





Tom
Mulcair

 @ThomasMulcair
 fb.com/TomMulcair

ndp.ca // npd.ca

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NDP  NDP

Open letter from NDP Leader Tom Mulcair: NDP plan to support Canadians living with disabilities

Dear Friends,

Four million Canadians are living with a disability – one in seven working age adults – but persons living with a disability just haven't been a priority for the Conservatives. Five years after Canada ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Canada has still not taken any action to implement the Convention. The federal government's own report, submitted two years late, acknowledged that many barriers still confront people living with disabilities, including "barriers to language and communication, learning and training, and safety and security."

The NDP believes that Canadians living with disabilities deserve better from their government. It's time for more than lip service to the rights of persons living with disabilities.

That's why I'm pleased to share with you my plan to support Canadians with disabilities – a plan that promotes full inclusion and effective participation for people living with disabilities.

As the cornerstone of our approach, the NDP will introduce a comprehensive *Canadians with Disabilities Act*. Developed in consultation with Canadians living with disabilities, the Act will eliminate barriers and promote accessibility, effective participation, and equality of opportunity for persons living with disabilities. We will build on the important work done by the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and Barrier-Free Canada in identifying the aspects that the Act needs to cover in order to be effective and meaningful.

We will also take action to make good on Canada's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by developing a National Action Plan for implementation, in consultation with Canadians living with disabilities, disability organizations, the provinces and territories, municipalities, Indigenous governments, and other stakeholders. We will end Canada's reservation on Article 12, and work to develop mechanisms for supported decision-making. An NDP government will also ratify the Optional Protocol and create a complaints mechanism for Canadians.

Canada's system of income supports for Canadians living with disabilities is plagued by significant gaps, as well as an overall lack of coherence. The eligibility criteria for the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) are too narrow and not well understood, resulting in the exclusion of many Canadians living with disabilities. Even medical professionals have difficulty interpreting them, leading to some Canadians being discouraged from applying by their doctor, even though they might very well qualify. This is even more problematic when you consider that the DTC has been made the gatekeeper for a number of other federal disability programs, including the Registered Disability Savings Plan. The differences in eligibility for the DTC and Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPPD) benefits is also an issue. Finally, the lack of coherence between federal and provincial programs can leave some people with disabilities without the important support they need, while others can only get help at the price of forgoing employment.

An NDP government will work with the provinces, territories, Indigenous communities, persons living with disabilities, and disability organizations to conduct a review of existing income support programs for persons living with disabilities in order to coordinate benefits and increase accessibility.

Too many Canadians who have applied for CPPD benefits have found themselves caught up in the Conservatives' broken appeal process. The Conservatives replaced the former pension tribunals and appeal boards with the Social Security Tribunal, which they significantly understaffed, leading to large backlogs and lengthy wait times. They also removed transparency from the process, refusing to publish the Tribunal's decision, and restricted the types of advocates that appellants could turn to for help. We will restore fairness and transparency to the appeal process, ensuring that appellants are given a hearing in a reasonable amount of time and that they are allowed to have a representative of their choosing.

The Conservatives killed the Court Challenges Program, ending a program that provided important support to Canadians with disabilities seeking to defend their Charter rights. An NDP government will restore the Court Challenges Program to provide funding for citizens and organizations to protect and advance equality rights guaranteed under the Charter.

Over the past decade, Stephen Harper has failed to provide a strong leadership role in healthcare, refusing to meet with the provinces and territories, and imposing reckless, unilateral cuts. I will work collaboratively with the provinces and territories, restoring federal investment in healthcare while ensuring that important challenges are addressed collectively. The NDP plan for healthcare includes investments in long term care, including assisted living facilities. We will also invest \$30 million in palliative care to ensure that Canadians receive high quality end-of-life care. One in four Canadian households currently includes someone who cannot afford to take their medications as prescribed. The NDP will work with the provinces and territories to establish a National Drug Plan to ensure that Canadians have universal, comprehensive drug coverage regardless of where they live.

We will also restructure two existing Employment Insurance benefits to ensure they work better for Canadians living with disabilities and their caregivers. We will expand EI Sickness Benefits from 15 weeks to 45 weeks, while also making them more flexible. This will include a pilot project that will allow recipients to collect some income from employment while on sickness benefits, similar to the Working While On Claim project for regular benefits. We will also expand eligibility for Compassionate Care benefits for caregivers to include non-terminal conditions.

I understand that there are many in the disability community who are concerned about the Supreme Court's Carter decision and what it will mean for persons living with disabilities. New Democrats recognize that there are profound and highly complex medical, ethical and legal implications involved in the care of terminally ill patients – and that physician-assisted dying engenders strong feelings, touching many Canadians in a very personal way. As Prime Minister, I will make access to palliative care a priority, while taking immediate steps to implement the Supreme Court of Canada's historic and unanimous Carter decision swiftly with balance, respect and sensitivity. My government will also consult widely with Canadians with disabilities to ensure that the law contains sufficient safeguards.

Canadians living with disabilities are more likely to be living in poverty as other Canadians, as well as to be living in housing that is either unaffordable or in need of major repairs. An NDP government will implement a national anti-poverty strategy with targets and timelines to reduce and eventually eliminate poverty. We will also invest more than \$2.7 billion over 4 years in affordable housing and homelessness programs, including

funding to renew the long-term social operating agreements where necessary, funding for capital repairs, and direct funding and incentives for the construction of new, affordable, accessible housing. My Better Transit plan will also invest up to \$1.5 billion annually in funding for accessible public transit.

Full inclusion starts from the very beginning, in early childhood. That's why my plan for affordable childcare, costing parents no more than \$15 a day, will be based on principles of accessibility and inclusiveness. All children, including those with disabilities, should have the right to high quality early learning and care.

Canadians living with disabilities deserve a government that is committed to breaking down barriers and making full inclusion meaningful. As Prime Minister, I will make that a priority and I look forward to working with you to make this vision a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Mulcair". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tom Mulcair
Leader, New Democratic Party of Canada