

TOWNHALL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

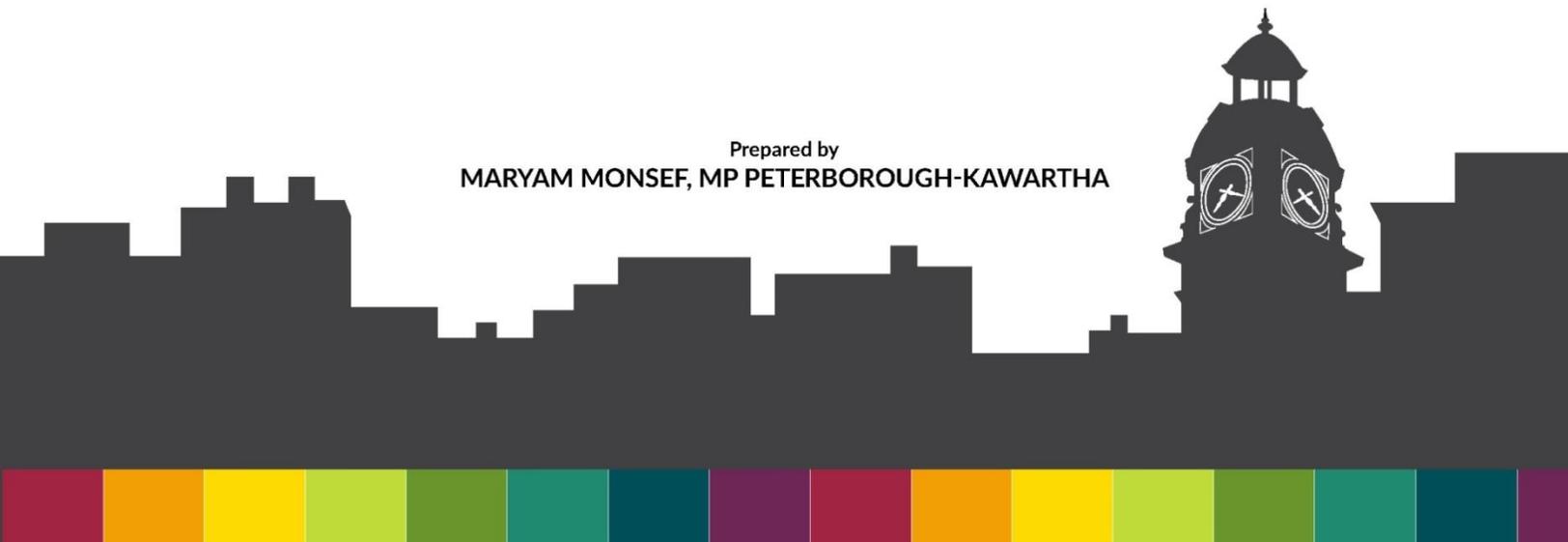
— REPORT —

Accessibility and Inclusion

January 19th & 20th, 2017

Peterborough, Ontario

Prepared by
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CANADA

Maryam Monsef

Member of Parliament
Peterborough-Kawartha

Greetings,

Following an invitation from the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, to consult local constituents about their suggestions and ideas for new national accessibility legislation, my team and I have created this report of input received at two Town Hall meetings – the first on January 19th at the Evinrude Centre, and the second on January 20th at Mark Street United Church. Both meetings took place in the City of Peterborough.

We heard about experiences and issues that are cross-cutting and interconnected: employment, housing, health, transportation, and adequate income. They are the responsibility of actors and institutions at the local, provincial and federal levels of government, as well as in both public and private spheres. It became clear that solutions must be pursued through coordinated efforts and in partnership with community-based and front-line organizations, governments, and the individuals most affected.

Undertaking this consultation process has already raised awareness and created a cultural shift among my own office and staff. From the initial meeting with volunteer advisors who themselves live with disabilities, to working in partnership with the local municipal government as well as community-based service and advocacy groups, and then hearing from a wide range of community members, we have learned a great deal and we will move forward in acting on what we have heard.

