

Community Living Ontario Policy Snapshot

Lessons from Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The Ontario government is currently planning a reform of the province's approach to developmental services (DS). In this context, it is important to understand the experience of other jurisdictions that have reformed their DS systems.

Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is often referenced as a leading example of disability service reform, and there is much to learn from the country's experience. However, the NDIS has been plagued by a number of issues – especially for people who have an intellectual disability – and it is crucial that we learn from Australia's mistakes.

In Australia, much has been made of the [negative aspects](#) of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) launched in 2016. However, the history of the Australian approach is instructive, as it replaced a disability service regime that in many ways mirrored the system that currently exists in Ontario.

Before the NDIS was implemented, disability-related supports in Australia were:

- Largely block-funded, with transfer payments directed to service providers who were often overburdened by policy restrictions that suppressed innovation;
- Focused on addressing crisis situations, rather than early intervention;
- Triaged and rationed so that only a proportion of people in need were supported;
- Complex and confusing for end users, with little personalization or flexibility.

These [criticisms](#) are remarkably similar to those made by the provincial Ombudsman in his 2016 [report](#) on Ontario's developmental service system.

Positive aspects of the NDIS

During its development, the NDIS – which is essentially a direct-funding program on a massive scale, incorporating people who have a disability of all ages – was broadly supported. Four years into the program's implementation, People with Disability Australia (PWDA) has [expressed](#) a "strong and continuing support for the objects and principles" of the NDIS. Further, PWDA holds that "the vision for the NDIS still stands as a way of introducing a national, universal system to replace the old, broken and unfair system of past provisions of disability services."

The new program was bolstered by increased funding for disability-related services, and this seems to have contributed to better access to needed supports for many participants. It is notable that people who are covered by the NDIS tend to [report](#) greater satisfaction than those who are not covered. At the same time, the implementation of the NDIS was a momentous transformation, and any transition of

this magnitude risks substantial drawbacks.

Ongoing problems with the NDIS

The downsides of the NDIS provide an important reminder that disability service system users require ongoing assistance with understanding, navigating and advocating within such a system. People with Disability Australia has [stated](#) that:

“There is an emerging and troubling picture that some people get good plans while others, particularly from marginalized groups or communities are left with poor quality plans, with limited access to supports and services.”

This criticism was also made in an arm’s length [evaluation](#) of the NDIS, which noted that:

“While in general the NDIS is leading to increased levels and quality of services and support, not all people with disability have experienced improved outcomes under the NDIS. People with disability who are unable to advocate for themselves or who struggle to navigate NDIS processes are at risk of receiving lower levels of services than previously, and many have.”

Similarly, NDIS staff reported that “participants and families who were confident, educated and able to articulate support needs had better outcomes than those with less capacity to understand the NDIS, including participants with intellectual disability.”

The Australian system is currently overwhelmed by a level of demand that far outstrips what providers can supply, with long wait times and a shortage of quality agencies. It is crucial to note that NDIS participants who have an intellectual disability have had the most difficulty finding services for which they have funding, and report significant unmet demand.

The implementation of the NDIS has also been challenging for service providers. According to a recent [report](#) published by National Disability Services, between 20% and 30% of organizations participating in the NDIS reported a deficit/loss in each year since the new program was put in place. There are unresolved concerns about the pricing of services and the ability of providers to offer quality services with current funding levels.

As a national effort to make services and supports available to every person who has a disability in Australia, the NDIS is an important case study. It is an admirable attempt to eliminate wait lists and increase personalization and control over disability supports. However, the program has presented serious difficulties for people who have an intellectual disability, problems with system navigation, and existential challenges for service providers. The next few years will be critical in understanding if and how Australia’s efforts have led to increased quality of life for people who have a disability, including people who have an intellectual disability. In the meantime, we must be cautious of following Australia’s lead too closely.

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