

**Notes for presentation to House of Commons Standing  
Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the  
Status of Persons with Disabilities**

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**Introduction – Charles Ramsey**

We want to thank the Committee for accommodating our request to make this presentation. We were pleased to also submit a written brief on the issue of Workplace Literacy.

Our purpose in this presentation to the Standing Committee is to emphasize the need for federal government investment and leadership in both workforce and workplace literacy for adult Canadians.

**The Need – Charles Ramsey**

The importance of literacy in all aspects of the lives of Canadians has been well established by the various international literacy surveys including the recent International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. We know that 42% of working-age Canadians have serious literacy challenges. We also know that 54% of adults with literacy challenges are employed. We also know that only 2.2 % of the dollars that employers spend on training go to literacy. These figures show the serious affect not only on Canada's prosperity, but the prosperity of adult Canadians and their ability to participate in a democratic society.

The importance of a solution to address the literacy issue with leadership and investment by the federal government has been well documented. The first example of this documentation is the 2003 report entitled *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: the Need for a Pan-Canadian Response* by this same Standing Committee. A second important example is the consultations conducted by the federal government on literacy and essential skills with stakeholders across the country in 2005.

Investing in adults with literacy challenges is also an investment in their children. We know that parents often choose to improve their literacy skills so they can read to their children, and help them with their homework as well as set an example with respect to the importance of learning and getting an education. Literacy rich environments created by adults are critical to the literacy development of children.

## **NALD – Charles Ramsey**

In our own work at the National Adult Literacy Database or NALD we see the thirst for, and extent of the need for literacy resources and supports across the country.

NALD is an on-line library which provides information on adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities to anyone, anywhere, anytime, at no cost to the user and in both French and English. - The numbers show the breadth and depth of our services and of our reach.

I'd like to illustrate with some figures:

In the year 1997-98 there were 172,000 visits to the NALD website. By March 2006 this number had increased to over 9 million. Similarly, just six years ago, the number of PDF documents downloaded from NALD totaled about 36,000. In 2005-6, over 4.4 million PDF documents were downloaded. I could give you more numbers, but these are sufficient to provide an indication of the magnitude of the need out there.

I want to acknowledge that the federal government has recognized the important work of NALD. Recently, HRSDC announced support of \$1.6M over three years to enable NALD to develop and implement the Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Clearinghouse and Portal. This will allow us to provide a bilingual single-source, comprehensive, up to date and easily accessible database of workplace literacy and essential skills programs, resources, services

and activities to those involved and connected to the workforce and workplace literacy field.

### **The Cuts – Sue Folinsbee**

At the same time we applaud the federal government's investment in the future work of NALD, we are dismayed and perplexed by the recent government cuts especially the 17.7 million dollars to the National Office of Literacy and Learning (NOLL) funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). We would like to know what evidence was used to decide that the services and programs that were cut were not value for money. We would also like to know why the government made these cuts with no consultation with the literacy community.

NOLL funds that were cut provided critical support to literacy programs including those that prepare adults with literacy challenges to participate in the work force and adults in the workplace who need to upgrade.

These cuts affect crucial support to programs such as coordination, promotion, learner recruitment, professional development for practitioners, research, partnership development, and sharing of best practices. We can already see the disastrous effects of these cuts across the country as provincial and regional networks, and coalitions, that have provided supports for decades are, or will be forced to close, or severely downsize. It is unclear to us whether the cuts will affect the workplace education partnerships in place in several provinces such as Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and the NWT where employers, labour, and provincial governments work together to promote and deliver workplace literacy programs. Nor is clear what the effect will be on provincial and territorial federations of labour. Federations have been successful partners in workplace literacy partnerships. Their work and these successful examples of provincial partnerships should be strengthened and enhanced, not cut.

These provincial and territorial organizations are also important partners that NALD and other national organizations work closely with to do their own work efficiently and cost effectively.

We imagine that the negative long-term effects of these cuts on adults with literacy challenges and the programs that are desperately trying to provide services to them on already limited resources will be severe.

This funding is effectively the glue that holds the adult literacy infrastructure together. Without the glue we are left with disconnected bits and pieces at the program level and a missing link especially at the provincial and territorial levels between national organizations like NALD and the program level. This infrastructure allowed practitioners and others in the field to work together in a way that prevented waste because no one had to reinvent the wheel.

In talking about federal government cutbacks, we must take account of the funds under the Labour Market Partnership Agreements. The federal government has not honoured signed agreements with the provinces of Ontario, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The LMPA funds were to be spent on labour market programs for currently employed workers, including literacy programs.

### **Recommendations – Sue Folinsbee**

The impacts and results of workplace literacy programming have been well established throughout the years by organizations such as ABC CANADA, the Conference Board of Canada, the Canadian Association of Municipal Employers, the Canadian Labour Congress and various unions.

At this point, we would like to make a number of recommendations to the Standing Committee:

- 1) First, we ask the federal government to restore the 17.7 million dollars to HRSDC's ALLESP program immediately. The cuts contradict the advice of this same committee, which in 2003 called for an end to the "patchwork approach" to adult literacy, highlighted the need for a national vision and a pan-Canadian strategy, and called for increased investment.

- 2) Secondly, we urge the federal government to honour and transfer committed funds to the provinces through the Labour Market Partnership Agreements.
- 3) Third, we strongly encourage the Standing Committee to review the 2003 report by this same committee *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: the Need for a Pan-Canadian Response* especially concerning the:
  - a) development of a pan-Canadian accord,
  - b) an increase in the annual grants and contributions budget that would continue to be delivered through the National Funding Stream and the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Funding Stream.
- 4) Fourth, we urge the Standing Committee to review the ideas and recommendations from the cross-country 2005 literacy and essential skills consultation roundtables held with stakeholders including employers and unions across the country. This includes ideas that the federal government could use for increasing employer investment in workplace literacy such as learning from the 1% training tax levy that is used in Quebec.
- 5) Lastly, we urge the federal government to consider a joint partnership model with both private and public sector employers and unions along with other important stakeholders to provide a shared vision and plan of action to address the need for workforce and workplace literacy. We encourage a broad definition of literacy rather than narrow one that just considers the present job. We encourage multiple entry points for upgrading as well as strategies and initiatives that are flexible and contextual. We discourage a “one size fits all” approach.

In conclusion, we would just like to say that support for adults with literacy challenges is not only about their participation in Canada's economic life but is also about participation in their communities, with their families and as citizens in a democratic society. With strong leadership and investment in adult literacy by the federal government not only adults with literacy challenges gain, we all do.