Transcript

Episode 43: The Intersection of Disability and Rural and Remote Communities

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Dean Askin 00:02
This is You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. The podcast that explores the power of inclusion in business, in employment, in education, and in our communities, and why disability is an important part of the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility conversation with your hosts Amy Widdows and Dean Askin.

Dean Askin 00:22
Welcome to the show. You're listening to episode 43 of You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. Whatever time it is, and wherever you're listening from. Hey, thanks for joining us. You know, while I was writing this episode, I went in to have a look at the audience statistics for the show, and wow, listeners and episode downloads in 33 countries around the world, including Canada, of course, but also Vietnam, Nepal, Republic of the Congo, Mongolia, Brazil, Kenya, and Morocco. Now, the reason I mention these particular countries, is that there are some really remote parts of all of them. Hi there, I'm Dean Askin. And if you're listening right now from a rural or remote part of your province, state, territory, or country, well, that's what we're exploring in this episode, the intersection of disability and rural or remote communities.

Amy Widdows 01:21
Here's a factoid to frame the conversation we're about to have. Hi, I'm Amy Widows. Here at the other mic, about 8 million Canadians 15 and older have at least one disability, but there aren't any statistics on exactly how many of them live in rural and remote parts of the country, and by the way, two thirds, that's almost 3,400 of the 5,123 municipalities in Canada are considered moderately remote, more remote, or most remote by Statistics Canada. In remote communities, there are some distinct different challenges compared to experiencing urban life with disability, as we'll hear from our two guests, but no statistics, and not a heck of a lot of research about those challenges and barriers either.

Dean Askin 02:06
Amy, for sure. When I was researching this episode, I found only one report, and it's a 15 year old Canadian federal report, by the way, that sort of details barriers in rural communities and what to do about them. Now, I say, sort of, because it's a report that focuses on seniors, the references to people who have a disability. How should I put it? Well, they seem tertiary. I read the whole report and counted, and the word disabilities is mentioned only six times in the whole 50 page report, but the thing is, all of the barriers to inclusion they talk about in this report, and by the way, it's called Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities: A Guide. Well, all the things apply just as much to people who have a disability as they do to seniors. It talks about eight areas, including built environment barriers, transportation barriers, communication and information technology barriers, housing, and social participation barriers.

Amy Widdows 03:04
I think our two guests are probably going to have something to say about how seniors and people who have a disability are talked about in silos, and they shouldn't be.

Dean Askin 03:13
Oh, I know one of them will for sure. Amy.

Amy Widdows 03:17
For this discussion about disability and rural and remote communities, well, we wanted perspectives from some of the most remote parts of Canada, so we picked the far northwest and the remotest part of Down East. The Northwest Territories covers 1.1 million square kilometres, and much of it is remote. So, from way up in Yellowknife, we're joined by Denise McKee.

Dean Askin 03:39
She's been the executive director of the Northwest Territories Disability Council for the last 15 years. In 2021 the council received the Federal Social Innovator Award from Economic and Social Development Canada for its work supporting and advocating for people in the Northwest Territories who have a disability.

Amy Widdows 03:59
And down east, we picked New Brunswick. It's the most rural province in the Maritimes. Over 80% of New Brunswick is forest, and almost 50% of the New Brunswick population lives in rural areas. So, joining us again from Fredericton, Shelley Petit. Shelley was on our season seven kickoff episode, that episode 41 when we talked about making tourism accessible. She's a former teacher, and she's chair of the New Brunswick Coalition of Persons with Disabilities. And, like Denise, she's an award winner.

Dean Askin 04:29
That's right, Amy. Shelley recently received the 2026 Resilience Award from the Environmental Health Association of Canada and the Environmental Health Association of Quebec. The award was given for Shelley's outstanding contributions to raise awareness about multiple chemical sensitivity and advocate for and support other people living with MCS, which is an invisible disability. Oh, and here's the other thing about our two guests, Amy, you know, we wanted perspectives from the West and the East. Well,

turns out by pure coincidence we went after guests 1000s of kilometres apart from each end of the country who know each other. Both Denise and Shelley are on the board of DAWN Canada, that's the Disabled Women's Network of Canada.

Amy Widdows 05:17
Well, you know, we do always have great guests on this show, and it does make for a great conversation when the guests know each other. Denise McKee up there in Yellowknife, welcome to You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D, and Shelly Petit and Fredericton, welcome back to the show. Thanks for coming on to share your perspectives.

Shelley Petit 05:35
Thanks for having me again, really appreciate it.

Denise McKee 05:38
Thanks for the invitation.

Amy Widdows 05:40
We love having you, so I'm going to jump into the first question, if you don't mind. With Denise, Denise, you're way up in Yellowknife in the vastly remote Northwest Territories, and Shelley, you're down in New Brunswick, where almost half the population lives in rural areas. How would you describe living with a disability in a remote or rural community in this country, we'll start with Denise.

Denise McKee 06:04
Well, I think that the word that best describes it is challenging, between the geography, the lack of services, the difficulty in navigating services when they do exist, it becomes almost impossible to to access services to live a life within these small communities, and maybe we'll talk about it a bit later, but there's also an element of fear that's involved in people being able to to expose themselves and to to describe their disability in order to get services

Amy Widdows 06:52
And Shelly, what about you?

