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## **“A Place to Work Like Any Other?”**

### **Sheltered Workshops in Canada, 1970-1985**

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#### **Abstract**

This article explores the emergence and evolution of sheltered employment in Canada during a period in which the discourse of disability and role of rehabilitation became increasingly contested. From the early 1970s to mid-1980s, sheltered workshops were an integral part of an evolving Canadian welfare state that provided employment to people who were unable to compete in an exclusive capitalist labour market due to physical impairments, intellectual disabilities, or mental health issues. As workplaces within a token economy, sheltered work did not reflect true employment relationships with workers earning “symbolic” rather than “real” wages. Though sheltered work was initially conceived as a strictly transitional part of the rehabilitation process, the workshop system was repurposed in the 1960s and 1970s to handle new pressures created by the deinstitutionalization movement. Workshops acquired new controversial meanings due to these changing workforce demographics, attracting increasingly vocal condemnation from disability rights groups. Eventually, critics launched campaigns to undermine public support for sheltered workshops which were painted as obstacles to the pursuit of full participation in society. Sheltered employment was thus situated at the vanguard of changes in the discourse of disability in Canada during this period and reflected emerging debates about the economic rights and opportunities available to people with disabilities in modern Canadian society.

#### **Keywords**

disability activism, disability rights movement, work, employment, deinstitutionalization, sheltered workshop, vocational rehabilitation, token economy

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In 1978 Canadian disability rights activists wondered aloud, "Why, when we have the creativity and the resources to establish meaningful, long term jobs, do we continue to accept the status quo of the sheltered workshops as opposed to community integrated employment alternatives?"<sup>1</sup> A number of obstacles confronted people with disabilities in Canada during the 1970s and 1980s as they attempted to participate in the labour market, including pervasive inaccessibility that perpetuated exclusion from opportunities to gain conventional work and life experiences. Deemed unfit to work by mainstream standards but requiring social and vocational skills necessary for the transition to paid employment, many people with disabilities were channeled into the sheltered workshop system, performing work designed to develop their vocational skills. Yet, sheltered workshops reflected broader social, political and economic dynamics that surrounded the problem of disability during this period. Sheltered workers were neither fully "patients" nor "workers" but laboured within a transitional, liminal space originally designed to ensure that people deemed unemployable could engage in work appropriate to their abilities and build skills that would eventually transfer to gainful employment. In fact, sheltered workshops were neither able to rectify the chronic poverty and unemployment of disabled people nor reconcile critical problems that undermined the workshop model itself. The workshop system

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<sup>1</sup> Archives of Manitoba (hereafter MA), Council of Canadians with Disabilities (hereafter CCD) Fonds, Box P5367, File 2, Conference Proceedings, Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (hereafter COPOH) National Employment Conference, 1978.

formed an integral part of an evolving welfare state, revealing the exclusive nature of Canada's economic system which stigmatized people with disabilities unable to compete effectively in the mainstream labour market.

The following article examines the role and evolution of sheltered workshops in Canada during a period in which the advent of disability rights activism created countervailing pressures on the workshop system. By 1970, the deinstitutionalization movement produced substantive changes in the workshop system. Fifteen years later, the same forces that invigorated the workshop system were forced to come to terms with its limitations in supporting full participation, producing yet another paradigmatic change in policies and practices affecting marginalized working-age disabled people. As a result, sheltered workshops were situated at the centre of changes in the discourse of disability and debates about community living and the rights and opportunities available to people with disabilities. An initial discussion of the purpose of sheltered workshops moves into analysis of the relationship between workshop advocacy and disability activism. The final two sections follow the transformation of this relationship as workshops experimented with the industrialization of the workshop practices.

### **Employability and the Role of Sheltered Workshops**

A common dilemma encountered by Canadians with disabilities in the labour market revolved around subjective determinations of their employability. Brian Doyle describes a strategic process many disabled jobseekers followed when applying for a new job; "Do disabled persons argue that their disabilities are serious, thereby attracting the defence that they are unable to carry out the essential elements of the job, or do they contend that their disabilities are not so severe as to effect employability, thereby risking a finding that they are not sufficiently disabled

to attract the law's protection?"<sup>2</sup> Assessments of one's employability by employers, rehabilitation professionals, social workers and jobseekers themselves, involved a subjective evaluation of an individual's skills, background and general utility in the labour market. For many people with visible or non-visible disabilities the subjectivity of employability often weighed heavily against determinations of their fitness to work in mainstream settings.<sup>3</sup>

The concept that work could be therapeutic was a popular theme in medical and social work practices stretching back to the establishment of Victorian institutions for people with disabilities. In his examination of patient labour at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, historian Geoffrey Reaume documented the consistent application of therapeutic work regimes in psychiatric institutions in Ontario from the 1870s to the post-First World War period.<sup>4</sup> Medical experts believed the provision of regular, if not demanding, labour served to stabilize "disturbed" or "distracted" minds by encouraging patients to focus on the immediate tasks of their occupation. Similarly, the provision of largely physical work to "emotionally disturbed" soldiers and civilians with mental health problems was seen to have rehabilitative effects.<sup>5</sup> Sheltered workshops in Canada evolved from mid to late-nineteenth century work programs for blind people designed to provide work deemed appropriate to their abilities, such as basket weaving, thread spinning, and other light assembly.<sup>6</sup> The earliest workshops that survived into the 1970s in Canada dated to the aftermath of the First World War when a surge in resources for war-

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Doyle, *Disability, Discrimination and Equal Opportunities: A Comparative Study of the Employment Rights of Disabled Persons* (New York: Mansell, 1995), 199.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Peters, "The Politics of Disability Identity," in *Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights*, ed. Len Barton (New York: Longman Publishing, 1996), 220.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 134.

<sup>5</sup> Friedland, *Restoring the Spirit*, 155.; Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), RG 7-148, Box B335962, File "Workshops," Paper, Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (hereafter MCSS), "1978 Workshop Survey: Research and Statistics Section," 20 April 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Durlinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 186.; Fleischer and Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement*, 19.; Greenland, *Vision Canada*, 103-104.

wounded veterans created demand for protected settings in which injured and war-blinded veterans could acquire competitive work-related skills as part of the resettlement process. By the 1920s, occupational therapists staffed "curative workshops" (as sheltered workshops were originally called) which formed part of the steady growth of the rehabilitation industry in Canada.

