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Government Relations and Social Action Alert

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Introduced

Premier Dalton McGuinty and Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Marie Bountrogianni introduced the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2004 (Bill 118) in the Ontario Legislature, October 12, 2004. The legislation, if passed, will replace the Ontarians with Disability Act 2001 which has been widely criticized for being weak and limited.

The new ODA has been praised by most disability advocates as being a very good bill and a dramatic improvement over the existing legislation. The proposed legislation meets a number of MS Society of Canada recommendations. Some of the bill's highlights:

- It uses a broad, inclusive definition of disability and the barriers that will be covered. It includes more than physical disabilities and physical barriers.
- It applies to the private as well as the public sector.
- Mandatory accessibility standards will be developed.
- There will be an enforcement mechanism.
- The full effect of the legislation would come into force by 2025.

Some opposition MPPs – especially NDP House Leader Peter Kormos – have criticized the proposed legislation for its long time-frame. Some parts of the legislation would not come into effect until 2025, however, there would be accessibility standards to be met every five years or less. Mr. Kormos also criticized the legislation for not providing financial support for small businesses, non-profit organizations and municipalities to meet the accessibility standards.

Other details:

- Minister Bountrogianni said in the legislature and in a reception for disability advocates that the government will consult with all sectors to develop the regulations and timelines.
- The minister said that improving access to public transit will be a priority.
- The legislation, if passed, would require an estimated 350,000 public and private businesses and organizations to comply with accessibility standards.
- Several business organizations including the Ontario Chamber of Commerce have expressed support for the proposed legislation.
- Approximately 13 percent of the Ontario population – 1.5 million – has a disability. This number is expected to grow to three million by 2025.

Cathy Vincent-Linderoos, a member of both the MS Society of Canada and the Ontarians with Disabilities Act Committee in London, praised the proposed legislation as “wonderful news.” She told the *London Free Press*: “We were really after one set of standards throughout the province.” She added that simple things such as getting rid of stairs to doctors’ offices and lifts to assist people who use wheelchairs onto examining tables are still needed.

The proposed Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2004 meets a number of the recommendations the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada made in consultations across the province and in a brief to the minister this spring. We are pleased that the proposed legislation is extended to the private sector and that there will be mandatory standards, timetables and enforcement. The MS Society will actively seek opportunities to encourage additional improvements as the legislation moves forward this fall

To view the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2004 (Bill 118) online go to: www.ontla.on.ca/documents/Bills/38_Parliament/Session1/b118_e.htm

For more details about the work of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act Committee go to: <http://www.odacommittee.net/>

Government Relations and Social Action 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 and click on Social Action.

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