Cornerstones of a Professional Association for the Community Disability Services Sector:

Stakeholder Engagement Process

Prepared by

Kathleen Worton

for

Alberta Council of Disability Services

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In partnership with the North East Workforce Council and St. Paul's Abilities Network (SPAN) the Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS) Provincial Workforce Council is exploring ways to recognize the professional nature of the work in the Alberta's Community Disability Services sector. Interest in exploring the development of an association stemmed from recommendations based on previous workforce initiatives undertaken by the Provincial Workforce Council that have aimed to address human resource issues within the sector.

The Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute (VRRI) was contracted by ACDS to analyze and report on the information gathered by ACDS and MacLean Management Consulting Services Limited (MMCS) from participants at the 2009 ACDS Spring Conference regarding the value, function, and structure of a professional association within Alberta's Community Disability Services sector.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data Collection Methods

The North East Workforce Council and MMCS co-facilitated two events that were held at the 2009 ACDS Spring Conference to provide conference participants with the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns regarding the possible development of a professional association within the sector.

2.1.1 Discussion Café

A Discussion Café was held with approximately 200 individuals who participated in three fifteen minute rounds of café-style discussions. Each discussion was based on one of three questions co-developed by the North East Workforce Council and MMCS:

1. What are the 3 things that a professional association could do for you or that would benefit professionals in Community Disability Services?

2. How do you think that a professional association would or could change people's perceptions of the field of Community Disability Services in Alberta? (Consider how this could impact people's perceptions both within the field and outside of it.)

3. How could a professional association impact the supports and services provided to people with disabilities?

2.2.2 Panel Discussion

A Panel Discussion was held that comprised of three experts who spoke on the topic of a professional association based on their respective experiences. The panelists included:

1. Ron Adachi, Executive Director of The Alberta College of Social Workers,

2. Robert Watson, Lawyer and Director of the R. D. Elliot Centre for Management, and

3. Tim Bear, Executive Director of St. Paul's Abilities Network (SPAN).

Approximately 50 participants attended and were encouraged to ask the panel questions on the development of a professional association and to provide information based on the following question posed by the North East Workforce Council and MMCS:

1. What are the cornerstones for a strong foundation that need to be put into place in order to ensure the success of a professional association in the Community Disability Services field in Alberta?

3.0 ANALYSIS

Data from the Discussion Café and Panel Discussion was gathered by ACDS and has been compiled and analyzed by the VRRI under three broad categories: structure, function, and value. Key themes were developed in each category to highlight the "cornerstones" participants suggested should be considered if the sector were to develop a professional association. These cornerstones highlight participant perspectives on:

- The roles and responsibilities of a professional association

- The ways in which a professional association could be of value to the sector

- The concerns and questions that need to be addressed within the sector if a professional association is to be developed

All opinions expressed in this report are those voiced by participants involved in the Grassroots Café and/or Panel Discussion. These views are not necessarily held by either ACDS or The VRRI, and their presence in this report does not in any way constitute endorsement by ACDS or The VRRI.

4.0 CORNERSTONES OF A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

4.1 Structure

A clear structure should be established in order to create a stable, self-regulating association that could gain respect and influence within the sector and externally. Structural aspects identified included governance, terms of reference, administration, and financing.

4.1.1 Governance

Strong leadership is a crucial element in the development of a professional association. There was uncertainty among participants regarding who should provide this leadership: agencies, councils or employees. Participants felt an association should be a "grassroots" organization initiated by sector employees with agencies and larger councils providing support and infrastructure. Concerns were raised regarding how a new professional association could work alongside existing councils or associations without competition or duplication of responsibilities. Key aspects of governance identified included an organized administration and a strong connection to the community.

- Administration: A board of directors would be needed to oversee the association and a stable administration would be required to manage day-to-day operations. It was recommended that an association be transparent and open regarding how the administration would regulate the association and manage the distribution of funding.

- Community Connection: For effective representation of the sector those involved in governance should act in the best interest of clients supported within the sector. It was believed the support of individuals with disabilities, guardians, families, employees and agencies would be necessary for the establishment of an association. Participants felt this support could be gained through continued connection with individuals and agencies involved in service provision.

