

## **Research Summary:**

### ***Characterizing Leadership in the Atlantic Canadian Disability Policy Sector***

*Nothing about us without us*; this is the philosophy that guides persons with disabilities in Canada. But who is *us*? Similarly, who represents *us* to decision makers? While much is known about different types of disabilities that exist, little is known about disability leaders and their organizations in Canada. This is important given the trend for governments to contract program delivery with nonprofit groups in a competitive funding environment. Yet, this questions the capacity and management of nonprofit disability groups to effectively and efficiently deliver programs. Specifically, how does the skill set that disability leaders possess, developed over time based on cooperation, align with the competitive funding environment that now exists? If the fit is poor between what exists and what is now required, then to whom can disability leaders turn to enhance needed skills to ensure effective program delivery? These questions guide this program of work and are important to governments given they are accountable for funds provided and for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society.

Current leadership research does not focus on nonprofit disability organizations. Rather, it focuses broadly on leadership styles, interactions between Board of Directors and their Executive Directors or on the general management of nonprofit organizations. The problem is twofold in that it first extrapolates “lessons learned” from the *for-profit* sector, yet this profit motive is missing in the nonprofit sector which emphasizes inclusion and fairness, items which are hard to quantify to maximize profits. Second, existing leadership research tends to group together nonprofits such as churches, hospitals, educational foundations and social welfare groups. Generalizations across these groups are problematic given their different types, sizes and functions. Combined, these issues greatly dilute our understanding of Canadian disability leadership.

A finer grade of analysis is required focused on the disability sector to unravel the leadership and management issues confronted to improve program delivery. This is significant for the disability sector which is highly fragmented. Many disability groups exist, representing diverse needs with few national groups that represent all persons with disabilities. The problem is compounded in areas that are economically challenged and with high proportions of persons with disabilities such as in Atlantic Canada. Needs differ but the challenge is one of how to effectively deliver programs to meet the requirements of a diverse group of people. Underpinning effective program delivery is an understanding of how leadership styles and management roles interact and are mediated by the socio demographic characteristics of disability leaders and their relations with their Boards of Directors.

*Nothing about us without us* but we need to illuminate who represents *us*, that is, who disability leaders are, what they do and how they do it to ensure effective program delivery in this new funding environment. Through interviews, surveys and network analysis, this research

develops a leadership and management profile of disability leaders in Atlantic Canada in order to address skills gaps to improve program delivery. I have two main objectives for this research project:

1. To develop a new understanding of leadership in the disability sector.
2. To improve disability policy development and program implementation.

Questions of interest include:

- What are the characteristics of disability organization Executive Directors and government program managers (e.g., age, gender, education, training, length of tenure)?
- What do disability organization Executive Directors and government program managers do and how do they organize their work? What essential skills do they identify?
- How do disability leaders characterize their leadership depending on the task at hand?
- From whom do they most often seek guidance and why? To what degree do they rely on the expertise of their Board of Directors and interact with other organizations?
- What are the relationship patterns between Executive Director leadership styles and management roles and what are the strengths and limitations of these patterns?
- How and how frequently do Executive Directors transition among leadership styles given their different roles? How do Executive Directors decide to proceed?
- To what extent are Executive Director leadership styles mediated by differences in Board of Directors?
- How do answers to the above questions impact disability policy?

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