Policies that Build Community

*Is current public policy effective in helping to create a community where all people belong?*

Report on 2015 Policy Forum

On February 27, 2015, Community Living Ontario hosted a policy forum in collaboration with the Ryerson School of Social Work, the Ryerson School of Disability Studies and the CAW Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy. The event titled *Policies that Build Community* explored the question “is current public policy effective in helping to create a community where all people belong?”

The event, held at Ryerson University, was attended by about 75 individuals including members of Community Living Ontario, students, parents and family members of people with disabilities and others. The event was planned to provide participants an opportunity to discuss current and emerging policy issues. This report contains a summary of the things discussed at the forum. This report is one of the tools that Community Living Ontario will use to identify social policy issues that it may wish to include in its agenda for advocacy in the coming period.

The event included presentation from Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute and Michael Prince from the University of Victoria. The event also included a facilitated discussion with the audience with input from a panel including Torjman and Prince along with Gordon Kyle, Director of Policy at Community Living Ontario and Cam Crawford, recent Director of Research at the Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society - IRIS - and for many years before that President, Vice-President and senior researcher at the Roeher Institute.
A summary of the Two Key Presentations

Presentation by Sherri Torjman – Policies that Build Community

While there are many interventions that build community, they can be understood as falling within two main categories related to creating appropriate context and content. The appropriate context involves designing for well-being. The appropriate content focuses primarily upon how we care for each other.

Context

The first category involves designing the context and spaces that enable community members to spend time together and to participate as active members. It is based on principles related to clean and green places, mixed use, accessibility and engagement.

Clean and Green - Building a sense of community can take place only within a healthy environment. In fact, much of the improvement in health over the past 150 years is attributable to public health policies in the form of sewage treatment, vaccination and clean water.

Mixed Use - Urban design should focus on mixed-use communities that combine live, work and play. This design involves a blend of housing, workplaces and shops to buy food and other essentials – ideally within walking distance or at least short travel [Jacobs 1961]. Neighbourhoods should be designed – or redesigned if necessary – with the walkability factor in mind. Mixed-use communities also tend to be safer. There are more public places – or at least places where you can be seen in public. This means more “eyes on the street,” a concept developed by Jane Jacobs [1961]. There tend to be fewer crimes against people and property in the presence of an informal neighbourhood watch.

Accessibility - While walkability contributes to physical and mental health, it also translates into a smaller ecological footprint. But walkability is possible only up to a point. In both larger urban centres and rural communities, it is often a challenge to get from here to there. Accessible public transit is an essential piece of building the community puzzle.

1 Content of this section of the report is based on the presentation by Sherri Torjman at the policy forum with material borrowed from Policies the Build Community by Sherri Torjman http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/1051ENG.pdf
Engagement - Social inclusion is not just about going somewhere or doing something. It also involves creating opportunities for individuals to participate meaningfully in their community and to express their thoughts about the issues that affect their lives. Governments often believe they are engaging citizens by consulting them on various public concerns. True engagement, however, involves the active participation of community members in the formulation of possible responses. Ideally, it means engaging residents in formulating the appropriate questions to consider.

Content: Caring for each other

The second component of building community involves supporting the various ways in which we care for each other. Governments fund a wide range of services focused on formal supports. We also build community through the equally important informal types of care involving families, friends and neighbours. These include personal communities, circles of support, long dinner tables and community celebration.

Personal Communities – tapping into personal communities involves exploring and using informal, flexible supports that can be provided by those around you in your community. Within any community there are numerous local assets that can be engaged to provide a rich inventory of support and can be accessed through an exchange of time and skills.

Circles of Support - Linked closely to personal communities is the explicit creation of circles of support. These typically are formed around individuals or families deemed to require additional assistance because of their personal or family circumstances. Circles of support are actively employed, for example, in the disability community. Support circles can lead to sustained care and assistance, enhanced sense of belonging through human connection and co-production of services that create links among caregivers, care receivers and formal services.

