

BC Provincial Election 2005 Tool Kit

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Provincial Election 2005

Introduction

May 17, 2005 marks election day in the province of British Columbia. On that day, eligible voters exercise their right to vote for one of the candidates in their riding to represent their community in the provincial legislature.

The following guide provides some tips for how to encourage members of your community to get involved in the election, raise issues of concern to people with developmental disabilities, and vote for the candidate of their choice.

Note that this year's ballot will also include a **referendum** question related to the method of counting votes in BC elections. More information is provided below.

Campaign Goals

- To ensure that candidates meet people with developmental disabilities and their families, and hear about the issues affecting their lives.
- To secure commitments from prospective MLA's and community support for our issues.
- To support people with disabilities and their families to be visible and to have their voices heard in all candidates forums and in the local media.
- To support people with developmental disabilities to exercise their right to vote and to participate in the election process.
- To build relationships with other community organizations that share in the work of creating strong, inclusive communities.

Remember that many candidates may never have met a person who has a developmental disability, and many will not be familiar with the issues of concern to our community. They may also be unfamiliar with the capabilities of people with developmental disabilities and the many contributions that individuals with disabilities make to their communities.

One of the most powerful ways to educate future MLA's is to introduce them to self advocates and their families who can raise questions and issues important to their lives.

BCACL Office Role

- Provide election support materials and updates to members.
- Continue efforts to communicate with key ministers and MLAs about community living issues.
- Gather feedback from members about candidate responses.

Member Association Role

- Make contact with local candidates and seek their support for our issues.
- Assist self advocates to learn about the election process and exercise their right to vote (see BCACL's self advocate election guide - ***Get the Vote Out – Information and Participation Guide***).
- Involve families, self advocates, caregivers and supporters in the election process.
- Provide feedback to the provincial office on meetings with candidates and any local coverage about people with disabilities.
- Build working relationships with other community organizations through information exchange and joint activities.

Election Activities

The media momentum that builds during an election period offers an excellent opportunity to bring our issues forward and to seek both public and political party support. The following activities provide some ideas about how to bring our issues forward and ensure that the broader community becomes more aware of people with developmental disabilities and their families.

1. Involve Your Members and Supporters

Send this election package and any other material to the families, self advocates and volunteers in your association and your community.

Host a meeting in your association to prepare people to speak to their candidates on their door-steps, in individual meetings, and at all candidates meetings. The issue sheets in this package offer brief outlines of issues and sample questions to ask.

2. Meet with Individual Candidates

Having lobby meetings with individual candidates is an important public relations exercise for your association and the community living movement as a whole. It is an opportunity to let the candidates know who you are and how they can best support people with developmental disabilities if elected.

Step-by-step guide to organizing a meeting with a candidate

- Call the candidate's campaign manager, or your MLA's constituency office if the nominated candidate is currently a government member.
- Introduce your organization and ask for a brief meeting to outline your issues and hear their positions.
- Have a pre-meeting with your lobbying team to decide the issues you want to bring forward, questions to ask, etc. Include a self advocate and family member in your delegation and assist their participation.
- Offer background information on the work of your association and the other community resources needed to support people with developmental disabilities and their families.
- Keep notes, leave information and be non-partisan in your approach.
- Try not to leave without some form of commitment to our issues. As we prepare to work with a new government and new MLAs, it will be very helpful to have some foundation of support upon which to build a post- election strategy.
- Send a brief thank you letter to the candidate with your appreciation for any agreements reached during the meeting.
- Send feedback to the BCACL office regarding commitments made by the candidate.

3. Attend All Candidates Meetings

Attending all candidates meetings in your community is a powerful way to promote the citizenship of people with developmental disabilities. Asking questions in this public forum increases the visibility of people with developmental disabilities and families, and invites the community to understand and support our issues.

All candidates forums may also be held on-air by local television and radio stations. If they welcome callers, encourage families and self advocates to phone in with questions. If the forum will not have an open question period, contact the station ahead of time and request for the host to ask a question on an issue that's important to people with developmental disabilities in your community.

Tips on preparing for all candidates meetings

- Organize a meeting of your members to brief them and discuss questions that can be raised at all candidates meetings. (See attached issue sheets.) Secure volunteer commitments to attend scheduled all candidates meetings and ask questions.
- As local media may attend all candidates meetings, approach them and offer to provide introductory information, comments on your issues, etc.
- Be prepared to talk to local media about issues raised during the meeting or issues you believe should have been raised.

4. Organize an All Candidates Meeting

If you wish to hold an all candidates meeting it is a good idea to work with other disability and/or organizations in your community. All candidates meetings are a lot of work, and candidates will be more attracted to forums that guarantee a large audience.

