

## **Opinion | Canadian Dental Care Plan fails people with developmental disabilities**

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*No one should be denied essential care by a program that was created to support them in the first place, writes Brian Swainson, CEO of Sunbeam Community and Developmental Services.*

The Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP) was launched with bold promises of breaking down barriers and delivering essential dental care for those who need it most — including seniors, children, and adults living with disabilities.

But, nearly a year after the federal government officially announced the program, a major gap remains. For disabled Canadians who are unable to communicate through speech, accessing this plan is still frustratingly complex, leaving some of the most vulnerable voices unheard.

At Sunbeam Community and Developmental Services, an organization providing supports and services to more than 15,000 people with developmental disabilities and their families across Waterloo, Wellington, Dufferin, Halton, and Peel, a troubling pattern has emerged.

More than 80 clients have already been identified at Sunbeam alone who meet all the eligibility criteria for the CDCP but are unable to apply due to communication barriers. Despite operating the only not-for-profit Specialized Dental Clinic for persons living with developmental disabilities in southwestern Ontario, Sunbeam is struggling to connect its clients with the critical oral health care they desperately need.

While the CDCP outlines eligibility for people with a “severe and prolonged impairment,” it overlooks a crucial reality: some individuals living with communication challenges — especially people who do not communicate with words — have no clear or supported way to safely and meaningfully express their verbal consent. This fundamental oversight excludes the people this program aims to serve.

Under CDCP guidelines, Service Canada requires applicants to provide verbal consent in order to authorize a designated person, such as a family member or support worker, to assist with their application. If verbal consent isn’t possible, the only alternative is for the person to have a legally authorized substitute decision-maker, such as someone with power of attorney for personal care for the individual or a court-appointed guardian. This rigid requirement creates a barrier that is both unnecessary and deeply exclusionary.

This is where the system breaks down.

Most adults with developmental disabilities do not have a power of attorney or a court-appointed guardian. It is an expensive, time-consuming, and legally complex process, which is often well beyond the reach of families already trying to navigate a maze of barriers just to access basic care and support for their loved ones.

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Many individuals may not have the legal capacity to grant power of attorney to another, and guardianship applications typically require court proceedings, legal fees, cost-prohibitive capacity assessments and other formal documentation that many families simply cannot provide.

Guardianship is also rarely pursued because it grants broad control over a person's life, often undermining efforts to promote independence, autonomy, dignity, and supported decision-making that are core principles to supporting people living with developmental disabilities.

The result? A systemic gap that excludes some of the very people this program was designed to help. Individuals who do not communicate with words or live with significant cognitive challenges are effectively denied access to basic, accessible and affordable dental care, despite being fully eligible.

For several months, Sunbeam has been working with Service Canada in an effort to find solutions. While there has been some acknowledgment that a gap exists, meaningful progress remains frustratingly elusive. Even with the support of our local member of Parliament, who has championed this issue on our behalf, no change has been secured.

This is yet another frustrating situation in which individuals living with developmental disabilities are left fighting for the equity and equality they deserve. Too often, systems are designed without fully considering the diverse ways people communicate, make decisions, and interact with the world around them. When policies fail to accommodate these realities, they perpetuate exclusion, regardless of intent.

We urge you to raise your voice. Contact your local member of Parliament and ask them to advocate for a clear, compassionate pathway to ensure people living with developmental disabilities, especially those who do not communicate with words or use alternative forms of communication, can access the CDCP.

No one should be denied essential care by a program that was created to support them in the first place.

*Brian Swainson is the CEO of Sunbeam Community & Developmental Services, which supports more than 15,000 people with developmental disabilities and their families across Waterloo Region, Wellington County, Dufferin County, Halton Region, and Peel Region.*