



**Employment Access for All:
Educational Sessions to Increase Employer Awareness and Access to the
Labour Force for People Living with Episodic Disabilities**

Final Report

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Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR)

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The **Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation** (CWGHR) is a national charitable organization working to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS through rehabilitation research, education, and cross-sector partnerships. CWGHR members are individuals and organizations that have an interest in HIV, disability and rehabilitation. These include: community-based HIV/AIDS, disability and rehabilitation organizations; national professional associations; unions; government agencies; private-sector companies; people living with HIV; health care, social care and human resources professionals; and other people who are interested in HIV and rehabilitation.

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Due to a range of developments such as medical advances and technical supports, many people with episodic disabilities¹ are living longer, healthier lives and additionally with greater capacity to participate in employment. In contrast, according to a January 2006 bulletin prepared by the Council of Canadians with Disabilities:

- Over 56% of working age adults with disabilities are unemployed or out of the workforce.
- Persons with disabilities face levels of poverty almost twice that of persons without disabilities.²

These figures indicate high levels of unemployment for people living with disabilities. Although these statistics refer to people with disabilities in general, the figures are relevant to workplace participation for people living with more 'traditional' disabilities and those living with 'episodic' disabilities. While there may be similarities in the overall challenges among people living with disabilities to access the labour force, there are differences in the types of employment barriers faced by people living with episodic disabilities in relation to people with more 'traditional' forms of disability.

'Episodic disabilities' is a term used to describe conditions such as multiple sclerosis, HIV/AIDS, lupus, Hepatitis C, some forms of mental illness, cancers and arthritis. Features that distinguish episodic disabilities from 'traditional' disabilities are their unpredictability, and alternating episodes and degrees of illness and wellness, both of which can force people out of the workforce without warning and then resolve, to once again allow people to return to work. Increasing numbers of Canadians are living with lifelong episodic disabilities. Social Development Canada (SDC)³ stated in its November 2003 report that "recurrent and episodic disabilities are becoming more prevalent in Canadian society."⁴

Many people living with episodic disabilities in Canada have described serious barriers in accessing and/or maintaining employment. As access to employment is a key determinant of health⁵, quality of life can be reduced or limited if these barriers cannot be overcome. Access to employment is also an essential form of income security. Research on vocational rehabilitation has found that "people look to the workplace to meet their needs for primary social interaction".⁶ Access to stable employment is not only a social determinant of health but also a basic human right. The issues or barriers identified by people living with episodic disabilities, researchers and supporters, include: lack of understanding and awareness among employers and co-workers, stigma, discrimination, lack of accommodation or access, impacts of unpredictable health, and employer and government policy and program barriers.

Questions also remain on:

- What strategies need to be used to hire and retain employees with episodic disabilities?
- What can be done to effectively foster a workplace culture that is inclusive of employees with episodic disabilities?
- What should employers know about developing accommodation plans for employees with episodic disabilities?

In order to begin to meet the challenges and barriers in access and/or maintaining employment, the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR) received funding from the Opportunities Fund in March, 2010 to conduct a project on the issue of employment and episodic disabilities.

2. EMPLOYMENT ACCESS FOR ALL

The objectives of the Employment Access for All project were to:

¹ Episodic disabilities are lifelong and chronic conditions such as HIV, multiple sclerosis, lupus, arthritis, diabetes and some forms of cancer and mental illness. People living with episodic disabilities may experience periods of good health that may be unpredictably interrupted by periods of illness or disability. Resulting consequences can force people out of the labour force without warning for indeterminate lengths of time. This in turn, can have significant impacts on health and income stability.

² Retrieved from <http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/socialpolicy/elections/2008/091808>

³ In December 2003, HRDC divided into two departments: Human Resources & Skills Development Canada & Social Development Canada. It has now become Human Resources & Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

⁴ Government of Canada. Government Response to 'Listening to Canadians: A First View of the Future of the Canada Pension Plan Disability Program. The Fifth Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities'. November 2003. p22.

⁵ Social determinants of health include factors such as income security, housing, access to appropriate employment, health care, education, nutrition/food security, psychosocial support, gender, social safety net, social inclusion <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/oi-ar/index-eng.php>.