Shelley Petit 06:56
Challenging or very difficult in the because you get, I mean, really, in the urban areas in, in New Brunswick, services aren't great, so then you get to the rural communities, and they tend to be worse, but they also create almost, it's not jealousy, is the word I want to use, but a dichotomy or a battle in some areas, because you have these age-friendly communities that have been built in rural communities, and people with disabilities can see the building they're in, but we're not allowed to use the same services because of these silos, and so you have people that are can't do anything, can't get to a needed medical appointment, but they can see the van that could take them, and it's not moving, and it's like, why are we doing this again? When is the government going to listen to us and realize that it, regardless of who faces the barrier, we need to eliminate the barrier, not the name of the person that's associated to it is not our barrier, it's the society's barrier, and we have to eliminate that. So, for both of you, again, What are the most significant issues or challenges for people who have a disability

living in remote or rural areas compared to living in an urban center, whether that's a small town or a big city.

Denise McKee 08:23
I'll jump in with this one. Yeah, I think that the Northwest Territories is somewhat unique in the sense that we have a population that is 50% indigenous, which adds to the number of people that are identified as having a disability, so I think that when we take a look at this, we have to look at the lack of inclusive employment. We suffer from some of the lowest rates of employment in Canada, and yet when we talk about inclusive employment, it's almost non-existent. There is no pressure to, or no incentive to, hire someone with a disability when everybody is challenged to finding employment. There's a lack of informed decision making, so there's non-involvement of the disability community. We have people with no background making the decisions on funding on services, and they don't, they don't even consider the disability population as being the most informed and able to tell you what they need. I believe you know in what Shelley was talking about, we absolutely, whatever the urban challenges are, they're just exaggerated within the rural communities. So, when we have, when we say there's a lack of accessible housing in the Northwest Territories, we are talking not about, oh, less than the 30% percent. Percentage that it should be, we're talking about zero, and so people are prisoners in their homes. They, we've had people die in their home, and until after that person passes away, nobody even understood that that person couldn't even make it outside of their home for that entire period that they were sick. There's also a component of dislocation and fear that exists within the Northwest Territories, especially in the indigenous communities, because people, for from, you know, historical colonialization to present day decision making. Understand that if they come forward and say they have a disability, they are living in fear that some medical professional or social worker or someone else can make the decision that they are dislocated. Yes, we understand that in urban centers sometimes people have to drive far to get to their appointment, but what we're talking about here is being removed from your community, from your family, from your culture for the rest of your life, and it's all under a colonial structure that is based on the premise of care. We're caring for you, we don't have the resources here, so we're going to send you somewhere else where you'll never be seen again, and we don't have to provide, and we are talking about massive amounts of money in the Northwest Territories being spent dislocating and sending people away, so we could go through all the lists that other places have, such as lack of diagnostic services, long wait lists, and you know, a lack of medical professionals, but when you have people coming in that are locums and don't know anyone in the community, have no connection to the culture, and if there's a snowstorm, they don't even come in that month, so nobody gets any services. We're talking about people who are in dire, dire health and survival mode most of the time.

Shelley Petit 12:15
Wow, so it's not quite so extensive compared to that in New Brunswick, but people who live in rural communities here would still feel that same isolation, and it's, I guess, when you look at it, a lot of our urban or rural population is francophone French Acadians, and they are, they are sometimes plucked and put into anglophone centers, and they don't speak English, and it makes it hard for them. Just a lot of people think that they all speak some English, but I have friends up north that don't know a word of English, and they have been plucked and put into Moncton, or put into Moncton. Not so bad, you've got the two languages, but they get plucked down to St. John. There's not enough people that speak

French there, and it becomes a real issue. We also get people from our McMacet and Passamaquoddy communities that are also removed and brought down, or if it's a child and they're brought to Halifax from here, because we have no children's hospital in New Brunswick, even myself, for my cancer treatment, cancer I can get locally, radiation, I have to go an hour and a half away, doesn't sound that long for some people, but when you're going through the treatment, it's a pretty long drive, so it, these are all things that people feel, and I mean, they really, more than anything, want transit, they want access to transit, they want access to home care and to rehab services or medical services, and they just, in rural communities, feel that they're not there.

Dean Askin 13:54
Lot of differences, a lot of differences. I mean, there's a national, you know, there's this national conversation happening about accessibility and disability inclusion, you know, people, people are talking to each other, groups are talking, and there's, you know, there's posts on LinkedIn, but do you think people who have a disability, who are living in a remote area, are benefiting from any of the national conversation that's going on? I mean, whoever wants to answer this one.

Shelley Petit 14:22
I would say, well, no, and part of it is they can't even participate in that, because this conversation is being put on primarily online, and I don't know about territories, but here in New Brunswick, a lot of our rural communities still do not have internet, or they have access to a system like Explore Net, that's very expensive, they have made federal government and provincial government made commitments to get better access in, but it's not there, and we have a lot of our province that just cannot get online yet in 2026 that can't get online, it just shocks me, but it's the truth, and that in and of itself. Self is a barrier because they don't get to participate in these conversations, and nobody is going to ask them face to face, at least not down here, and it's a problem.

