

Due to early diagnosis and the availability of HIV medications, many people living with HIV are now able to return to work after being out of the workforce for some time. This is an exciting opportunity for many individuals, but can also bring up many questions.

### **Common Concerns for People Living with HIV**

There are several reasons for people living with HIV to want to return to the workforce, including financial stability, having a sense of purpose, fulfillment and identity, wanting to feel included in the community, and wanting to contribute and be a productive member of society.

However, workplaces have changed significantly over the years and structures around health benefits, disability leave benefits and employment stability have also changed. For people who have been out of the workforce for some time, it can be difficult to return to work due to fears that their workplace skills have diminished during their absence and that they may require upgrading in their skills in order to survive in today's workplaces. Likewise, people often worry about whether their health is stable enough to return to work and whether working will have a negative impact on their health due to the physical and emotional stress involved. People are often concerned about having their disability benefits cut off when they return to work, or about having difficulty accessing the same benefits if they experience poor health again. Finally, people may have concerns regarding stigma and discrimination related to HIV and be unsure of how to deal with information about their HIV status in the workplace or worried about what to tell their employer about their health. All of these concerns can be daunting, but as we discuss below, there are many ways to overcome these challenges through accessing the right information and services.

### **Workforce Education and Re-training**

There are many excellent programs available to people who wish to return to work, but want to update their academic training, re-train in a new profession or update their skills. There are also programs that provide training and employment counselling and job search and interview skills. You can get specific information on which program would be best for you from your disability benefits provider, through AIDS Calgary or through accessing the Employment, Training and Career Services Directory created by Alberta Works available at the following link: [http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/RRM/RRM-CG\\_etcs\\_directory.pdf](http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/RRM/RRM-CG_etcs_directory.pdf)

People living on low incomes, or receiving income supports may be able to qualify for tuition coverage or subsidies for these programs and may also be able to apply for income support while they attend courses.

### **Workforce Rehabilitation**

In addition to requiring upgrading or re-training, many people living with HIV have additional needs around returning to work. There are many rehabilitation services available to help people deal with physical symptoms and treatment side effects, to provide emotional and psychological support and assist you with other employment issues.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, you may require:

- A physical therapist to teach you exercises to help strengthen your muscles, improve your flexibility or manage pain.
- An occupational therapist to help you make adjustments to your work place in order to address any physical challenges you are experiencing. For example, helping you to learn how to use a walker if you require one, or teaching you strategies to conserve your energy at work.
- A speech-language pathologist to help you with issues affecting communication or speech.
- An audiologist to assist if you have experienced hearing loss by providing a hearing aid or teaching you strategies to help you communicate.
- A physiatrist to help you regain any physical functioning or movement you have lost or to treat chronic pain.
- A complementary or alternative therapy practitioner to provide acupuncture, massage therapy, homeopathy, naturopathy, chiropractic treatments etc.

- A psychiatrist, psychologist, psychotherapist or mental health counsellor to provide therapy and counselling, suggest strategies to help you relieve anxiety and stress or to prescribe medication, if necessary.
- AIDS Calgary Client Services can provide counselling, referrals to other professionals and programs, information about your legal rights and advocacy on your behalf.

People living on low incomes, or receiving income supports, may be able to qualify for coverage or subsidies for these services.

### **Transitioning to Work from Disability Benefits**

Many disability benefits programs (e.g. AISH, CPP-D) will continue to pay benefits while an individual upgrades their education or retrains in order to return to work. Likewise, many programs will actually cover or subsidize the tuition for an individual to attend these programs. Most programs allow an individual to receive some income from employment without affecting the benefit level, but at a certain point, as a person's income increases, benefits programs typically reduce the benefit level. Most benefits programs now allow for "rapid reinstatement" of benefits, if an individual returns to work and then finds that their health worsens and they need to return to benefits. Also, individuals may be able to continue receiving the health coverage portion of their benefits once they return to work. For information on specific disability benefits programs, health benefits and other financial supports please read briefing document *HIV/AIDS-Disability Benefits* or contact AIDS Calgary.

---

<sup>1</sup> Information for People Living with HIV. Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation. Electronic Document. Accessed Dec 19<sup>th</sup> 2007. [http://www.hivandrehab.ca/EN/information/people\\_HIV/index.php](http://www.hivandrehab.ca/EN/information/people_HIV/index.php)