EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Getting Services Right for Torontonians with Disabilities: Demographics and Service Delivery Expectations

The “Getting Services Right for Torontonians with Disabilities” research project was an innovative collaboration between the City of Toronto and Toronto disability service agencies to understand the little researched topic of the demographics and service delivery expectations of people with disabilities. This is the first project of its kind in Canada and its findings provide insight into the priorities that are on the minds of Canadians with disabilities.

Funded by an Ontario Works grant and the City of Toronto, this public and staff consultation process was also part of an effort to demonstrate Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation’s (PFR’s) commitment to reaching out to those who feel they are disenfranchised through their disability. PFR’s goal has been to increase participation of Torontonians with disabilities in its programs by 1,000 per cent. It is also responsible under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), 2005 and the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA), 2001 to reduce barriers and increase universal access, thereby providing opportunities for full participation. PFR also has a duty to accommodate individuals by providing opportunities for full participation in programs while respecting the rights and dignity of people with disabilities under the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Newly legislated provincial standards are in development for people with disabilities in the areas of:

- Customer Service (which took effect on January 1, 2008)
- Transportation
- Information and Communication
- The Built Environment and
- Employment.

In light of the need to incorporate these standards into PFR’s service delivery, it is recommended that the division develop performance measures to ensure accountability for reducing barriers and increasing accessibility across all sectors.
PURPOSE

The purpose of the research was to:

- build a comprehensive demographic profile of Torontonians with disabilities
- identify the most significant barriers that community members face when accessing recreation and leisure opportunities
- identify how to improve the programs and services that PFR offers to people with disabilities.

Three reasons were identified at the outset of the study that help explain the low participation in municipal recreation by people with disabilities:

1. it is a challenge to provide accessible, affordable and suitable recreational programs and services for community members within a limited budget and skill set
2. planning is more difficult when there is a lack of information about people with disabilities living in our city
3. partnerships with disability service agencies and ethno-cultural organizations need to be strengthened in order to effectively reach the gaps in our target groups (i.e. people with hearing loss, vision loss, mental health disabilities and members of newcomer and ethno-racial disability communities.

METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered in 2005 through:

A) 14 public focus groups specifically for the disability community that were held across the city in the fall of 2005 within disability service agencies and in divisional facilities

B) a survey sent out to 6,200 Toronto residents with a disability and 667 were completed

C) a survey that was sent out to an original contact list of over 200 disability service agencies and completed by completed by 56. Although a 25 per cent return rate is higher than the 10 per cent-15 per cent response rate predicted by survey theory, a higher return was expected from disability service agencies. It is necessary to note however that many disability service agencies do not:
• collect demographic data on their clients
• have the administrative support required to complete a survey of this type
• share data on their clients due to Right to Privacy legislation.

D) two additional focus groups were conducted with recreation staff in 2007 to give staff members an opportunity to respond to the recommendations and share their perspective on the delivery and quality of programs and services to people with disabilities. This was done after the findings of the report were presented to directors at the request of the Director of Recreation.

KEY FINDINGS

The insight that was gained from the public and staff focus groups, the Toronto Residents with Disabilities survey and the Community Agency Survey Regarding Programs and Services for People with Disabilities informed PFR that Torontonians with disabilities would like:

- access to the same variety, types and quality of municipal recreational opportunities (both adapted and integrated) enjoyed by the general population (please see the Glossary of Terms section of the main report for definitions)
- the appropriate city officials to “take tangible action” to make this a reality.

It should be noted that although a large percentage of surveys went out to parents responding on behalf of their children or preschoolers, only 18 per cent came back indicating a need for service improvement. In contrast, although a smaller percentage of surveys went out to adults, 46 per cent were returned indicating a need for change, improvement or increase in service delivery. This demonstrates that parents are somewhat satisfied with the municipal recreation system for children and preschoolers with disabilities and that the division’s focus should be on modifying its service delivery model to meet the expectations expressed by youth, adults and older adults with disabilities/special needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall findings of this study reflect input from Toronto residents with disabilities, disability service agencies and staff. The resulting 46 recommendations, some of which the division has started to implement, provide the basis for developing a multi-year action plan.
The full text of these recommendations can be found on pages 58-69 of the full report. Note that recommendations 1 through 12 have overriding implications on all of the recommendations.

**AFFORDABILITY (1-6)**

**Budget Line Allocation:**
1) Allocate one dollar from each program fee or a designated percentage of the operating budget towards an overall Adapted Programs and Integrated Services budget.

**Creating Affordable Fees:**
2) Charge people with disabilities between 25 – 33 per cent of the regular program participation fee. However, in the case of specialized programs and high staff to participant ratios (i.e. one to four), these charges may still be prohibitive, and will therefore need to be lowered further.