4.1.2 Terms of Reference

A Terms of Reference would need to be developed to guide the growth and operation of a professional association. This includes a clear set of objectives and a description of scope.

- Objectives: The objectives of a professional association should focus on the needs of those within the community including: individuals with disabilities, families, guardians, and sector employees. Clear objectives were believed to be essential to: 1) define the functions of the association, 2) distinguish these functions from those of other representational groups such as labour unions, and 3) identify whether intended functions of the association could have legal implications and would require external approval from government.

- Scope: The scope should define the size, location, and membership eligibility of a professional association. Questions emerged regarding the possible expansion of a professional association from a provincial level to a national level. The idea of a national association was presented in response to comments about the level of service standards and whether these service standards should be consistent across Canada.

  In addition, inclusivity of membership was also identified as a necessary consideration to determine who the association would represent. Questions were posed regarding 1) whether membership would be available to those who work or study outside of Alberta, 2) whether the association would represent individuals who work in the for-profit as well as the non-profit sector, and 3) how an association would include and represent individuals employed through family-managed supports.

4.1.3 Membership
Membership is an important consideration to determine who the association would represent. Two distinct membership policies were suggested: 1) "inclusive membership" that reflects the diverse nature of individuals (students, employees, retired employees, etc.) within the sector, and 2) "hierarchical membership" based on continuing education to distinguish members and to separate sector employees from those attaining membership out of general interest. Debate existed over inclusivity of membership. Some participants felt restricting membership to individuals attaining a high level of education would raise the professional status of the sector, while others were opposed to exclusive requirements.

4.1.4 Financing
An association should have enough financial support to become established, ensure sustainability, and promote change within the sector. Participants expressed concern about the high cost of running an association. Public perception was also a consideration as some feared the general public would presume funding for an association decreases the funding available for clients and services. To prevent this misconception, internal sources of funding such as membership fees were discussed.

- Membership Fees: Annual dues paid by members would be a justifiable means of funding an association as long as the benefits of membership were evident and the cost to individuals was kept low. There was some concern that sector employees may be resistant to membership fees and may refrain from joining the association as a result.

4.2 Desired Functions of an Association
Functions are tangible activities of an association that would help to: 1) establish Community Disability Services as a professional sector, 2) maintain this status by representing the sector, and 3) provide benefits and opportunities for its members. To inform the functions undertaken by an association, participants believed it was necessary for an association to define what it means to be professional within the sector. Establishing standards to govern practice and to outline employment qualifications was identified as a key function of an association, as employees meeting these standards would be recognized as professionals based on their knowledge, skill, and standard of service. In addition, functions such as: professional development, networking, collaboration with post-secondary institutions, providing members with benefits and resources, and sector representation were discussed.

4.2.1 Establishing Standards
The development of standards requires careful consideration as these standards may have serious implications for employees regarding membership and employment. It was believed that standards should be evidence-based and reflect best practices. Three major considerations presented were consistency, gradual implementation, and enforcement.

- Consistency: Consistency in establishing standards can help eliminate disparity among regions, leading to an increase in quality of services across the province and among private, non-profit, and family-managed supports. Standards that would be consistently applied and enforced across the province were identified as most effective.

- Gradual Implementation: Current employees should be given time and support in order to reach newly implemented standards, as standards could have a negative effect if implemented too quickly. Grandfathering was suggested as a way to prevent current employees from being denied professional membership because they could not meet new educational requirements. Some participants suggested years of practical experience be equated with education to ensure qualifications would not be determined solely by academic credentials, but by a combination of academic and practical experience.

- Enforcement: Setting standards would require a policy to ensure those standards were being upheld and to take appropriate action regarding questionable conduct or practice. Participants felt an association should establish disciplinary measures to handle situations where members were not abiding by association standards. Suggestions for enforcement included establishing a probationary period for the standard to be met and revoking membership temporarily or permanently. Some participants expressed caution that enforcement may have legal implications which would need to be considered if membership and employment were dependent on meeting standards.

