

INTRODUCTION

There are many concerns that have been voiced in the disability community regarding the proposed changes to the current Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program (“AISH”) for Albertans unable to support themselves through employment. This Whitepaper is our attempt to provide some background information while also providing a summary of the proposed changes as we know them (as of October 19, 2025).

My law firm is also launching a podcast called “We Advocate” which will cover this important topic that represents a significant impact on Albertans with long-term disabilities. Please subscribe for developing information on ADAP and related issues for the disability community.

HISTORY

On February 4th the Ministry of Assisted Living and Social Services issued a [news release](#) which stated:

“People with disabilities shouldn’t have to choose between getting the support they need and having the opportunity to pursue a meaningful career.

Alberta’s government is creating a new Alberta Disability Assistance Program (ADAP), which will launch in July 2026. This new benefit program for people with disabilities will empower Albertans with disabilities to pursue fulfilling job opportunities while continuing to receive the benefits they need.

“People with disabilities should not be punished for getting a job. Every dollar they earn on a paycheque should be helping make them better off, not threatening their access to the medication they need. That’s why I am excited to announce the new Alberta Disability Assistance Program, and I look forward to seeing the positive impact that it will have on Albertans with disabilities.”

Jason Nixon, Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services

Individuals on AISH already can work, and many do. [Currently, the first \\$1,072](#) of earned income is fully exempt.

MEDICAL ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

According to the government [ADAP Discussion Guide](#), changes to the medical eligibility criteria for AISH and the new ADAP will be:

AISH until June 30, 2026	AISH as of July 1, 2026	ADAP (start July 1, 2026)
• Impairment of mental and or/or physical functioning that causes a <u>substantial limitation in the person's ability to earn a livelihood</u>. • Impairment's effects are likely to be permanent because no remedial therapy is available that would materially improve the person's ability to earn a livelihood. • Required to look for, accept or maintain reasonable employment, and make use of suitable training or rehabilitation.	• Severe disability that results in them being <u>permanently unable to work</u>. • For example, people receiving palliative care, those residing in a continuing care home due to a severe and progressive medical condition, and those with a severe and profound disability that require ongoing care or support. • Other than the examples of individuals in palliative care or continuing care, it's unclear what other circumstances or diagnoses would lead to someone assessed as being unable to work and thereby to qualify for AISH.	• Severe disability who is assessed as having <u>some ability to work</u>. • Disability must be determined to either continuously or episodically restrict, but not prevent a person from being gainfully employed at the current time or in the future. • Includes people not now employed but deemed to have the potential to be employed in the future, with appropriate supports. • Includes those who are now employed but deemed to have the capacity for greater employment. • Includes those with episodic or recurrent disabilities who were recently employed but it is unknown when they might be able to work again.

The binary categorization of adults with disabilities as either employable or unemployable is not supported by evidence. These labels can restrict opportunities, reinforce isolation, and deepen financial insecurity. Almost every person, regardless of diagnosis or severity of impairment, has the potential to contribute meaningfully through work with appropriate support and accommodation. The definition of 'some ability to work' is not available, but the income exemption for those who are deemed eligible for AISH in 2026 falls from \$1072/month to \$350, showing that AISH only permits working 23 hours/month at minimum wage (presently \$15/hr).

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

The government [ADAP Discussion Guide](#) states:

- AISH clients will receive a maximum monthly living allowance of \$1,940.
- ADAP clients will receive a maximum monthly living allowance of \$1,740

The proposed maximum ADAP rate is \$200 lower than the maximum AISH rate, reflecting ADAP clients' greater opportunity to supplement income through employment as compared to AISH clients.'

Receiving ADAP's lower benefit will force impossible budget choices. One [individual who receives AISH described](#) \$200 as "the difference between getting uncovered prescriptions paid for or having groceries for the month. The difference between almost living and barely existing." The assumption that tens of thousands of individuals with disabilities on ADAP will secure sufficient employment to be better off than on the current AISH program is unrealistic. Alberta's current unemployment rate for ALL Albertans is second highest in Canada at over 8%, with youth unemployment above 16%. [Labour Force Survey](#) data shows unemployment rates for Canadians with severe disabilities at 50% and those with very severe disabilities at 73% in 2022.