The provision of work-as-therapy and expansion of the workshop system as an integral part in the development of the modern social welfare state was partly motivated by the widespread cultural fear of idleness. In her historical analysis of the emerging field of occupational therapy in Canada, Judith Friedland notes that sheltered workshops provided jobs and work skills to people whose impairments otherwise disqualified them from competitive employment.<sup>7</sup> As part of a regime of therapeutic intervention in the lives of disabled people, work in workshops—even if unproductive, unpaid and uncompetitive—was seen by medical and rehabilitation professionals to convey desired physical, psychological, and social benefits. For people with physical disabilities, workshops represented the latter stages of rehabilitation by restoring physical ability and self-confidence while providing work skills that would improve employability and enable future entry to the mainstream labour market. Workshops were considered to protect people with disabilities unable to compete in the labour market from the bodily, intellectual and morally deleterious effects of idleness on physical and social functionality. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, "As modernization proceeded, the disabled figure shouldered in new ways society's anxiety about its inability to retain the status and old meanings of labor in the face of industrialization and increasing economic and social chaos."<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Reaume concludes that unpaid work was seen as part of a moral treatment for apparent

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<sup>7</sup> Friedland, *Restoring the Spirit*, 155.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 47.

idleness which presumably contributed to poor mental as well as physical health.<sup>9</sup> Workshops were thus seen to protect disabled people from various moral hazards while providing them with structured opportunities for the development of vocational skills.

Shut out of the competitive labour market, many people with disabilities were forced to accept work in sheltered workshops. The notion that people with disabilities were "better off" in long-term care facilities led families to relinquish their disabled children into the care of professionals and policymakers to devote extraordinary resources to costly residential facilities. Reflecting upon her visits to sheltered workshops, however, Judith Heumann, pioneering American disability rights activist, recalls, "I remember one day we went to visit a sheltered workshop in Manhattan. We had a meeting with one of the executives. I remember this guy telling me that people had a choice. No one forced people to come to a sheltered workshop. If they really didn't like it there, they didn't have to come. I remember saying to him I didn't think people were really being given a choice if their choice was staying at home or coming out, at least being here. It didn't seem to me that was a choice."<sup>10</sup> Shut out of competitive employment in the mainstream labour market, many people with disabilities were forced to accept work in sheltered workshops regardless of its measurable benefits.

Indeed, the nature of sheltered work was conventionally unskilled and non-marketable, and thus people in workshops gained little actual competitive work experience. Classified as trainees to be compensated with "symbolic" stipends instead of actual wages, sheltered workers were training to *become* employable rather than gaining skills that in fact *made* them

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Reaume, "Patients at Work: Insane Asylum Inmates' Labour in Ontario, 1841-1900," in *Rethinking Normalcy: A Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2009), 158.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Pelka, *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement* (Cambridge: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 186.

employable. As a result, workshops were insulated from the economic dynamics in the broader labour market which also permitted administrators to eschew adherence to traditional labour rights and employment contracts. The symbolic nature of sheltered work also raised larger concerns about the ability of workshops to effectively address the displacement of disabled people from the labour market. Indeed, reliance on sheltered work indicated larger social and economic problems created by designating entire categories of people "unemployable" by means of their physical and mental abilities. Since paid employment was necessary to survive and be fully independent in the Canadian capitalist economy, sheltered workers were effectively denied the right to full citizenship under the pretense of "protection." Moreover, as workshops evolved to meet new demands on the system, proponents of the workshop system found it increasingly difficult to conceal the essentially charitable and symbolic nature of sheltered work.

### **Workshop Advocacy and Relations with Disability Activism**

The sheltered workshop system experienced a number of transitions during the twentieth century in response to changes in the broader sociopolitical environment. The workshop model evolved over the course of two World Wars and numerous medical advancements that drastically changed the lived experience of disability. Throughout this time, sheltered workshops were generally considered an essential strategy that promoted the economic integration of people adapting to some form of physical or mental impairment. During the Second World War and remainder of the 1940s, the federal Department of Veterans Affairs injected massive federal funds into the rehabilitation industry to expedite the recovery of "unemployable" injured



soldiers.<sup>11</sup> By the 1950s, the rehabilitation system officially transitioned back to care for the civilian population as federal funding receded and injured veterans completed training programs. Sheltered work typically figured into the latter stages of these vocational rehabilitation programs as most veterans participating in sheltered work were typically working-age men expecting to re-enter the labour market at some point.

Sheltered employment blurred the boundaries between separate disciplines that served similar but distinctly different populations. Occupational therapy and vocational rehabilitation programs in the healthcare and social service sectors formed concurrent thrusts within the workshop model. Where occupational therapy typically involved therapeutic intervention to develop an individual's functional skills and tasks related to daily living, vocational rehabilitation reflected a more intensive focus on employment integration through job coaching, training, and placement. Vocational rehabilitation extended from the longstanding support of the work-as-therapy model which facilitated the integration of people with disabilities in the labour market. Although work-as-therapy was a universal concept that informed both occupational therapy and vocational rehabilitation, sheltered workshops were originally designed to develop clients' work-related skills that would eventually enable labour market re-entry. Unlike "day centers" where deinstitutionalized people with intellectual disabilities attended to develop remedial life skills in the community, workshops were originally more closely focused on employment integration.<sup>12</sup> These dual currents meant that people with a range of abilities ultimately ended up utilizing the workshop model as part of their individual trajectories of

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Tremblay, "Going Back to Main Street: The Development and Impact of Casualty Rehabilitation for Veterans with Disabilities, 1945-1948," in *The Veterans Charter and Post-World War II Canada*, ed. Peter Neary and J.L. Granatstein (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 161, 173-174.; Reaume, *Lyndhurst*, 68.; Mary Tremblay et al, "When Elevators Were for Pianos," 104, 111-112.; Durflinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 283.

<sup>12</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 5, Paper, COPOH, "A Proposal: COPOH Employment Policy," 1982.; MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q012249, File 14, Brief, COPOH, "Fact Sheet," 1983.

rehabilitation. As a result, the workshop system was theoretically capable of addressing the needs of diverse populations of people with acquired and congenital disabilities with a wide spectrum of different rehabilitation needs and objectives.

The majority of sheltered workshops in the 1960s and early 1970s in Canada primarily served people with acquired physical disabilities given the traditional response to the "problem" of disability in Canada included segregation in residential institutions and community "day centres." These workshops closely reflected a focus on vocational rehabilitation and workforce integration. The acceptance of vocational rehabilitation as a transitional process in one's physical and emotional recovery meant sheltered work was featured in rehabilitation processes intended to facilitate greater economic participation. The emphasis on labour market participation contrasted with the nature of occupational work therapy regimes in residential institutions which were more focused on long-term care than skills-oriented vocational rehabilitation programs.<sup>13</sup> Occupational work therapy had long figured as an integral aspect of patient life in psychiatric institutions under the direction of "ward aides," as occupational therapists were originally known. Work therapy was considered by rehabilitation professionals to promote physical fitness, calm psychological turbulence by providing tangible activities, ensuring that patients were more compliant for staff while supplying cheap labour to subsidize the hefty operating costs of residential institutions.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1970s, however, these separate systems began to converge. The emergence of the deinstitutionalization movement reconfigured the workshop model to meet new demands as thousands of deinstitutionalized people with developmental disabilities and mental health issues

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Sandys, "'It Does My Heart Good': The Perceptions of Employers Who Have Hired People with Intellectual Disabilities Through Supported Employment Programs" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1993), 55.