Denise McKee 15:12
And just jumping in here, after Shelly, I hear you said to everything that you say, I think that the national conversation is almost comical, because especially for the Northwest Territories, everybody wants to tick off that box. Oh, we've got the Northwest Territories click, we've involved the North, but they're invited for the optics and not the substance, and when I look at small rural communities, they're drowned out by larger centers and compete constantly on importance of bay basis on numbers, but small rural communities will never have the numbers to be able to compete with, like a Toronto, so when I take a look at it, I say, why are we basing it on the number of people instead of the percentages? For example, in the Northwest Territories, the population is 40,000 compared to Toronto. Okay, Toronto has 3.3 million people, and according to their action plan that I looked into, they have, they, they believe they have 570,000 people living with disability, as Amy pointed out, no real stats to that, it's just self-identifying and their, their approximations. When you look at the Northwest Territories, and that's that for Toronto, is approximately 17% of their population in the Northwest Territories, because of a whole confluence of factors, from colonization to geographical terrain and distance. The population of 50% indigenous, it's estimated that over 14,000 people live with disabilities, which is 35% double. double the percentage of people from a large urban center, and yet their voice is silent. It's like being invited out for dinner, and you're invited to the hors d'oeuvres that everyone else gets to come for dinner, and you don't find that out until you're there. So the mindset in smaller communities becomes

they are part of continuous consultations without any impactful change, and I agree with that analysis. So, especially since these rural communities in the Northwest Territories are almost 100% indigenous, that population is the most impacted. They're the most engaged, because you get to tick off a whole bunch of boxes, but they're the most marginalized at the same time. Imagine if every single year you have people coming in, well, now they don't use flip charts, now it's online, and it's online surveys, and those kind of things, and you give feedback, and you never see anything come out of that feedback, and you also have a disability, and it's caused you a great amount of effort to even be involved in the process, so you, you're struggling with all these, with all these things, and you just become.. it has a more.. it is more impactful, and just minimizes the voice, and I think that's a really important message it sends to the community and the nation at large, is yeah, yeah, we'll say we're talking to them, but we're never going to really do anything for them, and so that becomes almost a trickle-down effect. From this is how the federal government operates, this is how the territorial government will operate, and now municipal government. So, why bother?

Shelley Petit 18:58
It's very traumatizing. Yes.

Dean Askin 19:01
That kind of all of that kind of brings me, you know, to the to the whole human rights thing, and sort of, you know, exclusion by systemic design and systemic attitudes. And I want to talk about the UNCRPD for a minute. I mean, Canada signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities way back in 2007 and ratified it in 2010 and of course the UNCRPD is it's the International Human Rights Treaty that's ideally supposed to protect the rights of people with disabilities, you know, and make sure they're not discriminated against and treated equally. I mean, right on the Canadian federal government website it says parties to the UNC UNCRPD are required to promote and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights of persons with disabilities, including full equality under the law, but I'm wondering if people have a disability, and especially those living in remote areas, whether. Even more barriers to participation, as you talked about, if they can't fully participate in their communities and employment, and in society where they live in those remote communities. What did that say about Canada's commitment to the UNCRPD, and what does it say about the importance of disability advocacy?

Shelley Petit 20:22
I see it two ways, so one, there's the whole part that you know, are we actually doing it? So, for example, we presented the MCS community actually presented to the World Health Organization, and they slap back a cannon, said you need to do better on this, and it's, it's been a big thing for us. So we're not, we're not following this enough. We're not, the provinces are trying to take this, the Fed sign that it doesn't reply to us. Oh, yes, it does, by extension it does. That's been the argument we've been fighting against for years. They seem to now be accepting that they have to follow it, and then do something, but on the other side of that balancing equation, I also see people that come to us and want us to advocate for things that we can't do down here in Atlanta. All of Atlanta, Canada is smaller, has less population than Toronto, and people want us to have GO trains, speed trains to get around, that's never going to happen. The population doesn't exist to maintain that. There's, you know, what I mean. So we have to look at things and say, how can we do things, because they have to still be affordable, or

it's just going to be, we have it for one government cut, for the next government, one government cut, like, so we have to have in a way that it is affordable, but there's creative things we don't need to recreate the wheel in Denmark. They use city busses that are no longer good to be on the road, and they turn them into portable grocery stores. It is the coolest thing I've ever seen, and you know when it's going to be in your community. They go to the rural and remote communities, and they bring up really affordable fresh fruit, vegetables, some staples, some meats, and you buy it from the bus, and you know when it's going to be there, and I was like, oh my gosh, what a great idea. So these are things that we could be looking at under the UN, that to say, okay, how can we meet these goals in remote communities, and then someone just has to start to do it, and they can't expect people with disabilities to continue to be the ones to do it. We are running out of energy, we are running out of lifespan, and check with us, work with us, don't tell us, ask us, but then you have to help us get it going, because we can't do it. All there's a reason we have a disability, and we're, you know, a lot of us are not able to work, so work with us, but don't tell us. And then we're going to get closer to meeting the ideals of that. We're a long way off, but we could get closer and closer and closer, not overnight, but we'll get there.

Dean Askin 23:00
And Denise, what do you think?

