



International Day of Persons with Disabilities

VIRTUAL QUEENS PARK DAY FOLLOW UP REPORT

Virtual Queen's Park Day Report – December 3, 2020

On December 3, 2020, Spinal Cord Injury Ontario in partnership with March of Dimes Canada held our first virtual Queens Park Day in celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This event usually takes place at Queen's Park and has had the great privilege of addressing landmark legislation, like the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act as well as key issues important to people with disabilities. We have also enjoyed the commitment of all members of Ontario Parliament.

This year, things were a bit different due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We got together virtually to raise a glass to each other and to all Ontarians living with a disability. Our theme this year was "Creating Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the Global Pandemic." We had an engaging discussion with an interesting and informative agenda of speakers.

Peter Athanopoulos, Director of Public Policy, kicked off the event by welcoming everyone, he introduced **Len Baker**, President and CEO of March of Dimes Canada, for opening remarks. Len acknowledged that there were participants joining the event from across Ontario. He spoke about how the pandemic has affected us all, but some communities are feeling it much more than others, including the disability community. There is the fear of being exposed to the virus, challenges in accessing services, and the effects of isolation on mental health, to name a few pressures. Len also commented that there have been remarkable examples of resilience amid these challenges. Heroes have emerged including those on frontline of service delivery and organizations providing essential services.

The event included a keynote speech by the **Honourable Raymond Cho**, Minister for Seniors and Accessibility. In keeping with the event's theme of opportunities, Minister Cho remarked on the importance of providing opportunities for people with disabilities to be gainfully employed. This continues to be one of the core focus areas in [Ontario's Accessibility Framework](#). Minister Cho commented that the government is partnering with local businesses and non-profit organizations to identify and remove barriers to accessibility. Before signing off, the Minister emphasized that everyone benefits when we ensure our communities are accessible and inclusive to everyone and that the government will lead by example by initiating a cross ministry agenda to advance accessibility across Ontario.

Researchers:

Dr. Cathy Craven is a scientist whose research focuses on the spinal cord injury community. She is also a parent of a child with disability. In her presentation, Dr. Craven covered the various major concerns for the disability community caused by the pandemic. First, she spoke of the need for resilience, especially for people in this community. The real front line heroes are personal support workers and family members caring for someone with a disability. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the value of informal caregivers. Also, the discussion of service

delivery changed due to the pandemic and it is something we should try to understand a bit more.

Next, Dr. Craven spoke of uncertainty, anxiety, isolation, the importance of a social network, courage, complexity, changes and ethical dilemmas. The overarching message from her presentation is that the pandemic has caused the medical community to pivot and reframe discussions of better serving people with disabilities in the community and that government needs to prioritize these investments. Government needs to make progress on the retention and recruitment of PSWs as regulated careers.

John Shepherd is a Ph.D. student of Rehab Science at the University of Toronto and is a strong advocate of the spinal cord injury community. John discussed the impact of the pandemic on the disability community, including issues such as access to medical supplies, mobility devices, and the availability of attendant care services. He mentioned that some of the issues affect everybody similarly, such as the changes to mental health during a pandemic. However, some issues are unique to the disability community, and there is a need for specialized information. He provided an example differentiated information on handwashing. It took some time to recognize what hand hygiene really meant. It is a different issue if you use a manual wheelchair versus a power wheelchair. This information had to be compiled and distributed amongst the disability community.

John also spoke on the issues of accessibility and access to health care services. He mentioned that the priorities moving forward will need renewed commitment to accessibility (AODA implementation and enforcement) and primary health care (taking advantage of the shift to remote services). [John Shepherd's presentation slides](#) can be found here.

Government Speakers:

Joel Harden is the MPP of Ottawa Centre. Joel spoke on the importance of two issues: an updated [medical triage protocol](#) and the distribution of vaccines. In terms of the triage protocol, he mentioned that the pandemic has been especially difficult for marginalized community, including people with disabilities. He pointed out the previous COVID-19 medical triage was not satisfactory and it is currently a priority as we're reaching 1700 cases and we have surpassed the milestone of 150 COVID-19 ICU cases.

Secondly, Joel spoke on the issue of distributing the COVID-19 vaccine. If we look to the U.S., access to vaccines will begin by making sure that frontline health care workers are vaccinated first, followed by immune-compromised people next. Joel agreed with this rollout framework and spoke that Ontario should embrace the same criteria for the vaccines.

Abhijeet Manay, Deputy Leader of the Green Party of Ontario introduced himself as working in the developmental sector for the past four years at organizations that work with people with intellectual disabilities. He mentioned that an inclusive society is a central component of the Green Party's commitment to the AODA and that it is an investment in the future of Ontario.

