

## **Independent Living and Inclusion in the Era of COVID-19:**

A statement for Online regional consultations with people with disabilities and their representative organizations in the Caribbean and North America

In Canada, there are over 6.2 million Canadians who are disabled facing sizable barriers. COVID has since amplified or created additional barriers, bringing us closer or deeper into poverty, threatening both current and previous housing options. With the increased cost of everything due to COVID, our autonomy and independence are at risk.

Many Canadians with disabilities rely on financial supports from various levels of government. Most of which have not seen increases near inflation anywhere over the past decade, yet costs of rent, and other goods continually increase. In Ontario, the disability rate for a single parent with 2 children is \$846 for Shelter, but a 2 bedroom apartment rents for \$1900.

Costs of food, gasoline, hydro, heating, clothing and other basic essentials have increased over 20% since the beginning of COVID on top of difficulties acquiring these goods due to scarcity. When we can't afford food, or housing, and we can't choose our housing situations, those of us who are disabled risk losing everything we have - our housing, our family, our independence.

Furthermore, the lack of housing that fits our needs must be addressed and services that provide such support are needed now. In the case of autism, an invisible disability, our needs are often unprotected or unrecognized. A functional advocacy program supporting Autistic individuals in communicating their needs is key to tackling this, and concurrently supports independent living. Independent living often creates risks of exploitation by landlords due to ignorance, lack of accommodations and the infantilization of Autistic people. In addition to inaccessible residential tenancy laws, barriers to independence seem insurmountable,



especially during the pandemic. Therefore, a third recommendation: robust anti-discrimination laws that are regularly enforced and evaluated to mitigate these barriers.

Finally, COVID has eliminated all predictability and familiarity in our lives. From losing jobs to routines, the abrupt uncertainty has disastrous impacts, especially for independent living. Thus it's critical today to increase support programs to help us create routines, and allow us to be fully included within society, living independently.

Building back better following COVID requires the involvement of people with disabilities in all policies and practices that impact us. For too long we've been excluded from decision-making tables. When engagement occurs, feedback is often limited to organizational leaders, eliminating lived-experience. In reality, best practices involving Autistic Canadians and people with disabilities is quite lacking.

One best practice we can point to is the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance (CASDA) and the planning committee for their annual conference. These past years, we've led the Lived-Experience Sub-Committee, a group of Autistic Canadians essential to reviewing and approving conference-related decisions. Committee members' opinions are fully integrated and illustrate a best practice in involving us.

However, engagement must go beyond consulting and instead include us as critical stakeholders in decision-making as we build back better. Similar to our Sub-Committee, opportunities for direct engagement must be broadly shared and all efforts made to ensure that the entire spectrum of lived-experience is included.

Change is critical to ensure that we can exercise our rights to independent living and inclusion within the community, that change must start now - with us.