Denise McKee 23:01
Yeah, I'm gonna head back into what's Canada's commitment. So I think that this goes back to, to also this viewpoint that disabilities is always just a subcategory of something else, so it's a more recognizable group that, oh, a certain part of that group will also have a disability. We are a standalone entity of vulnerable people. We are not a subgroup of someone else. We are at least at least 15% of the population, and if we ignored 15% of the any other group of vulnerable people in the population, it would come back to haunt them, and this is why they made the separation between seniors and people with disabilities, and it goes down to something very, very simple in politics: seniors vote, seniors show up, and they are the, they have the time, they have the resources, they have the ability to be able to get there and vote, and people with disabilities were pulled away from, you know, that group, as you said, even though many of the things that would address, you know, what seniors are actually asking for is related to their disability and not to their age. So often people with disabilities are seen as people who are not impactful in a vote, and after all, I mean a politician's only job is to get reelected, so if you're not going to be in that population that votes, or you're seen as part of a population that has less impact that way, you're then less addressed in their needs, and as I said, this filters right down through every level, so when Canada makes a commitment. Comment, or when governments make a commitment, oftentimes it is very strong on paper, but does not resonate in impactful change in action, and those kind of things. So, I think that when you talk about advocacy, we have to truly look at not just being kind of subservient advocates, and just go, you know, don't raise our voices. I think we have to become a much more vocal group, as other groups became, you know, proudly, when you look at it, you know, from an academic level, becoming very proud of disability, and it's part of who we are, and being able to kind of come out and say you will listen, you have to listen. We don't want a statement that says nothing about us without us, and then you just go about your business. We want that to be involved in every single decision and consultation with us, not able-bodied people giving what disabled people's voices are talking about some kind of credibility, because they're willing to repeat it. Our voices stand on our own.

Shelley Petit 26:18
Yes, it, we have to eliminate the Disability Industrial Collective. That's the first thing that has to go. All these silo groups that are getting paid, these people are being paid money, they're all able-bodied, or they have an, you know, they say, well, I half of our staff have invisible disabilities, but they face no barriers, so you may have a small invisible disability, but if you face no barriers, it's a lot different than people that are housebound because of their disability, and we need the voices of those who are being impacted the most to be speaking on our behalf, not people that can do everything, because they're usually more fortunate, they have it's a lot easier to be disabled when you got a lot of money than when you're stuck on the provincial or territorial benefit, so it's we've got to start allowing our voices to be out there.

Amy Widdows 27:15
Thank you both for that. I'm going to switch gears just a little bit. When we were researching for this episode, we came across a cerebral palsy Alberta blog post titled "Like a Jail: A Disability Can Make Rural Alberta Unlivable. How apt is that title if you were to switch out the word Alberta and substitute it for New Brunswick or Northwest Territories or any other rural part of the province, Shelley?

Shelley Petit 27:45
I don't even know if you need the word rural, we could just say New Brunswick. In the winter, you are in jail. The sidewalks aren't cleaned well, the streets aren't cleaned well. It is almost impossible to get anywhere. There is a little bit of transit in the bigger cities, not consistent enough. They tell us to rely on things like urban rural transit, which is a lovely system, but it's run by volunteers. So every time there's a snowstorm, we hear from people that have finally were supposed to go see the specialist that day, but their urban rural ride person isn't going that day because it snowed some, so now they're going to wait another two years to see the specialist or more, so it's, you know, it's, it's absolutely true, but again, I don't even know if we need the word rural in there, we could just have New Brunswick for a lot of people. Denise, what are your thoughts?

Denise McKee 28:38
Uh, well, if anybody's ever been to the Northwest Territories, I think it's self-explanatory. I think jail probably has more benefits having a disability in the Northwest Territories. Some of our communities are fly-in only, so they have no access. There's no paved roads, there's no, you know, we're they're dirt roads, they're covered in snow. They have it's extremely cold. The terrain is just unmanageable, unless you have a vehicle, and they're at the whim of the weather on top of everything else. There's a lack of building codes, there's a lack of even when we do get a ramp to something, it's like a ramp to nowhere, because we have, we have, you know, two stop signs that will have, and this is all I'm talking about in Yellowknife, which is still considered very rural, but not even in the most rural places, but that have the signals for somebody who has a vision loss or is blind, and then I guess once they get to the third light, they're on their own, so because there is absolutely nothing, so there's an. No rhyme or reason to what happens, and there's no infrastructure, as Shelly said, to take care of anything, so there might be a ramp, but it doesn't get cleared. There's no transportation is a huge issue in the Northwest Territories, so people have no access to their community and their community and social events. We do have in in Yellowknife one one accessible bus that stops at 7o'clock at night, so you know, I guess if, if you like to

go to bed at 730 but everything in the Northwest Territory starts like at 6o'clock or 7o'clock or 8o'clock at night, and goes till like 1o'clock in the morning. So I'm not sure how you can ever get back. We don't have cab systems, and people do. I mean, I described it at the beginning. People become prisoners in their own home. They even when that, even when that vehicle can is available, which is rarely, and only in a couple of communities. They don't, they don't clear a pathway to get on to that to that bus to go to the employment, so they refuse to take people. Plus, the fact that, yes, you're absolutely right, most of the people are living below the poverty line. Some, some have no access to any internet or any kind of communication, so there's a huge safety factor involved as well. And we went through evacuations, and we saw just how terrible it was during the fires for people with disabilities, and when you try to get out on a plane or something like that, because you have to go to a health appointment that's like somewhere outside of your community, there's no accessible flight there or accessible plane, you have people being pushed onto a plane by, you know, a couple of people who work on it, and I'm not talking about, you know, a beautiful night 737 I'm talking about a four seater, and you're trying to push somebody on board, and so people just give up, and that's the real tragedy, is people give up because their dignity is destroyed. Now, can you imagine being having somebody, or two young pilots, grab you and start pushing your, you know, your body as a female onto a, or a male onto a, onto a plane, touching you all over, and you have cultural components that absolutely are devastating with that. You just don't go anymore, right?