**Amend the Welcome Policy Process by:**
3) Creating an allowance for people with disabilities that provides subsidies over and above the Welcome Policy recreational subsidy program administered by PFR.

4) Considering a family’s disability-related expenses in the Welcome Policy approval process by either:
   a) using the same Low Income Cut Off (LICO) level for all citizens and applying disability expenses to it. If the total annual disability-related expenses put a family’s disposable income below the LICO, then they qualify for the Welcome Policy.
   b) automatically increasing the low income cut off (LICO) level by $10,000 per individual with a permanent or progressive disability.

5) Simplifying the Welcome Policy application, administration and approval process by:
   a) reducing unnecessary paperwork
   b) setting up the renewal process to be in effect for three years, unless the disability is considered temporary
   c) making application forms available online in either html or text format. If PDF files must be used, they will need to be deemed accessible and readable by screen readers such as Job Access with Speech(JAWS).
   d) having assistance available over the telephone for the benefit of people with disabilities via a central entry point (hotline)
   e) encouraging agency representatives to send in completed forms on the client’s behalf when necessary (e.g. vision impaired people who are living independently or in cases where English is not spoken)
f) giving applicants the option of mailing, emailing or faxing in their Welcome Policy applications


g) placing a pre-determined amount or credit on the account of Welcome Policy applicants


h) having a simpler and more accessible appeals process – please see examples above.


6) Offering alternative payment options such as:
  a) additional fee recovery options such as sliding scale, partial payment and payment over time to increase access
  b) free educational programs about what services are available through PFR. Participants could then receive discounts on fees for one year
  c) a pilot program whereby families can volunteer their time and/or expertise to benefit the division in exchange for the cost of a program or buying recreation-related equipment/clothing from participating local businesses. A system for monitoring the volunteer contributions of participating families would also need to be developed.


WORKING GROUP ON GETTING SERVICES RIGHT

7) Establish a working group comprised of people with disabilities and people who work in the field of disabilities. There also needs to be cross representation of PFR staff who are knowledgeable about and committed to furthering PFR opportunities for people with disabilities. A process would need to be developed to ensure that this committee has decision-making influence (senior management presence) and leadership for carrying out the recommendations from this report.


PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT

8) Include more people with a broad range of disabilities on existing program planning/review committees, advisory councils and youth councils and regularly consult with members of the disability community when developing new policies and initiatives.


TRANSPORTATION (9-11)

9) Develop transportation programs such as carpooling and/or a system whereby volunteers and/or parents supervise TTC rides for people with disabilities to and from recreation opportunities by traveling with them.


10) Begin dialogue with the TTC to establish a fare reimbursement program for participants who can not afford it.


11) Discuss the possibility of using accessible public school buses for
transportation to day programs with representatives of the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Ministry of Education and the provincial public and separate school associations.

**AGENCY/ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND INFORMATION SHARING**

12) Collaborate with agencies such as the Toronto Community Housing Corporation to help the division to plan future capital project priorities.

**COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION (13-21)**

13) Provide effective community-based distribution of age-specific information to children, youth, adults/older adults, and multicultural and religious communities by using:
   a) regular mail and community agencies as the primary means for distributing promotional material such as The FUN Guide or other information to people with disabilities
   b) email and accessible websites as a secondary means of distributing information.

14) Provide recreation staff with:
   a) a training tool such as the Adapted Programs and Integrated Services Recreation Resource Guide, which lists disability service agency contacts and the recreational opportunities that are available through them
   b) a one-page summary of disability service agency information in multiple languages, which they can distribute to citizens from ethno-cultural communities
   c) sensitivity training
   d) a dedicated website where staff can access adapted and integrated information and resources.

15) Provide and distribute a hard copy version of the Adapted Programs and Integrated Services for People with Disabilities Recreation Resource Guide to:
   a) people with disabilities and their families
   b) disability service agencies
   c) recreation staff at facilities
   d) staff in the four district Adapted Programs and Integrated Services offices

An accessible, downloadable version will also need to be available on the division’s website.
16) Provide any documents that are produced, displayed or distributed in a special format such as MS Word in an accessible, open format such as HTML, Rich Text Format (RTF) and plain text versions.

17) Increase the accessibility of City of Toronto public meetings by providing American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, attendant care, materials (including business cards) in alternative formats such as large print and Braille and meeting minutes online. Many full-time staff have shown an interest in taking courses in ASL so they can be more effective in their communication.