<sup>14</sup> Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past*, 144.

placed new pressures on the workshop system. Goodwill Industries, in operation since the mid-1930s, reported that deinstitutionalization transformed their organizational workforce to include unprecedented numbers of people with "mental handicaps."<sup>15</sup> Workshops thus became not just a transitional means to paid employment but a way for recently deinstitutionalized populations to secure remedial skills that enabled them to participate in the community.<sup>16</sup> Occupational therapists, key to residential labour regimes and community-based day programs, found new sources of employment in the expanding workshop system. Whether or not participation in sheltered workshops led to paid employment for deinstitutionalized people was no longer the primary focus since workshop proponents were often more concerned with ensuring ex-patients had sufficient resources in the community.<sup>17</sup>

Deinstitutionalization fostered closer connections between family advocates, rehabilitation professionals and disability rights activists under the banner of community living. Initially focused on reform within psychiatric hospitals following mounting evidence of poor living conditions and quality of care, the popularization of community living philosophies turned many concerned parents, rehabilitation workers and disability rights activists into vociferous advocates for the closure of psychiatric hospitals. The development of community-based social services, accommodations, and other supports figured prominently in the movement to deinstitutionalize people with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues. Parents groups forged coalitions that evolved into service agencies, such as the March of Dimes and Canadian

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Grimm, "Working with Handicaps: Americans with Disabilities, Goodwill Industries and Employment, 1920s—1970s" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2002), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Norman Acton, "Employment of Disabled Persons: Where Are We Going?" *International Labour Review* 120:1 (1981): 5.; MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q01225, File "DPU," Paper, Disabled Persons Unit, "Status Report on the Integration of Adult Persons with Disabilities into the Regular Labour Market" (3 July 1992).; AO, RG 7-148, Box B100615, File "ABT Associates Wage Permit Study #2," Report, ABT Associates, "Wage Permits for Handicapped Employees" (7 November 1980).

<sup>17</sup> John Alexander, *Capabilities and Social Justice: The Political Philosophy of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

Association for Community Living, which lobbied the state to replace residential institutions with community-based services. Rehabilitation professionals, meanwhile, devoted much of their attention and resources to developing local and national organizations such as the Canadian Council for Rehabilitation Workshops (CCRW), Canadian Rehabilitation Council for the Disabled (CRCD), and other professional associations that fuelled political lobbying at provincial and federal levels and stimulated public campaigns to promote the rehabilitation industry on behalf of disabled people.<sup>18</sup> Rehabilitation professionals were obliged to respond to the developing disability rights movement that spurred groups of mainly youthful people with physical disabilities, people with visual impairments, and psychiatric survivors to challenge the rehabilitation industry. Disability rights groups fostered social interaction among people with disabilities and helped to construct a sense of shared identity and common purpose against traditional beliefs and practices of professionals and service agencies that claimed to speak on their behalf. As these groups grew and evolved over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, they drew upon a developing international discourse that envisioned greater opportunities for disabled peoples' full participation, citizenship, and equality protected by certain inalienable legislated rights.

The end result of these converging interests meant that deinstitutionalization turned out to be a relatively swift process in Canada. Psychiatric hospitals housing approximately 70,000 people with developmental disabilities and mental health issues across Canada began shutting down as early as the mid-1960s.<sup>19</sup> By 1981, nearly 50,000 people had been deinstitutionalized or a whopping seventy-one per cent decrease in operating capacity. With the highest number of

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<sup>18</sup> Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, "Who We Are," accessed 20 September 2012, <http://web.archive.org/web/20000816033544/http://www.ccrw.org/ccrw/en/mission.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Sealy and Paul Whitehead, "Forty Years of Deinstitutionalization of Psychiatric Services in Canada: An Empirical Assessment," *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 49:4 (2004): 251.

institutionalized patients concentrated in Ontario, that province saw an eighty-five per cent decrease during the same period or more than 16,000 people discharged into the community within a span of ten to fifteen years.<sup>20</sup> Provincial governments steadily closed residential hospitals as a result of escalating operating costs, dwindling public funds and growing public opposition that rejected segregated models of care.

Rehabilitation professionals observed the transition to community living with a combination of optimism and skepticism. The official newsletter of the Canadian Association of Rehabilitation Personnel (CARP) released a special issue of their 1979 newsletter that took a detailed look at the closure of one major residential institution: the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital in Etobicoke, Ontario. The newsletter highlighted arguments "for" and "against" hospital closures, noting in the present case upwards of thirty million dollars in projected *costs* of renovation. This hardly compared to the immediate *savings* of approximately two-and-a-half million dollars and a further six million dollars in operating expenses that would result from closing the hospital.<sup>21</sup> Such cost-benefit analyses reflected broader concerns highlighted by the deinstitutionalization movement which argued that it "costs a great deal of taxpayers' dollars to keep people helpless."<sup>22</sup> Arguments against closure included the relative scarcity of alternative resources to supplement outpatient clinics and the likelihood that without adequate expansion of community supports, ex-patients would end up in boarding houses, motels, and on the street. The CARP editorial juxtaposed the demise of the hospital with the promise of sheltered workshops as

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<sup>20</sup> Sealy and Whitehead, "Forty Years of Deinstitutionalization," 251.

<sup>21</sup> AO, RG 7-148, Box B217563, File "Publications General 1981-82," Canadian Association of Rehabilitation Personnel, "The Case For and Against the Closing of the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital," *The Chronicle* 1:1 (1979).

<sup>22</sup> Marion Welsh, *Tales From a Human Warehouse: A Book About People with Special Needs* (Boston: Branden Press, 1982), 13.

