

Inertia is Barrier to Business Opportunities

Compliance Deadlines Pending for Accessibility Standards

By Frances Jewett

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) is the first legislation in the world that puts onus on businesses to make workplaces and other public venues barrier-free for customers and employees with disabilities. As part of that legislation, every business in Ontario that provides goods or services to the public and has at least one employee will have to comply with Accessibility Standards for Customer Service by January 1, 2012.

Additional standards to address the built environment, employment, information and communication and transportation will be phased in after that. Ultimately, the Act aims for full accessibility throughout the province by 2025.

The AODA employs the Ontario Human



Photos courtesy of AccessAbility Advantage

Rights Code's definition of disability, which includes physical, mental health, developmental and learning disabilities that can be either visible or unseen.

A barrier is anything that keeps someone with a disability from participating fully in society because of his or her disability. These can be physical obstacles or the absence of features, such as ramps, which support accessibility, or they can be service related and/or attitudinal barriers such as inadequate support for and insensitivity to people with different needs.

"Of the 360,000 businesses in Ontario, some are making progress in implementing changes, but many don't even know where to begin and are struggling to understand the complexities of these new regulations," observes Gail Mores, a Director and Accessibility Specialist with March of Dimes and AccessAbility Advantage, a consulting firm specializing in compliance with the legislation.

In terms of employment, people with disabilities are the most under-represented diverse group in the province. The 2006 census data reveals that people with disabilities have an unemployment rate 50% higher than for people without disabilities.

Yet, the proportion of the population with disabilities continues to grow. Currently, 1.85 million people or one in seven residents of Ontario have a disability, but that is projected to increase to one in five, or 20% of the provincial population, during the next 15 years.

Some companies and organizations have already taken proactive steps. Notably, the TDL Group has developed a policy and action plan

to identify, remove and prevent barriers in its existing and future Tim Hortons outlets. This goes well beyond the scope outlined in the Ontario Building Code, while other elements of the plan address operations and maintenance, staff training, web site messages and internal documentation.

The Greater Toronto Hotel Association (GTHA) has instigated a training program to boost staff's awareness of the special needs of people with disabilities, and to provide some practical skills that should also position the hotel industry to take advantage of a growing market.

In the public sector, Ontario Realty Corporation (ORC) has adopted guidelines to promote the accessibility of the Ontario government's leased and owned properties, while the Town of Markham has undertaken complete retrofits at 11 municipally owned sites, including arenas, community centres, theatres, libraries and civic centres.

When an Ontario March of Dimes audit determined that many of the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre's indoor and outdoor areas did not meet accessibility standards, administrators at the health care facility adopted a new plan to ensure that universal access would be central to long-term planning and daily operations. In-progress and future renovations will meet or perhaps exceed the AODA's accessibility standards.

"By planning today, and with a little help, most organizations will have a successful implementation under the new legislation," maintains Susan Ruptash, Principal and Accessibility Specialist with Quadrangle Architects Limited and AccessAbility Advantage.

On the flipside, non-compliance could mean missed business opportunities. Research from The Martin Prosperity Institute, affiliated with the Rotman School of Management at University of Toronto, suggests that the AODA could deliver positive spinoffs for the Ontario economy, possibly resulting in an annual increase in revenues in the range of \$3.9 billion to \$11.1 billion for retail and tourism alone over the next five years.

In contrast, failure to comply has monetary penalties. The Province may apply fines of up to \$50,000 per day or part day for Directors and Officers, and fines of up to \$100,000 per day or part day for a corporation for non-compliance once the accessibility standards come into force. **PMR**

Frances Jewett is the Business Development Manager with AccessAbility Advantage, a joint venture between the Ontario March of Dimes and Quadrangle Architects Limited to advise businesses on compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. For more information, see the web site at www.accessibilityadvantage.ca.

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