

Inclusive Development - Helping Guyana provide opportunities to better integrate persons living with disabilities.



Beneficiaries of the Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit
Garment Training Course Graduation Ceremony
Credit: Ministry of Human Services and Social Security Facebook Page, August 31, 2023

Buoyed by newfound oil revenue, Guyana's government has made a commitment to the provision of comprehensive and effective services to address the needs of vulnerable populations. One of these groups is people with disabilities (PWD), who historically and globally, are neglected and underserved, particularly when they reach adulthood.

Recently the government began providing grants for children, monthly income support to adults, and enhanced rehabilitation support and skills training for adults living with disabilities. Guyana's Ministry of Human Services and Social Security allocated \$73 million (Guyana \$) to construct a modern building to house a training and rehabilitation hub which officially opened in June 2023. Located in the compound of the Mahaica Hospital, East Coast Demerara, the new **Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit** is a first for Guyana. Concurrently the Ministry has been setting up a Unit to coordinate and integrate policy development, service provision, and funding measures for adults with disabilities. These services include financial assistance, adaptive equipment and advice, and training and rehabilitation.

The Ministry requested Catalyste+ assistance in assessing the needs of potential clients of the new Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit. Catalyste+ provided the technical expertise of a disability specialist with decades of international experience, to support the Ministry in developing operational guidelines for the new disability unit and analysing the training needs of citizens with disabilities.

What was the situation?

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) Report on Disability, 15 percent of the world's population, or more than one billion people, are living with disability. Guyana's Ministry of Health estimates that 6.4 percent of the population, about 50,000 of Guyana's 800,000 citizens are PWDs.

Although most Guyanese children with disabilities receive services through special needs and/or integrated schools, these children were frequently at risk of aging-out of the educational system without adequate adult services being planned or provided. Further, fragmented adult services for people with disabilities, which did not address the needs of the individual in a comprehensive manner were contributing to poor outcomes for PWDs.

Historically one of the poorest Caribbean Community member states, Guyana was classified by the World Bank as low income, with half of its population living below USD\$5.50 per day in 2019. Despite its poverty, over the last three decades the country had made some progress enacting policies to protect the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities.

Since 2019, rising budget resources from oil and gas discoveries, have allowed Guyana's government to respond to crises like COVID-19 and inflation, whilst scaling up spending to close gaps in infrastructure, education, and social security systems. With increased resources for its social safety net, Guyana's government began focusing on the integration of persons with disabilities into mainstream society.



Minister of Human Services and Social Security Dr. Vindhya Persaud, accompanied by High Commissioner for Canada in Guyana Mr. Mark Berman (center) Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit, Opening Ceremony
Credit: Ministry of Human Services and Social Security

How Catalyste+ Helped Frame a Solution

The Ministry of Human Services' Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit is located at two sites, one in Georgetown and the other at the new Mahaica facility, to increase the ease of access for consumers of these training, rehabilitation and income support services. For eight months, from November 2022 to May 2023, Catalyste+ Advisor Christine MacFarlane, PhD partnered with the Ministry on a virtual assignment to help develop the policy and operational framework for the new Unit and to analyze the training needs of Guyanese adults living with disabilities.

"Overall, the Ministry is on the right track, trying to pull together different ministries and policies that deal with people living with disabilities so that those involved can be more focused on their work."

- Christine MacFarlane, Catalyste+ Advisor

Advisor MacFarlane, a disability specialist, who has worked worldwide and has an academic and research background in policy and practice around rehabilitation and health and social services, said she supports the approach that Guyana is taking. "

Advisor MacFarlane, worked closely with Mahendra Budhram, Technical Services Officer at the Ministry. Over the eight-month assignment the two held weekly project meetings and Budhram helped Dr. MacFarlane reach out to disability stakeholders at other Ministries, such as the Ministry of Education and community groups representing people living with disabilities, who were instrumental in carrying out the survey on training and social situation of people living with disabilities.

The Operational Framework developed for the Ministry's Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit is based on international best practices. It sets out the goals and strategies of the Unit and its components: The Learning Lab, the Assistance and Adaptive Aids Services and the Financial Services, with draft implementation logic models for each component. The framework also sets out an organizational structure and includes job descriptions for key positions at the Unit's two locations.



Beneficiaries, Basic Computer Skills training.

Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit.