Amy Widdows 32:50
So, Denise, just to add to that, this goes without saying, I'm assuming, but how much does the severity of a disability come into play when you're living in such a rural area compared to an urban center.

Denise McKee 33:04
Well, I'll just use what having an intellectual disability does to you. In the Northwest Territories, we actually have a whole program dedicated to dislocating and moving people, not just out of their community, but south for their entire life, so because they have an intellectual disability or a cognitive issue under the guise of care, and this is this is almost 100% indigenous, they are taken out of their community and sent down south to stay in institutions. institutions, you know, different levels or different types of care facilities, never to see their families again. So, what happens is they become invisible populations. If you have a disability in the Northwest Territories, specifically, whether it's a severe physical disability, cognitive disability, you are unseen, so you're taken out of the community because you can have a locum come in and say, oh, you know, we just don't have the ability to support those people, and to let you know how bad that argument is. We, as an organization, went down to talk to some of these really, I guess, well, well-established facilities that are able to give all this great care that we can't do in the Northwest Territory, and what we learned is it isn't - it's a lie, it's basically a crisis intervention, which we're all expected to have in the North anyway. So, what it is, it's a, it's convenient, get them out of the community and send them somewhere else, and so this is where the fear of dislocation comes in, and people don't, people don't report, so we're talking about millions and millions of dollars being spent. Every year outside the health, the health budget, in order to keep people outside of their community somewhere else, so they don't have to be dealt with here. People that want to come back, people that should be back in their community, and the people that are able to stay in their community that have these pretty severe disabilities or barriers, their families and their infrastructure of community and social connections are what's doing it to allow them to stay. It's not anything to do with

funding or the government, they on their own are making the decision, my loved one will not go somewhere else, and we'll try to do whatever we can to keep them here.

Dean Askin 35:48
I'm kind of shaking my head, because it sounds like the 1970s happening in 2026 and you know we've talked about this a little bit about the whole silo thing, but I mean, in the disability sector, I mean, it's well known that support organizations are often working in silos, so I mean, what impact does that have on rural communities and people in them who have a disability?

Shelley Petit 36:16
Well, I know here in Northern New Brunswick, it's an issue, because first of all, they can't get, they don't have offices up in the rural areas. They often have English-speaking employees that do tours in the rural areas, and they sort of go around and visit, and you know, if they're coming this month on the third, but you're, you've got an appointment, forget it, you don't get to see them, so it's, you know, it's very siloed, it's hit and miss. Sometimes they share, sometimes they go two and three years, and they say, "Oh, we don't offer that right now because we don't have anyone to do it. Okay, well, me a river is still a service that you're getting money from the province or the feds to provide, find a way to provide it, and we've had people that, you know, they're waiting six and seven years to get a ramp to get funding approval for ramp. Well, that ramp is necessary, like no one's asking for a ramp for the hell of it. They want it because they absolutely need it, and you know it's to the people are just they're fed up, but the system by nature, like Denise was saying earlier, we need to be loud and vocal. The system by nature makes it so that we can't be, we can't get around to do even whole little protests. It's hard to have a protest with one or two people there, right? And so that's the biggest problem. They have us so isolated, even in urban centers with a lack of services that people just feel like they people are giving up, and unless you are independently, you know, not you have to be wealthy millionaires, but you know well enough off that you can afford your own vehicle, and any of the accessibility changes that you need for it, get your house, things like that. Life is very difficult. I would not, you know, I mean, I know why people live in rural areas, it's their heritage and their family, but you know, wouldn't recommend it to anyone in New Brunswick unless they had the money to be independent of all these services and be able to buy them yourself independently, because you're not going to get them, they just don't exist in the rural communities. It's terrible. It's unacceptable.

Dean Askin 38:28
And adding it, Denise?

Dean Askin 38:30
What's the silo, what's, what's the silo effect up there in the Northwest Territories?

Denise McKee 38:34
Well, I, I'm going to look at the silo effect from the from the point of view of those people attempting to advocate and work with people and provide the services, the silos are what keep us all in this competition for funding, as opposed to this, this working together and partnering to give the best wraparound services for people, or the best access to services. Everyone's so afraid that it's going to impact them, and there is no sharing of information from the government to the organizations. There's

lots of committees. Let me tell you, you could have committees up the wazoo, but none of them ever kind of really pull together this understanding that it has to be kind of funding that can be dependable, that people can can easily go from one place to another and work together without this belief that behind someone's going to say, oh, I believe that might be a duplication of service, so we got to get rid of that, and that's the that, and it's just perpetuates a system that doesn't serve the people it's meant to help. So, if you go outside that system and you say, well, I'm not going to play the game anymore, then you're ostracized.

Dean Askin 39:59
Mm. So you're not part of that in crowd. On top of the siloing effect among service providers, there's the whole dynamics of rural and remote communities, I mean perceptions of and attitudes towards disability in those communities. How significant is the dynamics factor?

