

A Plea for Justice for the Disabled

Robert (not his real name) is a middle-aged man with nothing to distinguish him from anyone else you might meet walking along in your neighborhood. What you don't see when Robert goes by is that he has been disabled by serious mental and physical illness for many years and, as a result, is forced to live in deep poverty.

There are many people in New Brunswick who, like Robert, are forced to live in poverty because provincial government policy turns a blind eye to the fact that their disabilities make it impossible for them to work. Today, as I visit Robert, the crushing depression that has left him unable to function normally is like an unseen, disturbing presence dominating his one-room home. Robert's serious asthma and back injury impose very real physical limitations on a man already overwhelmed by mental disability.

Robert's situation is like that of 16,737 cases of New Brunswickers receiving social assistance through the so-called Transitional Assistance Program (TAP). The Department of Social Development says TAP is for those people who are employable or who have a temporary medical problem. But Robert's combination of mental and physical illnesses make any job a challenge he simply cannot meet. To pretend he is employable is both pernicious and cruel.

Social assistance provides \$537 per month for Robert and those like him who rely on TAP. Robert's rent is \$375 a month and that means he has less than \$38 a week for his food, clothing, personal toiletries, and 'extras' like using the bus or having a telephone.

The ugly reality is that Robert, and disabled people like him who are forced to rely on TAP, often go hungry and live with the ever-present threat of homelessness. This kind of extreme poverty is a direct result of government policies that punish the poor and sick for conditions beyond their control.

Theoretically, the Department of Social Development helps disabled people like Robert through its Extended Benefit Program. The reality, however, is that the Department often simply refuses to recognize people's disabilities, thus adding to the heavy burden the disabled already shoulder. It's no secret that, among the almost 17,000 cases in the TAP, there are many like Robert who should be classified as disabled and thus eligible for extra help.

It is the NB Medical Advisory Board that has the power to certify an individual as disabled, and eligible for the Extended Benefit program. Disabled individuals receive an extra \$226 a month, for a total of \$763 a month instead of the \$537 that the TAP provides, and that makes survival a little less difficult.

The most recent figures available are for 2013. In that year, doctors of 1,114 people applied to have their patients certified as disabled. Yet, despite being diagnosed as disabled by their doctors, the NB Medical Advisory Board declared the doctors were

wrong, and rejected 602 such applicants. In effect, the Medical Advisory Board was saying that hundreds of doctors in the province were wrong about their patients.

Incredibly, without ever seeing a patient, the Board feels it can evaluate that patient's condition better than doctors who have been caring for that patient for some time. Such willful blindness by the Board can have devastating consequences. Zelia Cormier, for example, had muscular dystrophy, irritable bowel syndrome, and a paralyzed hand. Despite repeated requests by Zelia's physician, the Board callously rejected every application. Zelia Cormier died without the Board even acknowledging her disability.

To be judged as disabled, the physician must demonstrate that the patient cannot lead a normal life and has little hope of improvement. However, the Board takes the position that if the patient can eat, bathe, use the toilet and climb stairs, the patient is employable and the disability is denied. The criteria used by the Board to deny applications like that of Zelia Cormier are so restrictive that they force sick people to live in grinding poverty.

In fact, being disabled is often associated with a variety of physical and mental illnesses, including attention deficit syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome and depression. It's no secret to anyone but the Advisory Board that employers deem such individuals 'unemployable' and refuse to hire them.

It's long past time for the Department of Social Development to stop punishing the disabled for their disabilities! A 2017 study carried out by the NB Common Front for Social Justice recommended that a single individual, when certified as handicapped, be granted an income equal to the Market Basket Measure (MBM). The MBM is a measure of basic costs necessary for a person to live in dignity, which Statistics Canada says is \$19,232 per year. Such an income should properly be called a disability pension, not social assistance.

Such reform could be based on models elsewhere in Canada. The *Saskatchewan Assured Income for the Disabled* program, as of 2015, provided \$15,403 annually for disabled individuals living alone. The *Alberta Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped* program provides \$19,468 for disabled persons living alone. In NB, single persons living with disabilities only get \$9,528 per year! That fact alone condemns the disabled to live in extreme poverty.

Social justice, and simple human decency, demand that disabled people now wrongly placed in TAP be transferred to the Extended Benefits Program. The current practice of refusing to recognize legitimate disabilities treats the sick like 'throw-away' people and so devalues life itself.

Aur a Cormier

Moncton, NB