

# PERSONS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES COMMUNITY CONVERSATION REPORT

from Genia Leskiw, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports

Better Outcomes. Improved Contracting. Demonstrated Results.

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## Message from MLA Genia Leskiw

I am pleased to present this summary of the key themes and ideas presented at a series of focus group sessions held in June 2011. The twelve sessions, six with families and service providers, and six with individuals receiving services and supports from PDD, were uniformly forthright, engaging and helpful.

The focus of our conversations was on enhancing the contracting process, one of the four recommendations that PDD is working on. While this report describes the feedback received on improving the contracting process, it's not surprising that the discussions in each group were wider ranging than just contracting. The participants were passionate in these conversations and we heard contributions across a spectrum of topics, all related to building better quality lives for people with developmental disabilities, that can help inform the changes to contracting within PDD. The insight and advice from the participants was given generously and thoughtfully.

I was very happy to meet the many hundreds of people who took time out of their busy lives to contribute to this important conversation. I was particularly pleased to spend time with individuals receiving service. I gained great insight from speaking directly to these people who are, with dignity and determination, trying to build good lives for themselves with the support of the PDD program. Their comments were insightful, practical, and in many cases the input was deeply wise. I have tried to honour those contributions in this summary. I will never forget the experience of meeting all of the participants – such fine Albertans who embody the spirit of our wonderful province.

One of the individuals I met during these sessions passed on a piece of insight that has guided my thinking throughout this process. *“Our attitude plays a big role in our life. It's not just about you; it's about the other people around you in this world. If I show respect, I can say, ‘I hear you and I understand you.’”*

These focus group sessions were first and foremost, a listening exercise. My intent is that this report reflects and respects what we heard from participants in a way that can provide guidance for future contracting changes.

To the Honourable Mary Anne Jablonski, Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, thank you for the opportunity to have these conversations across the province. I hope these observations will assist you and the PDD administration, provincially and regionally, in making future plans and decisions that will enhance and sustain the contracting processes in the PDD system and will contribute to high quality lives for the individuals it serves.

Respectfully,

[Original signed by]

Genia Leskiw, MLA, Bonnyville – Cold Lake

## Introduction/Context

In June of 2010, the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports requested a review of the administrative costs of the Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) program.

The purpose of the review was to understand how effectively administration funds were being used in carrying out the PDD program. The mission of the PDD program is to promote independence and inclusion in a way that responds to the unique needs of each adult with developmental disabilities. While the review found that the PDD program is generally effective in meeting that mission province-wide, government must ensure that the program is always focusing on improving the efficiency of its administrative processes while meeting the distinct needs of individuals as effectively as possible.

The independent review of administrative processes carried out by KPMG, an external consultant, included surveys to a large sample of stakeholders, focus groups, interviews; analysis of financial and performance data; and comparisons with similar programs in other provinces and countries.

The review revealed areas for improvement in the administration of the PDD program and made a series of recommendations that the Government has accepted to improve administrative efficiency within the PDD program:

- Adopt a “one organization” approach, in which the overall organization operates cohesively and consistently.
- Improve the efficiency of the service provider network by introducing a new contracting process.
- Implement additional resources to support and enhance the use of the family managed services option.
- Introduce common processes and information technology (IT) systems.

Upon publication of the report, the Minister provided written direction to the PDD regional boards on the implementation of the accepted recommendations, such as enhancing the use of family managed services and establishing a provincial website to provide consistent information on PDD services. Where changes to contracting processes were concerned, it was decided that a wider stakeholder consultation would be necessary to make informed decisions.

The focus groups conducted across the province were undertaken to discuss and obtain feedback on the recommendation to introduce improved contracting strategies to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the service provider network. Participants were advised that a new contracting process might have the following characteristics:

- A clear definition of the results expected from the service provided, based on the individual’s needs.

- A new model for service provider contracts to ensure the best possible services and best value.
- A service delivery model that allows for co-operation between service providers. It will be important to build this service network together, with an aim to streamlining administrative processes and making a range of services easier to access.
- Key performance measures and monitoring and reporting expectations for all service contracts.

The focus group conversations were divided into three parts:

- Getting better at being outcomes-based
- Developing the best kind of contracting process to deliver on outcomes
- Looking at performance measurement and communications about performance

The participants in the focus groups expressed the value they saw in the PDD system and recognized the strong commitment of all stakeholders to the mission of the program. Feedback from the participants on contracting processes was constructive and consistently focused on how improvements can be made. While conversations were critical at times, they were always in the spirit of ensuring that individuals receive the highest quality services. The conversations covered a lot of ground, not all of which was related to contracting specifics. This report is a synthesis of the key ideas that were shared in the sessions, with a focus on how these ideas can inform the development of PDD's contracting strategy.

## Methodology

An important part of making the changes set out by the Minister was to get candid input on the PDD contracting system from individuals receiving supports, their family members and those who provide services.

This process involved 12 focus group discussions that occurred on six days, one in each of the PDD regions. Each day was split into two sessions: service providers and family members of individuals in the morning and then self-advocates in the afternoon.

All service providers and individuals receiving supports received an invitation to the session in their region. Family members and guardians of persons receiving supports were encouraged to attend the morning sessions with service providers. Attached to these invitations was one of two discussion guides for either family members and service providers, or self-advocates, which ever was appropriate.

The sessions for family members and service providers were facilitated by contract consultants and government staff from departments outside PDD. Attendees were divided into mixed tables of 8-10, where they spent approximately 90 minutes engaging in questions as set out in the discussion guides. Family-member only tables were made available at some sessions, based on the requirements of the participants.

