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Cornerstones of a Professional Association for the Community Disability Services Sector

Highlights Summary

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for

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Highlights Summary

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Spring 2009, the North East Workforce Council and St. Paul's Abilities Network (SPAN) in partnership with the Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS) Provincial Workforce Council began an exploration into ways to recognize the professional nature of the work in Alberta's Community Disability Services sector. In March, The Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute (VRRI) was contracted by ACDS to conduct a "pulse check" on the thoughts and opinions of individuals within Alberta's Community Disability Services sector regarding the structure, function, and value of a professional association for the sector. Activities included:

1. Analyzing and reporting information gathered from a Discussion Café and a Panel Discussion held at the 2009 ACDS Spring Conference.
2. Conducting a Pulse Check Survey on the cornerstones of the foundation needed to ensure the success of a professional association in Alberta's Community Disability Services sector.

This document highlights the key responses gathered through the data collection activities. For a more detailed description of research activities and results please refer to: (i) Stakeholder Engagement Process Report (Appendix A); and (ii) Pulse Check Survey Report (Appendix B).

NOTE: Opinions expressed in this report are those voiced by participants involved in the data collection activities. These views are not necessarily held or endorsed by either ACDS or The VRRI.

2.0 HIGHLIGHTS

2.1 Structure

A professional association should have a clear structure in order to ensure the association is stable and self-regulating. Key aspects of structure for a professional association include: i) Terms of Reference, ii) governance, and iii) membership.

2.1.1 Terms of Reference

A professional association should have a Terms of Reference to outline:

- Key objectives for the association that take into account the needs of individuals within the Community Disability Services sector (e.g. clients, families, guardians, sector employees, etc.)
- Scope of the association including size, location, and membership eligibility

2.1.2 Governance

An association should be a "grassroots" organization initiated by sector employees, with agencies and larger councils providing support and infrastructure. To establish a connection with the community, an association would require the support of guardians, families, and sector employees. Important aspects of governance for a professional association include:

- A board of directors to oversee the association
- An administration to carry out day to day activities
- Executive roles as paid positions
- Volunteer positions within the association available to members
- A centralized location
- Regional subcommittees

2.1.3 Membership

Establishing multiple membership categories (e.g. full member, student, affiliate, etc.) would be valuable for a professional association. For example:

- Inclusive membership reflects the diverse nature of individuals in the sector
- Hierarchical membership distinguishes sector employees from students and those obtaining membership out of general interest

In addition, annual dues could be a possible source of funding for a professional association, but should be kept low if the cost is to be covered by members.

2.2 Functions of a Professional Association

Functions are activities of an association directed towards establishing Community Disability Services as a professional sector and maintaining this status by providing professional representation for the sector. Important functions of a professional association include: i) developing standards guiding employee qualifications, ii) developing standards guiding service, iii) representing the sector, iv) establishing opportunities for professional development, v) promoting networking activities, and vi) providing resources to members.

2.2.1 Standards Guiding Employee Qualifications

Raising educational requirements for sector positions by setting standards guiding employee qualifications would result in a more qualified and dedicated workforce. A professional association could undertake the following activities to develop these standards:

- Establish benchmark job competencies to ensure the skills of an applicant reflect the specialized skills required for the position
- Establish minimum qualifications by position that incorporate relevant experience along with formal education to prevent exclusion of current employees
- Establish guidelines for additional training and development for employees to ensure knowledge and skills reflect current advances in the sector

2.2.2 Standards Guiding Service

Standards guiding service would help to ensure employees demonstrate appropriate behaviour and practice. The development of a code of ethics and code of conduct within the sector are two key activities a professional association could undertake. Standards guiding service could lead to:

- Improved quality of service to better protect clients and meet their needs
- Increased understanding among sector employees regarding identification and resolution of ethical dilemmas
- Increased understanding among sector employees regarding expectations for proper behaviour and conduct

2.2.3 Establishing Standards

The development of standards guiding service and employee qualifications should be approached with caution and given careful consideration. Although standards governing education and ethics are important within the sector, thought must be given to how these standards would be developed and upheld. A professional association should ensure standards are:

- Consistent across regions to prevent regional disparity
- Implemented gradually to prevent the loss of valuable employees
- Enforced to ensure standards are upheld and to take action regarding questionable conduct or practice

2.2.4 Sector Representation

Representing a large group of professionals provides an association with increased clout and political influence that enhances its ability to advocate for the sector. A professional association should undertake the following activities directed at influencing public policy:

- Advocating at a provincial and national level
- Informing members of proposed changes to policies, and gathering member feedback for a comprehensive sector response to policy changes
- Protecting the interests of individuals with developmental disabilities

An association should be dedicated to protecting employee interests and representing employees rather than agencies. A professional association could advocate for sector employees by:

- Calling for fair compensation to improve wages and benefits within the sector
- Increasing influence with the Provincial Government through collective bargaining
- Assisting employees to resolve grievances with employer agencies
- Developing policies and procedures to provide job protection for sector employees

Many activities related to employee representation are more often associated with a labour union than a professional association. This indicates confusion may exist regarding the purpose of an association; clarification of employee representation activities would be necessary when outlining the Terms of Reference.

2.2.5 Professional Development

A professional association could provide opportunities for growth and development to assist employees in staying abreast of new advances in the sector to increase skills and knowledge within the workforce. Professional development opportunities should provide specialized training applicable to day-to-day job activities and should open doors to career advancement opportunities such as increased responsibility, new positions, and/or higher wages. A professional association could establish professional development opportunities such as:

- Conferences to promote sharing of ideas and assisting employees in staying up-to-date on advances within the sector
- Mentorship opportunities to connect new employees with more senior sector professionals
- Association involvement through volunteer opportunities on councils and committees

2.2.6 Networking

Opportunities for networking among sector employees could encourage the development of new ideas and facilitate communication and relationship building among employees throughout Alberta. Valuable networking opportunities a professional association could facilitate include:

- Conferences to connect sector employees and educators
- Connections with other professional associations to increase awareness of the sector
- Workshops encouraging sharing of ideas and consideration of multiple perspectives
- Member registry to assist sector employees in contacting one another

2.2.7 Resources

Access to information and financial benefits are tangible resources an association could provide as additional incentives to encourage membership. A professional association could provide the following useful resources:

- Group benefit plans (coverage for health care, dental, etc.)