18) Design a disability services webpage that is directly accessible from the PFR website where people can directly access information, link to other disability service agency websites and take a virtual tour of some community centres. Computer access will also need to be made available at community centres based on local public demand.

19) Improve the advertising and promotion of information by:
   a) using universally recognized disability symbols in promotional material and placing it in more locations (e.g. the provision of wheelchair accessibility, ASL and alternative formats). In addition, information about public meetings/events will need to be planned and communicated at least four weeks in advance to arrange for ASL interpreters. It is a corporate requirement that all public meetings be made accessible.
   b) setting up display areas in community centres to advertise to people with disabilities
   c) advertising program and service information as well as job opportunities in more places using various types of media (e.g. person-operated telephone hotlines, deafconnect.com, the Voiceprint cable television channel for the blind and vision impaired and multicultural and mainstream newspapers, radio and television stations)
   d) having Youth Outreach Workers – Disability inform youth with disabilities about the services they provide, suitable recreational opportunities offered by the Division and how to contact them via telephone, email and in person
   e) providing and promoting material in multiple languages (e.g. Chinese, Spanish, Tamil, Urdu and Somali) and in alternative formats such as large print, Braille and CD ROM.

20) Continue to expand the newly developed central registry of Torontonians interested in recreational opportunities for people with disabilities and put these interested citizens on the mailing list.
21) Improve the promotion of City parks, trails and natural areas and the ways and means they are accessible by:
   a) indicating where they are located
   b) describing how accessible they are
   c) listing what recreational opportunities are available to people with disabilities at each location
   d) providing information about slopes, grades, materials used for surfaces and washroom locations
   e) using symbols rather than words where possible in promotional material.

EMPLOYMENT AND RECRUITMENT (22-29)
22) Make sure that previous experience working with people with disabilities is one of the qualifications used in the hiring of program staff. The Division may need to partner with disability service agencies to provide interested staff with opportunities for practical training and leadership in working with people with disabilities.

23) Hire program-specific trainers (i.e. aquatics, skating, gymnastics) to assist in the delivery of programs for people with disabilities.

24) Provide accommodations to employees and volunteers with disabilities through the identification of a divisional budget line. This funding would need to be available to each facility/program and added to the existing budget rather than absorbed from what has already been allocated.

25) PFR recruiters need to:
   a) attend job fairs specifically for people with disabilities
   b) answer questions and share ideas about how people with disabilities can apply for employment within the Division and advertise for potential staff online and in other ways that reach target groups (please see Communications and Promotion section).

26) Increase contacts/relationships with employment agencies through:
   a) direct advertising: the Division would benefit through the provision of job coaching, mentoring and employment accommodations. Organizations/agencies would also benefit by learning how to access opportunities for space and permits, resulting in appropriate parks and recreational services for their clients.
   b) working with agencies that support employment initiatives to help with hiring people with disabilities to fill positions in the
27) Develop a formalized work/volunteer experience program for people with disabilities to help them obtain the competencies necessary to be more competitive in the job market.

28) Hire more people with disabilities in various positions throughout the Division.

29) Provide accommodations like transportation in emergency situations and flexible work schedules for employees and volunteers as necessary. Any resulting cost would be absorbed through the budget line that is created for accommodations.

PARKS, FORESTRY AND FACILITIES (30-34)

30) Increase the accessibility of parks, trails and natural areas by:
   a) constructing wider and smoother pathways
   b) providing more wheelchair accessible parking spots and washrooms that are open year-round
   c) installing universally accessible equipment in more playgrounds across the city
   d) providing support for people with severe disabilities to experience city parks, trails and natural areas
   e) redesigning golf courses according to universal design principles.

31) Increase the accessibility of indoor facilities by:
   a) placing accessible washrooms in more locations
   b) providing more family washrooms, change rooms and change tables as well as larger changing spaces in all recreational facilities. These areas should be thoroughly cleaned on a regular basis and, in the case of swimming pools, be directly accessible from both the lobby and the pool.
   c) making use of universal signage to include large print, symbols and Braille
   d) installing sensory-operated rather than push-button doors
   e) providing more reserved parking spots over and above the Ontario Building Code (OBC) requirements.

32) Improve the maintenance of parks, trails and natural areas by:
   a) keeping washrooms clean and unlocked
   b) more frequent picking up of litter, with an increased number of garbage and recycling bins available for waste disposal
c) more accessible benches, picnic areas, public barbecues and operational water fountains

d) better tending of grass, gardens and flower beds.