The questions as set out in the discussion guide for family members and service providers were:

### Outcomes

1. *How can service providers and contracts enable an outcome-based focus?*
2. *What's getting in the way of being outcome-based?*

### Contracts

1. *What are the most important aspects of a contracting process?*
2. *What are things to avoid in a new contracting process?*
3. *What are the advantages/ disadvantages of competitive bidding?*
4. *What do you think about co-operation among service providers?*

### Performance Measurement

1. *What should be measured?*
2. *What should be reported?*
3. *What needs to change about the system in order to become more performance based?*

Afternoon sessions with self-advocates took the group as a whole through the following questions:

1. *What helps you to have a good life?*
2. *What doesn't help you to have a good life (what gets in the way)?*
3. *Do you feel comfortable talking to your service provider about your supports and how well they're doing?*
4. *What is the one thing you wish you could receive from your service provider?*

It was made clear to all participants in both sets of sessions that they should speak candidly about improvements they felt the PDD system needed and that all input would be considered in the course of the review.

Stakeholder attendance was high. In each of the regions, the family and service provider sessions attendance exceeded those initially registered. The case was the same with roughly half of the self-advocate sessions.

Community	AM Session		PM Session	
	Registered	Attended	Registered	Attended
St. Paul	16	27	8	7
Red Deer	57	92	7	20
Lethbridge	24	62	8	16
Grande Prairie	7	24	2	9
Calgary	123	151	8	7
Edmonton	111	131	16	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Total Stakeholder Attendance – All Sessions</b>				<b>557</b>
<b>Total Who Registered</b>				<b>387</b>

## Feedback on Specific Questions

What follows is a synthesis of what we heard during the conversations on the specific questions in the discussion guide.

### Being Outcomes-Based

**“Parents and Service Providers: Be active about exchanging information with each other”.**

#### 1. *How can service providers and contracts enable an outcome-based focus?*

There was general agreement that working in an outcomes-based way is important and contributes to enhanced quality of life for individuals. Contracts, said participants, should be outcomes-based and should strive to capture a high degree of accountability for results and not just a listing of services being delivered.

- **Thinking big**

Outcomes should be ambitious for the individuals. At the same time, there needs to be practical and realistic steps identified to meet the desired outcomes.

- **Accountable**

Outcome based contracts should make it clear what is being done with taxpayers' dollars.

- **Agreement on goals**

Clear goals have to be established by individuals, families and service providers together.

- **Flexibility and consistency**

Contracts have to be flexible to adapt to the changing needs of an individual. Service providers expressed a desire for the ability to adjust contract elements as required to meet individuals' needs within budget. At the same time, participants agreed on the need for province-wide consistency in the overall approach to contracting.

- **Meaningful accreditation supports focusing on outcomes**

Participants said that agency accreditation, developing outcomes for contracts, and performance measurement all need to be aligned to create a meaningful context for quality service delivery. Duplication and redundancy should be avoided and accreditation should be rigorous enough to assure quality services. A commitment to excellence and accountability should be reflected in contracts.

- **PDD connection to clients**

PDD regionally should know the client so they can plan for and deliver better outcomes for the individual. PDD regional staff should be connected to the families and not just to the service providers.



- **Clear communication**

There needs to be good communication about the intended outcomes for an individual, along with a commitment to plain language and clarity.
- **Customization**

Contracts and individual service plans need to work together hand-in-glove. Contracts cannot take a “cookie cutter” approach. Participants told us that while the overall approach to PDD contracting should be consistent, they see a need for customized contracts that can reflect the nature of the service provided to the client group. Similarly, individual service plans have to be specifically tailored to capture the unique service needs of each individual.
- **Listening**

Agencies need to listen to what families and individuals are asking for and develop their plans accordingly.
- **Focus**

There should be more focused service delivery in larger centres, with agencies specializing in the work in which they excel.
- **Process excellence, commonality and consistency**

Processes need to be exemplary and based on best practices. Once determined, all PDD regions should adopt the same processes for working with service providers and there should be clarity around definitions, language and service expectations.
- **Well-Planned Transitions**

Service providers should not be able to terminate contracts with families without ensuring that a smooth transition to alternate service is in place.

## **2. *What’s getting in the way of being outcome-based?***

While there was general support for working in an outcomes-based way, participants said that current day-to-day realities can get in the way of this. They talked about the following issues as being impediments to a focus on outcomes.

- **Trying to do too much**

It’s difficult for one agency to meet all the needs of an individual. Opportunities for collaboration among service providers should be sought.

- **Complicated record keeping**

Participants told us that having one file, electronic record keeping and easy sharing of files would all assist in streamlining record keeping and focus on outcomes across more than one service provider and on an ongoing basis across an individual's life. In addition, participants said that they wanted records to capture goals, activities undertaken to meet those goals, and results achieved, not just units of time delivered.

- **Impersonal service**

We heard that the current contract process does not provide strong enough support for personalized service and the potential for collaboration. The emphasis is largely on the dollars, not on the people being served. Coding is emphasized over personal outcomes.

- **Administrative burdens**

Participants said that they wanted to be sure that their paper records had value, and did not represent duplication or redundancy. They are concerned that the system is currently too paper-centric and paper heavy, which contributes to a bureaucratic way of working that is not as "people-oriented" as it could be.