Long Tables – The long dinner table approach is another way to foster the community capacity for care. This approach involves food, which is obviously essential for well-being. But it also plays a vital social and emotional role because it can act as a conduit for building social networks. These ‘tables’ could be part of a community event, such as educational session, local speaker, performance, concert or celebration. Nutritious food would be made available to families at no charge. The long dinner table approach is a way to build relationships and social networks, and to reduce reliance on food banks.
**Community Celebration** - Participation is vital not just from the perspective of individuals but also entire neighbourhoods, towns and cities. Every community has banner activities or events that are held on an annual basis to celebrate its identity, culture, achievements, geography or history. These celebrations generally provide a positive way to create community by drawing residents together around a common theme or cause. Community events are important not only because they are fun. These celebrations help neighbours and residents keep in touch with each other, and reinforce the networks and associations that make neighbourhoods strong. These events help create community ‘glue,’ which both strengthens and secures the social fabric.

**The Big Policy Challenge**

Unfortunately, there is a fundamental problem that challenges our ability to put in place the policies related to both the context and content for building community. It has to do with broader governance and financing arrangements. Local governments are charged with a wide range of responsibilities but are poorly financed to meet these responsibilities. Governments can’t create effective policies without the engagement of communities and communities won’t have effective policies without the involvement of governments. Policies help shape the context of the community as well as the content of what it provides.

**Presentation by Michael Prince - Public Policies and Community Inclusions**

The questions addressed in this presentation are:

- What is the current state of public policy in Canada for people with disabilities?
- What changes are needed to ensure public policies actively build community and an inclusive society?
- With a national general election this year, what are priority issues for an advocacy social change agenda?

There is and will be a vigorous debate about the elements that make up disability policy in Canada. Some of the key issues that continue to be the focus of this debate include:

- How to create community
- Who is in the community
- What access, inclusion and belonging mean
The preferred mix of goals and values
- The contribution of public policies and programs
- The actual policy means or tools to select and use

**Public policy tools**

There are at present a number of key policy trends that are particularly important to the community living and disability movements across Canada including:
- Continued heavy reliance on family care
- Advisory councils on disability and employment
- Spending restraint in grants to non-profit advocacy and service organizations
- Boutique tax credits from the federal government
- Renewed institutionalization with threats to the right to live in community
- Accessibility legislation and standards in a few provinces
- UN Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities which continues to have a low profile in governments

There continue to be limits to mechanisms for promoting social inclusion within public policies. For example, at the federal level:
- Program definitions of disability at present focus on severe/very severe and prolonged disability, thereby excluding people with mild to moderate disabilities and those with episodic disabilities
- Non-refundable tax credits: e.g., the Disability Tax Credit excludes low-income disabled people who have no taxable income
- Social insurance programs: e.g., EI, CPP, exclude people who have not a certain employment history and who have not paid premium

Many of our current public policies are ineffective and do not create positive change in our society or in the lives of people with disabilities. Some of the key complaints about public policies and public services are that they are:
- Difficult for people to learn about them
- Rely on overly complex forms, rules and procedures
- Insufficiently resourced: delays, backlogs and waitlists for services
- Reliant on (often) inadequately trained staff who also may be grappling with large caseloads of clients with complex needs
- Inconsistently implemented across staff, local offices and regions
- Often designed with a reactive and piecemeal focus on problems of clients
Establishing policies that create inclusive communities requires the establishment of clear values and practices such as:

- Embracing diversity of backgrounds, identities, life experiences, needs, and gifts
- Opening doors and borders to others
- Sharing of resources, information and ideas
- Respecting differences and disagreements
- Practising democracy every day
- Enabling participation and voice
- Addressing issues of privilege and inequities
- Sharing of authority and responsibility
- Holding decision-makers accountable for values and outcomes

Some of the key elements for establishing an agenda for moving forward on reform of social policy aimed at creating more inclusive communities include:

- Embedding the community living movement’s values into policies and practices
- Strengthening links with other progressive movements
- Ending practices of restraint and seclusion in schools for children with disabilities
- Establishing employer networks
- Spreading effective practices – e.g., transition planning for youth with special needs to community participation and work
- Moving from group homes to supported living in local neighbourhoods
- Ensuring an adequate standard of living for individuals and families
- Providing essential supports and services for everyday living
- Advancing reasonable accommodations and equality rights
- Facilitating employability and gainful employment in inclusive workplaces
- Promoting savings and the accumulation and retention of personal assets
- Enabling opportunities for the democratic co-construction of policy development

