

March 21, 2020

The Honourable Rajan Sawhney  
Minister of Community and Social Services

The Honourable Tyler Shandro  
Minister of Health

Dear Ministers:

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your immediate help with three urgent matters related to COVID-19. I will state my requests near the end of this letter, but first some context.

The Skills Society of Edmonton is one of many non-profit organizations in Alberta contracted by the Ministry of Community and Social Services to deliver a variety of life enabling and sustaining services to approximately 12,000 adults with developmental disabilities. The Skills Society supports 350 of these adults, many of whom have underlying health conditions that render them highly compromised and vulnerable within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adults with developmental disabilities supported by the Skills Society and other disability service providers across the province live in ordinary community housing and are supported by minimally trained, low-wage staff. Many of the people we support require high levels of daily hands-on personal care (e.g., meal preparation, feeding, bathing, lifting, toileting).

The Skills Society started its preparation at the first hint that COVID-19 might become a pandemic, quietly at first so as not to incite panic. We have since ramped up our preparedness in strict concert with the excellent daily guidance provided by Dr. Deena Hinshaw and other related information sources.

Some of the adults we support have families. A few families have elected to take their adult children home for the duration of the pandemic. Other adults either have no families or have families that are not able to take them home (e.g., aged parents).

The Skills Society is already beginning to lose some of its 500+ staff. Some must remain at home to look after small children. Others are self-isolating because of symptoms.

The Skills Society is deeply committed to the adults we support and will continue to deliver our very best services. At the same time, we have both a moral obligation and a legal duty to ensure the health and safety of our valued employees while at work (*Occupational Health and Safety Act*).

As you might imagine, our staff are anxious about contracting COVID-19. Rightly, they see themselves as essential service providers.

Allaying fear and panic in our staff is an everyday priority. Like other essential service providers, we are acutely aware of the importance of personal protective equipment (PPE) (e.g., N95 masks, gowns, gloves).

The availability of PPE is a necessity, both to ensure safety and to stave off panic within our staff. We have PPE on back order but have been told by suppliers we are in a long line of other high-priority customers. We are certain the Skills Society is not alone. Many disability service providers across the province are in exactly the same position.

We anticipate a number of drivers of staff panic. The first is the lack of PPE. The second is the lack of clear protocols and training for close-quarter personal supports and care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff are not trained health professionals. As you know, panic itself is contagious. If a large number of our staff refused to work, citing fear for personal safety, our capacity to provide service would collapse. Should this happen across the disability service sector, the Government of Alberta (GOA) could easily be overwhelmed.

We are seeking your immediate help with three priorities:

**Priority 1**

Centralize within the GOA the purchase and distribution of PPE specifically for the disability sector. For a variety of reasons, this approach will be more effective than hundreds of small providers ordering products separately.

**Priority 2**

Provide Alberta Health Service professionals to work with disability service providers to analyze the risks associated with the delivery of close-quarter personal care and develop specific protocols for safe service delivery. This should be done centrally by working with the Alberta Council of Disability Services.

**Priority 3**

Have government officials work with the disability service sector to develop contingencies in the event of partial collapse of non-profit capacity to provide services to adults with disabilities. While this eventuality may be somewhat less likely, it would be a mistake not to have contingencies in place.

I know we are all challenged to respond in real time to the seemingly endless number of immediate priorities. Skills staff have requested help from ministry staff for a couple of weeks now without any response. Little or no communication tends to ramp up fear and anxiety. Your prompt response will be greatly appreciated.

Last but not least, I want to sincerely thank the GOA, as a whole, for its thoughtful and assertive response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please do not view this letter as criticism. In addition to being deeply committed to providing the best support and care possible to adults with developmental disabilities, the Skills Society sees itself as your partner: your eyes and ears on the ground, providing intelligence, identifying risks and making recommendations.

Should you have any questions, please contact me at [chappellehart@gmail.com](mailto:chappellehart@gmail.com) or at 780-975-0121.

Sincerely,

Hart Chapelle  
Board Chair  
Skills Society