

**Planning for Accessibility in the
Centre Town of the City of Ottawa**

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Executive Summary

A human rights complaint filed in 1994 against the City of Ottawa over the inaccessibility of a public facility reached a settlement in 1997 that launched new city policies and practices regarding accessibility. While the city has clarified its role and has established a new framework to ensure barrier-free design in its public facilities, what are the key accessibility issues that persons with physical disabilities in the City of Ottawa continue to encounter when moving around the city? This is the question I explore in this report.

In 1991, 15.5% of the Canadian population reported a physical disability. As suggested by Jones and Tamari (1997), this figure could be as high as 30% of the Canadian population when considering individuals who could benefit from improved accessibility including the elderly and caregivers with young children. In further examining the size of the population that could benefit from accessibility, this figure could increase substantially if one also considered the many people who experience temporary disabilities from injury, illness and pregnancy (Malizia 1993).

Two key areas of legislation that have been instrumental in encouraging barrier-free design in Ontario include the Ontario Building Code (OBC) and human rights legislation at both the national and provincial levels. The OBC provides standards and guidelines for barrier-free design to which all new construction in the province must comply. Local officials who review site plans and building inspectors are responsible for ensuring and enforcing this compliance.

A city, or parts of the city, can be perceived as a welcoming or hostile environment depending on how an individual experiences it. An environment that is physically,

systematically or socially inaccessible to persons with physical disabilities excludes them from carrying out daily activities in meeting their interests and needs. This creates a hostile environment and reinforces the idea to an individual that his or her body is not welcomed in that environment. This, in turn, reduces the individual's control in meeting his or her own needs and, as a result, reduces their sense of independence and belonging in the city.

In this report, I explore accessibility issues with persons with physical disabilities in the context of the socio-political (Bickenbach 1993) and social (Barnes 1996) models of disability which examine aspects of the external environment that limit opportunities or create disadvantages. I seek to explore aspects of the city, including the physical, systemic and social barriers, that reduce the independence of individuals by limiting their movement and choice.

Seven participants living in the centre town of Ottawa participated in my study and responded to a questionnaire, a travel journal and an interview. With this method I wanted to explore the personal, attitudinal and external factors that influenced the participants' choice in their movement patterns. This would allow me to distinguish personal characteristics and preferences from external influences such as the physical, systemic and social aspects of the urban environment; it is these influences which were my focus. This enabled me to learn about accessibility issues that arose in the daily movement of the participants throughout the city. It is important to note that the sample population interviewed is not representative of all persons with disabilities but was meant to enable me to explore and learn about accessibility.

Participants liked the convenient proximity of stores and services to their neighbourhood, however, some expressed concern over crime and safety. Participants indicated that their outdoor activities were less frequent in winter and that they were increasingly dependent on Para

Transpo during this season.

Entry into buildings was the most frequently discussed physical aspect of the city. Participants noted the importance of automatic doors and ramps in this regard. Internal aspects of buildings that were cited included: easier to reach elevator buttons; lower service counters; additional space in washroom stalls, store aisles and elevators; and the availability of accessible washrooms. External aspects of the environment included lower and consistent sidewalk curbs, smoother sidewalks, the availability of handicapped parking in centre town, and transportation. Participants expressed frustration with the tardiness of Para Transpo, the length of time it took to use the service, and the lack of flexibility that it provided in comparison to a regular bus route. Several participants expressed interest in an integrated bus system but noted that they would only be able to use the regular bus system in the summer since it would be difficult to reach a bus stop during the winter if the sidewalks were not properly ploughed.

Systemic barriers that were cited included informal accessible entrances that were left out of service and thus, were no longer available to the participant. In addition, the scheduling of one participant's bus conflicted with her working hours and thus created tension between her and her employer.

Finally, few social aspects of the urban environment were noted. The main issue that was raised by three participants, however, was the use of accessible services such as accessible washroom stalls and showers by people who did not have a physical disability. As a result, participants would often find themselves waiting for an accessible washroom while the person occupying it could have used other washroom stalls.

Recommendations that I made based on my research are as follows:

(1) encourage store owners, restaurateurs and other services to provide and maintain accessible entry and facilities; (2) provide regular maintenance of sidewalks and ensure that curb cuts are consistently low; (3) support the continuance of OC Transpo's plan to replace its existing fleet with the new accessible low-floor "Nova" buses; (4) coordinate snow ploughing with transportation routes and ensure regular snow clearance of centre town sidewalks in winter; (5) older/inaccessible buildings should be revisited and facility owners should be required to provide accessible features, where possible (e.g. a portable ramp); (6) ensure consultation with, and participation of, persons with disabilities during policy making and planning; and (7) ensure commitment from city officials to monitor and enforce building code requirements for accessibility in new construction activity.