There are many issues that need to be addressed and could be included in an advocacy agenda for Community Living. Some key areas for advocacy that could effect positive change in government policy include:

- Modernizing income assistance programs
- Improving provincial family benefits
- Introducing federal accessibility legislation
- Reinstating the Court Challenges Program
• Enhancing the Canada Disability Child benefits
• Improving access to Registered Disability Savings Plans (RDSPs)
• Converting the Disability Tax Credit into a refundable disability tax credit

So how does Community Living and the disability movement effect change. Some of the critically important aims of advocacy should focus on:

• Amplifying the conversation of inclusion and community living
• Insisting there is a common good and public interest on these issues
• Emphasizing that individuals and families are embedded in larger social relationships and structures of constraints and possibilities
• Pointing out the contradictions and negative consequences of current practices
• Collaborating with old friends and new allies
• Talking about all people as citizens, rights-holders, equality seekers

Concluding observations

Public policies do matter a great deal when it comes to creating places of belonging for all citizens and building a sense of community. There continue to be far too many examples of ineffective policies and practices that do not move forward the agenda of inclusion. The policy recommendations presented above require discussion and further definition among key stakeholders including people with disabilities, advocates and government. Integrated policy making processes are needed that result in a set of measures that enable Canadians to live good lives as valued citizens in accessible and inclusive communities.

Discussion

A key intention of the policy forum was to provide an opportunity for participants to discuss the current state of public policy as it relates to the promotion of an inclusive society. Following are highlights of the points discussed during the forum.

Citizenship – we are all citizens, but some do not benefit equally from that notion. Because of perceived differences, some people are devalued and not taken seriously. This results in some people not being as protected by laws and law enforcement as others.
**Women as supporters** – policy considerations must take into account that it is usually women (mothers) who provide the bulk of support to people who have disabilities. Public policy however does a poor job of recognizing or supporting the role that women play. There continues to be huge gender inequality as women today still provide the bulk of support in the home and make up the majority of workers in low-pay human service support positions. Many women are sick, exhausted and are losing out on retirement benefits that are needed to support them in their senior years. Pay equity legislation was introduced in Ontario in the 1980s and still has 35 to 40 years before it will be completed – government must provide funding to address the pay equity requirements that now exist.

We should consider the stroller (perhaps more than the wheelchair) as an emblem for access and accommodation.

**Information highway** – current technology can provide many opportunities for helping all citizens be better connected to one another and to resources and supports that can help them live their lives. Emerging technologies within the *Sharing Economy* (Uber, Taskrabbit, crowdsourcing, etc.) are mechanisms designed to promote community collaboration and interaction. Could such mechanisms work to open doors to community engagement that traditional social mechanisms have failed to open? How would we ensure protection of rights and assure barrier removal and accommodation in these mechanisms that are so resistant to regulation?

**Basic income** – poverty continues to be a huge issue for people with disabilities. It is time for government to implement a basic income system that will ensure that all citizens have access to a level of income adequate to address their basic living needs and eliminate poverty. The federal government is well positioned to initiate a national basic income program. A reformed system must stop the current practice of playing one income benefit off against other benefits and programs. We need a rational system where all income and support programs interact seamlessly and result in a reasonable living income and adequate supports for all people. Much of the disability community continues to support the implementation of a federal basic income system as a mechanism for freeing up funding currently committed to income supports by the provinces – this would allow for provincial reinvestment in other disability supports.

**Role of municipalities** – municipalities have a great deal to offer in promoting social inclusion and providing necessary supports. At present municipalities do not receive adequate support from the provincial and federal governments to carry out even their required responsibilities
let alone be in a position to institute progressive new policies and programs. We need constitutional or quasi-constitutional change aimed at compelling provincial and federal governments to invest adequately in municipal governments.

**Inclusive housing** – experience has taught us that people who are well supported in inclusive housing feel better connected to their community and have enhanced opportunities to engage in and contribute to community life.