- **Jurisdictional issues**

In some instances, such as in First Nations reserve communities, jurisdiction issues can prevent individuals from getting support from the provincial government.

- **Response Time**

The time it takes to finalize contracts at the agency and at the individual level detract from getting on with the important work of delivering service.

- **Approach to planning**

The PDD system should know how many adults will be entering the system based on those who are being served by Alberta Children and Youth Services (ACYS.) Better proactive planning could improve the establishment of early and effective outcomes for individuals.

- **Communication**

There is a need to communicate with all parties as effectively as possible to enhance the achievement of positive outcomes. When PDD regionally, service providers and families are not on the same page about what would be positive outcomes for an individual, developing outcomes that are meaningful for all

is challenging. It is important, we heard, to ensure that there is common understanding of goals and ways to achieve them.

- **Staffing**

Difficulties in finding and keeping qualified staff make working in a planned and methodical way difficult.

- **Limited choices**

In some regions, where there are few service providers and a lack of programming options, being able to meet the diverse needs that an individual has can be a challenge.

- **Language and Terminology**

Not everyone has the same understanding of language like outcomes, goals, positive results and growth. Working from a common language base is key to developing meaningful outcomes.

Maintain conversation opportunities between families and PDD.

## Contracting

This was the part of the conversations that represented the most challenge for participants. The technicalities of contracting are of less interest to most participants than the need for excellent service and the effectiveness of an individual service plan. There was general agreement that effective contracts that reflect a high degree of accountability are an important tool for the system. It was also agreed that the overarching contracts set a tone for high quality individual service plans. What follows is what we heard on contract specifics.

### 3. *What are the most important aspects of a contracting process?*

- **Collaboration rather than competition**

Participants said contracts should encourage all levels of the PDD system to work together. While participants acknowledged that competitive contracting might encourage service providers to objectively demonstrate that they are doing a good job, they also expressed concern that competitive contracting might result in reduced collaboration among service providers or create adversarial relationships that undermine collaboration.

- **Flexibility and choice**

Participants said that they want sufficient flexibility to allow service providers to modify the types of service they provide under their contract as an individual's need changes. Families also expressed a strong desire that PDD's contracting practices should preserve choice of service providers.

- **Stability and continuity**

Participants said longer-term contracts with funding over more than one year would allow service providers to plan for the future and provide a sense of stability for families, individuals and service provider staff. Participants said that stability could contribute to the ability to “keep good people” working in agencies.

- **Transparency**

We heard that families want to know what’s included in the service provider’s contract with PDD and want the contract process to help facilitate the family’s role in decision-making for their loved ones.

- **Outcomes focus**

Participants told us that contracts with clearly defined outcomes that link to well-documented individualized service plans could facilitate a focus on the well-being of the individual. Participants emphasized their desire for contracting to focus on outcomes for people, rather than just on the money spent.

#### 4. *What are things to avoid in a new contracting process?*

Participants said that a new contract process should avoid:

- **Instability and disruption**

For participants, too much change emerged as something to avoid, particularly when considering the transition of individuals between service providers and the frequency of contract renewals. Annual contract changes, they said, could be detrimental to service continuity. At the same time, they asked that rigidity and additional administrative burden be avoided in contracting change.

- **Overemphasis on Business Processes**

Participants shared their hope to avoid an emphasis on business processes over outcomes for people. The conversation focused on avoiding a “lowest-price” approach to contracting, ensuring that the competitive approach could result in improved outcomes for individuals. They voiced concern that a focus on simple procurement, with government officers deciding on contracts in isolation, could take the focus away from individuals, impact service quality, and limit the choice of service providers for families.

- **Inconsistency**

Across Alberta, participants said they wanted PDD to avoid inconsistencies between PDD regions in the way contracts are handled.

### 5. *What are the advantages and disadvantages of competitive bidding?*

Advantages cited by participants included:

- **Accountability**

Participants said that competitive contracting would create incentives for agencies to be high quality and demonstrate their accountability, both to families receiving service and to the Alberta taxpayer. They also noted that competitive contracting is consistent with the general Government of Alberta procurement practices across the province.

- **Clarity of Expected Results**

A competitive contracting process, participants said, could enhance clarity about what service providers are working toward with their client groups, and help set the context for individual service plans. Participants also told us that this kind of process could enhance the objectivity and transparency of contracting.

- **Consistency**

Participants also noted that a competitive contracting process has the potential to help streamline the process of getting service. The process could work, they said, if it is consistent across the province and funded to the level of care that is necessary.

- **Efficiency**

A competitive contracting process could help put a focus on finding efficiencies in areas such as staff training, participants said. They also noted the potential to reduce duplication in service provision.

Disadvantages cited by participants included:

- **Increased focus on business practices**

Participants were concerned about the emphasis on business practices: some indicated that it feels like contracting is just about money, while others worried that a competitive contracting process has the potential to “commodify” individuals. Participants noted that while Request for Proposal processes work well in some sectors, they might not work well in PDD, which is a “people” business, and one where there is not always a surplus of service providers. A common concern was that the lowest bidder would simply be chosen, which would place the emphasis on dollars rather than on high quality services. Participants shared worries that smaller agencies would not be able to compete with larger ones, resulting in diminished service. They told us that bigger is not always better. Participants acknowledged the need for PDD to be accountable to the taxpayer for best use of funds. At the

same time, they expressed concern that the focus on accountability could drive the direction to lowest cost, not necessarily the best service option.