Credit: Ministry of Human Services and Social Security

Results and Changes Observed

Essentially, the Catalyste+ Advisor has helped to lay the foundation for the set up of the Ministry's Persons' Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit. The Ministry is now in the process of getting approval for full staffing of the Unit.

The Unit is on track to provide training to 200 people living with disabilities in 2023. Current offerings include courses such as basic computer skills, Job Access with Speech (JAWs), a software program that enables visually impaired users to read the text displayed on a computer screen with a speech synthesizer, and garment construction.

Although there has been some previous skills training offered for PWD, few surveys or evaluations of previous training existed and there were information gaps related to the training needs of people with disabilities. Advisor MacFarlane worked with the Ministry to design **a survey for adult PWD aged 16-60** and identify a list of stakeholder groups to interview in early 2023.

With outreach assistance from community groups and the Ministry of Education, a representative sample, focused on certain disabilities such as sight, hearing etc., totalling 107 surveys (53%M, 46%F) were returned. These provided the Ministry with **feedback on participants' age and gender, education, and employment status; areas of job and personal training interest and a self assessment of their current quality of life.**

"In narrowing down the list of potential skills training options, one strategy might be to focus on the fact that the majority of respondents were **young and at the career exploration stage,**" said Dr. MacFarlane. Along with this, another strategy would be **to survey potential employers** and find out what skills are in demand and whether they are interested in providing support, such as on the job training opportunities, she added.

Dr. MacFarlane points out that in addition to how one goes about training people, there are **daunting issues facing people living with disabilities.** Many of them are also living in poverty and need help addressing issues like transportation, housing, and access to childcare before they can take advantage of training opportunities.

For some people, adds Budhram, the **skills training needs to start at a more basic life skills level,** such as basic numeracy and literacy and basic computer skills. In the cases of participants who have spent a lot of time alone without much social interaction, he said, he has observed in sessions held this year, that the training needs to be more socially oriented, where they can experience a sense of camaraderie as they help each other.

Other clients at the Unit are interested in **entrepreneurial activities.** Rather than working for someone, they want to get involved in operating their own small businesses such as retail, poultry rearing or manufacturing. The Ministry has set up an agreement with the Small Business Bureau at Ministry of Commerce, which operates a revolving loan fund for start up ventures. When a suitable entrepreneur presents herself or himself, the Unit provides a letter of reference and a profile to accompany the fledgling entrepreneur's loan application.

"Christine has been working with people with disabilities most of her life. Through this assignment she guided us in setting up the entire unit,"

- Mr. Mahendra Budhram.

Next Steps in Moving Towards Better Integration of People Living with Disabilities

Once the Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit is staffed along the lines of the operational framework, the Unit can begin to take next steps in better integrating adults living with disabilities.

For example, there are plans to further define both the training offerings and to expand the delivery of training services to all ten regions of Guyana, beyond the four regions it currently serves, said Budhram. The four regions contain the greatest numbers of people living with disabilities. For these other regions, whilst the Mahica Learning Lab would remain the centre, where planning would take place, one option might be to have the trainers travel to the other regions and hold the training in other venues.

The Support Services for Persons with Disabilities Unit sees additional next steps, Budhram said. These include building the capacity of staff and contracted trainers to have a deeper understanding of people living with disabilities, to better meet the needs of their clients. Also, on the list is getting prepared for engaging more fully with public and private sector employers to explore future opportunities for clients' training and employment. And third, the Unit would like assistance in developing a public awareness strategy about people living with disabilities. The Unit is aware that knowledge and sensitization amongst persons without disabilities is low to non-existent, a situation that can pose a barrier to both social inclusion and eventual job placement.

Based on the success of the Disability Advisor assignment, the Ministry has approached Catalyste+ to request three Advisors, one for each area of assistance.

Story of Change

Country: Guyana

Program: Canada-CARICOM Expert Deployment Mechanism (CCEDM)

Partner: Ministry of Human Services and Social Security

Publication date: November, 2023

Domain of Change: Changes in government capacity to develop and deliver goods or services that respond to local needs (Immediate outcome 1210)

Acknowledgements

Catalyste+ would like to thank Gwen Walmsley for leading the creation of this case study.

We want to especially thank the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security Guyana for their partnership, and Dr. Christine MacFarlane for volunteering her time and expertise to make this assignment fruitful and impactful.

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