4.2.1.1 Standards Guiding Service

Two types of standards could be set by a professional association: standards guiding services and standards guiding education. Standards to guide service were identified as a way to govern appropriate behavior and practice. Suggestions for standards in this category included standards of ethical practice and conduct and clear job classifications.

- Code of Ethics/Code of Conduct: A code of conduct and code of ethics would outline standards that should be adopted by all Alberta agencies to improve quality of service, help to recognize and resolve ethical issues, and protect clients. Both a code of ethics and a code of conduct were identified as resources that would assist sector employees in determining how to respond in difficult situations. Participants felt standards of conduct would provide sector employees with a clear understanding of the expectations required of professionals within the sector.

- Job Classifications: Job classifications should be standardized across the province to ensure roles would be consistent among agencies and career positions would be matched with educational requirements and/or level of experience. It was suggested that employee input be considered when defining roles and that these classifications align with position classifications developed by the Workforce 2010 initiative.

4.2.1.2 Standards Guiding Education

An association should set educational requirements to increase the qualifications of employees in the sector. It was believed sector staff would be more qualified for their positions and more dedicated to a career within the sector if educational requirements for employment were higher. Varying perspectives were presented regarding the purpose of educational requirements raising questions concerning whether standards of education should be considered employment criteria. Discussion surrounding educational requirements included establishing benchmark job competencies, outlining minimum qualifications for employment, and promoting continuing education within the sector.

- Benchmark Job Competencies: Establishing position-specific criteria is a way to ensure educational qualifications reflect specialized skills needed to perform the role. Participants indicated that more specialized positions, such as those that involve leadership or supporting

individuals with disabilities with greater or more complex needs, should require more advanced education and/or experience.

- <u>Minimum Qualifications</u>: An association could set minimum education qualifications that influence membership or employment requirements. This was a contentious issue as many participants believed minimum educational standards could elevate the status of the sector, while others felt this could risk exclusion or alienation of dedicated employees who could not meet the established criteria. Participants also expressed concern that establishing minimum qualifications would make it increasingly difficult to fill open positions and quality of service could suffer. As noted in the gradual implementation of standards, participants felt experience should be considered along with academic qualifications in order to retain experienced employees.

- <u>Continuing Education</u>: An association should encourage members to engage in continuing education and training opportunities and consider making continuing education a requirement of membership. Participants felt an association could establish guidelines for additional training or education to help workers gain relevant skills and advance within the sector. Continuing education units (CEUs), used in other sectors as requirements for licensure, were identified as a possible method for tracking educational progress.

4.2.2 Professional Development

Professional development is a way to keep individuals employed within the sector and up-to-date on best practices, and to increase the level of knowledge and skill within the sector. It was suggested professional development opportunities should provide employees with specialized training and opportunities for career advancement.

- <u>Specialized Training</u>: Training should relate directly to occupational activities in order to improve the quality of services employees could provide in their day-to-day work. It was suggested that training be based on core standards so programs across the province would be consistent in providing the same level of skill and training. Consistency was identified as a way to increase recognition of training programs across the province, allowing training to be transferrable if employees change locations, agencies, etc.

- <u>Career Advancement</u>: To motivate employees to pursue professional development, training should open doors to new positions, increased responsibility, and higher wages. It was suggested that an association establish possible career paths for positions within the sector. These paths were seen as a way to help employees recognize the importance of continuous skill development for future career opportunities and advancement within the sector.

4.2.3 Collaborating with Post-Secondary Institutions

A professional association should establish strong connections with post-secondary institutions to ensure sustainability within the sector. Collaboration was considered important to maintain educational programs in community rehabilitation and to make sure these programs provide students with solid background knowledge and experience to prepare them for employment within the sector. Collaboration could be mutually beneficial and could help encourage enrollment within programs, promote employment opportunities, and provide specialized training for sector employees.

- <u>Increase Enrolment</u>: Through professionalization, an association can create a "buzz" for the sector and market it to students as an exciting and rewarding program of study. Declining enrolment was a concern among many participants and financial assistance such as bursaries and scholarships was suggested as a way an association could help students pursue a diploma or degree in community rehabilitation.