"a place to work like any other" for deinstitutionalized ex-patients in a fast-growing network of community services.<sup>23</sup>

At first glance, the legacy of workshops as a feature of vocational rehabilitation appeared fully compatible with the principles and goals of deinstitutionalization. New workshops were created to address the particular needs of people with developmental disabilities, many of whom had spent their entire lives in psychiatric hospitals. People with disabilities were funneled into workshops partly because they were an available source of professional community support where few other options existed. Proponents of sheltered workshops, including parents, rehabilitation professionals and some policymakers argued that an existing network of sheltered workshops could address the unprecedented increased demand for community services for disabled people by providing a means for deinstitutionalized client populations to continue occupational work therapy or vocational rehabilitation programs they had been used to in residential settings. Joe Dale of the Ontario Disability Employment Network explained, "At the time, it was not understood that people who had a disability were capable of holding regular paid jobs and most of those who went to the Canada Manpower Centres or VRS [Vocational Rehabilitation Services] Employment Counsellors were typically referred to a sheltered workshop."<sup>24</sup> The residential institution system had in fact created yawning gaps in community-based services since many people's needs were presumably covered in segregated facilities. As a result, the deluge of people leaving residential hospitals put a severe strain on existing community-based resources, including the workshop system.

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<sup>23</sup> Welsh, *Tales From a Human Warehouse*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ontario Disability Employment Network, "A Brief History of Employment Services in Ontario for People Who Have a Disability: The Pendulum Swings," accessed 17 April 2014, <http://www.odenetwork.com/tag/sheltered-workshops/>

Private and public sector reviews of sheltered employment conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s noted what appeared to be a revolution in the workshop system. In Ontario, for example, Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) released a survey of workshops confirming the extent to which an evolving workshop system reflected broader trends in the rest of the country. From 1973 to 1978 provincial subsidies to sheltered workshops increased 674 per cent which coincided with the introduction of new government funding through federal-provincial finance agreements. Where only twenty-five workshops existed prior to 1960, by 1978 there were nearly 150 workshops receiving provincial subsidies. Such figures coincided with the rate of expansion of the American workshop system where eighty-five workshops in 1948 swelled to 1,500 employing 160,000 workers in the early 1970s, ballooning to 3000 workshops by 1976, to a peak of 650,000 workers by the mid-1980s.<sup>25</sup> Pre-1960s workshops in Canada were predominantly dedicated to serving the needs of people with physical disabilities. By the end of the 1970s, however, approximately seventy-five per cent of workshops included or were exclusively devoted to serving people with intellectual disabilities, echoing developments south of the border. By the early 1970s, the number of workshops for people with physical disabilities in Canada was eclipsed by those for people with intellectual disabilities and it was presumed that most new workshops were devoted to the latter.

Where sheltered workshops originally focused on the vocational rehabilitation needs of its mainly physically disabled clients seeking workforce re-entry, the workshop system of the 1970s was increasingly composed of clients learning life skills through occupational work therapy programs while living in the community. Frustrated with the apparent failure of sheltered employment to facilitate clients into meaningful paid employment, people with physical

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<sup>25</sup> Alberto Migliore, "Sheltered Workshops and Individual Employment: Perspectives of Consumers, Families, and Staff Members" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2006), 5.; Pelka, *What We Have Done*, 574.

disabilities increasingly turned away from workshops, pursuing other means of vocational rehabilitation and job coaching. By the early 1980s, it was common knowledge among disabled jobseekers and disability rights activists that workshops were failing to live up to their original purposes. A spokesperson for People First, an activist organization for people with intellectual disabilities noted, "They call it a training workshop. If you're there 10 years it's not training."<sup>26</sup>

Critics argued that workshop funding arrangements encouraged administrators to retain productive workers to meet production targets, thereby securing funding criteria; but this practice ultimately prevented these workers from moving into the paid labour market. When funding criteria changed to discourage these practices, critics again argued that workshop administrators focused their energies on finding work placements for the least disabled clients rather than helping those with greater needs; a practice known as "creaming."<sup>27</sup>

Workshop advocates, however, were less concerned with the legacy of sheltered workshops than using the workshop system to address the practical realities of facilitating deinstitutionalized populations and other clients gain a foothold in the community. As Michael Bach of the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) noted, "Through the 1950s and 1960s our associations for community living built an impressive infrastructure of special education, sheltered workshops and activity centres, and residential care arrangements, inspired by a vision that people with intellectual disabilities were as deserving of support and a chance in life as anyone else. By the 1970s, there were some voices among families and leaders of our movement

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<sup>26</sup> *The Disability Myth: Part Two: Beggars Can't Be Choosers*, directed by Alan Aylward (1984; Toronto: Lauron Productions, 1984) 16 mm.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur O'Reilly, *The Right to Decent Work of Persons with Disabilities* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2003), 133, 147.; Vera Chouinard and Valorie Crooks, "Negotiating Neoliberal Environments in British Columbia and Ontario, Canada: Restructuring of State-Voluntary Sector Relations and Disability Organizations' Struggles to Survive," *Environment & Planning* 26 (2008): 187-188.; Robert Wilton and Stephanie Schuer, "Towards Socio-Spatial Inclusion? Disabled People, Neoliberalism and the Contemporary Labour Market," *Area* 32:2 (2006): 186-195.; Robert Wilton, "Working at the Margins: Disabled People in Precarious Employment," in *Critical Disability Theory*, ed. Robert Devlin and Diane Pothier (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).



which began to challenge whether this was enough."<sup>28</sup> The 1979 MCSS workshop survey noted many major differences between workshops for people with intellectual disabilities and others for people with physical disabilities and mental health issues, particularly in respect to the influence of parents, program diversity, and complexity of tasks. Intellectually disabled sheltered workers were far more likely to have no work experience, spend longer duration in workshops on average and to rely on social welfare for income, family members for participation in programming, workshop managers for contract procurement. As a result, older distinctions between sheltered workshops and remedial occupational activity centres typically designated for people with "severe" intellectual disabilities were decreasingly relevant during this period as sheltered employment moved away from its associations with vocational rehabilitation.<sup>29</sup>

Workshops had experienced an unprecedented shift in density, clientele, and purpose as the workshop system was reconstructed to meet the needs of a changing disability community. As sheltered workshops increasingly came under fire by disability rights activists, policymakers, and a wider public, rehabilitation professionals and policymakers were forced to explore ways of improving the workshop system to address some of these concerns.

### **Industrialization of Sheltered Workshops**

By the 1970s the role and discourse around workshops became increasingly contested in Canada. American disability historian Paul Longmore observes, "The Disability Rights Movement is not a homogeneous or unitary effort. Rather, it is an assemblage of disability-based

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Bach, "Achieving Social and Economic Inclusion: From Segregation to 'Employment First,'" Canadian Association for Community Living, 2001, Foreword.

