

Being Disabled in Nunavut

Not All Things Are Created Equally in Canada

Recently I worked as a nurse in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut in the Killaiq Health Centre. Nunavut has a population of 30,000 people of which 660 or 2.2% are identified as adults living with a disability, according to Statistics Canada and Labour Canada in 2006. This does not include the aging population over the age of 65 years.

It was an eye opening experience dealing with the challenges of Northern Canada's health care system, in particular, living with disabilities. The level of service is not the same as what Southern Canada is accustomed to. An example of this would be a disabled person with complex medical requirements; including care for feeding, dressing, stimulation, communicating, mobility and anything else that would provide optimum quality of life would only have two options to acquire this. The first would be to stay at home, within their community. With this option the family would have to provide care around the clock with limited help from home care agencies, which only consist of Personal Support Workers, nurse supervised, who are unregulated caregivers and cannot cover the full scope of medical needs for their patients. So the burden of care falls on the family, however because the family bonds are strong in these smaller tight-knit communities, there are lots of family members, extended family, friends and neighbors that assist in supporting these home care efforts. The second option, and last, is travelling to another community to get the services that are needed for an attempt at quality life. This separates families and puts a strain on everyone involved...not like driving from one major city to the next. In Nunavut travel only means "to fly".

In Rankin Inlet there is one group home for mobile physically and mentally challenged adults and houses approximately 6 people. It is much like any group home in Canada, but with room for so few, waiting lists are long and frustrating and when the situation is urgent, waiting on vacancy would be impossible. Therefore many Nunavummiut families choose to manage on their own dealing with the lack of services available.



Here lies the challenge. Home care is totally dependent on the limited PSW's that are within the growing community, so as you can imagine, the services are not optimum.

Next, the government provides funding for manual wheelchairs every five years, which is pretty standard in many provinces. Equal, yes, but....have you seen the terrain in Nunavut? Many communities have few or no paved roads as well as no sidewalks and the terrain is far from flat. The wheelchair that is funded is basic and would better suit individuals who are getting around on concrete, wood or hard surface floors. One of my observations is that this population needs a higher end wheelchair with bigger, sturdier, air pressurized tires that can handle the terrain. I helped fix a wheelchair once that was six months old, but looked more like it had seen 10 years' worth of very hard labour. The broken parts were bolts that had been sheered from the abuse of travelling in town. With no equipment or repair store in this community, broken products or their parts are either sent to Winnipeg or the part is shipped inland. That can take time, lots of time. So the community's solution is to find a part from an old wheelchair, find something similar at the small hardware store and the local physiotherapist, with their little bag of "tools" and fixes it.

Currently there is no program or motorized transportation system to move wheelchair bound people around town. Imagine the difficulty doing anything, going anywhere without having the means to travel from one end of town to the other, or getting up the hill, or making it to the grocery store in horrible weather conditions...? Regular means of transportation in Rankin Inlet is by foot, non-accessible taxi, ATV or truck (if you can afford one). This produces high amounts of isolation for people and is very evident by listening to stories that people share while walking around town. Thankfully, there is a volunteer organization that is fund raising for a wheel chair accessible van to transport any isolated disabled people to their community events. To get more information on this, visit their Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/groups/wheelchairvan>.

The Hamlet Government makes homes that are wheelchair-accessible since most of the houses are owned by Nunavut, and I did discover that there is funding to assist with housing costs for those with disabilities. That is a blessing, since none of the 3-4 story apartment buildings have elevators and virtually would be unsafe and hazardous



for a person with a disability to live within if they could not get themselves out quickly in case of a fire, flood or any other reason where a fast exit could save a life.

I communicated with the mother of a 19 year old legally blind daughter, who because of this is unable to work. In July 2012 a gentleman in Nunavut was the first to ever been partnered with a service dog. This event made CBC news headlines because it gave the man the freedom to move around safely...shocking isn't it? And so were the countless other stories that I heard of or witnessed as an RPN in this region.

Do you now believe that "Not all things are created equally in Canada?" As a true fan of our Canadian environment, culture and diversities, but who has come to expect and enjoy the many comforts of living in a major city in the country's most populous province, I now realize that this beautiful country has its inequalities, just as so many others do. Just a few short hours away, the disabled are suffering in more ways than we would ever realize. Equipment is next to impossible to acquire, funding is limited and services unavailable, mobility and ways of getting around are challenging to say the least and the communities have learned to do with what they have, no matter how little that actually is. Most of us would not survive with the limited resources they have to deal with; and the disabled have far less options than the rest. Physically made equally like you and I? Obviously not. Equal service across Canada? Not even close. Given equal attention as other health care issues? Never heard of this issue until being in Nunavut myself, what about you? Treated equally? Hard to treat someone equally if they are isolated in their home without means of socializing and moving around freely isn't it? I'll stop now, but I think you get the drift. Equality for those that suffer disablements is a far cry away, in any community...and for those in Nunavut, the cry has long since been heard. Now it's time to make their cries stop.

Here are some links to further understand the situation in Nunavut
http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/labour/equality/employment_equity/tools/eedr/2006/data_profiles/page16.shtml

<http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/>

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