- <u>Promote Employment Opportunities</u>: Providing graduating students with information on career opportunities within the sector is one way a connection with a professional association could

benefit both the sector and the institutions. A high rate of employment for graduates was presented as a way to help institutions market programs as viable fields of study. It was suggested that an association make job postings and career information accessible to all students through college and university career centers.

- Credentialing: A professional association can provide assistance to institutions engaged in program development by outlining practical skills and knowledge required within the sector. This was presented as a way that programs could ensure students graduate with qualifications applicable to careers within the sector. Another opportunity identified was for institutions to offer sector-specific continuing education courses for sector employees. This was suggested to provide staff with courses to advance their skills or gain additional credentials while producing additional income for the institution.

4.2.4 Networking

Encouraging collaboration within the sector and with other sectors can be a way to help individual employees and agencies establish partnerships and build alliances. Networking opportunities were proposed as a way to improve interaction between regions and bring sector employees together nationally and internationally. Participants believed that increasing networking opportunities would help to establish teamwork and encourage relationship building among colleagues. At an agency level, participants indicated communication between employees presented an opportunity to share best practices leading to better quality services for clients. Networking opportunities linking employees within the sector to individuals in other professions were identified as a way of improving awareness of the community disability services sector among other sectors. A member registry was suggested as away to facilitate networking.

- Member Registry: A member registry was identified as a way to assist employees in connecting with one another and to encourage collaboration within the sector. It was suggested a registry include employee names, positions, and agency affiliations. A clinical registry was also proposed to help employees contact specialists working within the sector.

4.2.5 Resources and Auxiliary Benefits

Tangible benefits and resources provided through association membership may motivate employees to join an association. Auxiliary benefits such as health care benefit plans, home and auto insurance plans, and professional insurance were identified as advantages offered by existing professional associations to members. In addition, professional resources were regarded as beneficial for members.

- Professional Resources: Distribution of current research in the sector is a way to provide information on developments in innovative technology and service practices to members. Participants felt an association could provide a subscription to an academic journal or post current publications relevant to the sector on an association website. This was presented as a possible way to engage members within the association as well as to encourage incorporation of new ideas into services and sector activities.

4.2.6 Sector Representation

A professional association should represent the sector and act in the best interest of the sector as a whole. It was believed an association could exert greater influence than could any individual employee or agency. Opinions as to how the association should represent the sector varied greatly regarding how closely activities of an association should resemble those of a labour union. Participants identified protecting employee interests and advocacy as aspects of sector representation.

4.2.6.1 Protecting Employee Interests

The role of a professional association in protecting employee interests requires clarification to distinguish the responsibilities of a professional association from those of a union. Participants

expressed interest in developing a professional association that would engage in collective bargaining, wage negotiations, and job protection. These activities are often associated with a labour union rather than a professional association. In contrast, many participants expressed concern that an association would set the stage for unionization, which they did not believe would be beneficial for the sector. Participants identified fair compensation, collective bargaining, employee representation and job protection as activities a professional association should undertake to protect employee interests.

- <u>Fair Compensation</u>: An association could advocate to improve employee wages and benefits Participants felt that wages within the sector should be increased to be equivalent to government employees and professionals in similar roles in other sectors. There was also a desire for wages to be consistent for each job classification and consistent across the province. Participants believed there should be a direct connection between the standards of education established by a professional association and wages, with increased educational expectations resulting in higher compensation.

- <u>Collective Bargaining</u>: An association could be a means to gain increased bargaining power and stronger influence with the Provincial Government. The ability to strike was mentioned by participants as a way of influencing government decisions. Based on the nature of the support provided within the sector, some participants felt the Community Disability Services sector should push for recognition as an essential service.

- <u>Employee Representation</u>: An association could provide employees with an alternative means of expressing grievances by performing an ombudsman function to resolve complaints between employees and agencies. Participants indicated an association could be a route to express concerns regarding issues (e.g. unsafe working conditions) in order to hold agencies more accountable. This function of an association was presented as a way to put more power back in the hands of employees and to ensure employees felt they had a voice and were supported.