- Group insurance discounts (home and auto insurance, professional insurance, etc.)
- An association website
- Job postings informing sector employees and the general public of current openings
- Information resources (e.g. posting publications regarding current advancements and innovative service practices on an association website)

2.3 Value

The value of a professional association is represented in long-term outcomes and benefits for the sector. Through professionalization, an association could bring about sector improvements such as: i) establishment of a professional workforce, ii) stronger sense of professional identity among sector employees, iii) increased positive perception of the sector among the public, iv) enhanced quality of service, and v) increased quality of life for individuals with developmental disabilities.

2.3.1 Professional Workforce

By working to develop a professional image for the sector, a professional association could help agencies address human resource challenges and establish themselves as employers of choice. Possible ways a professional association could influence the development of a professional workforce include:

- Increasing recruitment through promotion of the sector at career fairs and among post-secondary institutions
- Increasing retention by providing additional support and development opportunities to sector employees to increase job satisfaction and decrease turnover
- Ensuring recruitment of qualified staff by establishing standards based on benchmark job competencies, education, and evaluation of relevant work experience

2.3.2 Professional Identity

A professional association could promote a sense of professional identity by encouraging employees to envision a career within the sector rather than viewing their roles as simply jobs. Activities such as increased opportunities for networking could help develop a professional identity among employees by creating:

- A sense of community among employees in the sector through development of a shared vision and shared values
- Increased esteem and professional pride through recognition of employees as respected and valued professionals and by providing sector employees with a voice

2.3.3 Public Perception

An association could educate other professions and the general public about the knowledge and skill required to support individuals with developmental disabilities. By representing the sector professionally and publicly, a professional association could help to increase:

- Public awareness by generating interest regarding the sector through public education, promotion, and marketing
- Status and prestige of the sector by promoting the work of sector employees as legitimate, respectable, and credible
- Recognition and funding from the Provincial Government by establishing professional relationships and representing the sector at a government level

2.3.4 Quality of Service

Efforts to professionalize the sector (establishing standards guiding education and conduct) could elevate the quality of service by:

- Increasing the qualifications of sector employees through standards guiding education and training and through increased promotion and recruitment efforts at post secondary institutions
- Standardizing policies and practices through the development of a code of ethics and a code of conduct to increase employee accountability and improve consistency in services across the province
- Promoting innovation by encouraging sharing of ideas among sector employees at events such as conferences, workshops, etc.
- Stabilizing the workforce by reducing turnover through efforts to increase job satisfaction such as advocating for employee interests and increasing professional recognition

2.3.5 Quality of Life for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

A professional association within the sector should ultimately benefit individuals with developmental disabilities. Care must be taken to ensure professionalization does not produce feelings of alienation among clients. A professional association should act in the best interests of individuals with developmental disabilities by:

- Increasing understanding and awareness among the general public to encourage community inclusion and perception of individuals with developmental disabilities as deserving of a high quality of life and high quality services
- Advocating on behalf of individuals with developmental disabilities and supporting the work of self-advocates within the community
- Increasing the stability of services through efforts to decrease turnover to help clients form stronger relationships with support staff
- Enhancing client and guardian confidence in services by establishing a code of conduct, a code of ethics, and standards guiding employee qualifications to increase quality of service and decrease risk of abuse or neglect

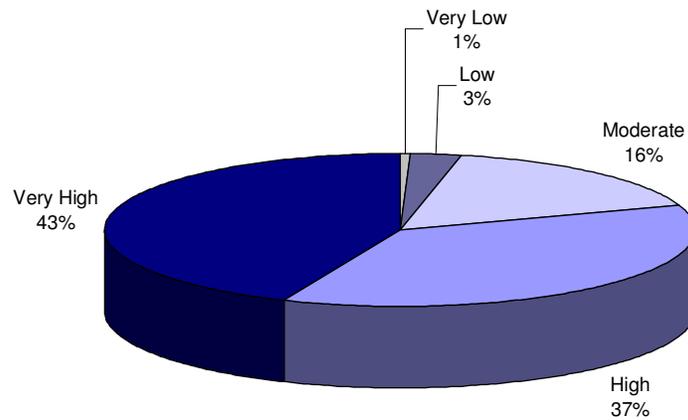
2.4 Considerations and Concerns

Questions and concerns that require increased development and additional consideration include:

- What objectives should be outlined in a Terms of Reference for an association
- How new standards can be implemented to prevent the loss of valuable employees
- How roles and responsibilities of an association would differ from those of a labour union
- Who the association will represent (membership inclusivity or exclusivity)
- What funding options will be explored to finance the association

2.5 Sector Support for a Professional Association

The majority of participants (Pulse Check Survey) indicated a high level of support for the development of a professional association with 43.5% of participants indicating a 'Very High' level of support and 36.9% of respondents indicating a 'High' level of support (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Frequency Distribution for Overall Support

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

Participants in the Discussion Café, Panel Discussion, and Pulse Check Survey responded positively to the idea of forming a professional association. Participant responses addressed many details regarding how an association should be structured, activities it could undertake, and the value and benefits an association could generate within the sector. In addition, questions and concerns were also presented identifying areas where additional consideration will be necessary should development of a professional association go ahead.