Alberta Doctors' Digest

The shift from AISH to ADAP

On July 1, 2026, Alberta began moving as many as 50,000 disabled Albertans from Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) to the Alberta Disability Assistance Program (ADAP). The introduction of ADAP, which was announced last year, was positioned as an update to disability supports that would allow people receiving disability benefits to pursue meaningful employment opportunities. While government described it as a change members of the disability community had asked for, many disability advocates have said it was a change no one asked for and no one wants.

In the weeks leading up to the transition, there were several media stories that discussed what this would mean for the approximately 80,000 people who currently receive AISH benefits. AISH pays up to $1,940/month, while ADAP pays up to $1,740/month. That means that following a grace period that ends on December 31, 2027, people on ADAP will receive $200/month less than they received through AISH. Once that happens, ADAP recipients will be $725/month under the poverty line in Calgary and **$**584/month under the poverty line in Edmonton**.**

For a disabled person, a loss of $200/month could mean having to choose between groceries, transit, rent and a phone bill. For some, it is the paper-thin margin that separates them from having a place to live and being forced onto the streets. It's the difference between support which was already barely at a subsistence level and that which will now be untenable. For too many, the transition to ADAP will push people deeper into poverty and, potentially, into crisis.

Automatically transferred to ADAP

Most Albertans receiving AISH were automatically transferred to ADAP as of July 1. The only exceptions, according to a government fact sheet, were the approximately 30,000 disabled Albertans who are 60 years of age or older, those with severe and profound developmental disabilities, people living in continuing care homes and individuals with palliative or terminal medical conditions.

The letters advising people about whether or not they would transition from AISH to ADAP began arriving in mid-May, and members of the disability community quickly began posting on social media that they were confused by the decisions. Advocates say some people with profound, permanent disabilities received letters indicating they would be inexplicably transitioned to ADAP. One CBC article detailed a Calgary family's shock at discovering that their daughter with a severe brain injury would transition to ADAP, despite her being reliant on a wheelchair, having limited ability to communicate and requiring around-the-clock care.

"These decisions make no sense," explains Dr. Sarah Bates, a family physician and the president of the Section of Family Medicine at the Alberta Medical Association. "We have patients whom we have assessed for AISH because they are unable to work and need these supports. It's already a rigorous process, and it can take months, sometimes years, for them to get approved. Now they have to prove their disability all over again.

They haven't suddenly gotten better and become employable because government decided to change the program."

New, more complicated medical assessments

Individuals who were transitioned and want to remain on AISH must reapply and undergo a new medical assessment, which can be conducted by a person's own family physician or specialist. The new, unified Disability Income Assistance Application includes multi-page sections, mapping out physical limitations and a list of work-capacity questions, something that will require more time from both the medical professional and the patient.

"Government has indicated they will pay for one medical assessment," says Dr. Bates. "But it seems unlikely to me that the fee government will pay will in any way reflect the effort involved or effectively compensate physicians for their time."

Physicians are bracing for a deluge of requests for these mandatory assessments, which will, in turn, take away the time physicians have available to provide other, much-needed care. At a time when approximately 700,000 Albertans are without a family physician, it may be difficult for disabled Albertans to access their physician.

"Disabled Albertans have already undergone a complicated assessment to qualify for AISH in the first place," explains Zachary Weeks, a disability advocate and outspoken critic of the AISH to ADAP transition. "I think it's deeply disrespectful to the physicians who have used their skills and experience to previously determine that someone qualifies for AISH. Now we have a government that is basically saying to medical professionals: 'We don't believe you, so we are going to make you and your patient prove it again.' It's a slap in the face to people who are experts at what they do and who know their patients best."

Once the medical assessment forms are completed, they will be submitted to a government adjudicator. If the form meets certain criteria, the application will be forwarded to a government-appointed Medical Review Panel, which will review the report and make a decision on whether the individual returns to AISH or remains on ADAP. That decision is final and cannot be appealed.

