

Poverty and Disability: My Lived Experience

On behalf of People First, an organization of people with intellectual disabilities, Nova Scotia resident Calvin Wood was invited to speak at the “Disabling Poverty/Enabling Citizenship: End Exclusion 2010” conference in Ottawa in early November 2010. The conference was sponsored by the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and the Canadian Association for Community Living. It also provided a launch for the Caledon Institute’s report “A Basic Income Plan for Canadians with Severe Disabilities.”

As the disability community knows too well, despite billions of dollars spent on a complex assortment of social benefits, many working age Canadians with disabilities end up desperately poor and trapped on welfare – the dead-end default program of last resort. While there has been some progress for persons with disabilities since the landmark Obstacles report was released 30 years ago, one area in which there has been almost no improvement at all has been that of income security.

Calvin Wood has worked hard to make People First Windsor a successful group. He asked Windsor’s mayor for office space and was given some. He registered the group for charitable status to allow its members to fundraise. He convinced someone to donate a computer to the new office. Calvin is in his second term as President of People First of Nova Scotia. He is also Vice President of the Board of the Nova Scotia Association for Community Living and is a member of several other community boards in Windsor.

Calvin’s presentation to the Ottawa conference speaks to the everyday reality of the Canadians we trap and marginalize under our current income (in)security system.

My name is Calvin Wood. I live in Windsor, Nova Scotia and I am in my second term as President of People First Nova Scotia. My presentation is about poverty and disability and what it means to me.

I am a person with a disability and living on social assistance. I find that after I pay my bills, like rent and phone and cable, I am left with \$250 a month for food, household things like clothing, coffee, and anything else I might need or want to do. That works out to about \$7 a day for everything.

The cost of food goes up and my pension cheques stay the same. Other costs go up, like cable or phone, and my disability pension stays the same.

I shop for clothes at thrift shops so I don't buy anything new. I have my clothes on today from thrift shops.

I like going to Tim's sometimes for lunch or for coffee, but I often don't have any money left to do that.

It costs a lot to buy healthy food. I need help to pick the right food and I need more money to buy things that will keep me healthy.

I would like to have more to live on.

I get \$50 a month for work I do at a store in Wolfville and I get a bus pass.

If I have a job making more money, I would have to deduct the wage from my pension so really, with my disability, it is hard to earn enough to make a difference in what money I have.

I'm lucky, though, that I am supported by a group called SSG – the Support Services Group.²

I have an attendant who helps me for six hours a week and I live by myself in an apartment.

I get help with washing, food shopping and other personal items.

I have help from the coordinator of SSG with banking, medication and recreation.

My attendant goes with me once a month to shop. Then in between, I get the groceries I need.

SSG gets \$400 a month and my attendant gets \$276. My rent is \$550 including heat and electricity.

I wish some of that money could come to me so I could do more things.

My \$50 goes to the Internet. I have a laptop that my sister got me and I spend a lot of time emailing friends and being on the Internet.

Some of my friends are worse off than me. Some don't get any help even though they have a disability. My friend Evelyn gets only small social assistance. My friend Donna, who is the vice president of People First Nova Scotia, doesn't get help for her teeth or glasses and has to use the food bank.

Another friend is not on assistance and works part time. He can barely pay his rent and has no one to help with medications.

We are all very poor.

I like being here in this nice hotel, all my expenses are paid so I'm really lucky, but I don't have any other money to go anywhere or to buy anything so I'm not really too lucky.

I would like the public to be aware that living on social assistance puts the person, that is me and many of my friends and most of our People First members, in poverty. And then when we try to work, they cut back on the assistance. And how we can buy clothes for work and pay for the transportation to get there? It is like they try to keep people with intellectual disabilities poor and dependent.

I have been a member of People First for 15 years. We are trying to support each other and we come together from all over the province of Nova Scotia, and we come together from all over Canada and we discuss things that are important to us.

We need jobs that will help us to be helpful in our communities and that will help us to live with some respect. We care that people with intellectual disabilities are still placed in institutions. Imagine how poor they are. No jobs, no going to Tim's with friends, no choices in what to eat. No way to get to be a member of groups like People First. No way to live like the rest of us here, that is in poverty.

I'm learning that we have rights like all Canadians. While I'm not sure is if having rights will help us come out of poverty. Thank you.

Calvin would like to thank Joan Paquette for helping him to prepare this speech.

Endnotes

1. People First of Canada's website is at: www.peoplefirstofcanada.ca/index_en.php
2. The Support Services Group operates as a member of the Nova Scotia Cooperative Council.

Copyright © 2010 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy
1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org
Phone: (613) 729-3340