Denise McKee 40:24
Well, I think that when you're talking about communities that are indigenous, we have communities that have 13 different, you know, we have 13 different official languages, you know, in a community and a geographical area of 40,000 people, so when people are historically ignored and they can't be communicated to because they're expected, as Shelley said, to, you know, be English speaking, because those are the professionals that come in, then it's a real, then it's a real problem, I mean, colonialism itself has taught, you know, and been based on a whole system of subservience, so when a professional says no, then there isn't a belief that you can advocate for yourself or that you can, you know, partner with a group, and oftentimes it's not until that that person or those families come to another, you know, to another place where they find out, yes, I do have the ability to to advocate, to be self-determinant, and to, you know, speak up on behalf of my family member or myself, so you know, like, within within this, there isn't that sharing of information from community to community, because the same fear exists. What's going to happen to my loved one? What's going to happen to me if I raise my voice? Maybe they're going to send somebody else in who's going to say something about me, and I'm going to be removed. So I think that these are these are significant issues that an urban center, you know, they're fighting a different battle, and disabilities and rural communities are fighting. We're like at the, we're at the beginning stage, and I did like when you said it's like the 1970s and sometimes I think it's probably going back to almost a feeling that there's a eugenics process involved, where you know now I see the biggest push on this unmade and allowing people to make decisions based on, you know, I'd rather not have to fight this fight for services anymore, and all, except a medically assisted, you know, dying because I just can't take it anymore. That shouldn't be what we're doing as a society, that's supposed to be, you know, progressive and supportive, and, and you know, a benchmark that people look to.

Shelley Petit 43:01
Yep. Yep, and even in New Brunswick, it's the French-English battle, the indigenous English battle, in terms of trying to get services in, in your language. I mean, I couldn't imagine being up north and only speaking French and being told that you know you've got terminal cancer, or you have a spine of it, for so, and you've got to go down to Moncton for a test, and they're going to try, you have no way to get there, so they're going to find some way to get you there for a test, and the person that's going to pick you up is English only, so you cannot communicate with them, and you're going to have all these tests

done, and it's, it's a scary enough situation, and then not to be able to communicate is just, it's heartbreaking, and it's frustrating at the same time, like it breaks your heart, but it makes you mad, and it makes you think, like, how, how is it so far behind still, but it's the systems that force us to stay behind, that's the biggest problem.

Amy Widdows 44:08
Okay, we can't

Shelley Petit 44:11
happy, not

Amy Widdows 44:13
at all, not at all. We can't talk about the intersection of disability and remote communities without talking about historical colonialism. How significant is the colonialism factor?

Denise McKee 44:30
Well, the whole system is based on a colonial system of dislocation, so you know, like my comparison is it's for people with disabilities, it's very similar to the dislocation and removal of, of children, and you know, to residential schools. If you are removing someone because they have a disability and you dislocate them and send them to an institution, that's what it is. You can't, you can't. Expect a population that has gone through this historically to be able to not look at it at exactly the same, that's why there's a fear, it's just like an underground network of don't say anything, don't say that your disability is there, or don't say how bad your disability is, so then what we have is this whole underground and unseen network of, you know, smaller support systems and families just in crisis because they're trying to do whatever they can, and then all of the sudden, especially with the demographics in the north and in aging population, you have individuals that have never been seen popping up because now their elderly parents or their family can no longer support them, and they're their needs and are like through the roof, and nobody's ever, they've never even been on the radar for services and supports, and then what happens. Well, we can't support them, so let's send them away. It's, it's catastrophic, and it's inhuman. As far as I'm concerned, I have a disability. My son has a severe intellectual disability, and I saw the bigotry, prejudice, and the and the disenfranchisement of him as a human being within smaller communities, not from the community members, but from the organizations and the government that were there to be able to provide the services to support them, and I come from a very privileged place of being, you know, a white educated female, you know, that has a job from being an indigenous parent who is part of a community and is living in poverty. I can't even express how devastating it is to try to amplify those voices, and, and know that the people listening are just saying, oh, well, it's the North, that's the way it's going to be,

Shelley Petit 47:15
But it's not just the North, right? It's, it's Northern Canada, absolutely, but it's all the rural communities across this country that are getting treated that way as well, and as the internet and other things do improve, our voices are going to get out there, and then they're not going to be able to leave us in the dark. Well, unless they cut off all our power, but they're going to be, they're going to have to start listening to us more, and I do think that you know this is away from colonialism, but we started to really

become more vocal during the pandemic because we seem to discover Zoom and say, oh, it's just as crappy in another province as it is here for us, and the only people that were saying something opposite were the people that were quite independently wealthy or very comfortable, and they have a different view of disability, and I get that, you know, even I'm privileged. We own our own house, it's been paid for, we have vehicles, like financially we're very, very lucky, but I went through two years of hell getting here when I had to stop working to the point that I was almost living in my car, and the whole system is made to keep us down, to keep us quiet, because people are terrified to say anything out of fear that they're going to lose some of the measly benefits they have today, and we see that across all across Canada, and rural communities, and in urban centers, but rural communities especially, because they get picked on. It's like, it's that's how I see it. It's like they're like, oh, who can we kick and keep down even more this week? Oh, I know, and it's, it's for 2026 Canada has to be doing better, and our neighbors to the south are the same way, have to be doing better. We have to do better because we are only as strong as our most vulnerable communities, and I'll tell you what, our vulnerable communities are very weak because nobody wants to listen to what we really need, and we know what we need.

Dean Askin 49:31
We've been talking a lot about, you know, what's being done wrong or what's not being done. Let's turn the tables for a little, for a minute or two, and I'm wondering what's being done right to support people with disabilities in rural and remote communities.

