

Some Lessons from British Columbia that Provide Insight Into the Transformation of the Developmental Service Sector in Ontario

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The Ministry of Community and Social Services in Ontario has initiated a process of what they call “transformation of developmental services.” A partnership table of families, self-advocates, service providers, and government created a “consultation paper,” that groups throughout Ontario have been responding to. The partnership table and the government will now review the submissions and propose policy alternatives for transforming developmental services. In this piece, John Lord reflects on some lessons from British Columbia, where transformation is a few years ahead of Ontario.

A new report by Cam Crawford and the Roeher Institute called *Gathering Momentum*, provides a glimpse into the transformation of community services that has been occurring in British Columbia over the last few years. Having read the report carefully, and having worked a fair bit in BC over the last three years, I would like to add some further reflections. Behind the power plays, the procedures, and the technical details in BC so aptly described by Crawford, I think there are **four key things we can learn** from that province that we must remember in Ontario. The transformation process underway in Ontario requires diligence, focus, and collaboration if we are to achieve some of the changes we so desperately need in this sector.

1. **We must find levers that can transform the system**, and try to get governments to work with us on that transformation. The BC leadership understood those levers even if they did not execute them extremely well. I am only hoping in Ontario that some of the submissions from the stakeholders to the MCSS consultation begin to identify those levers. Examples of transformative levers in Ontario would be changing a very traditional residential service system by de-linking housing and support (moving away from bricks and mortar). Another lever might be to build in ways to stimulate innovation (a key lesson from BC and Australia). Another would be to implement a comprehensive initiative of individualized funding. We must think strategically about levers for transformation if we are to make positive changes.

2. **We must be sure to build individualized funding with appropriate infrastructure support**. Where individualized funding has worked, it is because independent planning/facilitation (and related things) are in place. BC has understood this, but are now involved in a struggle to implement this in a principled way. Separating planning/facilitation from service delivery must be part of the Ontario experience, especially after families have experienced more than twenty years of individualized support through Special Services at Home. *Hundreds of families are now ready for individualized funding* and for continued control over individualized supports as their kids become adults. We also have an advantage over BC in that we have a few places in the provinces that are already doing this well and we can learn from them (and government could too). Initiatives in Windsor, St. Mary’s, Durham Region, Toronto, and Kitchener-Waterloo can teach us a great deal about the process and dynamics of independent planning and facilitation.

3. In Ontario, it is likely that the province will be interested in phasing in individualized funding - our challenge is to figure out how to do this phasing in an equitable and meaningful way. In BC, they wanted to do it all, which in some ways is the honest and correct thing to do. Phasing and tinkering, while politically more palatable, is tricky to do well. One way to phase in individualized funding is to build on those who have already experienced individualized supports. So, one could envision a five year plan of implementation, beginning with SSAH graduates and Foundations graduates, just as one example, and then moving on to other groups. Of course, there are many other phasing strategies. This will require lots of strategic thinking.

4. We must focus on citizenship and community inclusion. Many in BC understood this, but like in Ontario, many service providers do not understand citizenship, and thus undermine this approach. *A citizenship and community approach means we do not think service or placement, but we think capacity building and participation.* Moving to this new paradigm will be our biggest challenge. There is growing evidence that a placement approach cannot produce many positive outcomes for people. As well, there is no point in hiring independent planners/facilitators if they are not committed to citizenship and community. Some of the training of facilitators in BC has been exquisite and we can learn from that experience. Fortunately, there is a strong and growing element in Ontario of self-advocates and families with Family Alliance groups, the Individualized Funding Coalition, and many other groups that understand this in their hearts and minds. We need to nurture each other in this citizenship and inclusion work, since it is likely to take the government a long time to fully understand such a focus.

So, my caution for the MCSS partnership table from the BC experience is not to get side tracked with details, but to *build principles that all stakeholder groups can understand and work together to implement.* For this, the Roeher Institute Report offers us some important insights. Unfortunately, there has not been consensus in BC about the principles that will reform the system. Once we have the principles in Ontario, then we need to be strategic and collaborative in their implementation. *As we learn from BC, this can only happen if government and community work together the whole way.* So, I urge the partnership table to demand continued involvement as you move from ideas to principles to strategies to implementation. Leaving strategies and implementation to government alone will be inadequate, as we know from so many government changes in the past, such as deinstitutionalization, access centres, and levels of support. Convincing government that community can be a genuine and effective partner will be difficult but essential to this journey of change.

Transformation can only happen with dialogue, commitment, and strategic thinking. The Liberal government has begun the dialogue, and for this they are to be commended. The hard work now commences, as government and the community partners begin their strategic thinking, and build their commitment for change through common principles and policy development.

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