



Author Jen Powley.  
PHOTO: Nicola Davidson

# Disability and Climate Chaos

by JEN POWLEY

Like every other creature inhabiting this orb, people with disabilities will be impacted by rising temperatures and species change. I am a member of that group. I have progressive multiple sclerosis. I used to work at the Ecology Action Centre but left in 2013 when I no longer had enough voice to be heard in a meeting.

I am not alone. According to **Accessible Nova Scotia**, nearly one in three Nova Scotians identify as having a disability. The percentage varies with age. For youth aged 15 to 24 the rate is 21 per cent, for working aged adults (25-64) the rate is 29 per cent and for adults over 65 the rate is 41 per cent.<sup>1</sup> A disability can fall into any of the following categories: pain related, flexibility, mobility, dexterity, mental health related, hearing, seeing, memory, learning and developmental. Yet the needs of people with disabilities are often forgotten in discussions about climate change impacts.

Like a flower I droop in the heat. But staying cool with air conditioning or fans is expensive and takes a lot of energy. If you have a disability, there is only a 55.4 per cent chance you will be employed. Chances are you will not be in an air-conditioned building, which is dangerous during heat waves that are becoming more frequent and intense.

Most people with disability eat food (I say most because individuals with certain medical conditions rely on tube feed). With the rising cost of food, which is made worse by climate change, people on limited income are stretched. The poverty line for Nova Scotians is \$23,192.<sup>2</sup> If you are on social assistance with a disability, you will receive \$11,400 a year.<sup>3</sup> If you have to pay for an apartment, phone, utilities and food, it will be tight. There is nothing for extras.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

During the production of this issue, Jen Powley died at age 45. Her time working at EAC, from 2008-2013, included co-founding Our HRM Alliance and bringing the issue of complete communities into the conversation in Halifax. A lifelong activist, Jen authored *Just Jen: Thriving Through Multiple Sclerosis and Making a Home: Assisted Living in the Community for Young Disabled People*, ran for council and collaborated with Zuppa on more than one of their artistic productions, among many other accomplishments. She brought her incisive sense of humour to almost every interaction and made a real impact on the world and the people around her. Jen had an indomitable spirit and is missed by many.

My partner, Tom, is a type one diabetic. He uses orange juice to bring his blood sugar up, and he buys juice in aluminum cans. They are convenient and easy to open when his blood sugar is low, and I can hear him open them. For someone who is legally blind and a quadriplegic that is important. During the pandemic, getting juice in cans was difficult for a number of reasons. I was also shocked to learn that the rate of aluminum can recycling in California has dropped from 91 per cent in 2016 to 20 per cent in 2022.<sup>4</sup> This is not great for the environment (producing primary aluminum, instead of recycled, uses a lot of resources and causes pollution) and it affects people like Tom.

The problem with disability and poverty might be improved with the passage of Bill C-22 in June 2023, legislation that creates Canada's first national disability benefit. As of August 2023, we don't know the details.

## References

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