ADAP is unlikely to work as promised

Government has presented ADAP as a way to allow disabled Albertans to pursue employment and earn more money without losing benefits. Individuals on ADAP will be able to earn up to $700 per month with no impact on their financial benefits, and parents on ADAP can earn $1,100 before their benefits are impacted. In theory, it sounds promising, but a recent report from the University of Calgary indicates that ADAP may be structurally flawed.

The report explains there are gaps in ADAP's design, including the absence of employer-side obligations to create accessible workplaces and a lack of recognition of labour market realities. Several recommendations, including introducing provincial accessibility legislation modelled after the *Accessible British Columbia Act*, are outlined in the report. At present, Alberta and Prince Edward Island are the only two provinces that don't have accessibility legislation.

The lack of that accessibility legislation is an issue that Zachary Weeks says needs to be urgently addressed. “It’s hard for disabled people to work when they can’t get into places of work,” he explains. He notes that *Bill 206: the Accessible Alberta Act*, which was introduced by NDP MLA Marie Renault on March 12, aimed to have Alberta identify, remove and prevent barriers for disabled people. It was defeated at second reading on March 23 by a vote of 43-34. All UCP MLAs voted against it.

“Bill 206 would have allowed Alberta to do something meaningful to improve the lives of disabled Albertans, including employment opportunities,” says Weeks. “To say no to *Bill 206*, while pushing through ADAP, is counterintuitive.”

Physicians and Albertans called for a pause on ADAP implementation

Physicians across Alberta have been calling on the government to pause the ADAP transition and allow for more meaningful, broader consultation with Alberta’s disability community. Dr. Bates has alerted family physicians to the implications of the transition in her *SFM Bulletin* and was part of a group of physicians who penned an op-ed that ran in the *Calgary Herald* this past April. She worries about the impact any drop in income will have on her patients and countless others who are already barely able to afford the necessities of life.

“When people can’t afford the necessities of life, anxiety rises, sleep worsens, depression deepens and chronic health issues become even harder to manage,” explains Dr. Bates. “Poverty makes everything harder. So does disability. This transition will exacerbate so many existing challenges.”

In the weeks leading up to the July 1 rollout, several Alberta municipalities, including Calgary, Edmonton, Medicine Hat and Grande Prairie, asked the province to pause the transition. Their warning was blunt: cutting income for disabled residents will not reduce need. It will push more people toward food banks, housing instability and local crisis services, while shifting pressure onto cities and towns already trying to fill the gaps. Government officials responded on social media, accusing municipal leaders of “misinformation.”

Many disabled Albertans have been living in dread of the transition since it was announced. Over the past few weeks, there were news reports and social media postings about the fear and stress the looming deadline was creating. For people already living with depression, anxiety, trauma, chronic pain or serious mental illness, the threat of losing income can tip fear into crisis and make people question whether they can keep going.

That is what Zachary Weeks says he is hearing as well. In early June, Weeks received a suicide note from a member of the disability community and had to call in a wellness check to the RCMP. Unfortunately, the person died by suicide, an outcome that was heartbreaking.

“It was devastating for the disability community and should have been a wake-up call for government. At the very least, it should have warranted a pause to allow for reflection and consultation. That didn’t happen.”

Any of us could experience disability

“The disability community is one that anyone can join at any time,” says Weeks. “You can be born with it, you can acquire it, and if you’re lucky enough, you’ll age into it. We’re all only one bad day away from needing AISH, and now it’s harder to get.”

The realization that any one of us could become disabled at any moment makes the transition from AISH to ADAP relevant to every Albertan. It also underscores the need for a more careful, collaborative approach to policy changes that have the potential to devastate lives.

“It’s hard to see an upside to this decision,” cautions Dr. Bates. “Nothing about ADAP suggests it will improve the lives of disabled Albertans. Instead, it forces disabled Albertans to somehow find elusive employment or learn to live on less when what they currently have is not enough.”

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