- **Potential for instability**

Although participants said that healthy competition could lead to further cooperation among service providers, many felt that cooperation and competition do not seem compatible. Participants saw potential for instability in the contracting process in the case where contracts were won and lost over time. Stability and continuity, they reiterated, is positive for individuals, families and service provider staff.

- **Family Involvement**

Families shared concerns that a formal proposal process would not involve them, and expressed a desire to have input into service provider selection.

- **Potential for inefficiency**

Participants raised concerns that an elaborate procurement system could add to administrative burden and increase administrative costs. Participants also shared the opinion that a competitive procurement model could increase administrative costs in PDD regions.

## **6. *What do you think about co-operation among service providers?***

Participants cited many examples of collaboration between service providers that are already underway in the province, and said that there is much to build on here. They did describe their cautions if collaboration is mandated and expressed their concerns that collaboration might be seen as a precursor to amalgamations that would result in a loss of choice for families and a de-personalization of the system. Here is what we heard:

- **Some collaboration is already underway**

Shared training is already happening to some extent in agencies and should be encouraged and planned for more deliberately.

- **Collaboration is important**

There will have to be ways built into the administration of PDD that make collaboration easier and more natural, because individuals benefit from cooperative service providers. Time, effort and resources go into effective collaboration, and while collaboration may result in efficiencies, ultimately it requires an up-front investment of time and relationship development.

- **Collaboration should be rewarded**

Creative development of multi-disciplinary, inter-agency teams can have very positive results for individuals. There should be both incentives and rewards for this kind of creative service delivery.

- **Collaboration can be with non-PDD agencies**

In some small communities, collaboration is difficult because there may be only one service provider. However, participants cited examples of innovations where PDD agencies and community groups with different, but compatible mandates, partner with one another to share space, vehicles etc. This kind of “out of the box” thinking should be encouraged.

- **Reduce duplication**

Collaboration among agencies not only represents the potential for some administrative efficiencies, it also represents the opportunity to build a more streamlined suite of services for individuals that minimizes duplication.

- **Practical considerations**

Some agencies are not for profit, while others are for-profit. Their differences in business approaches could impact the potential for collaboration. It is likely that collaboration would be easier between agencies that share a business model. Collaboration would also have to take into account client privacy issues, staff confidentiality, different invoicing systems, etc. There is also a risk if agencies collaborate too closely that the system will lose out on specialized services currently offered by smaller agencies. None of these practical considerations are insurmountable, but will need to be considered when collaboration is encouraged.

- **Model Collaboration**

Collaboration is not only about change in practice, it's also about change in attitudes. A collaborative approach would need to be modeled by PDD provincial and regional leadership.

## Performance Measurement

This was another area in which there was general consensus. Just as there was agreement about the value of being outcomes-based, there was agreement that being accountable to those outcomes through effective performance measurement was equally important. We heard the following:

Measure how we are affecting the attitudes of our community with the work we do.

### 7. *What should be measured?*

- **Everything – the good and the bad**  
Measurement should be comprehensive, transparent, honest and ongoing and should be willing to look at all aspects of service from planning to front line service delivery.
- **Performance management should be formal and informal**  
There needs to be a combination of formal, paper-driven processes as well as informal feedback on an ongoing basis. Families working with service providers who are being creative about performance measurement find that their relationships are better and their satisfaction levels are higher. Performance measurement needs to be people-focused and personalized.
- **Performance measurement linked to goals**  
There should be a clear connection between the planning process and performance measurement, so that measurement is outcome-driven and based on the goals established for the individual. Social inclusion is an important outcome for measurement.
- **Satisfaction is the most important measure**  
Meaningful measurement of satisfaction is critical. Individual and family satisfaction with service needs to be assessed on an ongoing basis.
- **Individuals should play a role in performance measurement**  
Their perspective is essential and should be a part of a robust performance measurement framework.

### 8. *What should be reported?*

- **Accountability**  
Accountability is about demonstrating that the funder has received value for money and that the conditions under which the funds were advanced have been met. Participants said that service providers should report their accountability publicly.



- **Agency accreditation results**

In order for excellence to be mainstream in the PDD system, families should have easy access to information about accreditation.

- **Agency philosophy and values**

It should be easy for families to get a sense of the culture of an agency and what is important to them. This can become an important indicator of suitability and fit with the family.

- **Staff turnover**

Some participants felt that reporting staff turnover would be a way that families could assess the stability of agency services. However, given workforce stability issues, others felt that this was not an accurate measure of agency performance, but more an indication of the employment challenges of the sector.

- **A range of performance measurement instruments should be used**

Surveys, report cards, quarterly and annual reports – participants would like to see service providers exploring a range of tools that communicate quickly and easily to families. In addition, one-on-one sessions with families are important, so that there are opportunities for dialogue.

Seek partnerships with post secondary institutions to revive disability support worker education programs.

9. ***What needs to change about the system to become more performance based?***

This was the portion of the conversation where the PDD system culture was discussed. Participants talked openly about the need to shift the culture of PDD to become more collaborative, more trust-based and less adversarial. This part of the sessions was future-focused and committed to improved relationships going forward. We heard that participants wanted the following:

- **Relationships**

When relationships are strong among all parties, we were told, it is easy to work together for the good of the individual. Participants expressed a desire for these kinds of relationships, with greater trust, inclusive planning, and a commitment to working together. They also asked for a commitment to being service oriented and friendly across the PDD system. Real action from these conversations, they told us, could provide an opportunity for greater trust to evolve.

