

# Members' Assistance Programs: Working In a Job Like No Other

It's sometimes easy to forget that politicians are people too and must deal with many types of personal issues while serving the public in a job with particular stresses on them and their families. Members' assistance programs offer support to parliamentarians and their families and it would be a good practise for legislatures to routinely review them to ensure they are effective.

**Hon. Jackie Jacobson, MLA**

Parliamentarians don't often speak about the personal costs that a political life can have, or what we can or should do about it. In all our legislatures, Members devote a lot of time and energy to our jobs as we desire to make positive changes and are passionate to make the world a better place for our people and their children and grandchildren.

What the public, the media, and even we, ourselves, sometimes forget is that we're not just politicians – we're people too. Like any human beings we don't just bring our drive and commitment to work. We also bring our personal lives. And while this can include a lot of happiness and support from our families and friends, it can also include experiences that make it hard for us to stay healthy and focus on our work.

There are plenty of experiences and issues that can weigh on us as we do the work our constituents have entrusted us to do. Marital problems, grief, stress, anger, depression, addictions, and trauma from residential schools or other kinds of abuse are things we as politicians and human beings can experience in our day to day lives. And whether those things affect us directly or our family members, we can't just put them aside when we come to our jobs.



**Jackie Jacobson**

As Speaker of the North West Territories' Assembly, I feel like I have some responsibility to look out for the well-being of Members and it really concerns me when I hear some of the things Members are going through in their personal lives. I see the effects on them, on their work, and on the work of the Assembly as a whole.

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*Jackie Jacobson is Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories. This article is a revised version of a presentation he gave to the 2014 Canadian Presiding Officers' Conference in Ottawa.*

Furthermore, a lot of people who could be good leaders are discouraged from running to become an MLA because they see the immense personal costs involved in holding the position. There is stress from long hours and high expectations of us. Those of us who represent small communities never get away from it. It's 24/7. You can't go to the grocery store or the post office or the gas station without someone wanting to talk to you about something, and usually they're not happy. People aren't shy to come knocking on our doors or call us at home.

Public life, and all the criticism that goes with that is also tough. As politicians, we probably all knew what we were signing up for as part of the job, but that's not necessarily the case for our families. The worst is when it affects our children on the playground, or our spouses in their workplaces or social lives.

Finally, I think many of us know what a strain the long periods away from home can put on a family. Our spouses become single parents for weeks at a time. Our children get frustrated that mom or dad is not around and start acting out and getting into trouble. Some of us also have aging parents or others that depend on us for care and support, and it's difficult for them too when we're away so much. It's easy to feel like we're pulled in too many directions.

#### **What can we do about it?**

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Like most other legislatures across the country, the NWT Legislative Assembly offers Members a service that is similar to many employee assistance programs. There is a toll-free 24-hour number Members can call to arrange for counselling. Often the counselling will be over the phone, as counsellors are not available in all of our communities. This set-up can be a problem. Culturally, it's uncomfortable for some of our Members or their families to talk to a stranger about their concerns, especially someone in another province over the phone. It is a good program for some issues, but not adequate for others.

For these reasons, our Members' Assistance Policy also allows Members and their families to seek additional services through the Clerk. These can be more specialized or intensive therapies than are available through the counselling service, including residential treatment programs where needed.

We've recently noted a couple of concerns with this approach. The main one is that the scope of services that can be approved by the Clerk is not well defined. Most Clerks aren't trained psychologists or counsellors, so they should have some guidance about the best places to refer Members for help.

To improve the policy, our Board of Management has recently instructed the Clerk to work with our Department of Health and Social Services to come up with a list that we can work within. Still, we think it is very important that we continue to offer services that go beyond the basic counselling program.

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#### **A necessary service**

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Outsiders might think Members or their families are getting special treatment by being able to access services like this beyond a regular employee assistance program. I have to respectfully disagree. I've mentioned some of the ways the stresses of political life affect our personal lives beyond what other workplaces entail. This is no ordinary job. Most jobs don't involve so much public attention, so little downtime, or so much time away from home.

Members need to be able to do their work, and serve the public without having their personal lives fall apart or sacrificing the well-being of their spouses and children. Access to programs like these helps to make that possible. This benefits not only Members and their families, but the public we serve, and the health of our legislatures.

We're not just politicians, we're people too.

