

## 17. Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities have a wide range of physical, sensory or psychological conditions, which may be visible or invisible. These conditions can affect our family members, co-workers, friends and acquaintances.

*"In Unison 2000: Persons with Disabilities in Canada"*, a report released in March 2001, noted that 16 percent of Canadians, 4.2 million people, were considered to have a disability in 1991.

- almost four million live in the community, 273,000 are in institutions;
- 56 percent were of working age;
- 9 percent were children under 14;
- 35 percent were over 65;
- among working-aged women, 13 percent were considered to have a disability;
- slightly more than half of the adults with a disability were affected by mild disability;
- one-third were affected by a moderate disability;
- 14 percent were affected by a severe disability, and
- among aboriginal people, 31 percent reported some form of disability - almost twice the national average.
  - 66 percent of aboriginal adults with disabilities were affected by a mild disability;
  - 22 percent by a moderate disability, and
  - 12 percent by severe disability.
- The likelihood of a person having a disability increases with age. As the population ages, the incidence of disability is increasing.

According to the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA)* Committee, over 1.5 million people in this province face a wide range of systemic barriers in all aspects of their lives. In May 2001, the Ontario Human Rights Commission reported that 40 percent of the complaints filed were from persons with disabilities.

Many Ontarians with disabilities are imprisoned in lives of poverty. Basic needs such as shelter are ignored by a government with no interest in social housing. The Ministry of Community and Social Services reduced facility-based care for families with medically fragile children and for adults with developmental disabilities.

Even a fundamental right to personal safety is ignored. People with disabilities are easy and constant targets for physical and sexual abuse.

Home care should be available to help people with disabilities live independently in their communities. But home care is an administrative mess. It is under-funded, causing cutbacks to needed services and a deteriorating work environment for service providers. Ontario needs a public, non-profit system for home care adequately funded to serve Ontarians, regardless of where they live.

Public transit is another crucial need. An accessible transit system is an important public service and must provide quality service.

Not all persons with disabilities in Ontario are in the paid workforce. Income support programs such as the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) must be strengthened. Organizations representing people with disabilities are working with the Ontario Social Safety Network, legal clinics and service providers to identify weaknesses in this program. The present system can be restructured based on these discussions.

Education and training should provide Ontarians with opportunities to improve lives. In reality, the education system is more of a gauntlet and less of an opportunity for persons with disabilities. For children with disabilities, the 1980 amendments to the *Education Act (Bill 82)* promised them assessments of and resources for their special needs in the primary and secondary levels. The government is not delivering on this promise. Quite the opposite. Budgets for special education needs programs were cut.

At the post-secondary level things are just as bad. The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) will not fund involvement in programs offered at publicly funded institutions. If people with a form of mental illness do not have an "incident" for two years, Ontario Disability Support Program can cut their funding support. Someone with attendant care who moves away to pursue educational opportunities may have to wait years to receive this support in a new location.

Many disabilities occur as a result of an injury at work or in the community. Ontario should implement a Universal No-Fault Accident and Illness Plan to compensate these victims regardless of the cause. These workers are often bounced between the Compensation Board and private insurance carriers, neither of which wants them on its books. The best solution is to make all workplaces safer. This is accomplished by improved legislation and programs to make workers aware of the hazards they face at work.

**Recommendations for A People's Charter:**

- **Advocate for strong and effective Employment Equity legislation at both the federal and provincial levels.**
- **Ensure that effective legislation and functioning Human Rights Commissions protect the rights of all Ontarians.**
- **Develop a public non-profit Home Care service to serve the best interests of users, providers and the community.**
- **Organize public transportation system to serve the needs of Ontarians with disabilities. They must be involved in policy development and implementation. The government must provide resources for a truly accessible transportation system.**
- **Reform the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) based on the experiences of those who use it and the workers and unions delivering it.**
- **Establish a Universal No-Fault Accident and Illness Plan to compensate victims of accident or disease.**
- **Reinstate the Occupational Disease Panel.**
- **Enact a real Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA) to identify and remove barriers for 1.5 million people in our province.**
  - *The Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA) passed in 2001 is so flawed that it should be scrapped. The process should begin again with the active involvement of persons with disabilities and their organizations from the very beginning of the process.*