**Enhancing the voice of people** - both presenters at the forum highlighted the importance of civil engagement and the need for all citizens to participate in public discussion about community needs and public policy. How do we get the voice of people who have an intellectual disability embedded in those civil dialogues? Experience has demonstrated that including people with disabilities in public environments (classrooms, places of work) has a positive impact on the environment. A key priority of effective advocacy must be including the voice of people with disabilities in all elements of community life. The dominant narrative is still that disability is a burden; by including people with disabilities in public dialogue we can begin to shift this attitude to one of disability as a possibility. It was suggested that a requirement of any government funding should be that people with disabilities are at the table for planning and involved in the delivery of funded programs. We can learn from the mad movement about the effective social change that can occur simply by having people at the table. We need to focus on creating “long tables” as discussed in Sherri Torjman’s presentation and ensure that everyone has a place at the table. We must always pay attention to involvement of people from racial minorities. Policy follows moral action – groups like People First and various family groups are story tellers. Policy needs to be wedded to storytelling, values, reflection and truth telling.

**Inclusion** – we have not done a great job at inclusion. Our policies and initiatives often focus on people with mild disabilities. Too often the results of initiatives fail to achieve the outcome of inclusion. For example, we closed the government operated facilities only to have everyone move into group homes; additionally, growing numbers of people (including young people) are being placed into nursing homes.

**Checkbook citizenship** – policy initiatives are typically aimed at those things that benefit the most people. As a result, too often the people who are most in need of support do not benefit. How do we pull back from this?
Assisted suicide - the recent Supreme Court decision allowing doctor assisted suicides creates incredible risk for people with disabilities. This issue provides the movement an opportunity to raise the issue of the need for policy reform for end of life care. Policy focus should be on support to care-givers along with personal supports and services.

**Equity and affirmative action** – these are issues that have fallen out of public discussion for the most part – we should work to revive them.

**Advocacy** – we live in a time of “advocacy chill” in which the government characterizes advocacy as a bad word. We need a concentrated effort to revive on the ground advocacy. People need help to overcome the sense of powerlessness and fear that people feel towards government (culture of fear can also occur at the agency level). Governments, particularly the current federal government, have worked actively to dismantle tools that would help advocacy movements in this country including public research and publicly funded media. We are increasingly losing our memory of what came before in the advocacy movement. This puts us at serious risk of regressing. Disability studies programs such as those offered at Ryerson University act as a place to hold that memory.

**Need for bold action** – the fear discussed above has pushed us into being passive. It is time for bold initiatives, perhaps borrowing on successes from other jurisdictions. The disability insurance scheme from Australia for instance is a bold system that has created an entitlement for disability supports in that country. The idea is not likely implementable in Canada given our constitutional structure and federal provincial arrangements and responsibilities. Other large initiatives may however, be possible such as the implementation of a national basic income system as discussed above.

**Dis-functionality of government consultation** - is there a way to fix the current dis-functionality of the way government consults with the public on issues of policy development? **We** should initiate public discussions and invite the government to take part in these. Should it refuse, carry on with the public dialogue until the government catches on and pays attention.

**Have we done a disservice by siloing disability issues?** - The last federal plan for disability was contained in the document *In Unison* released in 1998. We are unable at present to get consensus on the need for a new plan and at present the disability community is largely fractured with each group fighting for its own turf. Many are suggesting that we do not need a
new government plan since we now have the UN Convention on Persons with Disabilities, yet we have no unified strategy for demanding the implementation of the convention.

Discussion wrap-up

Following are wrap-up comments from the panel that helped with the days discussions.

We had a powerful cross fertilization of ideas including an interesting focus on the role that municipalities and local communities can play in our efforts to promote inclusion. We are awash in issues but not in positions to address them. We need to set priorities and find friends to work with.

The question remains, how do we pay attention to the numerous issues that we are not currently able to focus on? One of the key tools discussed is the need to have all the people in our community at the table. It was suggested that one of the progressive principles we could adopt is to not ask government for any new funding for one year – thereby forcing a focus on existing community and human resources. When people get creative, government notices and seeks ways to get on board. If we set the agenda, we can tell the government it is welcome on board only if it is willing to do what the group wants.