- **Communication**

A desire for clear and open communication about all issues was expressed by all participants. Plain language and language support for non-English-speaking families could enhance clarity. Participants said that enhanced communication between all parties (PDD regions, service providers and families) would enhance transparency and trust.

- **Clarity around roles and responsibilities**

Participants asked for clarity around the roles of various stakeholders in the PDD system, and for more support and guidance from the PDD regions to “navigate” the system and complete paperwork. They told us they want a clear appeals process as well as clear processes in place for how to make a complaint or give feedback. They also expressed a desire that PDD regionally play an active role in monitoring agency services, and for joint evaluations between PDD and service providers.

- **Administrative Streamlining**

Streamlined administrative processes, we were told, could help keep the focus on people rather than on paperwork.

## General Themes from the Conversations

In addition to the specific feedback in the focus group sessions, we heard some themes that were consistently prevalent and the specific questions. They were common to all communities and are central to taking thoughtful and respectful next steps. While the focus group sessions were about contracting improvements, the additional themes that emerged through the conversations may also provide some guidance for the implementation of contracting changes. It should be noted that when the term PDD system is used this includes the PDD provincial program branch, regional Community Boards and service provider network.

The key themes are:

- People First
- Respect and Trust
- Planning
- Staffing
- Excellence
- Communication
- Performance
- Focus Group Process

### People First

The PDD world is a people business, participants said. Participants said it's impossible to talk about contracting improvements without talking about people, service and a commitment to making people's lives better. Their observations about putting people first fit into the following categories:

- **We're all in this together**

This sentiment of shared objective was evident throughout the conversations. Families and service providers, often talking together in groups, had no disagreement about what they want to achieve: a stable and consistent provision of exceptional service so that the individual can live as independent and happy a life as possible. Sometimes they had differences of opinion on how that could be achieved, but there was great commonality around the purpose of the PDD system.

- **Business models vs. people models**

Participants argued that PDD should be committed to building a system that puts people at the centre and makes decisions that are people-centric not system-centric. "*The system should work for the individuals who need its support, not the other way around,*" was the overarching sentiment.

- **Language**

In a people business, the language and terminology should be human, plain and personal. Participants reminded us that business language and government jargon can be alienating and overly formal, and its use should be minimized.

**"We need to focus on ensuring that whatever we do, we're always focused on taking care of our most vulnerable."**

“These vulnerable people need us to do our best thinking, planning and work.”

“Listening is key to a better system”

- **Flexibility and choice**

In a human enterprise, the ability to adapt and change is important. Any process enhancements that are proposed for contracting need to take into account the need for flexibility on the part of service providers and the importance of choice of service offerings for families. This need for system agility has to be balanced with province-wide consistency that reflects a commitment to “one PDD system” operating cohesively across six regions.

## Excellence

- **Get and keep staff who care**

We heard that what matters most to participants in the PDD system are the relationships that surround individuals, including high-quality staff members in both service agencies and PDD. Participants were clear that all changes that are being considered should include strategies that make it easier to recruit, retain and reward exemplary staff members who have a vocational commitment to working with people with developmental disabilities.

- **Work as a team**

A collaborative team, working together to enhance the life of an individual is essential to an excellent system, we were told. Families don’t always know their PDD client service coordinators or their agency leadership, and find that they have a series of isolated relationships, rather than a sense of team cohesion.

- **One government**

Participants expect the Alberta government to operate as “one government”, coordinating services, funding, and transitions between youth and adult services. Participants expressed optimism that the innovations of the Alberta Supports initiative could represent a new way of doing business in Alberta – one that could enhance the way in which the PDD system operates.

- **Plan thoroughly and thoughtfully**

Participants noted a desire for thorough and thoughtful collaborative planning among all the players in the PDD system. Participants want the system to avoid being reactive, but rather to think about the entire spectrum of services that an individual may need over a lifetime, and plan accordingly.

- **Sustainable funding**

Participants said that a key feature of an excellent system is predictable and sustainable funding. While contributors were realistic about the system not having limitless resources, they were clear that dollars need to be spent on the right things and that predictable future funding is essential to effective planning.

## Respect and Trust

The issues of respect and trust permeated the discussions. While many participants said that they appreciated the opportunity to contribute, they alluded to consultation “fatigue”, saying things like: “*will there be real change coming out of this?*” and “*is this just public relations as opposed to genuine opinion gathering?*” These centre on the following key ideas:

- **Service and funding challenges**

Many families described a smooth relationship with PDD, and considerable support once their loved one enters the adult system, while others said that the process of obtaining services and supports has created tension with the system that causes them to be guarded. This, they said, is not the best condition for establishing and maintaining a long and mutually respectful relationship.

- **Families are experts too**

Families talked about how important it was that their understanding of their loved one’s needs be respected. While they know that service providers have access to best practice insight and information, they described wanting to have their expertise about their family member taken into consideration.

- **Create methods to discuss issues and problem solving**

Families talked about not always feeling comfortable expressing dissatisfaction with the PDD system. They made the point that they don’t always understand how to raise an issue or initiate problem solving. Clarity around problem solving avenues and appeal protocols would be welcomed by participants.

## Communication

- **Be available**

Both families and service providers said that when communication worked well with PDD client service coordinators or contract managers, working together was easy. However, some participants expressed frustration about not being able to connect with various levels of the system, including their PDD service coordinator or agency leadership, and not having regular communications with front line workers who are supporting their loved ones.