Costs for basic necessities continue increasing at an even faster rate than the Consumer Price index and now the [cost of a basic standard of living](#) is higher in Calgary than anywhere in the country outside of Vancouver and the territories. Calgarians experiencing a cut from \$1,940 to \$1,740 will descend below the [deep-poverty](#) threshold. Disability-related expenses, estimated at 20% above normal living costs, make the impact even greater.

INCOME FROM EMPLOYMENT

The government [ADAP Discussion Guide](#) states:

Single individuals: fully exempt job earnings fall from \$1,072 under AISH today to \$350 under ADAP or AISH in July 2026.

Spouses/partners: employment exemption drops from \$2,612 to \$1,500.

Parents on AISH: employment exemption falls from \$2,612 to \$350 (AISH) or \$525 (ADAP).

Clawback rates for earned income have not been disclosed, but a University of Calgary economist [modeled clawback rates](#) that align with the numbers in the Discussion Guide's case studies, suggesting that anyone earning less than \$25,368 annually (roughly 33 hours/week at minimum wage) from employment will have lower income on ADAP than on the existing AISH program. Even individuals able to reapply and get back on the diminished AISH program, will be worse off if they previously were able to make more in employment than \$350/month, or if they have a spouse or co-habiting partner who earns over \$1,500/month from employment.

Employment barriers for adults with disabilities are well documented and complex. In June 2025 there were 79,331 individuals on AISH, of whom approximately 13,000 have some employment earnings (16.4%), leaving over 66,000 individuals on AISH without employment (83.6%). Even if unemployment in Alberta wasn't over 8%, the suggestion that tens of thousands of Albertans with disabilities will be able to secure and sustain adequate employment by the time ADAP is fully implemented is not realizable. While a few individuals with disabilities who are able to maintain full-time employment will not be hurt, the vast majority of adults with disabilities will be worse off than if AISH was to remain unchanged.

ASSESSMENT AND APPEALS

The government [ADAP Discussion Guide](#) states:

“On July 1, 2026, all AISH clients will be transitioned to the ADAP program.”

They may requalify for AISH if deemed ‘permanently unemployable’ but not if assessed as having ‘some’ ability to work. This binary classification has no scientific basis and ignores the spectrum of ability and the role of accommodations and supports in enabling employment. The government’s proposal for ADAP would end the right to appeal eligibility to the Citizens Appeal Panel that is impartial and independent from AISH program administration.

ADMINISTRATION AND PROGRAM COSTS

ADAP introduces a new administrative apparatus to administer a new program, expends healthcare resources reassessing individuals, and requires individuals with disabilities to navigate a new adjudication process to re-prove their disability status.

CONCLUSION

There are other problems with the proposed design that have not been described above but the key thing to note is that ADAP fails at the objective offered by Minister Nixon of ensuring that people with disabilities “not be punished for getting a job.” Given that the proposed design for ADAP fails at this objective, and would deepen poverty, erode choice and fairness, and increase administrative burden and red tape, there is no need for a new program. Individuals currently on AISH already benefit from employment income through earning exemptions.

If as the Minister stated, the goal is to ensure Albertans with disabilities get the support they need and have the opportunity to pursue a meaningful career, a better and more cost-effective solution would be to improve AISH by reducing the earning claw back rates, enhance employment supports and extend health benefits to individuals who earn too much to receive a monthly benefit.

VANDERLEEK LAW

Gordon P. VanderLeek, LLB, TEP, CETA
Founder & Managing Lawyer

Direct: (403) 457-2558
Email: gordon@vanderleeklaw.ca
Web: www.vanderleeklaw.ca

Suite 500, 1000 Centre St. NE
Calgary, AB T2E 7W6

Dated: October 19, 2025