- Given the 28-day election period, secure a time and place as early as possible.
- Contact the candidates' campaign managers and secure a commitment.
- Strike a small organizing committee to deal with site preparation, publicity, meeting format, securing a moderator for the event, etc.
- Establish a candidate liaison person to assist candidates' arrival and departure and ensure each candidate receives information from your organization.
- After the meeting, send a brief thank you letter to each candidate and any additional information you wish to provide.

5. Contact Local Media

Contact your local radio and/or television stations to find out how they will be covering the election and whether there will be opportunities for public involvement.

Monitor the media and use letters to the editor, feedback phone lines, etc. to raise and respond to issues important to you.

Make yourself available to the local media and assist spokespersons to raise key issues.

6. Support Self Advocates

Some self advocates will need your assistance in getting registered to vote as well as getting to the polls. Make sure all self advocates who wish to vote are supported to do so.

Ensure self advocates supported by your organization are given assistance to increase their knowledge of the democratic process and how it works. Here are some ideas:

- Circulate BCACL's ***Get the Vote Out – Information and Participation Guide*** which provides plain language information about the election.
- Hold a workshop where you can discuss who is running in the election and what each candidate stands for.
- Role-play the voting process by creating a makeshift ballot box and setting up a voting booth similar to what will be in polling stations.
- Watch the newscasts together or share information from the newspapers so you can discuss what people are saying about the election.
- Help prepare self advocates to raise their own questions in all candidates meetings.
- Assist self advocates to visit the candidates' campaign headquarters where they can get information and/or meet the candidate.
- If self advocates are keen on a particular candidate or party, support them to volunteer on a campaign if they want to get more involved. Most campaigns welcome everyone who wishes to lend a hand.

7. Help People Get Information About the Referendum

In addition to electing a member of the legislature, voters in this year's provincial election will also vote on a referendum about whether to change the way votes are counted. The referendum allows people to vote for the current system, called First Past the Post, or a new system called Single Transferable Votes – STV.

There is more information about the referendum on the following website:
http://www.gov.bc.ca/referendum_info/

Other Election Resources

BC New Democratic Party – www.bc.ndp.ca

BC Liberal Party – www.bcliberals.com

BC Green Party – www.greenparty.bc.ca

Elections BC – www.elections.bc.ca – nonpartisan site with general information about the election. Includes a complete list of all registered provincial political parties

Rock the Vote – www.rockthevotebc.com – youth/student oriented election info

Get Your Vote On – www.getyourvoteon.ca – youth voter registration campaign, website includes youth voting facts, updates and BC election news

Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform – the group that recommended the change to STV system – www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public

Know STV - <http://www.knowstv.ca/> - asks critical questions about the STV system

Election Central – www.thetyee.ca/Election - general election news from an irreverent point of view!

Community Living Issues and Questions

The following issue sheets provide you with background information and potential questions to ask the candidates in your riding. All of these issues can be strengthened with local information and examples of how individuals with developmental disabilities and families are affected. You may also have additional questions you would like to ask.

Waitlists for Services

Children, youth and adults with developmental disabilities have a right to be included in their families, schools and communities, but there is a critical shortage in B.C. of the services and supports that help to make that happen.

Across the province, thousands of people with developmental disabilities and their families cannot get the supports and services they need, when they need them. Long waitlists exist for services to support children and their families, such as infant development programs, early intervention services, supported childcare, and respite care for families. Many adults are waiting for supported employment programs, residential supports, and supports for older adults who are living with senior parents. With the budget cuts that have occurred over the last three years, these waitlists will continue to grow.

This means babies and young children miss out on early intervention therapies and programs that can have a significant impact on the rest of their life. It means children and youth do not get the supports they need to succeed in school or to make the transition to adulthood. It means families in need of help are left to spiral into crisis; and many adults are left without the support they need to live a quality life in their communities.

Questions to ask your candidate

- What actions will you take to ensure that the Treasury Board provides adequate resources to address the growing waitlists for supports and services desperately needed by children, youth and adults with developmental disabilities and their families?
- How will you ensure that the government develops a strategic plan to address waitlists in all areas of services for children and youth with special needs, adults with developmental disabilities, and families?
- What will you do to ensure that the various ministries and authorities responsible for the delivery of these services work together to increase availability and access?

Support for Families

Children with special needs belong with their families, but when a family is supporting a son or daughter with special needs, it is particularly true that “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Too often, families are not able to obtain the help they need to support a family member with disabilities. Many wait for years to access services, or cannot get the type of help they really need. Without the supports that can make the difference, many families struggle in isolation, or spiral into crisis and breakdown.

