

Thank you for this award. It is especially meaningful to me as we approach the International Day for Persons with Disabilities 2009.

It is also meaningful considering the source, as Peel Region has played a leadership role in improving accessibility for people with disabilities.

Both the Region and the Joint Peel-Caledon Accessibility Advisory Committee were justifiably recognized last year by Human Endeavour and the Punjabi Community Health Centre for their outstanding efforts towards making Peel barrier-free. This only comes about through inspired leadership, a committed staff and involvement from the community, all working together to make Peel accessible.

So I am truly honoured that you have presented me with this Accessibility Award.

As you know, I chose Accessibility as the over-arching theme of my mandate and have defined accessibility as that which enables disabled people to achieve their full potential.

In this I include both classically defined physical disabilities as well as non-visible disabilities which can be just as limiting as any physical condition.

In short, accessibility is much more than what is represented by the blue sign with the white wheelchair symbol on it.

As we move forward, the progress of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, now almost 4 and a half years old, will continue to impact Ontario in a positive way.

Do you realize that there is already an entire generation of voting age Ontarians who have grown up **always** seeing wheelchair parking spots, curb cuts and automatic doors?

And if we all continue to work diligently, in less than another generation, there will be children who are just now entering kindergarten who will grow up thinking that Ontario has always been fully accessible!

But, and it is a big one, that will only happen if we all continue to play our part.

There is still a long way to go before disabled persons have true civil rights in Ontario. The question is how much can be achieved through legislation and how much requires a change of heart?

Consider that at present, 40% of disabled people earn less than \$10K per year, that is, live in poverty. In addition, the unemployment rate for disabled persons far exceeds the national average.

During the worst year of the Great Depression, the national unemployment rate reached a staggering 24%. Yet today, the unemployment rate for disabled persons is over 50%. For disabled people, it is a perpetual depression.

The question is, why?

The answer I believe, is **attitude**; a series of myths and misperceptions about people with disabilities that prevents them from being hired.

If you aren't hired, you don't have a job. If you don't have a job you are dependent on social services. And if you are reliant on these services, it is unlikely you can achieve your dreams and goals or even aspire to them.

For many, life becomes a place of frustration and even despair. I often ask people, when you meet someone with a disability for the first time, what do you see, the disability or their ability?

We all like to say, we see the ability and that's a nice, warm fuzzy answer and we all know it is not true. We all see the disability and there's nothing wrong with that as long as we don't let that first impression form the basis of a value judgment about their worth as an individual.

It is important therefore, for employers **not** to form value judgments based on physical appearance. Consider that you are interviewing someone for a job but can only see them from the waist down.

If you rejected the one legged person only because of his one leg, you might have passed on Terry Fox. If you rejected someone only because they were in a wheelchair, you might have passed on Rick Hansen. If you rejected the woman in the racing wheelchair, then you just missed hiring Canada's athlete of the year, all-time Paralympic champion Chantal Petitclerc. And if you had passed on the man in the electric wheelchair who needed a computer to speak for him, you might have just rejected the hiring of Dr. Stephen Hawking.

Then, at the end of the day you could go to your boss and try to explain why you hadn't hired Terry fox, Rick Hansen, Chantal Petitclerc or Stephen Hawking. You could also then collect your own pink slip and consider your employment options!

These of course, are mythical examples but there tens of thousands of unemployed, highly trained disabled people who can't get jobs because employers believe in a series of myths.

COMPAS Research conducted a survey for the Job Opportunity Information Network (JOIN-Toronto) this

past summer on employer's attitudes towards hiring disabled persons.

COMPAS spoke to 110 Human Resource Executives from a cross-section of Ontario-based firms, including public, private, not-for-profit and for-profit organizations. The study examined employers' perceptions related to hiring persons with disabilities. They found that the top four reasons employers did not hire people with disabilities were all based on myths and misperceptions!

All studies ever done have found there are no significant if any expenses in employing people with disabilities, that absenteeism is lower, that job loyalty is greater and that managing people with disabilities is in fact easier than the general population.

Despite those facts, all too many potential employers believe the opposite, believe myths and misperceptions.

In the same survey, COMPAS interviewed employers who do hire disabled persons and found in overwhelming numbers that they bring a fresh perspective to the workplace, that they try harder, that they are oftentimes superior problem solvers and have higher retention rates.

These executives know the facts and do not believe the myths. They know that 15.5% of Ontarians are

disabled but that when you take into account their immediate family members, they represent over 53% of the population, a number that will continue to rise as boomers age.

Think of that for a moment: over half of our population either have a disability or have an immediate family member with a disability.

Shockingly, according to the survey, there is a significant lack of awareness about the AODA itself. Amazingly, 73 per cent say they are *unaware* of the Act Itself!

In fact, only 22 per cent of business executives say that they are aware of the accessibility legislation. On the flip side, employers who hire people with disabilities are very aware of the Act.

Clearly there is much more to be done and we all need to be involved.

Even so, we **are** making progress.

Because of the AODA, every municipality in Ontario now has an Accessibility Advisory Committee that works with the local municipality. Progress is varied but progress is being made.

It remains however, for us all to check our attitudes and be that person willing to look beyond disability to the ability within.

Last year, I attended a meeting in Bracebridge on accessibility and polio awareness, where I was welcomed by the Town Crier. He used the analogy of the common, everyday door for accessibility, and posed a series of questions I would like to repeat for you. He asked:

“Can the blind find the door?

Can the arthritic hand turn the doorknob?

Can the person with an arm injury push the door open?

Can those with mobility issues pass through the door?

And are those **without** disability prepared to open the most important door of all, the door to their minds?”

I hope you will keep this analogy in mind as you continue to help advocating on behalf of accessibility. As The Queen’s representative in Ontario, I thank you for this Award and wish you all my very, very best.

Thank you.