Shelley Petit 49:50
I have a bit of hope here in New Brunswick with a few things that are happening. So, today, as you know, is Election Day municipally. This is the first election since they've done a huge municipal reform. In around 2019 2020-ish and what they did is they went from having like 400 areas of voting to, I think, 56 or something like that. They did a lot of a forced amalgamation, which people aren't happy about, but they, one of the things that they did develop out of this are regional service district areas and community service district areas, and those are going to be established after this election. There were some ad hoc ones working, but they didn't have to come until after this election, and there must be a disability or an accessibility seat on those, and a transit seat on those. So I'm thinking we may get a little bit of progress there, because as the coalition we will be following up with all these new councils, and where's your commission, and is it set up, and we want, we want to hear what's going on, and we want that voice, and we want it zoomed out, so that everybody can participate in your community and see and be involved, so we have a little bit there, and we finally, hallelujah, have an accessibility act here in New Brunswick, and they do make distinctions with rural and urban, the fact that certain services may have to be provided differently in a rural area, but that you should be able to go to any little place in New Brunswick, anywhere, and get the same services, so if you're going to move from Puck Mosh to Moncton or Moncton to Puck Mosh, you should get the same services, or if you're going to go to Grand Dallas or Petit Grand Dallas or to Rich Abuck, you should be able to get the same services, and that is in part of the Accessibility Act, and that is something that we're going to help hold the government's feet to and ensure that it happens, so it's not going to happen fast, but it is starting to happen, and it's been recognized as a problem, so that gives me a smidge of hope.

Dean Askin 51:54

Denise, thank you. What, Denise, what about up there in the Northwest Territories? What's being done right?

Denise McKee 51:59
Well, I think that some of the things I'm always an optimist, because I wouldn't be - I've been here for 15 years, but I've been in the field before it was a field, so almost 40 years now, and I think that when we take a look at what's being done right, we see individual cases where people do a great job of being community champions and being mentors to other families, so it has that very familial kind of atmosphere where people learn from each other, as well as the fact that you know there has been a focus, and part of it is because it's national as well on early intervention and on those kind of strategies to help be able to address the issues earlier in life and get the supports in there so that you know some of the some of the development and those kind of issues can be met at an earlier at an earlier stage before they become older, I would say that those are probably the, the two that I see most of. I'm, I'm still, you know, not in a, not in an optimistic place to say that families and people living with disabilities in these remote communities have anywhere near the quality of life that they should be having, or that they even minimally should be having.

Amy Widdows 53:32
So, Denise, what needs to be done better? What needs to happen?

Denise McKee 53:40
Well, I think in the territory, I like what Shelley said. They've, they've created an act, so they have some legislation to have some teeth in it to be able to hold somebody accountable. I also think the federal government needs to step up. They're giving in the Northwest Territories. The Northwest Territory depends on the federal government for most of the funding and health, so and for housing, and some of the bare essentials that make living worth living, and they need to hold them accountable, the government accountable to the federal government of meeting the standards that are required for that funding to be provided, so when I can't be open, I understand that when you get federal funding for a building, it has to be, you know, in housing it should be 30% accessible, and I see not one accessible or it's visitor accessible, but no one can live there. Then I'm saying, where's the federal government in the accountability here? Okay, I don't need a government of in a territory that's just an overseer, some a gatekeeper to the money that's supposed to be spent in certain ways, whether it be education, housing, health. I need the federal government to say if you don't start using this money properly and being accountable for. And starting to put in universal design, design as the basis, and those kind of things, then you're not going to get the funding anymore, and I think that indigenous groups need to hold them accountable as well to the money being given, and to even some of those huge environmental issues that they deal with on a regular basis that lead to the disabilities that are occurring specifically within their communities, so I think that we shouldn't have to in this day and age legislate morality and ethic, but we sure do have to in the Northwest Territories,

Amy Widdows 55:43
So for both of you, what's your main message that you would want anyone listening to this podcast right now to take away? Shelley, and then Denise,

Shelley Petit 55:54
I guess the main message is the main message for us is that anybody can wake up tomorrow with a disability, and waiting until that day is too late. You can't get accessible housing overnight. You can't get transit overnight. You never know what's going to happen to you overnight. So many of my friends in the disability community went to bed okay, had a stroke while they were sleeping, or like myself walked into work one day and collapse, and that was it. And your whole life changes, and if you wait until that day to demand that your community is accessible, you're going to have a hard time, a very, very difficult time. So let's turn around and build Demand these accessible units. Nobody should be getting any money for the Build Canada Better program that is not meeting federal standards with universal design and everything else, and if we do that and make Canada universally accessible, it's accessible so that everyone can participate, whether you have a disability or not, whether you're aging and your body starting to affect you or not, it's just good for everyone. So, let's do it. It's how we all move forward together and make the country better.

Denise McKee 57:12
We well said, Shelley. Well said. I think, I think absolutely, that's right. It's there's only two things in life that you can depend on, death and having a disability. At some point, you're going to lose some ability, whether it be cognitive, physical, you're going to have episodic, you know, you break your leg, you find out how inaccessible the city is, or and that might be a small takeaway, but think about that exactly as Shelley said. This could be a lifetime. You don't know when you start out in life what the next day is going to hold, but what we should be waiting for is this idea that until it affects me it's relevant. We need to be this country that everyone thinks we are, which is friendly and loving, and and a community, and a mosaic, and come together and understand that what we do for somebody else benefits all of us, and we can't continuously say if it doesn't affect me that I'm not interested, so raising the voice shouldn't just be the responsibility of people with disabilities. It needs to be a responsibility of everyone, and that doesn't mean dropping their voice and telling other people this is why their voice is legitimate. It means standing behind them and saying, hey, everybody needs to, as an able-bodied person, I need to be listening, and I need you to be listening, so it's not just this community that needs to be speaking up, it's the entire community needs to speak up and say enough is enough, we need to provide quality of life for all our citizens

Shelley Petit 59:04
Here, here.