- **Create a positive communications culture**

Best practice communications is two-way, authentic and ongoing. Participants asked for a commitment across the system to a communications culture that is respectful, trust-based, and open to sharing both positive and negative news.

“There has to be a mutual respect... parents have expertise too and they deserve to be heard.”

“Listening. Communicating. Key!”

“There is a need for better communication. Family members want a better say in what is happening and what types of services are provided. There is a need to communicate with all parties.”

“Planning has to be done for an entire life... and be able to adapt over time.”

- **Need for cohesive communications systems**

Participants told us that provincial initiatives such as one website for the PDD system could start to address this issue, and should be further reinforced through clear communications channels and consistent problem solving approaches across the system. Cohesive communications could help reduce confusion about the various roles and responsibilities of those involved in the system.

## Planning

When a person enters the PDD system, it is most likely that the rest of their adult life will include some elements of service or support. Therefore the development of contracts for services and supports should take into account the context of a life-plan and a strategy for long-term independence and fulfillment. A number of conversations about individualized planning may provide insights for the development of a contracting process. We heard that planning for individuals should be:

- **Outcome focused**

Planning to “do” and planning to “achieve” are two very different things, said participants. A plan that describes units of service is not as meaningful as a plan based on outcomes and desired results. We heard that outcome-focused planning that defines results and the action steps that will be taken to meet those results is important. In addition, participants were clear that outcomes-focused planning has to be closely tied to performance measurement and should drive decisions about what to measure.

- **Long-term**

Annual planning is important and needs to be anchored in long-term life planning, said participants. They said it’s important to look at the stages of an individual’s life and plan for these stages, as well as annually. Individuals with developmental disabilities and their families want to design their lives in the same way as anybody else, and so annual planning needs to take into consideration a long-range plan for the six or more decades of adult life.

- **Prioritized and important**

Participants said that planning is sometimes difficult in the context of the day-to-day pressures of service provision. Participants talked about the importance of effectively documenting plans so that there can be continuity of strategy over time as well as appropriate progression of service provision.

- **Collaborative**

Participants emphasized that planning should be an inclusive and respectful activity that includes, wherever possible: the adult receiving service, their family, the regional PDD representative responsible for recommending funding support, the agency or worker providing service

and anyone else the individual considers an important ally. Such 360-degree planning results in more comprehensive feedback and more robust plan development. Parents expressed a strong desire for their input and expertise into their loved one to be respected and considered in planning. They also described the challenge of not being given information about the plan for their family member. Service providers described challenges with engaging some families in a planning process. Both groups agreed on the importance of thoughtful, inclusive and mutually respectful planning.

**“All planning is personal – it’s about the people we love.”**

- **Personalized and practical**

For planning to be meaningful and relevant, participants said that it has to be individualized and intent on achieving realistic goals for the individual. While there was agreement that having long-range aspirations for an individual’s life is important, these long-term plans have to be balanced against practical and achievable goals that enhance quality of life in the short-term.

### **Performance**

*“How do you measure happiness?”* was a prevailing question. Participants said that within the PDD world, the search for a meaningful performance measurement framework must centre on a commitment to accountability and best practice, and an ability to assess, capture and report happiness in all its dimensions. For families, the well-being of their loved ones is paramount and they know that this represents a combination of factors. The key themes related to performance were:

- **Not about paper/ process**

Performance measurement is about people. It’s about capturing the important landmarks of how their lives are progressing and it’s about working to the plan that has been developed collaboratively.

- **Ongoing measurement**

Performance measurement cannot be conducted at one point in time, it must be an ongoing and evolving process that is subtle enough to capture short term results, and developments across a life, yet sophisticated enough to capture the next level of an individuals’ aspirations.

- **Open and transparent**

Participants talked about the importance of open performance measurement and transparent reporting, similar to the Supportive Living Public Reporting Information program on the Seniors and Community Supports Ministry website. Families want to access reporting on their family member and feel that prospective families should be able to access general performance results for an agency.

- **Inclusive**

Performance measurement should be inclusive of all perspectives, said participants. Given the many relationships that impact the success of an

**“We need to change our focus to measuring quality of life in tangible, day-to-day ways.”**

individual's life, participants felt that consideration should be given to the most comprehensive, inclusive and multi-faceted performance measurement approach.

**“This is a people business; the people at the front line make all the difference.”**

### Staffing

Quality staffing is a key ingredient of an effective contracting process. Participants said that to achieve outcomes set in contracts, service providers need stable, reliable and knowledgeable staff. However, this can be a challenge for a range of reasons. We heard participants talk about the following issues:

- **Education, ongoing professional development and training**

Ideally, staff members should be well-trained, have opportunities for ongoing professional development and training and see potential for advancement and a meaningful career in the sector.

- **Need for a stable workforce**

Service providers described their challenges in trying to attract and retain the kind of staff skilled in being able to work with individuals to reach their greatest potential. Families described finding, keeping and developing these important staff members as the one thing that would make an enormous difference in the lives of their loved ones.

- **Salary pressures**

While some staff members are deeply committed and highly skilled, participants said that employees in the sector are not paid sufficiently to be able to commit to a career path within disability services.

### Focus group process

- **MLA leadership**

Participants were uniformly pleased to see the focus group process led by an elected official. Not only did having an elected government representative convey to the participants that the government was “truly listening”, participants also felt that they were speaking directly, in an unfiltered way, to the Minister.

- **Not enough time to talk**

Many participants said that they would have liked more time for the discussions. While they were happy that the session was held in their community and understood that it was important for the individuals to have time on the agenda as well, they did make the point that a full day of discussions might have allowed for more in-depth contributions.

