

⁸⁵ Statistics Canada (2013), *The 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) and the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS)*, Retrieved at: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/document/3251_D6_T9_V1-eng.htm.

innovation and building awareness.⁸⁶ Appropriate learning opportunities are integrated into high school, so necessary life skills are worked up to overtime. *Thrive* is a unique program because it accounts for current as well as future needs of individuals with ASD when developing a transition plan. Currently, Manitoba is the “only province to have an ASD provincial plan that considers ASD-lifespan needs.”⁸⁷

Manitoba ensures its citizens diagnosed with ASD are integrated into community and the labour market through a variety of efforts that Alberta could adopt. *Thrive*, Manitoba’s five-year program facilitating the transition into adulthood for students with autism is supplemented with a public awareness campaign designed to inform the public about ASD. Along with a province wide campaign, government is working alongside the University of Manitoba to provide a certificate in applied behavior analysis that teaches “specialized training and professional development for individuals who provide support to children and adults with autism.”⁸⁸ Manitoba’s resources for individuals with ASD over their lifespan are driven by awareness and support being present at every level of development in the public education system. The methods to provide this type of support is outlined in Manitoba’s handbook *Supporting Inclusive Schools: A Handbook for Developing and Implementing Programming for Students with ASD*. Manitoba should be used as an example of a multi-faceted approach to greater inclusion of individuals with ASD in the labour market and community.

Traditionally a move out of publically funded education for students with ASD accompanies a time of transition in the realms of social, mental, physical and emotional health.

⁸⁶ Thrive Family Services, Government of Manitoba, accessed on April 1, 2015, http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/thrive/bec_more_ind.html.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

The transition into adulthood is tumultuous and unique for all individuals, regardless of whether they have a neurodevelopmental disability or not. Quantitative research pertaining to the experience of individuals with ASD throughout the transition is limited; Alberta specific information even more so. General understanding of the transition for any persons of similar neurodevelopmental disabilities is also evolving because of the non-linear path of transition that has grown to be the norm. Shifts in societal values, lifespan, average wealth, and the labour market have had ripple effects on the age and rate at which children move away from a state of dependence on their parents. Consequently, the term “transition to adulthood” does not reflect a uniform experience, and striving for the optimal transition experience is not quantifiable. Provincial policy must accommodate this variety and explore ways to best support individuals with ASD throughout their transitional phase, with the understanding that it manifests itself differently for everyone.

This section explained how important the transition out of childhood is for all individuals, and explored how to support individuals with ASD as they experience the transition. The importance of planning long into the future when establishing transitional programs was emphasized.

Setting up Students with ASD for Success in the Labour Market: Early Intervention

This section will explain the importance of planning ahead at a young age for individuals diagnosed with ASD, because of the benefits of early intervention. The health and wellness of individuals with autism can be greatly impacted by establishing patterns and goals early.

The transition to adult independence for individuals diagnosed with ASD, also known as the “move into adolescence”⁸⁹ is particularly challenging because of “difficulties with anxiety, organization, executive functioning, test performance, social reciprocity, and emotional expressiveness.”⁹⁰ A common symptom for individuals diagnosed with ASD is “deficits in the area of social comprehension.”⁹¹ Self-awareness and the ability to advocate for one’s self are crucial skills for the transition toward adulthood and ultimate independence. Students diagnosed with ASD are not taught skills for self-advocacy, making the transition especially difficult. For students diagnosed with ASD in secondary school, the school system needs to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood by developing “an individualized checklist of strengths and limitations”⁹² to “help reinforce these skills as well as empower students with the necessary confidence to self-advocate, and ask salient questions during this important transition.”⁹³

Interventions can take place at the secondary school level through integration by school counselors or community initiatives. Research surrounding efficacy of intervention programs is

⁸⁹ Abiola O. Dipeolu et al., “Transition to College and Students with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder: Strategy Considerations for School Councilors,” *Journal of School Counseling* 0, no. 11 (2014): 6, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1034736.pdf>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 9.

⁹² Ibid., 23.

⁹³ Ibid.

only now emerging and best practice in the area has long relied on trial and error. The goals of intervention programs for students diagnosed with ASD are to improve social skills, anxiety reduction, and test-taking skills. Developed in the United States in 2004, the “SCORE skills strategy is a published social skills program.”⁹⁴ A new intervention, “with proven scientific efficacy among young adults with high functioning autism spectrum disorder (HASD). The SCORE program targets five key social skills areas aimed at helping young adults with HASD to share ideas, compliment others, offer help or encouragement, recommend appropriate feedback, and learn to exercise self-control.”⁹⁵ This 10-week program has been adopted throughout the United States and could be integrated into the Alberta curriculum as a way to incorporate transitional planning into the education system.

An important tool in providing assistance to students diagnosed with ASD as they transition from secondary to post-secondary or vocational training is a multidisciplinary team. Students with ASD and their parents should be assisted through partnerships with other students who have already gone through the transition, as well as other mental health professionals to facilitate a smooth transition.⁹⁶ This type of assistance does not currently exist in the public education sector in Alberta. Early intervention has proven effective at preparing students diagnosed with ASD as they conclude secondary school. Providing and incorporating skills is an important step in supporting students with ASD as they seek employment.