- <u>Job Protection</u>: Protecting the careers of workers within the sector is a way to protect employee interests. This responsibility of an association was believed to include developing and enforcing policies and procedures surrounding job security and investigating reasons for dismissal. Some participants cautioned this could result in protectionism of workers, (e.g. requiring the retention of employees who were not contributing to the sector and should be let go) indicating an association may become torn between protecting the interests of the professional and protecting the interests and safety of clients.

<u>4.2.6.2 Influencing Public Policy</u>
Another element of sector representation is influencing public policy using political clout gained from representing the sector. Participants felt it was the responsibility of a professional association to advocate for the sector at local, provincial, and national levels. An association was also expected to track developments in public policy and respond to those that influence the sector. It was indicated that an association should advocate for both professional interests as well as interests of individuals with disabilities.

- <u>Professional Interests</u>: Responding to public policy could be a requirement of a professional association. Participants expressed desire for an association that would lobby the government for change and respond to new legislation. It was suggested an association also keep members aware of changes to legislation and gather member feedback and opinions to inform the association's response.

- <u>Client Interests</u>: In addition to representing employees within the sector, an association could work to protect the interests of clients. In this role an association would provide a strong voice for clients and support the work of self-advocates.

4.3 Value of a Professional Association
A professional association can contribute to long term outcomes that would benefit the sector. Participants identified positive outcomes of a professional association such as professionalization, higher quality of service, and enhanced quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

4.3.1 Professionalization
Establishing Community Disability Services as a professional sector could be a valuable outcome of developing an association. Professionalization was regarded as a way to establish sector employees as professionals with specialized knowledge and skills gained from experience and advanced education. Functions of an association believed to help achieve professionalization included the development of a professional workforce, fostering the creation of a professional identity and increasing professional recognition of the sector.

4.3.1.1 Professional Workforce
The development a professional workforce is necessary within the sector and could be a result of establishing a professional association. It was believed activities of a professional association would increase the capacity of the Community Disability Services sector to be competitive with other professions and to become an employer of choice. The ways in which the functions of an association were linked to developing a professional workforce include increased recruitment, increased retention, and assurance of qualified staff.

- Increased Recruitment: Attracting new workers into the sector is necessary in order to establish Community Disability Services as a professional sector. Participants believed a professional association would have the capacity to promote the sector as an exciting and rewarding career choice. Increasing the visibility of the sector through exposure at career fairs and within career resource centers (such as those in post-secondary institutions) was identified as a way to increase recruitment in the sector. Participants also felt that by attracting more applicants, the sector could become increasingly diverse, drawing in younger workers and achieving more comparable numbers of men and women.

- Increased Retention: The support and resources provided by a professional association could result in improved levels of job satisfaction among workers and reduced rates of turnover. Activities of an association linked to increased satisfaction included: 1) additional training and development opportunities for members, 2) networking opportunities to create support networks among employees, 3) standardization of job classifications to clarify roles, and 4) establishing a direct link between increased education or experience and higher compensation. Outlining a career path for sector positions was also identified as a way to present employees with opportunities for advancement available through skill development and increased experience. It was hoped that by increasing awareness of opportunities for movement within the sector, employees would see their position as a career and choose to advance within the sector rather than pursuing work in another field.

- Qualified staff: The Community Disability Services sector should establish an experienced workforce with high academic credentials. Many felt that as a method of coping with staff shortages, the level of qualifications required of new applicants has decreased. Position classifications combined with required skill sets for each position were hoped to result in higher expectations of sector employees and new applicants. The necessity of valuing experience along with academic credentials was emphasized by participants who cautioned that greater education is not necessarily an assurance of higher quality service.

4.3.1.2 Building a Professional Identity
A professional association could help to develop a sense of professional identity within the sector by providing professional representation and increasing networking opportunities available to staff.

Professional identity was regarded as an element of workplace culture that has been lacking within the sector. Competition and division between agencies and employees was believed to have prevented the development of a sense of community. Participants hoped an association would assist sector staff in establishing a greater sense of community and viewing their roles within the sector as positions of esteem.