**“It’s important that there’s action after this conversation. It’s time for action”.**



- **Keep talking and listening**

Every session closed with participants saying that they felt the tone of the conversation was collaborative, fair and useful and they urged PDD to continue to organize focus group sessions on important topics.

Participants also urged the PDD system to act on the input received and reflect the advice in their future changes. The consensus at these sessions seemed to be that they represented an opportunity for a new era of trust and ongoing collaboration between PDD provincially, PDD regionally, service providers, families and individuals.

## Key Considerations

While the focus of these conversations was on a new contracting process, the issues raised were wide ranging and have implications for all aspects of the changes that are being implemented across the system. There may be insight here into assisting with all four key recommendations accepted by the Minister, including advice on:

- The “one organization” approach
- An improved contracting process
- Enhancing the family managed services option
- Introducing common processes and IT systems

The following ten observations could be key considerations as PDD moves forward with its approach to contracting reform and with its ongoing commitment to engagement and trust building.

### **1. *Excellence should always prevail.***

There is a lot that works in the system and any criticism of the system should be viewed as a positive opportunity to build an even more robust network of relationships and processes that are focused on success and happiness for individuals. The individuals served by the PDD system deserve excellence in all aspects of their service provision. It is an end worth striving for.

### **2. *Community engagement yields great wisdom . . . and enhances trust.***

We learned more through this process of conversations with the community than we could have by just planning contracting enhancements at the administrative level. There was great wisdom and insight provided by individuals, families and service providers and it enhanced our understanding of the realities that individuals face. In addition, the process of working together and having difficult conversations was an important example of building trust and nurturing relationships. Wherever feasible, input into pivotal PDD system decisions should be sought from the stakeholders who are affected by them. Participant evaluation of the sessions indicated a high degree of satisfaction with being heard and with the opportunity to provide input, and demonstrated an appetite for more conversations of this nature.

### **3. *Continue to proceed carefully.***

Participants were encouraged to hear that contracting reform will take place in a measured way and will feature pilot projects to test concepts. This is very important. Only when there can be evidence of positive change will stakeholders accept that contracting reform is a good idea.

### **4. *Balance the need for formal government procurement practices with common sense***

In a “people business” such as PDD, stakeholders yearn for plain language, common sense and a commitment to quality of life to prevail in decision-making. Any changes to the contracting process need to pass the “good sense” test and minimize bureaucratic and administrative complexity.

**5. *Be mindful of regional differences.***

Issues in rural and remote Alberta can be very different from those in urban centres. A “one-size fits all” approach to contracting changes will not take these geographic differences into account. While consistency and commonality across the province are important, these factors have to be weighed against the regional realities that impact service delivery.

**6. *Be very careful about competitive contracting.***

This issue was a true “lightning rod” in the focus groups. Concerns were expressed passionately and with vigor. This was the issue that most divided the participants. Given this, proceeding with a contracting process featuring competitive contracting will have to be done with extreme care. Wherever possible, competitive bidding should be thought of as “building agreements” rather than “bidding for work”, with the emphasis being on having an accountable and transparent process that results in the best possible service provision for individuals.

**7. *Put people not process first.***

Any element of system change, be it contract enhancements or anything else, must be focused on the well being of the 9,300 individuals served by the PDD system. They are among the most vulnerable of Albertans and require our most thoughtful work to improve the system that serves them. In the search for efficiencies in time and resources, the commitment to personalized service and compassion must be preserved.

**8. *Stay the course on workforce stabilization.***

There is important work already underway to stabilize the PDD frontline workforce, and this should be continued. High quality service providers and staff make the biggest difference to the quality of life of individuals. Making work in this sector a rewarding and fairly compensated vocation should be a long-term goal of the PDD system.

**9. *Self-advocates have much to teach us.***

Listening to the individuals receiving services and supports yields great insight. Only by “walking a mile in their shoes” can we begin to design a system that is sensitive to their needs and respectful of their desire for dignified, independent lives. As contracting reform continues, so should opportunities for conversations with individuals who are most impacted by the change.

**10. *Recognize that change is complex.***

These conversations were, among other things, an important opportunity to build trust. However, making change at a system-level is complex and often “messy” work. Change management best practice would suggest that change is:

- Incremental and ongoing
- Based on a meeting of leadership principles and grass-roots practice (top down **and** bottom up)
- Founded in a common understanding and belief that new actions need be taken
- Context sensitive and open to variety
- An optimistic willingness to face some failure in order to strive for improvement

## Conclusion

The focus group sessions across the province were a tremendous opportunity for PDD provincially and regionally to learn from individuals, service providers and families. They were also an important opportunity for these groups to learn from each other. In the important work of building a better system, a commitment to listening, sharing ideas and respecting divergent input is key. Any future enhancements to the PDD system will be more meaningful, of a higher calibre and more readily accepted by stakeholders, if they take into account the insights that were generously provided by participants in this process.

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## Glossary of Terms

**AGTA:** *Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act*, a piece of Alberta legislation that provides supportive decision-making options and safeguards to protect vulnerable adults who are no longer able to make all of their own decisions. Guardians are appointed under this legislation.

**AISH:** Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped, a Government of Alberta program that provides financial and health-related assistance to eligible Albertans with permanent disabilities.

**Alternate contracting:** a new way of doing contracts between the PDD Community Boards and service providers, to make the contracting process more outcomes-focused, consistent across the province, and efficient.