<sup>29</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q012250, File 45, Letter, Anonymous Concerned Citizen to COPOH, 5 March 1984.

political movements that sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete.”<sup>30</sup> Longmore observes the disability rights movement involves dynamic relations between separate groups with differing agendas which occasionally worked in tandem, but also conflicted with one another. Workshops in fact constituted a major struggle among competing disability movements in Canada as disability rights activists, family advocates, rehabilitation professionals and others promoted separate and sometimes competing priorities. Workshop advocates endorsed sheltered employment as being necessary for some people with “severe” intellectual, mental health, and physical disabilities in communities underequipped to respond to their needs. But disability rights activists and growing numbers of allies argued sheltered workshops represented the vestiges of oppressive regimes of segregation that counteracted efforts to promote integration and full participation by “warehousing” sheltered workers and thus violating basic civil rights.

Escalating distrust and uncertainty surrounding the legitimacy of sheltered workshops compelled administrators and advocates to respond by reinventing the workshop model. In 1980, the CCRW published a national inventory of sheltered workshops which concluded that the workshop system was ripe for a total makeover. The \$450,000 survey (over \$1 million adjusted for inflation) was described as “one of the most extensive research and development surveys ever undertaken in Canada on the industrial and commercial potential of Rehabilitation Workshops for disabled persons.”<sup>31</sup> The inventory was conducted as part of a proposal to stimulate the industrialization of the workshop system in order to convert workshops from expensive, unproductive mechanisms of social welfare into robust, self-sustaining, non-profit enterprises that would provide realistic work experiences for clients. The objective was to identify industrial

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Longmore, *Why I Burned my Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Library & Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 29, Box 210, File 4314-4-2, Press Release, Bureau on Rehabilitation, 13 August 1979.

and commercial work that could be performed "profitably" by workshops in order to establish programs to develop business skills and operational strategies to place workshops in a better position to compete for public and private sector contracts. The CCRW inventory determined there were more than 600 workshops across Canada serving 25,000 workers, approximately half of which (forty-five per cent) were located in Ontario in medium-sized communities.<sup>32</sup> The majority (sixty-seven per cent) of workshops were dedicated to clients with "mental retardation," while only seven per cent were focused on delivering services to people with "physical disabilities." As the 1979 Ontario MCSS workshop survey suggested, workshops devoted to people with intellectual disabilities were less self-directed than other workshops in that they relied heavily on workshop managers to secure contract work. As a result, the conversion of most workshops in Canada to an industrial model could take place in a rather straightforward centralized fashion given the hierarchical manager-client organizational structure of workshops serving intellectually disabled clients.

The CCRW's preliminary inventory culminated in "Project BIDS" (Business Industrial Development Strategies). The project was a collaborative venture between CCRW and the recently-established federal Bureau on Rehabilitation designed to facilitate the transition of workshops from "mere activities" into actual "production lines."<sup>33</sup> The necessity of transforming the sheltered workshop system was identified at an early stage in the development of the Bureau with internal documents earmarking special funds to stimulate the industrialization of workshops.<sup>34</sup> Shortly after being created, the Bureau began actively working with CCRW to develop Project BIDS, committing another \$86,000 (or \$260,000 when adjusted for inflation) to

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<sup>32</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 19, Brief, CCRW, Business Industrial Development Strategies, 1980.

<sup>33</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 19, Letter, Bureau on Rehabilitation to COPOH, 27 April 1979.

<sup>34</sup> LAC, RG 29, Box 238, File 4314-3-1 9(1), Paper, Bureau on Rehabilitation, "Potential Incentives to Employment of the Handicapped," May 1979.

develop pilot projects in Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia to assist selected workshops in the handling of recycled waste paper products in order to effectively compete for public and private sector contracts.<sup>35</sup>

As a preliminary measure in order to generate some public sector business for industrialized workshops, the Bureau advocated to the federal Treasury Board and Department of Supply and Services that they enact policies favourable to the procurement of public sector contracts from sheltered workshops.<sup>36</sup> The Department of Supply and Services initially raised concerns about the quality of goods and inexperience of sheltered workers, but eventually consented to the plan on a trial basis.<sup>37</sup> A series of progress reports from 1979 to 1981 on the status of pilot initiatives in the Ottawa region found that workshops that had transitioned to handling recycled paper products increased their net productivity and profitability.<sup>38</sup> Sheltered workers participating in the project, all of whom were recruited from the Ottawa District Association of the Mentally Retarded, also demonstrated a more "industrious attitude" and developed new work skills. Feedback from the other pilot projects also appeared to confirm these findings.

The reported success of a few workshops, however, masked underlying problems and tensions that threatened Project BIDS. One branch of the project was located in Fort Erie because

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<sup>35</sup> LAC RG 29, Box 238, File 4314-3-1 9 (1), Paper, Bureau on Rehabilitation, "Projects Relating to Employment of the Disabled" (1 April 1979).; CCRW also held a special conference to clarify roles around the marketing, contract procurement, and manufacturing business of workshops. MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 19, Conference Program, CCRW, "Implementing Industrial Strategies for Workshops," 19-21 June 1980.

<sup>36</sup> LAC, RG 29, Box 238, File 4314-3-1, Press Release, Bureau on Rehabilitation, "Policy on Employment of the Handicapped Announced," 21 March 1978.; LAC, RG 29, Box 210, File 4314-4-3, Letter, Bureau on Rehabilitation to Department of Supply and Services, 27 April 1979.; LAC, RG 29, Box 210, File 4314-4-2, Letter, Department of Supply and Services to Bureau on Rehabilitation, 14 March 1983.

<sup>37</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 19, Letter, Bureau on Rehabilitation to COPOH, Undated.

<sup>38</sup> LAC, RG 29, Box 210, File 4314-4-3, Report, Bureau on Rehabilitation "Organization, Implementation and Assessment of Opportunities for Canadian Sheltered Workshops in the Recycling Industries: Follow-up Report" (October 1982).

the "area was particularly depressed and needed the work."<sup>39</sup> At one stage, parents withdrew their support due to a funding crisis that endangered the financial solvency of the organization. When these financial difficulties were eventually resolved, parents reached a new consensus that the BIDS initiative represented a financial liability to the rest of the workshop and also undermined its social objectives. Due to these and other concerns, the Bureau on Rehabilitation retained a private consultant in 1982 to conduct an internal audit of Project BIDS. The scathing report found that project terms such as "adequate remuneration for work performed" failed to address widespread concerns about the payment of subminimum wages to sheltered workers.<sup>40</sup> The non-partisan auditor noted other substantive problems, including extensive documentary inconsistencies, insufficient data, inadequate costing mechanisms, miscommunication between levels of government, and a number of procedural issues. The auditor finally concluded the project had lost sight of the "individual client as the ultimate workshop product" by placing too much emphasis on the conversion of workshops into "competitive businesses" when reviews of the workshop system "suggest that few could [become competitive]."<sup>41</sup>

The internal report confirmed what some disability activists had been saying for years. As the national representative of disability rights activists in Canada, the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH) was invited to provide regular input at each stage of the project. Although initially optimistic with the prospect of providing consumer input, COPOH soon became disillusioned with the notion of using sheltered work to "produce commercial articles for contracted sales without paying production scale wages, insurance" and other

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<sup>39</sup> LAC, RG 29, Box 210, File 4314-4-3, Report, Bureau on Rehabilitation, "Organization, Implementation and Assessment of Opportunities for Canadian Sheltered Workshops in the Recycling Industry: Implementation—Fort Erie, Ontario" (January 1981).

