



Disability – By Design

I was honoured to be asked to be a thought leader for Vibrant Canada. The Caledon Institute had been involved for more than 10 years in the development of the Vibrant Communities initiative and I am delighted that the poverty-based reduction effort remains alive and well – and growing!

Vibrant Canada has encouraged the selected thought leaders to submit blogs on subjects of interest to us. I have chosen to start this process by writing a few blogs on disability-related issues.

Poverty and disability are intrinsically linked. People with disabilities face disproportionately high rates of poverty because they are excluded from participation in the paid labour market and from communities, more generally. I believe that the first and most important step that we can take to tackle exclusion is to shift the way in which we understand the problem.

Disability used to be understood in fairly narrow terms. It was seen as the shortcoming of the person who happened to have a particular functional limitation. This approach, referred to as the ‘medical model,’ typically views disability as a set of characteristics of the individual. A person *is* disabled or *has* a disability.

The emerging social model, by contrast, views disability largely as the result of how well (or not) society accommodates impairment or limitations in function. When environments are adapted to individual need, the effects of a disability can change in severity – or even disappear altogether.

Individuals who are blind, for example, are much less restricted in various activities of daily living if they have access to information printed in Braille, traffic light standards with auditory walk signals and elevators with Braille panels. Persons with mobility impairments might be more mobile in an urban community with access to para-transit and curb cuts than in a remote community with no accessible transportation.

According to this ‘social model’ of disability, which has been promoted by the World Health Organization and others, the person with a functional impairment is handicapped by obstacles within the environment. Rather than being seen as ‘their’ problem, disability is the result of a world that is poorly constructed and organized. *Disability by design*.

The challenge for us all is to be aware that the ways in which premises and communities are designed, and in which work processes and other procedures are organized, can create serious obstacles to participation.

The good news for communities is that there are wide-ranging actions that can be taken to reduce and remove the barriers that create exclusion. In fact, the decision to act or not is no longer ours to make – at least in Ontario.

The province has enacted legislation that obliges municipalities and all other organizations to meet designated standards. The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* sets out the goal of an accessible Ontario by 2025. There are requirements for every organization (both private and non-profit) with one employee or more to take specific steps to fulfill the obligations under the Act.

More on this next time and its implications for communities in other jurisdictions.

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