I strongly encourage any organization or workplace that has not already done so to begin the process – reach out to individuals who experience both visible and invisible disabilities to start a conversation.

Thank you to everyone who attended the meetings, and thank you to Minister Qualtrough for considering the input of the constituents of Peterborough-Kawartha.

Truly,

Maryam Monsef, P.C., M.P.
Peterborough-Kawartha



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Background

In July 2016, the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities opened a Canada-wide consultation to inform the creation of national legislation about accessibility and inclusion.

The discussion paper released to assist with these consultations noted that many Canadians continue to face barriers to full participation in their daily activities, such as physical and architectural barriers that impede the ability to move freely in the built environment, use of public transit or access to information, attitudes and beliefs that some may have about what people with disabilities can and cannot do, and outdated policies that do not take into account the varying abilities and exceptionalities that Canadians may have.

Minister Qualtrough outlined a number of areas and questions about the proposed legislation for public feedback:

- The overall goal and approach;
- Whom it should cover;
- What accessibility issues and barriers it should address;
- How it could be monitored and enforced;
- When or how often it should be reviewed;
- How and when to report to Canadians on its implementation; and
- How to raise accessibility awareness more generally and support organizations in improving accessibility.

Canadians were invited to offer their ideas by email, telephone or online. Minister Qualtrough also encouraged local Members of Parliament to hold their own consultations and report their findings. It was suggested that these conversations should tackle three main questions:

- What are the main barriers to accessibility that Canadians with disabilities face?
- What would it take to fix those barriers?
- How can we change attitudes in Canada to better include and respect people with disabilities?



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Peterborough-Kawartha Consultations

Maryam Monsef, MP Peterborough-Kawartha opened the opportunity for local constituents to meet together in person to offer their ideas to the national consultation, while at the same time sharing experiences and suggestions on how to improve the accessibility and inclusion of the services offered to constituents in the riding and in Ottawa.

Two public sessions were held – the first on January 19th from 6:30 PM to 9:00 PM at the Evinrude Centre (911 Monaghan Road, Peterborough) and the second on January 20th from 1:30 PM to 4:00 PM at Mark Street United Church (90 Hunter Street East, Peterborough). Both sessions included general discussion questions, as well as small group discussions on several key questions which were facilitated by volunteers. A total of 109 people attended the two sessions. Local media, including the Peterborough Examiner, Peterborough This Week and CHEX News covered the consultations.

At the time of registration, all participants were asked about their accessibility needs. Based on feedback, both sessions were offered in wheelchair –accessible facilities, with CART services and an attendant present, as well as with water bowls provided for guide animals. The venues were accessible by public transit and offered free parking. The afternoon session on January 20th included two ASL interpreters.

The sessions would not have been possible without support from Peterborough Public Health, Special Advisor -Teresa Daw, Kawartha Participation Projects (attendants), Peterborough Council for Persons with Disabilities and the City of Peterborough Accessibility office (transportation).



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Summary of Key Themes

- The top 5 priorities raised were employment, funding, transportation, education and housing;
- There is a lack of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, even when their skills are evident;
- There are major limitations for persons with disabilities who wish to access transportation, as well as older buildings which are still not physically accessible;
- There is not enough public awareness and understanding of the range of experiences encountered by persons living with disabilities;
- There should be more engagement of persons with disabilities who want to be heard and be more actively involved in their communities.

Summary of Key Recommendations

- The Government of Canada should lead by example – both in policy and in practice – in areas such as employment of persons with disabilities, communication that is accessible to all, services offered, and coordination with other levels of government and community service providers;
- The definition of disability in the new legislation should take into account both visible and invisible disabilities, which will consequently open access to services for more people;
- ASL should be recognized as a language in all areas under federal jurisdiction;
- The Government of Canada should work with their provincial, territorial and municipal counterparts to ensure that persons with disabilities have an adequate level of financial support, including but not limited to basic income, special needs technologies, affordable housing, support personnel, and community programming.