- Creating Community: Networking opportunities arranged through an association could be a method of connecting individual employees to encourage a sense of belonging and community within the sector. Through its ability to represent all employees equally, participants hoped an association could reduce division between agencies and increase respect and shared identity among employees.
- Esteem: Operations and activities of a professional association could provide opportunities to establish workers as individuals who are valued and respected in the sector and the greater community. Participants felt that pride and empowerment would develop among employees if a professional association provided workers with a voice.

4.3.1.3 Professional Recognition
Work done within the sector should be recognized and respected. Participants felt their role was perceived as that of a babysitter and was not considered to be legitimate or of value. A professional association was seen as a way to represent the sector and to increase understanding of the skills required to support clients among other professions and the general public.

4.3.1.2 Public Awareness
Activities and operations of a professional association, such as making the sector more visible and promoting sector achievements, are ways an association could educate the public and spark interest in the sector. It was considered necessary for other councils, such as ACDS, to be involved in promotion of the sector to provide a more complete representation of the sector as a whole. Sector awareness and increased credibility were outcomes participants hoped would result from increased public awareness.

- Sector Awareness: It is important for a professional association to market the sector whenever possible and to provide branding for the sector. It was suggested that the association engage in sector promotion targeting educational programs and community resource centres. A clear definition of the sector was identified as a requirement for promoting sector awareness. It was suggested that this definition should refer to the high standards set by the association.
- Increased Credibility: The Community Disability Services profession should be viewed as legitimate and credible in the eyes of the community and other sectors. Participants wanted the public to recognize the value of the sector and have confidence in the ability of staff to provide high quality services to support individuals with developmental disabilities.

4.3.1.3 Government Recognition
Influencing government perception of the sector is a necessary step to achieve professionalization. Participants hoped that a professional association could work to develop respectful relationships between the government and the sector. Connection with the Provincial Government was presented as a way to ensure the association would be recognized by the government and could represent the sector at the government level. Establishing the sector as a legitimate profession enhanced through government support was suggested as a way to make it easier to acquire funding.

- Funding: By establishing a professional reputation for the sector and gaining recognition from government, taxpayers may view sector support as a valuable use of government funds. It was believed that the community would be more receptive to requests for funding because a profession with government support would be regarded as a legitimate investment.

4.3.2 Quality of Service

Establishing a professional association could increase the quality of service provided within the sector. An association was seen to have the ability to provide employees with support and resources that would increase their ability to perform their job well. Participants believed a professional association could contribute to enhanced quality of service by increasing education and training for staff, standardizing policies and practices, encouraging sharing of innovative ideas, and creating a stable workforce.

- Increased Education and Training: By setting standards for education qualifications and offering training opportunities to members, a professional association could establish a workforce with greater skills and knowledge regarding specific elements of services including medication and complex needs. By outlining a career path for employees, it was believed an association would help staff strive to achieve higher levels of education and/or professional development. Increasing the public profile of the sector and encouraging enrollment in post-secondary programs were identified as ways a professional association could benefit the sector by attracting job applicants with higher levels of experience or education.

- Standardized Policies and Practices: Standards developed and modified based on current best practices could keep the sector at the forefront of service provision within the country and internationally. Developing a code of ethics and a code of conduct were recognized as ways to help regulate the sector and increase employee accountability through enforcement of standards and identification of poor practice. Standardization was also believed to help improve consistency of services provided across the province by requiring all agencies to abide by the same standards of service.

- Innovation and Shared Ideas: By providing opportunities for employees within the sector to connect and collaborate (such as conferences, social events, workshops, or committees) a professional association could encourage sharing of ideas and discussion of challenges among employees. Employees would be able to interact outside of agency boundaries and establish connections that could form into professional or social ties. Connecting employees within the sector was also identified as a way to help establish a shared identity and help to foster a sense of professional pride and prestige.