When families do get the support they need, they become stronger, more resilient, less isolated, and more able to be active members of their community.

Families who have a member with a disability also face exceptional financial challenges. One parent may have to leave the work force or give up career opportunities to support a child with disabilities. Many families use up savings to cover the additional costs of supporting someone with disabilities – such as adapting homes, converting vehicles, or paying for support services. Statistics show that almost 30% of children with disabilities live in poverty.

Many senior parents continue to support their adult son or daughter with disabilities – but as they age, want to ensure their family member will be supported in the future. Often, the community supports they need are not available.

For several years now, families have been asking government to consider alternative options that would help ensure they receive timely, responsive supports that are flexible enough to meet each family’s unique needs. Many have worked hard to create a more community-based structure for community living services. Through the creation of Community Living BC, some of the options families have sought, such as individualized funding, could become available. However, the transition to this system has not yet been fully achieved.

Questions to ask your candidate

- What will you do to ensure that more and better supports are available to families caring for a member with a disability?
- How will you support the efforts of Community Living BC to create more flexible options for families, including individualized funding for individuals and families to purchase the services they need, when they need them and where they choose?
- What will you do to ensure that federal and provincial tax policies truly recognize the extra costs of supporting a family member with a disability?

Income Security for People with Disabilities

People with developmental disabilities face tremendous barriers in accessing a secure income that can enable them to live quality lives in their communities. For those who are able to work, training, support programs and employment opportunities are limited. For those who are not working, the only available options are seeking support from family members or relying on disability benefits that provide an income that is well below the poverty line. People with disabilities also face great threats to health and safety because of the unavailability of affordable housing and transportation.

These realities mean that a disproportionate number of people with disabilities live in poverty. Here are some startling facts:

- 29% of adults with disabilities live below the poverty line, compared to 11% of the general population.
- Whether they are working or not, adults with disabilities have a significantly lower income than those without disabilities.
- Almost half of all people with disabilities depend entirely on family or friends for disability supports, rather than government programs. Many do not receive all the supports they need to participate as citizens in society because they can't afford to pay for them.

The costs of poverty are high. Living in poverty increases the risk of health problems due to inadequate nutrition, unsafe housing, less access to health care, and fewer social supports. The social effects of poverty include isolation, loneliness, and alienation from community life.

To ensure the inclusion of people with developmental disabilities, we need:

- a truly adequate income support system
- employment programs designed specifically to help people with developmental disabilities to find and keep employment
- incentives for employers to hire people with developmental disabilities
- more affordable housing for people with disabilities
- improved transportation for people with disabilities

Questions to ask your candidate

- How will you ensure that BC maintains a social safety net for people who are unable to work?
- Will you support a disability benefit program that reflects the true cost of living?
- What would you do to ensure that your government creates real employment opportunities and supports for people with developmental disabilities?
- What will you do to make sure people with disabilities can get housing they can afford?
- What will you do to get more accessible public transit service in BC communities?

Inclusive Education

Since the 1980s, children and youth with developmental disabilities have had the right to attend regular classrooms in their neighbourhood schools, with appropriate supports. Research now shows that including students with special needs in regular classrooms creates a positive learning experience for all students. Commitment to the practice of inclusion has risen dramatically among teachers, parents, legislators, and the public.

However, teachers cannot provide inclusive education without the necessary training and classroom supports.

In 2001, the provincial government stopped the practice of “targeting” certain dollars for special education within each school district’s budget. As school districts struggle to manage limited budgets, the funds that might have been spent on special education can now be diverted to cover administration, technology or other costs. This results in a loss of resources at the classroom level and undermines the school’s ability to support inclusive education.

The result is that all students suffer. Students with disabilities are more often excluded – by being left out of classroom activity, permitted to attend school only part-time, or being denied access to school altogether. And all students suffer from the loss of support to teachers, and miss out on the rich opportunities offered by learning in an inclusive classroom.

Ultimately, the rights of people with disabilities are eroded. That’s why it is so important for the provincial government to support inclusion not just in policy, but through its funding practices – through targeting special education dollars or ensuring that some other accountability measures are in place.

Questions to ask your candidate

- Do you support the right of children with disabilities to attend their neighbourhood schools and to be included in a regular classroom?
- What is your response to those who say children with disabilities should be put in a segregated educational setting?
- How will you ensure that all students receive the support they require to have their educational, safety and social needs met in public schools?
- How will you ensure that inclusive education is adequately funded and that resources are actually spent to support inclusive education at the district level?