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**Government Relations and Social Action E-Alert**

- **Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Approved Unanimously**
- **Government Relations and Social Action E-Alerts Online**

**Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Approved Unanimously**

Bill 118, the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Act, 2005* (AODA), was approved unanimously on Tuesday afternoon, May 10. All MPPs voted in favour of the new legislation with a recorded vote. Once the legislation receives royal assent in the near future the entire act will come into effect, although the act itself is structured to have various stages apply over a 20-year period.

Following the vote, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Marie Bountrogianni hosted a reception at Queen's Park to celebrate the passage of the new AODA. She thanked members of the ODA Committee and others within the disability community for all the work that has taken place over more than a decade to bring the legislation to a successful conclusion. Premier Dalton McGuinty closed the formal remarks with fulsome thanks to everyone for the concerted effort that has led to the new legislation. Members of the Multiple Sclerosis Society who attended the reception included Ian Greaves and Robyn Garner from the Niagara Peninsula Chapter of Hope, Joan Gallagher-Bell from the Halton Regional Chapter and myself. (Apologies to other MS Society members who might have been there as well and whom I didn't see – there was quite a crush.)

Speaking to the news media, Minister Bountrogianni said, "We are firmly on the path towards an accessible Ontario, where our quality of life is enriched by the inclusion of all, and our economy benefits from the contribution of all." David Lapofsky, chair of the ODA Committee, told news media: "This historic milestone is the most important day in the campaign for full equality for persons with disabilities since 1981, when the Charter of Rights and the Ontario Human Rights Code were each amended to prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities."

In the coming days, the MS Society will provide details about how people with MS across Ontario can become involved in the new AODA. Please see the backgrounder below from the Ministry of Community and Social Services which provides highlights of the new act.

## **Highlights of Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005**

Ontario's legislative assembly has passed Bill 118, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005. It will take effect on royal assent. The new act is strong and effective legislation that will allow people with disabilities to participate in building a stronger province.

The purpose of the new act is to benefit all Ontarians by achieving accessibility for people with disabilities. This will be done by developing, implementing and enforcing accessibility standards concerning goods, services, accommodation, facilities, buildings and employment. Improvements will be phased in, in stages of five years or less, moving towards an accessible Ontario in 20 years.

### **Importance of Standards**

Standards will set out the measures, policies, practices and other steps needed to remove and prevent barriers for people with disabilities. They will be mandatory and will include time periods for implementing accessibility requirements in stages of five years or less.

Standards could cover such areas as: accessible buses, safe pedestrian routes into buildings, automatic doors at entrances, lower counter heights at cash registers, large-print menus, accessible washroom facilities, staff training in serving customers with learning disabilities, and adaptive technology in the workplace.

### **Why This Act Is Needed**

Improving accessibility is the right thing to do. It is also the smart thing to do, because of demographics and economics. The workplace and the marketplace are changing. With an aging population, 20 per cent of Ontarians are likely to have a disability in 20 years, up from about 13 per cent today.

People with disabilities already have an estimated spending power of about \$25 billion a year across Canada. In the U.S. hospitality industry, implementing standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act increased annual revenue by 12 per cent. People with disabilities also represent a wealth of untapped employment potential.

### **Scope of Legislation**

The new legislation covers both the public and private sectors. It also applies to the legislative assembly. Standards will address the full range of disabilities - including physical, sensory, hearing, mental health, developmental and learning. That is, both visible and invisible disabilities will be included.

### **An Inclusive Process for Developing Standards**

The act will set up committees that include persons with disabilities, representatives of industries or sectors, the Ontario government and others to develop standards. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration will appoint committees for various sectors or industries to determine long-term accessibility objectives as well as five-year targets for achieving them.

Each will set a target date for implementing the steps required in the first five years or less - as well as target dates for successive stages of five years or less.

Committees will have the flexibility to tailor accessibility requirements and timelines to economic realities. They could set different requirements and timelines for different kinds of organizations. Since change will be phased in, the cost of accessibility improvements could be absorbed in regular planning and budget cycles. Committees will submit proposed standards to the government for approval as regulations.

### **Enforceable Legislation**

Once a standard has been adopted as a regulation, all affected persons and organizations will be required to comply within the timelines set out in the standard.

The government will take a modern, transparent approach to enforcement. Organizations covered by standards will be obliged to file accessibility reports annually or as required, confirming compliance, and make them public. Spot audits will verify the contents of reports, and there will be tough penalties for non-compliance.

To strengthen accountability, the minister will prepare an annual report on progress in removing and preventing barriers. In addition, the government will appoint a person to undertake a comprehensive review of the act's effectiveness after four years. The annual report and the comprehensive review will provide timely information on the measurable results achieved under the act.

### **Public Education**

Attitudes are one of the biggest barriers facing people with disabilities. Under the bill, the responsibilities of the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario will include conducting public education programs on the purpose and implementation of the act. Among the public education activities will be information and training for schools, colleges, universities, trade or occupational associations and self-governing professions to build awareness of accessibility into the educational experience.

### **New Advisory Council to Be Appointed**

A new Accessibility Standards Advisory Council will advise the minister on the progress made by standards development committees, public information programs and other matters. Like the existing Accessibility Advisory Council of Ontario, a majority of the members of the new body will be persons with disabilities.

Disponible en français [www.gov.on.ca/citizenship](http://www.gov.on.ca/citizenship)

### **Government Relations and Social Action E-Alerts Online**

The Government Relations and Social Action Alert newsletter is available online. This issue and previous ones are posted to the MS Society website. Just go to [www.mssociety.ca/ontario](http://www.mssociety.ca/ontario) and click on Social Action/ Social Action Alert.

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