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Community Dialogue

The remainder of this report will provide detailed feedback from the consultations, grouped by the question that was asked of participants and then by major themes that emerged during the conversation.

Question 1: What issues or barriers should the law cover?

Government Systems & Procedures

- Participants expressed that the definition of disability needs to be inclusive and broad enough for people to access services. Specifically cognitive, sensory, and mobility barriers were identified, and the issue that some disabilities are visible and others are invisible. For example, blindness is considered a sensory disability not a physical disability and consequently does not qualify for certain supports.
- Application forms and procedures need to be simplified and available in multiple formats. A number of comments were made that government processes and procedures are complicated, involve “too much paperwork”, and are difficult to access. Often the individual requires additional supports (such as interpreters or special needs/adaptive technology) that are not available or are unaffordable. Individuals and families living in rural or isolated circumstances may not have access to high speed internet, which means they can be further prevented from accessing information or participating in necessary government communications.
- There was also a recommendation to improve coordination and communication among multiple agencies and levels of government in order to improve efficiency and reduce unnecessary time and challenges around transportation in particular.
- Participants wanted to see adequate financial resources earmarked to support accessibility legislation, as well as assurances that the legislation would set accountability mechanisms for provincial or other jurisdictions that receive federal transfer payments for relevant services and initiatives.



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Income and Employment Standards for Persons with Disabilities

- Unemployment and underemployment were significant concerns among participants in both sessions. The need to address discrimination in hiring practices and harassment in the workplace, as well as to ensure accommodations (technologies) are available and employment standards are maintained was also raised. It was recommended that the new legislation should address barriers and provide for accommodations in the workplace.
- Some participants believed that the Minister for Persons with Disabilities should either share responsibilities with the Minister for Employment, Labour and Workforce Development, or that the Ministry for Persons with Disabilities should be located within the Department for Employment, Labour and Workforce Development.
- Participants wanted to see the government provide incentives to employers to hire persons with disabilities, as well as to lead by example by setting (and achieving) a certain target percentage of persons with disabilities hired by the federal government.
- Working in coordination with the provincial government, participants believed the federal government should eliminate or reduce claw backs for people on ODSP or similar provincial social assistance programs who find employment, as well as reform the tax credit program for people who cannot find employment.

Rights to Basic Services: Transportation, Housing, Health Care, Education

- Participants identified a number of issues that may be defined as Basic Services – that they believe all Canadians have a right to access. These include transportation, affordable and/or supportive accessible housing, health care (including mental health care), education and legal assistance. In one comment, these issues were framed as meeting “basic human needs” such as access to water or washroom facilities, and meeting “basic human rights at home” such as rental housing standards or accessibility to outdoor Canada Post group mailboxes or high speed internet for rural dwellers.
- Regarding health care, it was suggested that interpretive services be mandatory for all emergency services. There was also a recommendation to include health advocates as part of health services, and to address caregiver needs.
- In terms of transportation challenges, sufficient options for affordable, flexible and timely



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transportation, both within an urban setting and in rural areas, were frequently identified as significant issues for daily living.

- Quality education was raised as an essential first step towards employment and self-sufficiency. There was a call to retain Schools for the Deaf as an effective approach to education for that community. As well, it was suggested that all teachers be required to have training in working with students who are living with disabilities.

Infrastructure and Physical Barriers

- There was a great deal of discussion on the barriers that people faced in their day-to-day lives – physical barriers which prevented them from attending school, participating in recreational activities, finding employment, and simply socializing; in other words accessing basic services and activities that improve quality of life. There were many specific examples of improvements that could be made to older buildings, public spaces and private businesses. For example, Canada Post group mailboxes that are inaccessible in winter due to snow and ice; the need for visual smoke alarms to be mandatory in all buildings for those with hearing impairments; handrails and appropriate signage in public parks.
- In terms of legislation, there was a recommendation for universal design requirements particularly for public spaces and buildings, federal government organizations and institutions, and government services.