⁶ Harder, Henry. Early Intervention in Disability Management: Factors that Influence Successful Return to Work. *International Journal of Disability, Community and Rehabilitation*. Vol 2(2) 2003.

- Increase the awareness and understanding of employers on episodic disabilities and employment related issues.
- Increase awareness and capacity of employers to address the challenges facing people living with episodic disabilities in the workplace.
- Increase capacity of employers to employ strategies to enhance opportunities for someone with an episodic disability to be/stay engaged in the labour force.
- Identify and enhance supports for people with episodic disabilities to engage in the labour force.

3. KEY PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The following key project activities were conducted as part of the Employment Access for All project (see details in section 5 below):

- Developed and delivered two in-person workshops with employers on: episodic disabilities and the employment related challenges and barriers faced by people living with episodic disabilities, accommodation best practices to support people with episodic disabilities in the workplace and strategies to involve all staff in creating a workplace culture supportive of people with episodic disabilities.
- Developed supporting resources for workshop content and for dissemination to, and future reference by, employers (workshop participants and others).
- Catalogued resources developed for workshop content as well as for future reference by employers.
- Developed promotional strategy and related materials to promote workshop sessions.
- Developed and produced video of workshop sessions. Recorded, edited, produced and translated (into French) video of workshop sessions and posted videos (e.g. on CWGHR web site, Episodic Disability Employment Network web site etc.).
- Identified future opportunities to work with employers on next steps.
- Developed summary report outlining process and outcomes of educational sessions.
- Posted information on CWGHR web site.
- Evaluated sessions (pre/post and follow up) to determine changes in employers' knowledge, understanding and capacity to address episodic disabilities and employment related challenges.
- We are currently in the process of disseminating the information and resources through relevant networks, and will be integrating the findings of the project into future activities.

4. EXPECTED PROJECT RESULTS

The project had the following outcomes:

- Increased knowledge and awareness of employers regarding episodic disabilities and the implications related to employment.
- Increased capacity of employers to support employees with episodic disabilities.

With increased awareness about episodic disabilities, employers have increased capacity to include people living with episodic disabilities in employment. Increased social inclusion of the many Canadians living with episodic disabilities, will in turn, lead to a brighter future and stronger communities.

5. WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

- CWGHR developed and delivered two in-person workshops to employers on: episodic disabilities and the employment related challenges and barriers faced by people living with episodic disabilities, accommodation best practices to support people with episodic disabilities in the workplace and strategies to involve all staff in creating a workplace culture supportive of people with episodic disabilities.
- The workshops were conducted at the Ontario Ministry of Education and at the Royal Bank of Canada in April 2010.
- At each of the workshops there was a strong participant turnout. 35 participants attended the Ontario Ministry of Education workshop and 26 participants attended the Royal Bank of Canada workshop. For those who wished to attend but were unable to, information from the workshop sessions was provided on the CWGHR website. This increased the reach of the information to a broader audience.
- Each workshop was delivered by experts on episodic disabilities, employment and accommodations strategies including people living with an episodic disability who talked about their lived experience.

- The experts discussed some of the following issues in the workshops:
 - What an episodic disability is
 - The challenges facing people living with episodic disabilities including lack of access to: quality services and care, income security, insurance benefits, employment due to difficulties related to medication and a lack of flexible workplace policies and guidelines.
 - How to support the employee in the workplace including: having flexible policies and programs to accommodate participation in the labour force (e.g. 'flexicurity'), conducting knowledge and training on episodic disabilities for human resources professionals, adopting a long-term view to accommodation planning and building strong coworker relationships.
 - Additional workplace supports available to people living with episodic disabilities including: Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), peer associations and a variety of disability associations (e.g. National Network on Mental Health (NNMH), Arthritis Society).
- Each of the speakers living with episodic disabilities discussed practical tips and hints on how they overcame their barriers to employment and were able to sustain work. They gave tips on what organizations can do to support employees living with episodic disabilities in the workplace including:
 - Establishing pro-active communications with employees living with episodic disabilities.
 - Having a flexible work policy e.g. flexible hours or flex time.
 - Actively helping employees develop a back-up plan for unpredictable absences.
 - Keeping files meticulously up to date.
 - Understanding that on-going management of the episodic disability is dependent upon access to care.
- Participants at the workshops were very engaged and asked many questions of all workshop presenters especially of the speakers living with episodic disabilities. Most questions centred on what accommodations strategies worked for them. Participants were eager to learn best practices. They also mentioned that they would welcome more training, tips sheets and case studies on the dimensions of disability and managing mechanisms.
- Videos of the workshops were developed for employers. The videos highlight accommodation best practices on how to support people with episodic disabilities in the workplace and strategies to involve all staff in creating a workplace culture supportive of people with episodic disabilities.
- Supplementary supporting resources for employers were developed and made available to participants on a variety of employment topics including: how to manage employees with an episodic disability and the role of co-workers in helping to support people living with episodic disabilities.
- All content developed for each workshop, supplementary supporting resources and videos have been made available to other staff at the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Royal Bank of Canada. These are also posted on the CWGHR website (www.hivandrehab.ca) and available to any employer who wishes to learn more about episodic disabilities and employment.

