

# New disability benefit on its way to making ‘major, major difference’ for working-age Canadians

By [Natasha Bulowski](#) | [News](#), [Politics](#), [Ottawa Insider](#) | February 3rd 2023



Michelle Hewitt speaking at the Disability Without Poverty rally, on Parliament Hill, on Oct. 19, 2022. Photo by Mamoun Hassan

A government bill aiming to lift Canadians with disabilities out of poverty is working its way through the Senate after MPs voted unanimously to pass it earlier this week.

If it clears the Senate, the Canada Disability Benefit Act, or Bill [C-22](#), will provide a tax-free, monthly payment to low-income Canadians with disabilities under the age of 65. It would be the first federal guaranteed income supplement for working-age Canadians with disabilities and is meant to top up inconsistent provincial and territorial benefits to bring people at least up to the poverty line.

Precisely how much the benefit will be and who will be eligible to claim it has not yet been specified. That, and more, will be decided when regulations are developed, which will happen within a year after the legislation comes into force.

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“This legislation will make a major, major difference in many people's lives,” said Al Mills, executive director of [Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region](#), on behalf of the

organization and the 2,000 adults and children with developmental disabilities that use its services. “Disability should not equal poverty in Canada ... but it currently does for many, many people,” Mills told *Canada’s National Observer*.

Nearly 917,000, or 23 per cent of working-age Canadians with disabilities, live in poverty, according to the most recent Canadian Survey on Disability, from 2017.

“We often hear about (how) Parliament is so divided ... But for disabled people, the sense that everybody was behind us, and we’ve seen them do it twice now, for second and third reading, is just a wonderful testament that Parliament can come together to do the right thing,” [Michelle Hewitt](#), co-chair of the board of Disability Without Poverty, told *Canada’s National Observer* in an interview Feb. 3. Hewitt has fairly advanced multiple sclerosis and is a full-time power wheelchair user.



Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion Carla Qualtrough (back left) and Green MP Mike Morrice (second from right in the back) with Disability Without Poverty representatives just after Bill C-22 passed second reading, on Oct. 18, 2022. Disability Without Poverty representatives were watching the vote from the gallery, and Qualtrough and Morrice came upstairs to celebrate with them. Photo courtesy of MP Mike Morrice's office

She says the delay to work out the details will ensure the new benefit is done right. The development of regulations allows time and space for people with disabilities and organizations that serve them to be consulted on the workings of the bill, which would not have been possible to the same extent if everything was laid out in the legislation.

“It's a massive leap of faith,” said Hewitt. “If there is not a fulsome involvement of disabled people when it comes to regulations then disabled people are going to feel sold down the river.”

The mantra of disabled people around the world is “nothing about us without us,” and the 2019 Accessible Canada Act was built on the premise there must be “full consultation and involvement of disabled people in anything the government does that involves us,” she said.

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Developing these regulations will be the first real test.

Hewitt said she is “trying very hard” to remain optimistic that disabled people will be invited to the table with bureaucrats to craft the rules.

Hewitt and Mills both acknowledged federal Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion Carla Qualtrough’s commitment to engage people with disabilities in the process.

Qualtrough has been legally blind since birth, and Hewitt says the minister “has worked like mad” to get Bill C-22 passed with support from the disability community, Green MP Mike Morrice and NDP MP [Bonita Zarrillo](#).

Disability advocates, Canadians with disabilities and disability-serving organizations across the country led the charge to strengthen and pass the bill, Morrice told *Canada’s National Observer* in an interview.

While the bill passing the House represents a big win, there’s a “really unfortunate” eligibility limitation, Morrice noted.

“The Canada Disability Benefit is going to end at 65. The fact is, though, that poverty doesn't end for a person when they turn 65. And neither should the Canada Disability Benefit,” he said.

One certainty, however, is that the benefit will be indexed to inflation, something people with disabilities pushed hard for and Morrice [successfully introduced](#) as an amendment in December.

Ensuring the benefit is indexed to inflation was key because the Ontario Disability Support Program hadn't been increased for about a decade, until this year, he pointed out.

Morrice and Zarrillo are calling on the federal government to fund the benefit in Budget 2023. At the same time, organizations are starting up a letter-writing campaign encouraging folks to urge Finance Minister [Chrystia Freeland](#) to fund the benefit, said Morrice.

On the same day MPs across party lines voted in favour of Bill C-22, Justice Minister David Lametti [announced](#) the expansion of the [medical assistance in dying](#) (MAID) law to cover people suffering solely from a mental illness would be delayed until 2024.

MAID and the Canada Disability Benefit are in stark contrast with one another, said Hewitt.

On one hand, you have assistance in death, and on the other, a benefit so people can live a better life with dignity, she said.

“I know which one I prefer ... I prefer the life that's lived with dignity,” said Hewitt.

“We hope that the Canada Disability Benefit, rather than being a piece of legislation for the government that's aimed at disabled people dying, we hope that this is going to be the start of our country recognizing that disabled people need to live in dignity, and that the money that people get from this ... will stop people accessing MAID for social reasons.

“Yesterday was our day for celebration. Today, we go back to work,” said Hewitt.

*Natasha Bulowski / Local Journalism Initiative / Canada's National Observer*

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