<sup>40</sup> Bureau on Rehabilitation, "Organization, Implementation . . . Follow-up Report," October 1982.

<sup>41</sup> LAC, RG 29, Box 210, File 4314-4-2, Report, Bureau on Rehabilitation, "Analysis of Project BIDS: Phase II Report and Phase III Proposal," 1982.

benefits.<sup>42</sup> Suspicious that the industrialization of workshops legitimated "an outdated, detrimental concept," COPOH argued rather than retrofitting workshops into production lines there should be "consultation with handicapped people as to what type of meaningful work they wish to be trained for and in what training atmosphere they wish to work."<sup>43</sup> COPOH complained there was little indication that Project BIDS would address the issues of consumer control, minimum wages, fringe benefits, safety standards, and how the project planned to work with private industry. Since Project BIDS was not demonstrating sufficient commitment to "eliminating exploitative wages" despite negative feedback on minimum wage exemptions in sheltered employment, COPOH held its 1980 conference in Vancouver where it resolved to promote more "human rights to disabled workers."<sup>44</sup> For disability rights activists, the industrialization of sheltered workshops represented an attempt to extend the life of a rapidly-crumbling and essentially exploitative system.

Public opinion of workshops was also in serious decline by the early 1980s as mainstream media and disability literature painted a bleak picture of sheltered work. An early retrospective by David Cooney, president of Goodwill Industries, noted it is "disappointing but, not surprising" that those who favour de-institutionalization are critical of sheltered workshops and that "attacking a program as successful and useful as the sheltered workshops system is both illogical and counterproductive."<sup>45</sup> Sheltered work became something of a "hot topic" as complaints of unfair labour practices, poor working conditions, mismanagement of funds, violation of minimum wage legislation, and funding disincentives that held back productive

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<sup>42</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5360, File 1, Letter, COPOH to BIOS Committee, 1980.

<sup>43</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 19, Paper, COPOH, "Project BIDS: Federal Government Sponsored Study of Canadian Rehabilitation Workshops: A COPOH Critique," 1980.

<sup>44</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5367, File 8, Conference Proceedings, COPOH, "Vancouver Conference Resolutions," 1980.

<sup>45</sup> David Cooney, "A Second View of Workshops," *Ability & Enterprise* (May/June 1987).

workers hit news outlets across the country.<sup>46</sup> In a critical commentary on sheltered workshops in Ontario, Lola Freeman wrote that training in workshops was not relevant to current market demand for skills. Freeman concluded, "Parents often see the workshops as a place for the person to go during the day, rather like day care for adults. These parents neglect to take responsibility for enhancing or assisting their child's progress."<sup>47</sup> Some critics even drew associations between workshops and "slave" or "sweatshop" labour, particularly following revelation that industrialized workshops would continue to receive minimum wage exemptions, further complicating the labour market status of sheltered workers.<sup>48</sup> The National Union of Public and General Employees even undertook to organize sheltered workers advocating the repeal of minimum wage exemptions while counting charitable organizations among the "worst employers in the country."<sup>49</sup> Payment of symbolic stipends was a common practice in most workshops across North America given their status as training facilities, but disability activists in both Canada and the United States pointed to subminimum wages as evidence of the exploitative nature of workshops. American disability activist Frank Bowe similarly noted, for example, that

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<sup>46</sup> AO, RG 7-149, Box B363026, File "Speeches/TV," Memo, Handicapped Employment Program, 1 Apr 1982. In April 1982, an internal memo at the Ontario Ministry of Labour pointed to "renewed media interest in sheltered workshops," including a fifteen minute segment on CBC's "Metro Morning," with similar features on CTV's program "W5," as well as CFTO. Other news articles included: Roona Maloney, "Hearing People are Outsiders at Centre for the Deaf," *Globe and Mail* P14 (9 September 1981).; Arthur Moses, "Not Paid Minimum Wage, Cerebral Palsy Victim Suing Ontario," *Globe and Mail* P10 (12 October 1981).; "Group Rejects Union Scheme for Disabled," *Globe and Mail* P10 (16 October 1981).; OMOD, *The Advocate* (Jul/Apr 1981).; Handicapped Action Committee, *HACing Away 2:2* (February 1982).; OMOD, "Awareness Theme of Employment Conference," *The Advocate* (Nov/Dec 1981).

<sup>47</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 18, Paper, Lola Freeman, "Why Does Rehabilitation Have to Hurt So Much?: Sheltered Workshops in Ontario," January 1983.

<sup>48</sup> "Clients or Employees: No Minimum Wage for Disabled Workers," *Hamilton Spectator* (22 October 1983).; "'Disability Myth' Hard-Hitting Documentary on Plight of Disabled," *Montreal Gazette* (10 September 1982).; *The Disability Myth: Part II: Employment: Beggars Can't Be Choosers*, 1982.

<sup>49</sup> "Unions Vow Fight for Disabled," *Toronto Star* A17 (9 October 1981).

the U.S. *Fair Labor Standards Act* ironically permitted sheltered workers to be paid half the minimum wage even when this proved "the only source of work [disabled people] can secure."<sup>50</sup>

Minimum wage exemptions proved to be the sticking point in the fight against workshops. The payment of subminimum wages despite the move to reorganize workshops into industrialized production lines underlined inherent contradictions and the symbolic nature of sheltered work. The CCRW attempted to address this ambiguity at their 1981 national conference in order to help resolve concerns around Project BIDS, but concluded that since insufficient funding was part of the decision to industrialize workshops, it did not make sense to pay sheltered workers minimum wages or anything above what they "earned."<sup>51</sup> A 1980 review of procedures used in granting provincial wage exemption permits by the Ontario Ministry of Labour, for example, concluded that the system operated as intended but recommended that permits apply to individuals rather than entire workshop organizations. The report also found that if workshops were required to pay minimum wages it might actually create a disincentive for sheltered workers find employment in the mainstream workforce. Unconvinced by these arguments, disability activists argued sheltered workshops often did more harm than good for the disability community. Activists demanded that provinces institute mandatory minimum wages, or provide welfare rate "top-ups," and that workshops should provide greater emphasis on vocational rehabilitation and job placement services. The wage issue remained a serious point of contention across the country until the late 1980s when fair wages legislation was first implemented in Ontario, followed by other provinces.<sup>52</sup> By then, however, the reputation of

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<sup>50</sup> Frank Bowe, *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 165.; Fred Pelka, *The ABC-CLIO Companion to the Disability Rights Movement* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1997).