- Stable Workforce: Dedication to the development of a professional workforce was presented as a way an association could help the sector establish a more stable workforce and increase quality of service. Protecting employee interests paired with more professional recognition and increased pride was presented as a way to increase job satisfaction resulting in decreased turnover among employees. Increased connections with post-secondary institutions were suggested as a way to engage students and recruit new graduates into the field. Developing a more stable workforce was believed to be a way to ensure services would not be compromised due to lack of staff.

4.3.3 Enhanced Quality of Life for Individuals with Disabilities

The existence of a professional association should ultimately benefit individuals with disabilities. Many participants expressed a desire to remain connected to clients and were concerned a professional image may reduce the personal connection by making the sector more medical and more academic. It was suggested that steps be taken to preserve the relationships between service staff and clients and to ensure professionalization would not result in feelings of alienation among clients. Participants emphasized that a professional association should act in the best interests of clients and should work to increase community awareness, advocate on behalf of clients, provide stable services, and increase client confidence in services.

- Understanding and Awareness: Promoting awareness and understanding of the sector among the general public could be a way to promote professional recognition and to elevate the status of individuals with disabilities. Participants felt that the general public should realize individuals

with disabilities deserve a high quality of life and should receive a high quality service. An association was also seen as a way to promote the value of community living and community integration among the general public to encourage acceptance and inclusivity.

- <u>Advocacy</u>: Ensuring association governance remains connected to individuals with disabilities and families would help to keep the professional association aware of the needs of the community so it could act in the best interests of clients as well as professionals. Government connections established by an association were viewed as possible opportunities for an association to advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities and provide a voice for individuals with disabilities. Participants also felt a professional association should support the work and contributions of self-advocates within the community.

- <u>Stability</u>: A professional association could benefit clients by creating a more professional workforce. Participants felt a decrease in sector turnover would allow clients to form stronger relationships with their support workers. Also, by increasing recruitment, participants felt more positions could be filled resulting in a greater variety of supports available to meet client needs.

- <u>Client Confidence</u>: Clients and families should be able to have faith in the competency of all employees. It was believed that standards governing education and conduct would reassure clients and families that all agencies and all staff members would provide a high standard of service. Development and enforcement of standards was presented as a way to hold staff accountable for their actions and decrease the risk of abuse and neglect in client-support worker relationships. Participants hoped consistency in services across the province could ease the transition between services if a client is relocated. Services would become more transferable as all agencies would be operating based on standards identified by the professional association.

5.0 SUMMARY

Discussion among participants at the 2009 ADCS Spring Conference produced considerable feedback regarding 1) the value, structure, and function of a professional association, 2) concerns and additional considerations that need clarification, and 3) ways the development of a professional association could benefit the sector.

5.1 Key Elements

Key elements sector employees would like to see incorporated into a professional association include:

- Strong governance dedicated to representing the interests of the sector and maintaining connections to families and clients within the community.

- Clear objectives and scope outlined in an association Terms of Reference and disseminated to members.

- Membership categories that ensure association membership is inclusive allowing students, sector employees, and retired employees to be members.

- Development of standards to guide practice and outline academic qualifications based on benchmark job competencies and best practices.

- Training and development opportunities to encourage career advancement within the sector.

- Dedication to the development of external relationships to enhance the sector. This includes connections with post-secondary institutions, governments, and associations representing other sectors.

- Opportunities for networking and collaboration among members to exchange ideas and develop a sense of shared identity.

- Government advocacy representing the best interests of sector employees and individuals with developmental disabilities and responding to changes in government policy and legislation.

5.2 Questions and Concerns

Questions and concerns emerged that indicated a need for more explanation and consideration regarding the development of an association for this sector. These included:

- What objectives should be outlined in a Terms of Reference for an association.
- The roles and responsibilities of an association compared to those of a union.
- Membership inclusivity - who the association would represent.
- How the association should be funded.

5.3 Positive Outcomes of a Professional Association

Participants felt an association could provide a number of benefits for the sector. These included:

- The development of standards to ensure workers would be qualified for their positions and would conduct their work in a professional and ethical manner.
- An increase in the knowledge and skill level among employees and a higher quality of service.
- Enhanced professional recognition of the sector to promote public understanding and inclusion of individuals with disabilities and to address the human resources challenges that exist within the sector.