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## **Open Letter to Families**

RE: Looming Crisis in Disability Services for the Northwest

Dear Families and Supporters,

I am writing to you today with a very worried and heavy heart about the future of disability support services for our loved ones in Northwestern Ontario. The federal government's recent reform of the Post-Graduation Work Permit program (PGWP) is leaving Canadian Colleges and Universities in a grim position and forcing many to make significant cuts to staff and programs. The PGWP allows for those who attend our post-secondary institutions in specific programs to be granted the ability to work in Canada after they graduate, which contributes significantly to the huge gaps in our workforce.

Under the new regulations, international students who complete the Developmental Services Worker (DSW) programs in Ontario are no longer eligible for a PGWP. What does this mean for Northwestern Ontario? With over 80% of our DSW student enrollment being international, these new regulations will place our local DSW program at risk. We know that international students are not going to sign up for a program that does not guarantee them the ability to live and work in Canada post-graduation. If we lose the local DSW program, we lose the only thing locally that provides education and training that is specific to the disability community. Our already struggling families will have an increased burden in seeking out support staff that understand the complex care their loved ones require and who can provide the specialty supports that are so desperately needed. International students are key to addressing the severe staffing shortages we have in developmental services. You can click [here](#) to view the list of PGWP eligible programs under the new federal regulations at Confederation College and you will see that the DSW program is NOT listed.

DSWs play a unique and vital role in the human services sector. They offer specialized skills in behavioural supports, augmentative and alternative communication, educational support, health and wellness, preventative care, life skills development and so much more. Other programs, such as those for Personal Support Workers, Child and Youth Workers, and Social Services Workers, provide quality care in their own specialties, however they are not a replacement for DSWs and receive very little education on disability. DSWs provide services that others cannot and they contribute to better health and wellness outcomes for our loved ones. Without those supports here, we know we will see increased emergency room visits, mental health crisis, faster

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admission to long term care (which is NEVER where our loved ones should end up being placed anyways!) and, most worrisome of all, the potential for increased mortality rates.

We already know from our own experiences just how difficult it is to get support workers who have the skills needed to effectively support our loved ones. Families without adequate support have already had to take drastic steps, including putting their loved ones in care of agencies such as the Children's Aid Society, and this is unacceptable in any way, shape, or form.

Community Living Ontario's report, [Ending the Wait](#), provides us with multiple sources of data to support the fact that we are already in a crisis in Ontario. In 2021, the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services published [Journey to Belonging: Choice and Inclusion](#), which stated "*The passionate and dedicated staff working in the developmental service sector make a real difference in the lives of the people they support every day*" and "*We want the people working in the sector to be valued and recognized as skilled professionals who provide critical services to Ontarians*". As families, we know that not just anyone can provide support to our loved ones and we need more qualified professionals, not less!

Being geographically isolated in Northwestern Ontario from larger, urban areas, is already a struggle in terms of workforce planning, recruitment, and retention. The entire North of Ontario is the most underfunded and under resourced part of the province and our sector has been hit especially hard over the last few years. We are already seeing increased conversations around housing in the form of institutions and we cannot go backwards!! You cannot put a price on our loved ones and we need your voices to help us today!

How can you help? We have created an advocacy package on our website ([click here](#)) with contact information for municipal, provincial, and federal representatives. There is a template letter that you can customize to send to the Hon. Marc Miller, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and your elected representatives. We have provided a contact list for all Northwestern Ontario MPs, MPPs, and Heads of Municipal Councils for you to utilize. You can also request an in-person meeting with your local federal Member of Parliament to express your concerns. Thunder Bay Family Network is working quickly on an advocacy plan and that will include media releases and potentially town hall discussions. We continue to work with advocates across Ontario on this very important issue, with a focus being on amplifying the crisis this poses for families in Northwestern Ontario.

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We do not raise this alarm lightly, and we in no way want to cause increased anxiety for our families, however it is very important to us that we provide information to you all as well as avenues you can take to advocate. We know that we have an amazing community of people in the Northwest who care about the quality of services families and individuals need and that our voices joined together are stronger and CAN create change. As the changes to PGWP are already in effect, and work visas are set to be issued for eligible programs in mid-January, we have a very short window of time to get the Federal Government to include DSW programs on the list of eligible programs. Time is of the essence and your help and support is essential!

Should you have any questions or require further information, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at any time.

Sharon Bak  
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