<sup>51</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 5, Letter, CCRW to COPOH, 8 January 1981.

<sup>52</sup> AO, RG 74-30, Box B162583, File "Rehabilitation," Paper, Ontario Rehabilitation Workshops Council, "The Disabled Persons' Fair Wages Act," 1989.



sheltered workshops as segregated institutions that violated disabled people's rights was deeply engrained in the public mindset.<sup>53</sup>

Canada celebrated the International Year for Disabled Persons in 1981 which culminated in an unprecedented degree of attention centered on the capabilities and rights of people with disabilities. As disability rights activists across the country seized the moment to press their rights-based agenda, work began on a unique documentary series entitled *The Disability Myth*. The series contrasted common "myths" about disabled people with "facts" based on interviews with disabled people, activists, professionals, and politicians.<sup>54</sup> With a combination of public and private sector funding, Toronto-based filmmakers landed Oscar-nominated actor John Hurt as host and narrator for the series which aired in 1982 and 1983 on Canadian Television Networks (CTV).<sup>55</sup> Public response to the program was "positively overwhelming" and CTV was "inundated with phone calls from viewers." One published review of the series noted, "Aylward [the director] paints a bleak economic picture. The handicapped in sheltered workshops earn between \$1.50 and \$5 an hour. Some are not paid at all; they're not considered worth the minimum wage. Yet the best workers are kept in the shelters because they keep the operations going, yet about 65 per cent of the disabled remain unemployed." Part One of the series, subtitled *Segregation*, stated it was a "fact" that "most people are better off in integrated settings."<sup>56</sup> Cinematographers cast workshops in a particularly dark atmosphere reminiscent of a Dickensian institution accompanied by ominous music which portrayed workers as helpless

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<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Reaume, "No Profits, Just a Pittance: Work, Compensation, and People Defined as Mentally Disabled in Ontario, 1964-1990," in S. Noll and J. Trent, eds., *Mental Retardation in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 466-493.

<sup>54</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q012240, File 19, Brief, Lauron Productions, "Disability Myth," 1982.

<sup>55</sup> *The Disability Myth Part I: Segregation* was financed primarily by Suncor Corporation while subsequent films secured funding from a variety of federal ministries and provincial departments of social services.

<sup>56</sup> *The Disability Myth, Part I: Segregation*, 1981.

victims. Part Two of the series focused on employment issues and blamed workshops for inhibiting the integration of disabled people in the mainstream workforce, emphasizing the importance on finding alternatives to the workshop model.<sup>57</sup> It was repeatedly argued that sheltered workshops were outdated compared to modern training methods that provided more realistic work opportunities. Despite investments in the industrialization of the workshop system only a few years earlier, CCRW representative Leroy Thompson appeared in the documentary arguing that workshops negatively impacted occasions to have "normal life experiences." Such portrayals of workshops permeated the public consciousness, enabling disability rights activists and their allies to promote alternatives to the workshop model.

### **Supported Employment and Decline of the Workshop System**

With mounting pressure surrounding the workshop model and imminent failure of the industrial experiment, workshop advocates and rehabilitation professionals began to consider alternatives to the workshop model. The accepted wisdom was (and continued to be) that workshops were necessary for some people depending on the type and severity of impairment. However, it became increasingly clear that workshops had moved away from their original emphasis on vocational rehabilitation and lost sight of the transitional nature of sheltered employment. A study commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Labour's Handicapped Employment Program (HEP) in 1980 explained,

As a business operation [...] the workshop relies heavily on its most productive workers. Workshop managers whom we interviewed confirmed that there is an immediate and noticeable drop in output when good workers leave. The workshop may then find itself in the peculiar position of not being able to meet the income target set in the agreed budget with MCSS, thus paying an

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<sup>57</sup> *The Disability Myth Part II: Employment*, 1982.

economic penalty for achieving a prime rehabilitation goal. This contradiction is likely to intensify as the workshops expand their business operations.<sup>58</sup>

Working in a sheltered workshop was never intended to be a permanent alternative to competitive employment, yet it seemed this had become the reality for too many "unemployable" people who "trained" for paid jobs that never materialized. Among the key complaints were a lack of individual attention to workshop clients and inadequate resources for facilitating labour market integration.<sup>59</sup>

By the mid-1980s, a new consensus among disability rights activists, family advocates and rehabilitation organizations coalesced around supported employment. In 1984, the landmark report of the federal Commission of Inquiry on Equality in Employment confirmed that if workshops were going to continue to exist they should pay minimum wages and provide better job placement services that assisted sheltered workers find paid work.<sup>60</sup> Active dismemberment of the workshop system did not immediately materialize as social policymakers were reluctant to abandon a "facility-based program" model.<sup>61</sup> Many parents of workshop clients also continued to support the workshop model and had "a strong voice in setting policy for workshops." These parents supported the workshop model, fearing the loss of reliable day programming services would negatively impact the social integration of their adult disabled children. These cautionary voices, however, were eventually overtaken by opposition to workshops.

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<sup>58</sup> "Wage Permits for Handicapped Employees"

<sup>59</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q012254, File "COPOH, CAP and VRDP," Paper, CCRW, "Submission to the Consultation Regarding the Fiscal Arrangements Affecting Persons with Disabilities," 3 November 1987.

<sup>60</sup> Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, *Report of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment*, Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1984: Recommendation 114.

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Oldman et al, "A Case Report of the Conversion of Sheltered Employment to Evidence-Based Supported Employment in Canada," *Psychiatric Services* 56:11 (2005): 1437.; D. Mank, "The Underachievement of Supported Employment: A Call for Reinvestment," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 5:2 (1994): 1-24.; P. Wehman and J. Kregel, "At the Crossroads: Supported Employment a Decade Later," *Journal of the Association of Persons With Severe Handicaps* 20 (1995): 286-299.

In response to growing criticism of the workshop model, the CCRW undertook a major constitutional review by engaging in extensive consultations with key stakeholders including government, employers, disability rights activists, advocacy organizations, and service agencies.<sup>62</sup> A CCRW survey called *Updating for the 80's* solicited input "about what the current vision was, and what role this national organization would play in working towards making that vision a reality."<sup>63</sup> Results of the review steered the CCRW away from sheltered workshops toward a "new mandate of increased access to competitive employment." To stay current with the developing consensus regarding the move away from a workshop model, the organization dropped its name "Canadian Council of Rehabilitation Workshops," becoming the "Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work."