Abhijeet also mentioned that the pandemic exposed how people with disabilities are often excluded from services. He said that both levels of government (federal and provincial) need to work together to ensure that people with disabilities have funds for living, for masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE). Abhijeet questioned why people on ODSP were not given the same compensation from the federal government's CERB, raising the issue of gaps in funding.

He then discussed how accessible housing is a key part of AODA legislation. The AODA addresses reforms to building codes. It also addresses increasing the supply of accessible housing and retrofitting houses for improved accessibility. Abhijeet closed off his presentation by emphasizing that including the disability community in a pandemic recovery plan will be beneficial for all of us.

Our last panelist was **Lucille Collard**, MPP for Ottawa-Vanier representing the Liberal Party. Lucille mentioned that she has a personal relationship with a person with a disability that helped her to understand the predicament. She had some learning experiences when she recognized some of the barriers to access public washrooms, grocery stores and restaurants. When she began her position as MPP, she spoke with people with disabilities and came to understand that they are not getting enough support; that services are not sufficiently provided by the government. The pandemic has made this issue worse. She calls on government to reinstate emergency funding help and concluded by saying that pandemic revealed that the government needs to do better to serve this community.

[Personal remarks from a member of the disability community:](#)

Carol Sagan provided personal insights outlining her observations as someone living with and caring for a person with disability. Carol is married to Matt, who has quadriplegia and uses a wheelchair. During the pandemic, Carol and Matt celebrated their 10-year anniversary. She mentioned that she has always helped with parts of Matt's care as his care workers cannot be present with them 24 hours a day. Carol mentioned an incident when none of Matt's morning care workers were available. She had to step in and take over, helping Matt to shower, dress, work out in manual chair followed by transfer to his power wheelchair. It was a busy and demanding morning for Carol to be put in the position of Matt's care worker.

Carol mentioned that as a spouse of someone living with a disability, there are no rules when dealing with issues as anything can happen. She provided an example of a crisis they experienced when they could not find gloves and other PPE equipment anywhere. They ended up finding some online but had to pay triple the standard price due to high demand and low supply. She also mentioned that the one-time direct fund issued by the government was helpful but not nearly enough to keep up with their cost of living. Carol also described the biggest dilemma they experienced during the pandemic, when their 5 day a week support worker left. They approached an agency to find help, but even the agency had no staff available. As a result,

Carol had to step in and assume a care giver position. Carol finished her presentation by mentioning that the pandemic has changed all their lives, but she hopes that other families do not have to experience the issues that she and Matt went through.

[Raise your glass in celebration](#)

CEO of Spinal Cord Injury Ontario **Dr. Stuart Howe** then concluded the panel of speakers with a toast in celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities and a reminder to government on the importance of collaboration. Dr. Howe provided examples of where government needs to be more inclusive (decisions that make a direct impact on people with disabilities) and acknowledged the importance of leveraging the lived experience of people with disabilities.

[Q&A with the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility](#)

This section of the event was a question-and-answer session with the office of the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility moderated by **Amanda MacKenzie** from March of Dimes Canada.

1. What is the ministry currently doing to support Ontarians with disabilities with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mark DeMontis (Policy Advisor) acknowledged that there is a wide range of issues and mentioned that not a day passes that his office does not receive a call, e-mail or text message from a person with a disability. He is proud of the leadership of Premier Doug Ford and the minister in advancing the accessibility framework. His office is committed to looking at the immediate needs and long terms solutions required for people with disabilities.

With regards to COVID-19, he mentioned the \$6 million investment they have made over two years to the [Ontario Community Support Program](#) which has led to 500 deliveries of medical supplies and goods to people with disability and seniors.

He is also proud of the partnership with [SPARK Ontario](#) that has enabled 5,000 new volunteers across the province so people with disabilities get the support they need. He reiterated the ministry's priority to ensure people with disabilities are protected, safe, independent, active and socially connected.

2. What are some highlights of activities or initiatives which Ontarians with disabilities can be part of/support/Engage in?

Mark said his office will always take the time to chat no matter who the "stakeholder" is. His office imagines a "province for all, inclusive for all." He shared that unlike previous

governments, he is proud that they are taking a cross-ministry, total government approach to accessibility.

He clarified it means working across ministries to remove barriers. Next month his office will make an announcement on the Built Environment Standard, a step in removing barriers and an opportunity to increase and advance awareness.

Alex Ibrahim (Manager of AODA Policy and Standards) joined the discussion and said they are finalizing two standards submitted to the Minister and will be brought out for public review. Standard Development Committees have completed their recommendations on the Education and Health standards.