⁹⁴ Score Skills Strategy, Guide for Effective Teaching Score Skills Strategy, last modified 2001, <http://www.txautism.net/uploads/target/SCORE.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Abiola O. Dipeolu et al., “Transition to College and Students with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder: Strategy Considerations for School Councilors,” *Journal of School Counseling* 0, no. 11 (2014): 9, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1034736.pdf>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

This section described various intervention options that can help develop the skills necessary for success in the labour market. These intervention programs are options that Alberta could explore to further increase its support and vocational training for individuals with autism.

Policy Recommendations

This section outlines suggested policy changes to better accommodate students with Autism Spectrum Disorder as they transition into adulthood. The following policy recommendations will increase consultation, communication and awareness of the issue.

Policy Recommendation 1: Reform Alberta Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)

As pointed out in the OECD report, as well as Rick August's research, "public policy might help low-income Canadians achieve greater economic equity with their fellow citizens."⁹⁷ The AISH policy controls quality of life for Albertans, and it is important that the impact of the policy is recognized and made as positive as possible. To assist Albertans with autism integrate them into the labour market, barriers to entry must be removed. One barrier to be addressed is the existing claw back mechanism on AISH funding. The primary goal of a reform would encourage and allow as much participation as possible in the workforce by people receiving AISH. A key concern with the policy is that people deliberately keep earnings low enough to stay on AISH – and remain eligible for the medical services provided to AISH recipients. A 2004 Alberta Government program review revealed that 50% of people receiving AISH have some type of

⁹⁷ Rick August, "Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Passive Disability Policy in Canada," *Caledon Institute of Social Policy* (2009): 1, <http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/488ENG.pdf>.

employment, many of whom want to be working as much as they can to remain engaged in society.⁹⁸ Yet, for many with disabilities they will never be able to fully support themselves given the monetary cost of the health expenses caused by their disabilities. As discussed earlier, the lifespan costs of an autism spectrum diagnoses are significant. Individuals diagnosed with ASD apply for AISH, because it is the only government program in Alberta that provides assistance for those diagnosed with ASD who have an IQ above 70. This creates an unfair dependency that keeps people in a cycle of poverty. There needs to be a middle ground that supplies coverage for the cost of the disability that so many AISH recipients rely on, without taking away the right to enter and participate in the labour market. This policy recommendation is not only specific to the needs of individuals with ASD, but would positively affect all recipients of AISH.

Policy Recommendation 2: Include Vocational/Work Training as a Component of Individual Program Plans

Establishing precedent that students with ASD will be transitioning to work in their future is critical from a young age. “Fostering the ability to carry out responsibilities independently helps an individual to develop valuable skills and support a healthy work ethic, which can be transferred to job settings.”⁹⁹ Schools must adopt the attitude that as a component of educational planning and accommodations, students with ASD must be given the social

⁹⁸ Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), Alberta Human Services, Accessed April 4, 2015, <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/disability-services/aish-faq.html>.

⁹⁹ Deborah Pugh, ed., *Living and Working with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in British Columbia A Manual for Parents and Community Professionals* (Burnaby: Autism Community Training, 2013), 2. Accessible at http://www.actcommunity.ca/files/pdf/act/manual/PM_cover.pdf?v=13.08.20.

conventions and routines necessary for employment from an early age. Similar to the *Thrive* program in Manitoba, schools in Alberta must design curriculums with the goal of teaching students with ASD the skills necessary to take them beyond graduation. This type of intervention needs to be incorporated early on for students with ASD, as a part of the individual program plan (IPP), given to children with ASD in the public school system upon diagnoses. “The connection between school and the community becomes central in making the work experience successful for the student, the employer, and anyone else who is involved, including co-workers and customers.”¹⁰⁰

Policy Recommendation 3: Tax Incentivize Diverse Hiring Practice

We must ensure that individuals with and ASD diagnoses are eligible for the Canadian Disability Tax Credit. Currently under review, the Disability Tax Credit “is a non-refundable tax credit used to reduce income tax payable on the income tax and benefit return. A person with a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental functions may claim the disability amount once they are eligible for the DTC.”¹⁰¹ This tax incentive will allow companies to put in place the necessary workplace accommodations to better attract and retain employees with ASD as well as other disabled Albertans. By promoting diverse hiring practices, over time best practice will eventually grow to reflect the benefits of hiring ASD individuals.

¹⁰⁰ Deborah Pugh, ed., *Living and Working with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in British Columbia A Manual for Parents and Community Professionals* (Burnaby: Autism Community Training, 2013), 12. Accessible at http://www.actcommunity.ca/files/pdf/act/manual/PM_cover.pdf?v=13.08.20.

¹⁰¹ Disability Tax Credit, Government of Canada (2015), last modified 2015, <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/ndvdl/sgmnts/dsblts/dtc/menu-eng.html>.

Conclusion

Government support for individuals diagnosed with ASD is not inadequate as a whole; it is missing a valuable component that could allow for greater return on investment from a social, as well as financial perspective. The lacking component is a means of integrating individuals with ASD into the labour market through job training, greater accessibility to the marketplace and early intervention, to assist with planning for the future of these students. There are numerous positive externalities that occur as a result of including more Albertan's in our labour market. Not only is providing those diagnosed with ASD employment good for them as individuals, it benefits our economy as a whole. The policy decisions relating to income assistance for those with disabilities need to be made considering the whole lifespan of a person, instead of increments. Policy must create the opportunity for all individuals to be included in Alberta's workplaces and spaces equally, regardless of whether they have Autism Spectrum Disorder or not.

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