

Assisting Children With Disabilities

Assisting Children with Disabilities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)

Handi-Care Intl. (HCI) is a registered Canadian charity that was formed in 1992 with the goal of supporting educational and rehabilitation programs locally and internationally for children and young adults with disabilities. It was formed by a group of dedicated volunteers who felt that there was an unaddressed need in the care of disabled children in Canada and internationally. Our goals are:

1. Funding educational and rehabilitation projects for disabled children and young adults.
2. Advocating for people with disabilities.
3. Training of Canadian rehabilitation professionals for working with challenging populations of people with disabilities.

Initially, HCI was focusing on funding rehabilitation projects for disabled youth and children in rural India. Over the years, we have seen that there is also a huge need in the local community in Canada, especially with regards to children with disabilities. We are addressing these needs with 2 major projects.

(1.) Assisting Children with Disabilities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)

Supporting Canadian children with Cerebral Palsy – Since 2015, HCI has been supporting children affected by Cerebral Palsy in Canada, by raising funds for a very specialized surgery – SDR- that is not covered by health insurance. HCI also supports post- surgery rehabilitation for these children, by covering the cost of physio and occupational therapies that are not covered by insurance.

We work with families who have children with disabilities, primarily Cerebral Palsy, by providing added support towards their rehabilitation needs. When a family has a child with a disability, there are many expenses that are not covered by provincial health plans or private health insurance or government support programs. Many families forgo necessary therapy and adaptive devices due to the cost. However, we feel that this puts these children at a disadvantage with regards to their future mobility, function and education. Therefore, we assist families get the therapy and assistive devices that have been recommended by therapists and doctors, that families can't afford.

We assist families to raise funds for the surgery and rehab costs of additional private therapy for their children, including physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational

therapy as well as for adaptive equipment such as wheelchairs, adaptive toilets, chairs, walkers and standers. This in turn empowers these children to become more functional, increasing their self-esteem and provides a better future for them.

(2.) Clinical Placement and Volunteer Program for Students and Professionals Across Canada

Handi-Care Intl. has been facilitating clinical and volunteer placements for Canadian students and professionals since 2004 in India with a focus on those in the rehabilitation and health care fields. We have created a partnership with an organization in rural southern India called Amar Seva Sangam (ASSA), which runs a school and rehabilitation center for disabled children. We have facilitated over 200 placements over the last 12 years that have included Canadian professionals and students in medicine, nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and special education. Students and professionals work with both adults and children with disabilities at ASSA's school and rehabilitation center. Over 500 clients with a variety of disabilities are served at this institution in India and students and professionals work alongside their counterparts in physiotherapy, occupational therapy and special education in India.

The purpose of this placement is to expose Canadian professionals and students to a variety of disabilities in a resource poor setting over the period of 2-3 months. Such an immersion experience is difficult to obtain in Canada. The skills they obtain during these placements empowers them both clinically and culturally, so that upon their return to Canada they can work and improve the lives of people with disabilities that may pose a challenge to them. The challenges they learn to work with include which will benefit them in Canada include:

1. Working with people with less resources (this is helpful in both urban and rural Canadian settings where poverty is prevalent)
2. Working with clients with more severe conditions and
3. Working with clients of different cultural and language backgrounds.

Many rehabilitation sciences programs at Canadian universities have identified this need for international clinical placements for their students in order to make them more caring and skilled health providers in Canada. Therefore, Handi-Care Intl. has affiliation agreements with the University of British Columbia, University of Manitoba, McMaster University, Western University, Queen's University and McGill University. The focus of these partnerships is to facilitate clinical placement for both students and professionals in occupational therapy and physiotherapy for a 2– 3 month period. It is a collaborative effort with all these universities and Handi-Care Intl. working together to create a

coordinated and sustainable program. In 2015, there will be 15 Canadian OT and PT students going to India from the above named universities, along with 7 OT professionals who are faculty at these universities. The focus of these partnerships is to facilitate clinical placement for both students and professionals in occupational therapy and physiotherapy for a 2– 3 month period. It is a collaborative effort with all these universities and Handi-Care Intl. working together to create a coordinated and sustainable program. In 2015, there will be 15 Canadian OT and PT students going to India from the above named universities, along with 7 OT professionals who are faculty at these universities.

Below is a testimonial from a current HCI volunteer about her placement when she was an OT student in 2005.

“In the summer of 2005, I traveled as a volunteer with Handicare Intl. to Amar Seva Sangam in India. I saw and learned about more types of disabilities than I would ever see on my occupational therapy placements in Canada. I met people with post-polio syndrome, significantly contracted extremities, stage IV pressure ulcers, club foot and suffering from long-term effects of tuberculosis. . I didn’t know how much this learning would be helpful to me until I took a position as a Baffin Region Occupational Therapist stationed in Iqaluit, Nunavut where I again saw each of these conditions and situations. Later, working in Ottawa in an urban Canadian setting, this experience helped me working with clients that were poverty stricken and had very little support. Another way this experience provided by Handicare Intl. helped me with my work in Nunavut and Ottawa, was in learning how different cultures approach disability, and an introduction to what it is like to live with a disability in areas of extreme poverty. Handicare Intl. and Amar Seva Sangam provided me with so much more relevant experience that I needed in Nunavut than did the rest of my occupational therapy education, which was executed in an urban Canadian setting.”

~ Janna MacLachlan, MSc OT