



# Helping to bridge the gap towards employment and independence

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by LAURA BUSHEIKIN



Canadian provincial and federal social programs are meant to provide a safety net, but there are always people who fall through the gaps ... often landing on rough ground.

That's where HSA member Aaron Wilson can help: as Community Coordinator for the Opportunities Fund at the Centre for Ability in Vancouver, he serves a clientele that otherwise would be shut out of a number of key employment-related programs: people with disabilities who don't qualify for Employment Insurance.

"A typical client has not been in the workforce for a long time. They have a disabling condition and often other barriers as well, such as long-term poverty ... not surprisingly ... and also substance abuse and other personal barriers to employment," Wilson said.

The Opportunities Fund sponsors skills training, wage subsidy and self-employment training for these clients. The program replaces those offered to people on unemployment insurance, with an important difference: it is tailored for people with disabilities.

Wilson recalls when the Opportunities Fund was initiated by the federal government 10 years ago. "It was a very exciting time. There was a recognition within the federal government that there was a gap, that people with disabilities, who already had a disadvantage, were falling through the cracks. The program really does address these concerns."

Wilson loves being part of big, positive changes in his clients' lives.

"I feel really privileged. It's part of this crossroads that our clients have arrived at, often after having survived really difficult circumstances for a long time. They are making really big and often scary changes. Going back to school after 20 years is a scary thing! We get to support them in that. It's a wonderfully exciting thing to be part of."

"This applies equally with self-employment and wage subsidies. It is a privilege to be part of a situation where an employer is willing to do this," he says.

If clients need adaptive equipment in order to study or work, the Opportunities Fund can help.

"A good example of that would be a young fellow who was hearing impaired but was a skilled autobody technician. He needed a ttY phone system so he could communicate by phone if he were alone in the shop. We could administer funds for that."

Aaron Wilson Community Coordinator The Centre for Ability
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Wilson's job includes liaising with community organizations such as the YMCA, Family Services, and THEO BC, ensuring the case managers there know about the program and are referring clients. He is also in contact with training providers such as BCIT, Capilano College, and Douglas College, and with potential employers. The dedication, support and cooperation of all these partners is part of what keeps him passionate about his work, he said.

Wilson began working with people with disabilities more than 20 years ago. He kept working in the field while completing a BA in English Literature and a masters in Interdisciplinary Studies. For his current position, he studied with the National Institute of Disability management and Research. -I completed 22 modules and am a certified return-to-work coordinator," he said.

Wilson is a proud and active member of HSA, although he acknowledges that "return-to-work coordinator" is not what people generally think of when they hear the words "health sciences."

"It can seem like an anomaly," chuckles Wilson. "Sometimes when I'm surrounded by technologists, I feel like a square peg in a round hole." but, in fact, HSA is a great fit for his job, he says.

Neurological conditions affect about 10 per cent of his clients; approximately half have mental illness as the primary disability, he said. "So a knowledge base of disabling conditions, as well as disability management treatment and rehabilitation, is important."

Wilson has been an HSA member for about five years, and has been getting increasingly more involved in the union. He is currently member-at-Large for Region 5 and represents his region on the resolutions committee.

"This is very complementary to the social activism I've been involved in for decades," he said. "part of what makes me tick and what I'm passionate about is a vision of social justice.

"That involves a lot of networking, being resourceful, being willing to take on causes that can take an awfully long time to move forward," he says.

For example, when living in Alberta, he learned that the human rights act in that province did not include sexual orientation. So he became part of the movement to make Alberta, and all provinces, change their provincial laws to harmonize with the Canadian Charter of Rights.

"There was tremendous opposition, and threats to veto it; it took years of collective effort provincially and nationally to get the legislation ratified. Those types of efforts take dogged persistence. That's very much in the spirit of union activism," he says.

"Of course I've also been active in the movement to change thinking around people with disabilities. And the first thing I did when I moved to Vancouver is volunteer at a neighbourhood community centre in East Vancouver. I also do volunteer radio production with CFRO cooperative radio," he said.

There is no clear boundary between Wilson's activism, fuelled by his commitment to social justice, and his work. He likes it this way.

"I don't buy into it when people say something is just business and not personal. Work isn't impersonal; it's very much part of who I am." 

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