**Board:** refers to the governing body of the Community Board, which is comprised of the Chair, Vice Chair and board members.

**CEO:** Chief Executive Officer. In the PDD program, CEOs are responsible for delivering services within each of the six PDD regions. The CEO reports to the Community Board as well as the Assistant Deputy Minister within the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports.

**Client Service Coordinator** (or Coordinator): PDD program staff function involved with clients, determining and adjusting supports to meet their needs and regular monitoring of the supports received from service providers or family managed programs.

**Community inclusion:** being able to live, work, and access activities in the community like all other citizens.

**Competitive bidding:** a process by which vendors bid to win a contract by submitting proposals to do specific work for a specific fee. E.g. In the case of the PDD program, the PDD Community Board would issue an RFP, service provider agencies would then submit their proposals for contracts, and the PDD Community Board would select the proposal they believe would provide the best services for the most reasonable fee.

**Contract:** a legally binding document. In PDD, contracts outline services to be provided, outcomes expected, and agreed-upon fees.

**Contract Manager:** PDD program staff function involved in managing contracts and relationship with service providers.

**Direct operations:** facilities owned and operated by the Government of Alberta where individuals with developmental disabilities receive supports.

**Facilitator:** a person who works with a focus group to help consolidate and summarize the feedback into clear ideas and key points.

**Family Managed Administrator:** refers to the family or guardian that enters into a contractual arrangement with the PDD program to administer supports for an individual either by hiring staff or a service provider.

**Family Managed Services:** an option within the PDD program that enables families to hire and administer their own supports and services for their family member.

**Flexible funding:** refers to ability of service providers to respond quickly to an individual's changing needs through a greater focus on the “what” (the outcome for the individual) rather than the “how” in the contracting process. This could be achieved through a change in the contracting process that allows service providers more flexibility in the use of funds, multiple service options within categories, and more decision-making autonomy. (Based on the “What

We Heard” report from the 2010 consultations on increasing flexibility in the contracting process, which is available online at: [www.seniors.alberta.ca/pdd](http://www.seniors.alberta.ca/pdd))

**Focus groups:** A group of people who are brought together to discuss and provide input on a particular topic, e.g. the consultations government is doing with families, guardians, individuals and service providers to get their input and ideas about a new contracting process for PDD.

**Guardian:** A person who is legally responsible and has been appointed by the court to make personal decisions for an individual who is incapable of managing their own affairs, e.g. a family member, friend, or a Public Guardian.

**Individual:** a person with a developmental disability who receives supports from the PDD program.

**KPMG:** An independent consulting firm that performed a review of the PDD program’s administrative spending and provided Minister with a report on findings.

**MLA:** Member of the Legislative Assembly – an elected representative of an electoral district within Alberta. e.g. Genia Leskiw, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

**Note taker:** the person who records the feedback of the focus group.

**OPG:** Office of the Public Guardian, which provides decision-making mechanisms for individuals who are unable to make personal, non-financial decisions for themselves.

**Outcomes:** the intended results, consequences, behaviours or attitudes that indicate progress toward achievement of a goal. e.g. in the case of PDD, desirable outcomes for individuals supported by PDD include social inclusion, emotional well-being, personal development, and self-determination.

**PDD Community Boards:** Crown Agencies that are responsible for community and corporate governance in six regions of the province: Northeast, Northwest, Edmonton, Central, Calgary, and South. “Community Board” refers to the entire Community Board organization, including the Board of Directors, the CEO, and staff.

**PDD Program:** Persons with Developmental Disabilities program, a provincial government program that provides funding for staff supports for adult Albertans with developmental disabilities.

**PDD Program Branch:** a unit within the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports.

**PDD Supports:** the PDD program offers four types of support

- **Community Living Supports:** provides assistance to help individuals live as independently as possible in their home environments, including private residences, support homes, group homes, etc.
- **Employment Supports:** train, educate and support individuals to gain and maintain paid employment.
- **Community Access Supports:** staffing supports to help people participate in community activities.
- **Specialized Community Supports:** generally short-term supports provided in unique circumstances (e.g. behavioral supports or psychological counseling)

**Performance measurement:** numerical measurements of the degree of success that an organization has in achieving its goals. e.g. a performance measurement in PDD might include the overall percentage of families who report satisfaction with their services.

**Priority Actions:** six initiatives, announced in 2008 that are intended to improve the PDD program. The six Priority Actions are:

- Introduce an eligibility regulation for program services
- Define mission and core businesses of the PDD program
- Develop a consistent approach to assessing individual support needs and related funding
- Increase flexibility for families to manage their own supports:
- Improve supports for people with complex needs
- Increase effectiveness and efficiency, internally and within the service delivery sector

**Region:** refers to one of the six regions that comprise the PDD program.

**RFP:** Request for Proposal, an invitation for suppliers to submit a proposal, or “bid” to provide a service

**Self-advocate:** an individual with a developmental disability who advocates for the concerns and needs of people with disabilities. Self-advocates are often their own guardians.

**Service provider:** a community-based agency that provides the front-line PDD supports and services to individuals with developmental disabilities.

**Service provider network:** refers to the collective group of service providers delivering supports in any region or across the province.

**Supports Intensity Scale (SIS):** a tool used to evaluate the support requirements of an individual with a developmental disability. The SIS measures the frequency, amount and type of supports an individual needs to participate in areas such as home living, community living, lifelong learning, employment, health and safety, and social activities.