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National study reveals shortfalls of independent-living programs

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WATERLOO – Six years after the Decade of Disabled Persons, a new study of Canada's independent living policies and programs has concluded that many persons with disabilities are in danger of losing the modest gains they have made in barrier-free housing, transportation and personal support.

The national study, by Peter A. Dunn of Wilfrid Laurier University's Faculty of Social Work, determined that federal downloading to the provinces and territories, and in turn to the municipalities, has created a patchwork of services across Canada. There exist large disparities in the services offered. Some regions offer very little support; others offer none.

"Although more and more government policies are recognizing the value of independent living concepts and incorporating them into a region's system, many programs are being reduced," says Dunn. "A good number of the gains which were made during the Decade are being eroded – and in the worst cases they're being reversed – by funding cutbacks that originate in Ottawa and trickle down through the system."

Not only has the federal government introduced cutbacks; a number of provinces have also reduced the funding for housing adaptation programs and accessible transportation. Personal supports continue to grow, but at a reduced rate.

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For the study, Dunn reviewed a range of reports, articles and position papers from across the country. He also distributed a questionnaire to 200 key government officials. Because of the importance of the research, 100 percent of the people who were approached provided information that now appears in Dunn's report, *The Development of Government Independent Living Policies and Programs for Canadians with Disabilities*.

The study asked participants to address three research concerns:

- What have the provincial and territorial governments accomplished in promoting independent living for people with disabilities in Canada from 1980 to the present time, and what remains to be accomplished?
- How have the efforts of the provinces and territories been similar and different?
- What factors account for major differences in the extent and quality of these government initiatives?

Dunn found that many programs continue to stress a medical model in which individuals are categorized, remain dependent on professionals, have little control over the services they receive and are stigmatized. When available, services are frequently not responsive. Often they are separate from mainstream services. In other cases, there is just one service for everyone, despite the range of individual needs.

The study also determined that during the Decade of Disabled Persons, the economically stronger provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec integrated independent-living policies and programs more extensively than did the other provinces or territories. They also spent more money on implementing independent-living initiatives. Other regions, however, have at times been able to compensate with unique and extensive programs.

But despite even the best efforts, a number of obstacles remain. Many individuals cannot leave their homes because of architectural barriers. Nor can they obtain accessible transportation or secure adequate personal support. Without these and other necessities, individuals with disabilities cannot easily integrate economically and socially into the Canadian mainstream.

Service consumers expressed growing frustration and anger with the limitations and restrictions of government initiatives, the inaction of task force reports and the slow progress of change. Disability groups are lobbying for strong disability-rights legislation and pan-Canadian standards.

The study concluded that there must be a fundamental shift in service delivery to emphasize consumer control, choice, flexibility and a strong federal role to ensure that all Canadians with disabilities can live independently in the community.