

Bill C-22 The Canadian Disability Benefit Act

A Statement/Response from the Disability | Accessibility Network in The United Church of Canada

What is the issue?

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) is considering Bill C-22, the Canadian Disability Benefit Act, to provide income relief to persons with disabilities who live in poverty. The bill was introduced to the 44th Parliament on November 22, 2021, unanimously passed second reading October 18, 2022, and has been referred to committee. The United Church has a long history of advocating for the reduction of poverty and in its report on Theologies of Disabilities, adopted at the 42nd General Council in 2015, states that “disability is part of the natural limits and conditions of creation, neither a flaw nor a blessing but one of the diverse ways of being an embodied creature.” The church’s support of the effective and timely implementation of this bill is warranted.

Why is this important?

This bill is intended to provide income support to people with disabilities who otherwise will have incomes below the poverty line.

This bill responds to the hundreds of thousands of persons with disabilities who live in poverty in Canada. The 2018 census identified 1,364,000 persons with disabilities living in poverty. They are in our pews and in our communities across Canada. The Disability Benefit can significantly reduce the number of these people living in poverty in Canada, at a time when rising costs—particularly for housing and food—have made the prospects for many persons with disabilities bleak. Disability benefits from provincial governments are not keeping up. (As an example, the Ontario Disability Benefit Program (ODSP) currently provides a maximum of 73% of the poverty rate to a single person without dependents!) This new federal benefit would allow persons with disabilities the potential for a life with dignity.

What are some of the challenges in this proposed legislation?

Bill C-22 as presented is a foundational bill, with many defining items left to later regulations which can be approved or changed by cabinet. This enshrines an unnecessary risk for persons with disabilities unless some limits and targets are defined in the bill. It can also limit the government’s requirement to meet the disability communities’ repeated request for “nothing about us without us”—in other words, meaningful consultation with disabled people about measures that affect disabled people.

There is great urgency to provide relief to people with disabilities who already live in poverty as increases in food and housing costs stretch their incomes even more. Interim financial support for those who qualify is essential while the bill is being clarified and implemented.

While financial supports for persons with disabilities are available across the country from provincial governments, as stated above, many are not indexed and may be subject to change without notice. Characteristic of many of these programs is the potential for claw backs, where funding can be reduced or withdrawn if the person gains additional income from new programs or employment. Negotiation and program design for the Canada Disability Benefit should look at the total support being provided

and not allow claw back or loss of income from existing and ongoing programs when the new benefit comes into effect. It should also recognize that the cost of living differs across Canada.

There are additional costs associated with living with many disabilities. Examples of this include wheelchairs, service animals, specifically designed computer software and hardware, access to personal support workers, housing modifications, and many other aids. Finding ways between federal and provincial programs to provide these much needed supports without forcing persons with disabilities back into poverty is essential.

The definition of disability and therefore ways of qualifying are complex. People may be born with a disability or develop it during their lifetime. They may experience disability one time or encounter repeating or recurring disability throughout life. It is unclear how this will be recognized in the federal disability benefit program. As well, the bill is currently limited to those of working age. At this point, it does not address seniors who often develop disabilities as a natural part of aging.

Recommendation

Bill C-22 proposes a federal Canada Disability Benefit which can provide a great opportunity to make significant progress towards reducing poverty and increasing the possibility of a life with dignity for those persons with disabilities who currently live in poverty in Canada. The bill deserves the United Church's support and commitment to timely and effective implementation.

Supportive United Church persons are asked to contact their MP to encourage support of this bill.

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