Question 2: What is the best way to get people and organizations to follow the law?

Incentives & Enforcement

- Participants suggested a combination of incentives and enforcement would be required for people and organizations to follow the legislation. Some incentives that were identified:
 - Wage subsidies and/or federal tax breaks for businesses hiring persons with disabilities;
 - Funding for technology or infrastructure improvements;
 - Community awards for businesses that become accessible.
- At the same time, the participants identified a need to improve the effectiveness of enforcing violations of existing legislation and non-compliance. As part of the improvements, legislation needs to be refined and ensure minimum standards. There was a suggestion that an



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Ombudsperson for Accessibility Rights could be created, and/or accessibility inspectors hired who could investigate cases by complaint or through random selection.

- Participants felt that enforcement could ultimately include fines, but generally should be a last resort.

Training

- An important component to ensuring organizations and individuals follow the law is an investment in training – first and foremost for institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, as well as businesses. Sensitivity training should be aimed at employers, unions and employees of all organizational sizes, not only those with larger staff numbers.
- Mandatory training for both public and private employers would necessitate government funding or subsidies to ensure accountability.
- Accessibility advisors could also be made available for ongoing support.

Awareness/Promotion

- In order for individuals and groups to follow the law, participants felt it was important to educate and promote the legislation among organizations, and also raise awareness in the general public through mainstream and social media, and advertising campaigns.
- Participants encouraged the government to educate the public about the range of disabilities that exist, to normalize disabilities in professional environments, and to integrate persons with disabilities in regular activities such as inviting deaf speakers to public events.
- Awareness activities should be coordinated with relevant organizations and other levels of government to maximize the impact and use resources effectively.



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Question 3: How can the government raise awareness, change attitudes and show leadership to increase inclusion, participation and equality of opportunity?

Leading by Example

- This was perhaps the strongest message across both sessions, and it was raised in the context of each of the discussion questions: the federal government needs to lead by example and put its words into action.
- Specifically, some examples include employing persons with disabilities, offering alternative forms of communication particularly in dealing with government services and departments, and fostering partnerships across community organizations, business, and government to coordinate services and cross-sectoral issues like income security.
- Participants wanted the federal government to change the language used (for example, using the term “exceptionalities” rather than “disabilities”). They would like the government to offer more opportunities for feedback, dialogue and engagement, and ensure persons living with disabilities are included in decision-making roles and in the discussion or development of any policy or practice related to accessibility and inclusion.

Training for Government Employees

- As noted earlier in this report, training and education are key components of improving accessibility and inclusion across Canada. It was suggested that the federal government needs to start this process from within.
- Recommendations from participants included using creative approaches and taking leadership from persons living with disabilities to sensitize and train all government departments (including policy, bureaucratic and front line staff) and government-funded agencies on the issues facing persons living with disabilities.
- In tandem with the training, update government procedures and policies to reflect the training outcomes.

Funding and Programs

- Participants wanted the federal government to allocate sufficient financial and human resources



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to provide necessary programs and services, including transportation, health care, and education.

- Specifically, the participants recommended the funding and promotion of employment skills training and support.
- As well, the government could support opportunities for participation for adults and youth, such as sports, hands-on life skills programs (for example budgeting and accounting, repair of small appliances).
- Three participants also encouraged funding collaborations and partnership at all levels of government, particularly with local levels.

Research and Communications

- Participants indicated that the federal government should take a systematic and broad-based approach to raising awareness and increasing understanding of the experiences of people living with disabilities, including, for example featuring more people living with disabilities on TV in a variety of roles and situations, and utilizing local champions to educate others.
- The government could also explore existing research from other countries as well as from within Canada and promote what works.
- In doing this work, it was strongly suggested that the federal government should recognize both hidden and physical disabilities, address the myths that are common in our society, and shift the discourse to highlight people's capabilities and exceptionalities, the social and economic benefits of inclusion and value added of accommodation.