## **Members' Assistance Plans**

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*A brief look at the types of Members' Assistance Plans available to parliamentarians across the country based on information provided through an inquiry to the Clerks-at-the-Table listserv (November, 2015).*

**House of Commons:** The House of Commons provides access to an Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). This program provides confidential and voluntary counselling services on a broad range of topics such as personal, family, financial, legal, professional, lifestyle, nutrition, health and wellness matters. Members of Parliament and their immediate family (as defined in the employee benefit plan) can receive support over the telephone, in person, online and through a variety of self-guided resources. Members have access to immediate, relevant support in a way that is most suited to their preferences, learning approach and lifestyle. Highly qualified, experienced and caring professionals help with the selection of a support option that works best for the individual. The EFAP provides short term counseling and will arrange for referrals if long term treatment is necessary. In some cases, the additional counseling and treatment programs may be eligible for partial coverage under the Public Service Health Care plan.

**Senate:** Senators have access to the same Employee Assistance Program (EAP) used by senators' staff and employees of the Senate Administration. While the Senate enters into its own contract for EAP services, the services offered are the same as or comparable to what is provided elsewhere in the public service. Senators do not benefit from any additional coverage over and above what is offered under the EAP.

**British Columbia:** Members are provided with the same basic coverage as Assembly and public service employees. The Speaker may approve additional treatment as required by individual circumstances. The Speaker has exercised this prerogative over

the years to facilitate treatments and alternative services. To protect the privacy of the Member requiring assistance, the request is not sent to the Legislative Assembly Management Committee or any other committee for consideration. Typically, the Caucus Chairs and/or House Leaders would be informed depending upon the sensitivity of the treatment or alternative medical service.

**Saskatchewan:** Members and their family have access to brief short term assistance from a service provider through an Employee and Family Assistance Plan. The service provider may explore options to assist the individual in transitioning to other services.

**Manitoba:** Members have a separate Employee Assistance Plan from what is provided for Legislative Assembly employees to provide confidentiality to members. The plan provides for a short-term counselling model and will refer out to community resources for long-term or specialized circumstances like residential treatment programs, but these programs are not covered under the plan. Members have standard insurance coverage from a provider that is covered by the EAP and have the option of paying additional premiums to receive extended coverage.

**Ontario:** The Legislative Assembly of Ontario provides an "Employee Assistance Program" to Members and their dependents which continues while they are in office and for an additional six months after leaving office. The program, offered by Shepell-fgi, is paid for by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario with no cost to the Member or their dependents. If the individual requires more specialized or longer-term support, the provider will assist in the selection of an appropriate specialist or service that can provide the assistance required. The fees for these additional services are not covered by the Legislative Assembly and Members do not have the option to request approval for coverage through the Assembly.

There is no dollar amount limit on coverage under the Assembly's plan. There is not a residential treatment program and, as stated above, the provider would assist in the selection of a treatment program (if requested), however it would be the individual's financial responsibility and they would not have the option to have the treatment/service covered by the Assembly.

The types of services provided under the EAP plan are: Achieve Personal Well-Being; Manage Relationships and Family; Address Workplace Challenges; Tackle Addictions; Research Child and Elder Care Resources; Get Legal Clarity; Get Financial Clarity; Understand Nutrition and Focus on Your Health. There is no defined list of professional services covered under EAP. Under our Group benefit plan, there are only “standard” services covered with limited expenses (i.e. Chiropractor, osteopath, chiropodist, naturopath, podiatrist, speech therapist, acupuncturist, massage therapist, or physiotherapist.)

**Quebec:** The Employee Assistance Program applies equally to administrative and political employees and Members of the National Assembly. The Assembly offers up to \$600 annually for registered professional counseling services and the group insurance plan covers 100 per cent of the cost of these services up to a maximum of \$3000 per calendar year.

**New Brunswick:** Members use the same plan as the public service. Members must select from a list of approved service providers for therapeutic sessions based on a defined list of services covered. While there is no specific dollar amount limit for these sessions, there is a limit on the number of allotted sessions.

**Nova Scotia:** Members use the same plan as the public service.

**Prince Edward Island:** Members do not have access to a member/employee assistance program.

**Newfoundland and Labrador:** Members use the same plan as the public service.

**Yukon:** Members do not have access to their own plan or the public service employee assistance plan. The Assembly deals with situations where therapeutic sessions may be required on a case-by-case basis. The Director of Administration, Finance and Systems would work with the Member and the Member’s leader to determine the program and length of treatment. No specific dollar amount or preapproved list of providers is set provided there are funds available. If funds are not available, the Director would discuss the situation with the Clerk. The Members’ Services Board would not be advised.

**Northwest Territories:** Members have access to the public service employee assistance plan and are encouraged to seek help there first, but if they feel the plan does not meet their needs they can request the plan pay for additional treatment options.

**Nunavut:** Members have access to the same basic coverage as Assembly and public service employees. The Management and Services Board has the authority to approve additional treatment as required by individual circumstances, including residential treatment programs, but these provisions would be co-ordinated outside of the current public service plan.