Alex also mentioned that there will be a design of public spaces review within the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council which will emphasize not only lived experience but technical expertise. He was excited to see this work happening.

3. What are policy areas where you would like to better understand the experience of Ontarians with disabilities during the pandemic?

Alex reiterated that his office is always wanting to hear from people and constituents. He mentioned upcoming opportunities for participating in public reviews of the new [Health and Education Draft Standard Recommendations](#).

Alex said his office understands the new pressure on health and health care providers and the committees mentioned by Mark will use public feedback to inform advice. Alex celebrated the “power of political participation.”

Mark jumped back in and said the voices of people with disabilities is important to the province. Their office is open to everyone and they commit to continue to engage stakeholder groups and all constituents.

Mark shares that Premier Ford believes if someone is willing to work, they must be able to work and the government will work towards removing barriers for employment.

He said that on a personal level he has struggled with employment and has lived on ODSP. He personally understands the challenges people face.

Mark continued with his excitement for increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. He considers it “tapping into our untapped market” and welcomes the opportunity to break down barriers in business and across the labour market. There is no excuse for people with disabilities to be excluded. They have proven their value and this is why they work so closely with the Ontario Disability Employment Network and other disability organizations to breakdown barriers.

Mark encourages people to contact him at mark.demontis@ontario.ca

Community Chat:

During the event, there was a chat function available where participants could post their questions and comments. We have compiled the comments, questions, challenges and opportunities provided in the chat box by our community.

Employment:

- Unable to work during pandemic; seasonal workers are most affected
- Mental health support required for employees during this stressful time
- Lack of technology is a barrier to accessing job opportunities; #digitaldivide
- The cost of internet and smart phones are too expensive for people on ODSP

Economy:

- The minister spoke of inclusivity and accessibility. How is that possible without the means of exchange? The community expects better engagement with government.
- Lots of discussion on the need for Universal Basic Income in Canada
- We can't pay for lobbyists.... Government needs a platform to inform disability community on priority issues
- There have been cuts to legal aid during the pandemic, yet you are investing in analysts. We need more explanation on the purpose of so many policy analysts
- Suggestion to increase wage for PSWs
- Suggestion to give people on direct funding additional funding so they can pay PSWs a competitive wage would help those living in the rural community if they happen to be on the program.
- To the ministers, why does ODSP refuse to offer money to buy masks that are necessary according to Premier Ford?
- More social spending needed to support people with disabilities.

Social change:

- Changes only came when the non-disabled population needed to shift. Our needs are always ignored until general public is affected.
- Persons with disabilities have advocated for the option to work from home for years and were told it couldn't happen. But we saw how that happened when impacting greater community.
- What is being done for persons with disabilities to get access to COVID-19 testing?
- There will be no equal distribution without attaching our movement to the general movement of other workers.
- 60% below the poverty line on ODSP. During the election campaign Minister Elliot made a commitment to MPP Mike Schreiner the guaranteed income pilot won't be touched

instead now it's going to the courts. How much is that taking away from benefits on ODSP?

- We will not experience inclusivity and Accessibility without an appropriate means of exchange.
- People with disabilities, including seniors, need an accessible place to live. Will the Ontario government change the building code to mandate that all new apartments and condos be universal design so anyone of any age or ability can live there?
- While I appreciate the emphasis on physical disabilities, it is important to acknowledge Accessibility for all of us with varying abilities.
- Courage could be demonstrated by our elected leaders by standing up for our real needs.

AODA:

- Where does Ontario stand in terms of collaborating with the federal government with the Canadian disability act? Without reinventing the wheel, Ontario is well ahead of a number of provinces and wonder if they will step up and take the lead in assisting this get done in a timely fashion. Where do we stand with the AODA progress?
- Why are we not hearing anything coming out of the ministry about the January 1st AODA deadlines in digital Accessibility? Accessibility of websites and documents impact people with disability to apply get jobs and keep jobs. It impacts people's ability to search the Internet for jobs.

Final Notes:

Peter Athanasopoulos and Amanda MacKenzie ended the meeting by acknowledging the 168 RSVPed attendees, 27 MPPs, 6 ministries, and 12 government officials that attended the event in celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

This report has been shared with the MPPs and Ministries involved in this event. With initiatives and processes, like those mentioned in the chat, ever evolving please contact advocacy@sciontario.org for current information on your questions.

Acknowledgements: Report prepared by Shruthi Dhananjaya

Our captioner for the event (name withheld)

Our notetakers who kept track of questions and comments.