

Disability Alliance BC – questionnaire responses

1. Income and Disability Assistance Rates

In April 2020, the provincial government introduced a \$300 COVID-19 supplement for income assistance and disability assistance recipients; this was initially set for a three month period, and has been extended through December 2020. We would like to see this \$300 increase made permanent for both income and disability assistance, and rates further indexed to inflation.

Despite increases in recent years, we know that income and disability assistance are below the poverty line and are woefully inadequate to meet even basic needs. The \$300 supplement has meant that in the context of a pandemic, some income assistance and disability assistance recipients have finally been able to meet basic needs, and are not making impossible decisions between essentials like food, medication, rent, and utilities. This should not be reserved for extraordinary times.

If elected, would your government make the \$300 increase permanent for both income and disability assistance, and index rates to inflation?

Recognizing the continuing challenges faced by people on Income Assistance and Disability Assistance, we extended the additional \$300 COVID-19 supplement until the end of December. Based on our Poverty Reduction Plan and the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Basic Income coming later this year, we will then determine the best approach and path forward to reducing poverty long-term and providing opportunities for jobs and skills training for everyone through our Economic Recovery Plan.

2. Comprehensive Program for Assistive Devices and Medical Equipment

BC is in dire need of a comprehensive program for assistive devices and medical equipment for people with disabilities. An assistive device is a technology that helps promote independence and safety (e.g. equipment and devices that aid in areas such as mobility, vision, hearing, communication, breathing, and self care).

Other provinces and territories in Canada have programs ensuring broad access to these devices. This is not the case here in BC, where coverage for assistive devices is piecemeal and confusing. Most financial assistance available for for adults for these devices is through the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR) for people who qualify for PWD and other narrow categories of income support. People with disabilities that do not qualify for these restrictive programs are left to purchase expensive medical equipment on their own or seek help from non-profits and charities.

In its report following the 2021 Budget consultation, the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services recommended that the government invest in a comprehensive program for assistive devices and medical equipment for people with disabilities.

If elected, would your government invest in a comprehensive program for assistive devices and medical equipment for people with disabilities?

Ensuring people who need them have access to assistive devices is something we are committed to working on together with you. Through contracts with WorkBC, we are providing \$17.3 million over three years to provide assistive technology to support employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In addition, we provide funding through Communications Assistance for Youth and Adults, to support people with severe communication disabilities to live with independence and participate in their community. We recognize that you have concerns about the restrictive nature of the existing funding programs, and a re-elected BC NDP government would be pleased to work with DABC and other stakeholders to look at how we can make improvements to the current system.

3. Accessibility Legislation

British Columbians with disabilities routinely experience barriers to accessing housing, employment, transportation, and other services. The Canadian government recently introduced accessibility legislation which govern areas under federal jurisdiction. Prior to the pandemic, the provincial government had committed to provincial accessibility legislation, and conducted consultations for feedback on new laws, standards and policies to better support people with disabilities to live with dignity and to meaningfully participate in their communities.

If elected, would your government commit to completing and enacting accessibility legislation for BC with enforceable standards and regulations for areas under provincial jurisdiction?

Yes, a BC NDP government is committed to opening doors to opportunity and participation through provincial accessibility legislation. In our platform, we have committed to continue to work with people across the province to develop and bring in comprehensive accessibility legislation.

4. Independent Mental Health Advocacy Services for Mental Health Detainees

In March 2019 the BC Ombudsperson recommended that the province create a legal aid service to provide independent legal advice and advocacy to people when they are detained under the *Mental Health Act*.¹ The BC Attorney General accepted this recommendation and committed to seeking the appropriate funds to establish it; however, the service has not yet been created.

Independent Mental Health Advocacy (“IMHA”) services are person-centered advocacy models designed to promote self-determination and recovery for people subject to mental health detention and other coercive interventions. An IMHA service has the potential to profoundly improve access to justice for a marginalized population. Ensuring that everyone has access to legal advice and assistance to exercise their legal rights is a therapeutic exercise that can promote well being and improve access to quality care in BC’s mental health and addictions system.

If elected, would your government create a legal aid service to provide independent legal advice and advocacy to people when they are detained under the Mental Health Act?

We're happy to continue our discussions with advocates and others to address these concerns. After so many years of people struggling to get care in a broken mental health and addictions system, the BC NDP's focus is on improving services for people. Nothing is more important than keeping people safe, while ensuring dignity and fairness when someone is vulnerable and receiving mental-health care. That is our focus as we work to improve the systems of mental health and substance use care. A re-elected BC NDP government will engage with all stakeholders, including DABC, on improvements to this system.

5. Community Care

We have a crisis in our care system for people with disabilities. Far too often, people with disabilities who live in their own homes are struggling to find care workers, particularly during this pandemic, putting their health at risk as they try to manage with less support than they need. Working-aged adults with disabilities who have no other care option than to live in long term care facilities are faced with care that is designed for seniors, and simply does not meet their needs. As the province looks to “build back better,” the voices and needs of these people with disabilities must be considered.

¹ BC Ombudsperson's Special Report No. 42, *Committed to Change: Protecting the Rights of Involuntary Patients under the Mental Health Act*, March 2019.

If elected, would your government commit to improving the delivery of community care by including the voices of people with lived experience of these situations to ensure that they have the supports they need to live with dignity and independence?

Our government is committed to looking at all opportunities to improve how we deliver the services people count on, including the delivery of community care. And it is important to us that the voices of people with lived experience are part of efforts to improve all of our programs. That is why, for example, we established an implementation steering committee for the Reimagining Community Inclusion report, which began meeting earlier this year. This committee has representatives from BC People First, Community Living BC, Inclusion BC, Family Support Institute, BC Family Net, BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society, BC CEO Network, Advocate for Service Quality, and Self Advocate Leadership Network, and it will set goals and priorities and work through a collaborative approach to the implementation of the 10-year RCI Roadmap. A re-elected BC NDP government would be happy to meet with you to learn more about your thoughts for improving the delivery of community care, and look at how to follow a similar process of including the voices of people with lived experience in those discussions.

6. Affordable and Accessible Housing

As you know, housing affordability continues to be one of the biggest challenges for people and families across the province. This is a particular challenge for people with disabilities given the dearth of accessible housing.

While the dire need for affordable and accessible housing is not new, the pandemic has added a new dimension to the issue. With public health directives from all levels of government encouraging us to stay home to stop the spread of COVID-19, many without homes were left without safe spaces to self-isolate.

If elected, would your government make major new investments in affordable and accessible housing?

Thanks to the partnership of many non-profits and local governments across the province, we have made good progress to date on our 10-year housing plan, which includes a commitment to deliver 114,000 new affordable homes for people in communities of all sizes. To date, we have more than 25,000 homes complete or underway, in all categories of housing, from homes with supports for those experiencing homelessness and the first investment in new housing for women and children fleeing violence in two decades, to new indigenous housing both on- and off-reserve, new mixed-income rental housing for families and seniors with low to moderate incomes, and thousands of market rental units for middle-income families and individuals.

While we have made a good start, there is much more to do, and our government will again be counting on our strong partnerships as we work together to deliver the homes that all of our communities need, on our path to delivering the full 114,000 homes we have committed to. In addition to continuing our work to build these new subsidized and affordable market-rental homes, we will also expand the work of our innovative HousingHub team at BC Housing to work with our partners in the non-profit and co-op sectors to acquire and preserve existing affordable purpose-built rental housing.

We are committed to delivering accessible homes as part of all of our new investments, wherever possible, including purpose-built accessible units and other units that are designed to be able to be adjusted to accommodate a range of accessibility needs.