

A glimpse of life on disability support

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Determined to kick off the discussion on a positive note, Christine Watts enumerated the good things about living on disability support.

"It's better than Ontario Works (welfare)," she said. There were grudging nods around the table. No one could dispute that \$1,020 a month was better than \$572.

"There's less stigma." Her tablemates looked dubious. Watts added a hurried caveat: "as long as your disability is visible."

Her third point was more tentative. "I think we're a little more secure than other people in this recession. And most of us are incredibly resourceful."

Then her list – and her forced optimism – petered out. "The truth is it affects every aspect of your life," Watts said. "You're always asking: What can I do without best right now?"

She was one of 120 participants (half on disability support, half from legal aid clinics and social agencies) at a conference called Leading the Way last week. Its objective was to develop a poverty reduction strategy for people with disabilities.

This segment of the low-income population was largely overlooked in December's poverty reduction plan. (It was targeted at children.)

There was a 2 per cent increase in disability support payments in last month's budget. But it won't take effect until November. And it will still leave them \$9,200 below the poverty line.

Close to 350,000 Ontarians depend on disability support. But they seldom speak out. The reason, Bill Haggett explained, is that they're afraid their benefits will be cut off. "We couldn't get people to come out for our March for Dignity (Sarnia to Toronto) because they were scared their caseworkers would see them."

He was willing to limp all the way to Queen's Park, with his leg brace, cane and amputated toe. But he understood why others wouldn't take the risk.

The story of Haggett's amputation provides a glimpse of life on disability support. He has diabetes and heart disease. His toe became infected with gangrene. His doctor said it couldn't be saved.

Haggett had it amputated, then received a \$400 bill for his transportation to and from the hospital. According to the government's rules, the trip wasn't long enough to qualify as a medical expense. "But I didn't know that," he said.

Joy Asham ran afoul of the rules, too. She was cut off disability support when she went back to her maiden name. She asked her caseworker why. The explanation: "Obviously, you've gotten remarried."

The rules are mystifying and, in many cases, mean-spirited to the point of absurdity.

Loans are considered "income." A person's disability support cheque is reduced to reflect the amount borrowed, even though it has to be paid back. No adjustment is made when it is.

When the Ministry of Community and Social Services requires a disability support recipient to come in for paperwork, it won't pay for a taxi, even if the individual has severe mobility problems.

If the government discovers an overpayment, it will reduce a person's monthly disability payments until the money is recouped, even if he or she can't afford food or medications.

There are rules stipulating how often a person can move (every two years); how much he or she can take out of a private pension plan (\$5,000 a year); and which assistive devices are covered (eyeglasses and canes frequently aren't).

Carole Van Loan voiced everybody's thoughts. "We shouldn't be penalized for being ill. I did not wake up one morning and decide I wanted to be on social assistance for the rest of my life."

The province has announced a review of social assistance "with the goal of removing barriers and increasing opportunity."

People with disabilities are wary – past reviews have made life worse, not better – but willing to cooperate. They are pooling their first-hand knowledge and drafting their suggestions in the hope that the government will allow them to live in dignity.