Support for sheltered workshops was replaced by a new concept called "supported employment." Practiced in the 1970s by innovative job placement organizations in Canada such as The World of One in Seven and popularized in the early 1980s, supported employment presented an ideal alternative to sheltered workshops. By suggesting that disabled people needed "support" rather than "shelter" to ultimately achieve the goal of independent living in the community, supported employment revolutionized the role of professionals in the lives of disabled jobseekers. Supported employment typically involved placing clients in work-training programs within mainstream industry for specific durations under the co-supervision of employers and transitional placement coordinators.<sup>64</sup> The general expectation was that clients

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<sup>62</sup> Valerie Duffy, "The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work," *Abilities* (Summer 1995).

<sup>63</sup> Duffy, "The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work"; MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q012249, File 14, Letter, CCRW to COPOH, 4 January 1983.

<sup>64</sup> Robert E. Drake et al, *Individual Placement and Support: An Evidence-Based Approach to Supported Employment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).; David Hagner and Dale DiLeo, *Working Together: Workplace Culture, Supported Employment, and Persons with Disabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, 1993).

would acquire skills and experience that would enable a smoother transition to a paid employment relationship. The supported employment model relied heavily on the intervention of social workers, rehabilitation professionals, and job placement workers who cultivated rosters of employers willing to create work arrangements that met mutually-agreeable goals. The model worked by gradually removing support mechanisms until clients became virtually independent workers in mainstream workplaces.

The popularization of supported employment built on years of demonstrated results by agencies practicing the concept. In 1976, the Metro Association for the Mentally Retarded (MAMR) in Toronto successfully placed twenty-nine clients in supportive work arrangements.<sup>65</sup> MAMR representatives discovered that cultivating an open and honest relationship with employers meant clients were placed in realistic and ultimately successful jobs. The Kingston, Ontario-based special job placement agency, The World of One in Seven, also developed a national and international reputation for their highly successful client-centered approach that included low client-counsellor ratios to ensure that job placements were positive experiences for both supported workers and participating employers.<sup>66</sup> A documentary film of the agency featured clients working in a variety of factory, services, and media workplaces and included interviews of Kingston-area clients and employers praising the supported employment model.

By the late-1980s the CCRW declared, "Most of the sheltered workshops in this country are in a state of transition. They were founded by family members and concerned citizens because society was not willing to accept disabled people on other terms. It was, in part, through the achievements that disabled people demonstrated through the 'workshop' system that societal

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<sup>65</sup> "Retarded People Placed in Jobs," *Whig-Standard* (30 September 1976).

<sup>66</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box P5364, File 5, Paper, The World of One in Seven, "The World of One in Seven Inc.: A Brief History," 11 December 1979.; *The World of One in Seven*, directed by Michael Steele (1975; Kingston, ON: Quarry Films, 1975), 16 mm.

attitudes have evolved and that the early inroads to competitive employment were achieved."<sup>67</sup>

The CCRW praised its role in designing new community-based services, but lamented their organization's legacy in supporting an approach which addressed the economic problem of disability by "sheltering" disabled people in segregated workplaces. As examples of supported employment initiatives had demonstrated, it was far more effective and appropriate to facilitate labour market participation in integrated workplaces.

## **Conclusion**

Sheltered workshops were not "a place to work like any other." Originally designed to facilitate workforce re-entry for physically disabled jobseekers, the workshop system provided a ready source of community-based occupational programming during the 1970s as part of an under-resourced response to the Canadian deinstitutionalization movement. The same optimism for community participation which led people with physical disabilities and mental health issues away from segregation in residential institutions invigorated the workshop system. By the early 1980s, however, it became increasingly clear that sheltered workshops were incapable and perhaps no longer entirely devoted to helping resolve the economic displacement of disabled people. Many people came to workshops and never left, trapped in a charitable token economy that provided symbolic rather than "real" paid employment. Others left quickly, crediting workshops for illustrating the directionless future they wished to avoid. Relatively few clients ever "graduated" from workshop training programs by moving onto competitive employment and it became increasingly difficult to differentiate workshops from older methods of "warehousing" disabled people.

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<sup>67</sup> MA, CCD Fonds, Box Q012254, File "COPOH, CAP and VRDP," Paper, CCRW, "Submission to the Consultation Regarding the Fiscal Arrangements Affecting Persons with Disabilities," 3 November 1987.

As criticism of workshops mounted during the 1980s, administrators and advocates attempted to salvage the workshop model by experimenting with the industrialization and commercialization of sheltered work. Seemingly unproductive and unprofitable workshops could be transformed, it was thought, into thriving capitalist non-profit enterprises capable of addressing both the vocational and rehabilitation needs of client workers. While policymakers spent thousands of dollars on the reconstruction of the workshop system, a growing movement of critics highlighted the apparent focus on making sheltered workshops more profitable as opposed to more effective vehicles of employment integration. Initial pilot projects were heavily criticized as activist organizations argued that money would be better spent helping people with disabilities establish their own businesses or developing supported employment initiatives. As a result, by 1985 the sheltered workshop model had been not only demonstrably undermined but was under concerted attack, leading to a gradual withdrawal of public support and resources.

Sheltered workshops did not resolve the problem of chronic unemployment and poverty in the disability community, nor were they proven to be an effective mechanism for ensuring full participation in society. Indeed, one of the troubling legacies of sheltered work was that it underscored the pervasive stigma of disability and justified exclusion from opportunities in the mainstream labour market. The ideological basis of sheltered work reveals how "unemployable" disabled people are made casualties of an economic system predicated on arbitrary standards of the working body. Attempts to rescue the workshop model through the introduction of industrial capitalist practices ignored the fact that workshops were token economy enterprises and thus incapable of engaging market forces to adequately respond to an organizational objective fundamentally based on social justice. As the labour market evolved, it became increasingly difficult to acquire relevant vocational skills in sheltered settings that were applicable to the

broader economy. Needless to say, the reversal of support for sheltered work in Canada suggests the traditional belief that disabled people are "better off" in segregated settings was slowly being eroded by a more progressive paradigm based on integration and participation. At the very least, it was reasoned that if people with disabilities sought greater participation and integration in the community, they needed to work in mainstream settings with the appropriate supports. The history of sheltered workshops in Canada thus reveals that protection can unintentionally lead to segregation. Sheltered workshops in Canada have certainly not been "a place to work like any other."