Dean Askin 59:07
Wow, you have both been such great guests, and so many powerful insights from each end of the country. I mean, just before we wrap things up here, there's.. we've talked about so much. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important to mention before we go.

Denise McKee 59:25
I think I'll just end on disability shouldn't be looked at as something that is bad. Disability is a power. We are innovative, we are resilient, and we are creative, and we benefit every aspect of life and society, so to exclude us is to exclude an amazing resource. And I refuse to be embarrassed or ashamed or have

stigma attached. I stand up and I proudly say, "Hey, I'm a disabled woman, and that's what you're getting, that's just. Part of me, I also have gray hair.

Shelley Petit 1:00:06
Yep, disability is not a bad word. People have to get over it. People have to stop. I wish people would stop saying, "Oh, you're differently abled. No, I have a disability. I actually had someone try to tell me two weeks ago, that I don't know what people with disabilities want. He has friends that have disabilities, and that's how they talk about.. I said, maybe you have a friend that prefers that term, but I'm disabled, and I'm not ashamed to say it, and I'm not a shit.. I'm going to keep fighting until my dying breath from the cancer to make sure that things are better for the next generation, because as Canadians we need to be ashamed of how little we have done for a community that could solve and has solved so many problems. If you wanted someone who thinks outside the box, hire a person with a disability, work with people with disabilities is what we've had to do our whole lives to survive. We can't do the same old same old because it doesn't work for us. And going forward in this country to keep our mosaic going to keep what Canada is supposed to be going, we need to have more and more and more people with disabilities involved on the front line of these programs, projects, and services, or it won't work well.

Amy Widdows 1:01:26
Thanks so much to both of you for coming on the show and sharing all of these insights. It's been such a great conversation. I think one of the most important things that's come out of this conversation is that all of these barriers exist and they're magnified for people who have a disability in rural and remote communities anywhere they exist partly because everybody's working in silos instead of together. There was actually a report done just last year, so May 2025 for Aspect BC, that's the Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training. It focused on the employment barrier and how to make sure people in remote communities who have a disability have equitable opportunities to be included in the workforce, but I think the conclusion of the report really applies to everything we've talked about today. It said finding solutions requires working together, not in silos, and those solutions need to be flexible and inclusive, and they need to be ones that are responsive to the unique challenges faced by people in remote and rural regions. We'll be sure to put a link to that report in the show notes. But thanks again for coming on the show.

Denise McKee 1:02:35
Thanks so much for having me.

Shelley Petit 1:02:37
Yep, thanks for having me, and thanks for continuing to talk about the important subjects.

Amy Widdows 1:02:42
Absolutely,

Dean Askin 1:02:43
Well, I have to say thanks for me as well to both of you, Denise and Shelley. And yes, indeed, Amy, we'll have a link to that report for Aspect BC, and there'll also be a link to the federal report I mentioned

in the intro to this episode, that's Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities: A Guide. That's good alliteration, but sometimes it's a real tongue twister. Amy, that Aspect BC report you mentioned, I read that as well. And by the way, it was funded by the Canadian Association for Supported Employment Innovation Lab, which is supported by the Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives Program. And one of the points in that report that stuck out for me was the first of the seven main findings. A lot of community organizations that support people who have a disability rely on government funding to provide services, but the report found funding levels and amounts often don't reflect the real cost of operating in remote regions and supporting people in those communities who have a disability. In short, we have to do better. Maybe responsible use of AI is a way to do that, especially in remote regions.

Amy Widdows 1:03:51
Well, next month in episode 44 we'll be looking at the double-edged sword of AI. On the one side, how using AI can help employment service providers operate and serve their job seeker clients who have a disability efficiently, and at the same time, how much is the use of AI in recruitment and hiring processes excluding job seekers who have a disability? I will be away on this day, but Jenny Hope will be our guest co-hosting that episode. I know she's really looking forward to that. I'm Amy Widows.

Dean Askin 1:04:23
Going to be an interesting conversation, I think. I'm looking forward to that one too. There's no question, AI has transformed the job search process for better and for worse, depending on who you ask. I mean, all you have to do is go on LinkedIn, no shortage of posts by frustrated job seekers in a tight market. I'm Dean Askin. Thanks again for listening, wherever, whenever, and on whatever podcast app you're listening from. Join us each episode as we have insightful conversations like this one about disability in remote communities with Denise McKee and Shelley Petit, and explore disability inclusion in business and in our community. Identities from all the angles. You can't spell inclusion without a D is produced in Toronto, Canada, by the Ontario Disability Employment Network. Our podcast production team: Executive Producer and Co-host Amy Widows. Our producer is Sue Defoe. Associate Producer and Co-host Dean Askin. Audio editing and production is by Dean Askin. Our podcast theme is Last Summer by Iksen. If you have feedback or comments about an episode, email us at info@odnetwork.com that's info at o d e n e t w o r k.com Join us each episode for insights from expert guests as we explore the power of inclusion, the business benefits of inclusive hiring and fostering an inclusive culture, and why disability is an important part of the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility conversation. Tune into, you can't spell inclusion without a Dean Podbean, or wherever you find your favorite podcasts.