

# A New Income Support Program for Persons with Severe and Prolonged Disabilities

## Project Overview

In October 2019, the Manitoba government shared its commitment to develop a new income support program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities. In late 2019, Manitoba Families organized a number of public engagement opportunities with Manitobans to obtain feedback on different features of such a program. This feedback is available at [https://www.gov.mb.ca/asset\\_library/en/proactive/2020\\_2021/disability-consultation-report.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/asset_library/en/proactive/2020_2021/disability-consultation-report.pdf).

One main finding in the engagement work with Manitobans for a new program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities is the desire to include a service navigation component. Service navigation would help clients find services and supports they require - both internal and external to government. In February 2021, Manitoba Families organized an additional round of public engagements, this time to develop feedback on the key features of a service navigation component for the new program.

This report summarizes the feedback received from these engagements.

We would like to thank Manitobans for the feedback they provided over the course of the public engagement process. Their participation in the development of this new program will have a significant impact on the lives of individuals experiencing disability, as well as their families, friends, caregivers, and many other Manitobans.

## Engagement Overview

Six virtual public focus groups were held in February 2021. Manitobans could also share their responses through a public online survey, containing the same core questions posed at the focus groups, available between January 27th and February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The department received 490 responses to the online survey and 66 people attended the virtual focus groups.

To help the government understand who was providing feedback, survey respondents were asked to identify if they were currently receiving Employment and Income Assistance, if they were a person with a disability, or if they provided services to people with disabilities. Thirty-four per cent of respondents said they were people with disabilities, 20 per cent said they were service providers in an income support program or program that supported persons with disabilities, and eight per cent said they were receiving Employment and Income Assistance. Forty per cent of respondents said none of these categories applied to them and eight per cent preferred not to say.

## What We Heard

During the virtual focus groups and surveys, Manitobans shared a wide range of feedback from many diverse perspectives. Individuals shared their personal experiences and those of their families and friends, including their experiences advocating for individuals living with disabilities. They shared recommendations for developing a service navigation component to the new program – including features of the service, who should deliver it and how it should be delivered.

### **Support for a Service Navigation Component**

Most Manitobans (84 per cent of participants) who were consulted in the engagement process strongly supported including a service navigation component in the new program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities. Another 14 per cent were unsure what service navigation might involve and whether it was necessary. Two per cent indicated that they were not in favour.

Manitobans told stories of the challenges they have personally faced in accessing supports, as well as stories of friends and family members. Many shared that the current Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) program is unable to meet the unique needs of individuals living with disabilities, and offered suggestions for how service navigation support might help to reduce these barriers.

Manitobans emphasized the important impact an effective service navigator could play in supporting individuals with severe and prolonged disabilities, including improving access and making it easier to navigate resources, supports and programs.

### **The Functions of Service Navigation**

Manitobans were asked to define service navigation and identify the tasks and functions a service navigator should perform. The following themes emerged:

- **Information and referrals**

Manitobans expressed that while there are many services and supports available to individuals with disabilities across the province, these systems can be difficult to navigate and individuals are often unaware they exist. Service navigators should have expert level knowledge of supports available and be an accessible source of information.

Service navigators should complete referrals for desired services and support clients in completing applications.

- **Case management**

Manitobans would like to see service navigators thoroughly assess client needs, actively engage the client with relevant supports and set client-centered goals. Service navigators should play a case management role in supporting individuals with disabilities, helping them to make progress on their goals and providing informal psychosocial support. Respondents identified specific areas in which service navigators could support clients, including:

- finding and maintaining affordable housing
- accessing assistive equipment
- budgeting and financial management
- mental health support
- transportation support

- **Employment and training supports**

Manitobans would like service navigation to support individuals with severe and prolonged disabilities to access education, training, volunteer, and employment services that are tailored to their needs, if this aligns with their personal goals. Service navigators should also support clients to find paid internships, scholarships and bursaries, and connect them to accessible employers, if appropriate.

- **Ongoing communication**

Frequent communication with clients was identified as an essential feature of service navigation. Manitobans want service navigators to regularly reach out to clients, initiate follow-ups, and provide updates and links to benefits, resources and services. Manitobans hope that service navigators will communicate with clients' caregivers, advocates or family members, when appropriate and desired by the client, to provide information on services and supports available and engage them in the process.

- **Transition support**

Manitobans would like to see service navigators provide support to individuals who transition off the program if they find employment, or if an alternative source of income becomes available.

### **Who is a Service Navigator?**

Manitobans were asked to consider who is best suited to perform service navigation, and encouraged to think about options both within and outside of government.

It was repeatedly emphasized that service navigation should be delivered by staff with knowledge of long-term disabilities, experience working with individuals with disabilities or lived experience with disability. Service navigators should also have expert level knowledge of services, programs and benefits available to individuals with disabilities in their communities.

Most respondents said service navigation would be best delivered by a combination of government and non-profit community organizations, drawing on the strengths and expertise of both. Many mentioned a partnership approach where government provides funding and oversight to non-profit organizations delivering services.

Some respondents described the advantages of government representatives delivering service navigation, including their access to resources and training, awareness of provincial and federal support programs and expertise in delivering large-scale services. Others emphasized the benefits of having community organizations and non-profits deliver the service, including their experience working with individuals with disabilities, established trust in the community and connection to community-based supports. Overwhelmingly, Manitobans emphasized that regardless of whether services are delivered by government or non-government representatives, service navigators should be well trained, knowledgeable of services, and use a client-centered, empathic approach.

Many Manitobans described a team approach where experts or partners support the lead service navigator, including housing specialists, financial or budgeting experts and legal experts. The importance of hiring individuals with clinical expertise and training in mental health disabilities was also noted, including social workers with training in trauma-informed counselling.

### **Delivering Service Navigation**

Manitobans were asked how service navigation should be delivered (in-person, online, by telephone or otherwise) and whether clients should have an assigned service navigator or open access to the first available in a team of service navigators.

Manitobans agree that in-person service delivery, whether in an office, community-based or home setting, is important to effective service navigation (83 per cent). Meeting the client where they're at and offering flexible ways to communicate were repeatedly mentioned. Manitobans support having service navigators available by phone (79 per cent), email (71 per cent), virtual meetings (67 per cent) and online chat platforms (64 per cent). Offering a hybrid approach where clients have an assigned service navigator but are also able to contact a call centre for quick questions was also mentioned as an ideal feature.

Ensuring services are accessible and meet the unique needs of individual clients was mentioned. Offering services in a central, accessible location was emphasized, and offering in-home services for rural Manitobans or providing transportation to appointments was identified as essential.

Manitobans stressed the need for relationship- and trust-building between service navigator and client, and recommended that each client have a dedicated navigator with whom they can be in regular contact. Manitobans believe having a dedicated service navigator will help reduce the need for clients to repeatedly re-tell their stories, support trust building and increase successful case management outcomes.

## **Next Steps**

Manitoba Families is now focused on developing the major components of the new program, including service navigation. Program design will be guided by the feedback Manitobans provided during public engagements.

On April 26, 2021, the Honourable Rochelle Squires, Minister of Families, introduced [Bill 72](#), the Disability Support Act, which provides the framework for a new income support program for persons with severe and prolonged disabilities. Manitobans can view the bill online at

<https://web2.gov.mb.ca/bills/42-3/b072e.php> and can follow the status of the bill at <https://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/business/billstatus.pdf>.

## Questions?

For more information about this document and the public engagement process, please contact:

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