6. EVALUATION

Participants at each workshop were asked to complete the self-assessment questionnaire at the beginning of the workshop to take a baseline measurement of their knowledge, and the same self-assessment questionnaire at the end of the workshop. They were also asked to complete another self-assessment questionnaire two months after the workshop was conducted. A total of 16 participants completed the pre- post and post- post- workshop self assessment forms.

Both the formal and informal feedback from the workshops participants was very positive and there was clear evidence of learning by the workshop participants. Participants reported increased knowledge and understanding on episodic disabilities and employment related issues and ways to address the challenges facing people living with episodic disabilities in the workplace.

The results indicate that the knowledge and understanding increased in all areas identified in the self-assessment form:

- Knowledge of similarities and differences between different types of disabilities

- Knowledge of the types of episodic disabilities
- Understanding of the impacts of people living with episodic disabilities on the employer/organization
- Understanding of the impacts of living with an episodic disability on the employee
- Knowledge of limitations to workplace participation
- Knowledge of how to work with people who may have various vulnerabilities associated with disability
- Knowledge of the challenges of living with an episodic disability and employment
- Knowledge of accommodation support options for persons with episodic disabilities
- Knowledge of challenges of living with an episodic disability on income security
- Recognition of gaps in training related to disability and employment

Participants also reported a high level of satisfaction with their experience at the workshop as well as having the opportunity to hear someone talk about their experience living and working with an episodic disability. We were particularly pleased with the comments that came from the evaluation forms. Included below is a collection of direct quotes from workshop participants:

“Great. Very interesting and informative workshop. I learnt a lot about available options and resources”

“Thanks very much. We were all engaged!”

“Excellent - recommended highly for all managers”

“Great session - should be mandatory for all”

“This type of workshop can be used for Managers and should be provided to RBC Campus”

“Great opportunity for those that don't deal with this sort of thing so frequently - I'm sure that there were many “ah ha” moments for those in the room and on the phone”

Presentation slides from the workshops, videos and information resources developed are available on the CWGHR website (www.hivandrehab.ca). These will be useful to those who were not able to attend and for other employers to learn about accommodation best practices to support people with episodic disabilities in the workplace and strategies to involve all staff in creating a workplace culture supportive of people with episodic disabilities.

7. NEXT STEPS

Following the workshops, both the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Royal Bank of Canada stated that the workshop should be made available to all managers. They felt the workshop increased their capacity to support employees with episodic disabilities in the workplace. We are currently exploring the possibility of conducting workshops with their staff across the country.

Increasingly, employers mention the need for more information on understanding accommodation best practices and supports for employees living with episodic disabilities and strategies on how to move towards greater organizational integration of employees with episodic disabilities. The work conducted with these two employers has the potential to be of benefit to other employers as well. We look forward to taking some of the lessons learned from this project and some of our other employment-related work to help improve employment opportunities for people living with episodic disabilities in Canada and beyond.

If you are interested in CWGHR conducting a workshop and for more information please contact Martine Mangion, Manager of Episodic Disability Initiatives at mmangion@hivandrehab.ca or at 416 513 0440 ext 244.