



Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation

Groupe de travail canadien sur le VIH et la réinsertion sociale

"Episodic Mental Illness, Employment and Disability Benefits in Canada". An EDF capacity building session discusses the complexities involved in making decisions about work while on benefits.

The Episodic Disabilities Forum (EDF) is comprised of policy makers and program developers, government representatives, disability organizations, researchers and people living with episodic disabilities. The EDF meets throughout the year to exchange information and connect on issues of relevance to people living with episodic disabilities.

The EDF also undertakes a number of capacity building sessions each year designed to raise the profile of episodic disabilities and to enhance the capacity of individuals and organizations to address issues related to broader inclusion of people with episodic disabilities.

On Friday February 6th, the Episodic Disabilities Forum met for a capacity building session on "Episodic Mental Illness, Employment and Disability Benefits in Canada" presented by Dr. Rebecca Gewurtz from McMaster's School of Rehabilitation Sciences.

Dr. Gewurtz outlined recent SSHRC funded research conducted by herself and Dr. Bonnie Kirsch that examines how benefit systems and work needs intersect for persons with episodic mental illness. The research looked specifically at what types of decisions people with episodic mental illness are able to make in regards to employment while on or contemplating going on benefits. It also examined the messages about work that these individuals received, and from whom they received them, as well as the impact that their decisions about work had on their work trajectories and their lives.

The EDF heard about significant differences between benefits systems in three provinces; British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia. British Columbia has recently made substantial changes to its income support programs for people with disabilities, including the implementation of a system of annual reporting of employment income. By contrast, Ontario and Nova Scotia both require individuals on benefits to report any employment income monthly.

The research demonstrated that benefit recipients had a strong desire to work if they were able. Dr. Gewurtz reported that for many individuals, however, the complexity of understanding and complying with the rules surrounding the reporting of employment income acts as a barrier to engaging in employment. Benefit recipients and programs workers alike reported concerns related to a lack of transparency and difficulty finding information about what is required of benefit recipients and what benefits they may actually be entitled to receive. Many participants reported extreme stress associated with receiving letters from their benefits providers saying that their benefits were to be suspended. As one study participant stated

"We went away for a week at the end of July this year and I get back and there's this big letter from ODSP. You are - in whatever words - terminated at this point and you will not get your monthly cheque because of such and such... It just stresses the hell out of us when all of a sudden we are terminated and we don't understand why."

One possible reason for the ongoing difficulties for both staff and recipients with negotiating these systems relates to the complexity of the calculations required. There are literally hundreds of rules governing how income should be reported, how much income is allowed and under what



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circumstances and how other employment related benefits and policies interact with each other. Understanding how these pieces work together as a whole is extremely challenging for all involved. Drs. Gewurtz and Kirsh are in the process of authoring articles about this research but their initial thoughts call for increased transparency in benefits systems and less complicated reporting requirements. There is also a need for the development of a more flexible system and can better deal with varied employment arrangements

To learn more about this research or to inquire about joining the Episodic Disabilities Forum, please contact Wendy Porch, Disability Specialist and Education Coordinator at 416-513-0440 or wporch@hivandrehab.ca