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Put disability issues on election agenda



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It's less than a month to the federal election. Do you know where your candidates are?

Where do they stand on helping people with disabilities get the education, jobs and services they should be entitled to?

What are they doing to make sure that this election is barrier-free, including access to campaign literature, websites, public meetings and polling stations?

When will they start putting plans into action?

Over the next week leading up to the New Year, draw up a list of constructive questions and ideas to help disability issues get the profile they deserve. Then take them to candidates meetings and make sure they get aired.

What are the hot topics?

At the Winnipeg-based Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD), chair Marie White emphasizes jobs, for starters.

Among Canadians aged 15 to 64, White notes that 51 per cent of those with disabilities are not in the work-force compared with only 16.5 per cent of their able-bodied counterparts.

"We need jobs, equal access to education and the necessary supports to ensure we can participate in the labour market and training programs," she says in a call to arms. What would the candidates in your riding do to make that happen?

Ottawa struck a blow against accessible transportation by agreeing to buy inaccessible rail cars from a European manufacturer, White adds. The council is appealing a court decision that rubber-stamped the purchase agreement and wants clear federal regulations banning future steps backward.

The U.S. is among the countries with laws to prevent transportation systems from backsliding on accessibility, the council points out. It also should be noted that this year's White House Conference on Aging ranked transportation among the top three priorities facing seniors.

Needless to say, tax rules and other fiscal policies also should be key federal election issues.

A technical advisory committee reviewing the federal disability tax credit has recommended changes to eligibility requirements, including fairer treatment for families coping with mental and intellectual disabilities. Among other things, it backed increasing the limit of medical expenses caregivers may claim for dependants with severe disabilities, raising the child disability benefit and creating more flexible rules on the ways caregivers can use their savings to provide for the future of a family member with a disability.

Would candidates in your riding support those proposals? And what are their thoughts on a Disability Savings Plan to help families provide for relatives with special needs after their parents die?

The need for such a plan cannot be underestimated. Across the country, parents struggling to provide a secure future for adult children with disabilities run into a minefield of rules and regulations under which governments effectively claw back even the most meagre efforts to raise standards of living.

Without any contribution from family members, people with disabilities are condemned to abject poverty at the hands of substandard disability support programs.

For example, the most anyone can get from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is \$959 a month. Most get much less. Out of this they must pay rent, buy food and cover utilities in addition to finding the money for personal-care costs, which can be considerable.

Yet any increase in income — even in the form of a few cents a month more in Canada Pension Plan disability payments — is automatically deducted from ODSP.

Of the more than 3 million Canadians with disabilities, 1.6 million live on less than \$15,000 per year; 800,000 eke out an existence on less than \$10,000, notes the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN), a Vancouver-based not-for-profit group championing the idea of a Disability Savings Plan. Essentially, it would work much like an RRSP, providing tax breaks for families contributing money earmarked for disability expenses. The group has been collecting signatures on a petition to send to Ottawa and lobbying for the support of election candidates.

If you care about a Disability Savings Plan, check out <http://www.plan.ca> and sign the petition or write Suite 260, 3665 Kingsway, Vancouver, B.C. V5R 5W2.

And tell the men and women competing for a spot in the House of Commons that it's a plan worth backing.

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