

Calgary's Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Policy Initiative

• Challenge •

In the summer of 2003, members of several Calgary nonprofit organizations wanted to improve their relations with the provincial government as well as increase their capacity to influence public policy. They selected a specific public income program — the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped — that was of interest to their memberships and established an eight-member policy roundtable to affect change.

Spearheaded by the United Way of Calgary and Area, roundtable members came from organizations serving people with physical and mental disabilities. They shared the concern that work in public policy might damage their reputations with politicians, their membership and funding bases. AISH benefits already had been left aside in the provincial government's 2001 low-incomes program review, in part because it represented a measure that was not satisfactory as a pension benefit for those completely unable to work nor as a supplement to people whose disabilities allowed them to work part time. Concerns were mounting over medical expenses, special transportation, childcare and special needs costs not originally covered by AISH.



As the roundtable began its work, 10,000 AISH recipients in Calgary were receiving a monthly benefit of \$855, an amount that had remained unchanged since an earlier review in 1997. Several program elements needed revision, including the amount of employment income participants could receive without having to pay back part of their AISH benefits.

• Strategy •

Originally intended as a six-month process, the roundtable's research and report formulation stretched to 20 months. Members met monthly and initially were guided in their work by two facilitators. When the first six months were over, funding from the United Way made it possible for researcher Ramona Johnston to continue coordinating the roundtable.

Throughout the process, disability groups, Calgary MLAs and key provincial government representatives were consulted and kept informed of the roundtable's activities and direction.

In September 2004, the provincial government announced that it was ready to review AISH. The December deadline for policy submissions coincided with a provincial election, during which extensive media attention focused on how difficult it was for AISH recipients to make ends meet.

The policy process also coincided with the roundtable's presentation of its recommendations to a provincial standing policy committee. At the last minute, however, some provincial disability groups felt that they should have been consulted more fully threatened to derail the roundtable report by denouncing it publicly. By reaffirming their desire to be seen first as a vehicle for building government relations and by working diligently to include certain specific concerns, the roundtable members won the support of these potential breakaway groups.

• *Impact* •

The AISH Public Policy Roundtable submission was carefully considered by the provincial review committee, in part because it represented a wide spectrum of disability organizations. The Roundtable report was seen as offering positive suggestions for change and its collaborative approach had won the respect of politicians and program administrators alike. The report also helped government understand the major shortcomings of the program.

Ultimately, the changes made to AISH reflected a number of the roundtable's policy recommendations. Announced in April 2005, AISH benefits were increased immediately to \$950 a month, with an additional \$50 increase scheduled for April 2006. Full exemption for employment earnings was increased from \$200 to \$400 a month for singles and from \$775 to \$975 a month for couples and families. The exemption rates for amounts above these levels were raised from 25 percent to 50 percent, to a maximum of \$1,000 for singles and \$2,000 for couples. Supplementary benefits are now being provided to help cover additional medical supplies, special transportation, childcare and special needs not previously covered by AISH. Client services for persons with disabilities will be improved and the provincial government will work to better coordinate its services for this population.

Ultimately, members of the roundtable were successful in their first attempt to forge a collaborative, action-oriented approach to policy change. They are seen by the provincial government as a key stakeholder group that can be consulted issue by issue.

Ramona Johnston, now the Manager of Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC), has already applied the lessons of the AISH roundtable to VCC's work in establishing a low-income transit pass program. "Our increased capacity in the area of government relations has helped direct our approach to lobbying and advocacy and how we conduct networking and community relations activities," Ramona explains. "Long-term policy changes lie at the heart of reducing poverty and encouraging the development of caring communities, and we were very pleased that our work with AISH was such a success."



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