33) Improve the maintenance of indoor areas by:
    a) providing a hotline to report the need for maintenance and repair regarding problems such as doors that are not operational
    b) improving the quality of snow removal on pathways and walkways leading up to facility entrances and ensuring that all snow and ice is cleared quickly

34) Improve the safety of outdoor areas by:
    a) installing more lighting, safety signs and video cameras in parks, along trails and in facilities
    b) hiring more security officers
    c) stricter enforcement of laws pertaining to off-leash dogs
    d) placing audible traffic lights at intersections around major city parks and facilities.

Please see Recommendation (44-i) for a parks-related programming item.

RECREATIONAL ADMINISTRATION (35 and 36)

35) Simplify the current registration process by making it more person-centered and sensitive to customer needs by:
    a) using easy-to-understand/clear language
    b) reducing any unnecessary paperwork
    c) implementing alternative registration processes (e.g. designating spaces for people with disabilities, permitting on line registration and/or filling out forms with the assistance of staff)
    d) having longer registration hours
    e) communicating openly with staff about program/participant needs
    f) having open house nights prior to program start dates
    g) providing opportunities for participants to visit a program prior to registering to determine its suitability
    h) encouraging customer service representatives to put people with disabilities on a wait list when they do not get into their program of choice.

36) Investigate the feasibility of issuing a photo identification card or a card with a magnetic strip to all adapted programs or integrated services registrants. This card would be attached to participant information/medical forms and would facilitate the ease of access into programs/facilities when participants come with support staff at no charge.
RECREATIONAL SUPPORT (37-39)

37) Provide one-to-one support workers so that the service can be offered year-round for any programs and age groups consistently across the city.

38) Provide Sign and First Language interpretive services and attendant care at public events, programs and facilities.

39) Provide participants the opportunity to choose the gender of their support worker when both are available. This will require the recruitment of support staff with knowledge and skills in particular program areas as well as the development of a float staff system to ensure that there is adequate coverage of support staff to cover absences and other unexpected events or emergencies.

STAFF TRAINING (40-42)

40) Provide and fund ongoing disability awareness training that is hands-on and specific for all PFR staff including front-line workers. This training will need to focus on issues related to:
   - the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA)
   - the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)
   - changing attitudes
   - customer service
   - specific types of disabilities– and what to expect workshops
   - communication with the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing community via American Sign Language (ASL)
   - how to make referrals
   - expanding current First Alert requirements and materials
   - sensitivity awareness
   - accommodations
   - reducing barriers through increasing universal accessibility and design
   - program adaptation/inclusion
   - human rights.

41) Provide maintenance workers with training on: the ODA, the AODA, PFR’s vision, policies, and the appropriate storage of specialized equipment.

42) Have Adapted program and Integrated service staff train recreation staff on an “as needed” basis by modeling the actions required to foster positive attitudes toward people with disabilities.
PROGRAM AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS (43 and 44)

43) Develop and carry out uniform policies across the four districts to ensure greater consistency of the programs and services offered (i.e. fees, registration and staffing ratios etc).

44) Increase the number, type, scope and variety of adapted and integrated program offerings for all age groups by providing more:
   a) accessible adapted and integrated social, life skills, fitness, indoor and outdoor sports, computer training and hobby opportunities as well as programs that combine traditional recreation activities with an opportunity to learn life and social skills
   b) adapted programs and integrated services offered at various times throughout the week to accommodate different age groups and schedules
   c) gender and age-specific swimming, fitness and sports programs that can accommodate participants with disabilities in all four districts
   d) programs geared towards a specific type of disability or special need based on community demand
   e) recreation opportunities to underserved communities such as people with hearing difficulty, vision loss, culturally-specific needs and newcomer groups
   f) camps and alternative summer programs for youth and adults who are over the age of 24
   g) investigate/offer specialized recreational opportunities for children and youth with autism (e.g. having a Snoezelen room in each district)
   h) half and full day adapted and integrated recreational respite programs and more opportunities for out trips. These will need to be developed in partnership with disability service agencies/interest groups and offered on weekends, afternoons and week nights at a recreational facility in each district.
   i) develop more Discovery Walk programs for people with disabilities and give consideration to providing signage in alternative formats, clear language and/or symbols.
   j) increase the amount of adapted equipment available in weight rooms and swimming pools.

REFERRALS (45 and 46)

45) Strengthen partnerships with disability service organizations to ensure their familiarity with divisional services as well as our understanding of their program and service offerings.
46) Assist recreation staff in providing referrals to clients with disabilities by:
   a) informing (educating/training) staff on which agencies, programs and services are available to clients with various types of disabilities and identifying the staff contact lead
   b) distributing resources such as the Adapted Programs and Integrated Services Recreation Resource Guide to all recreation centers
   c) building referral services into their portfolios
   d) bringing the need for adapted programs and integrated services to the attention of the neighbourhood teams
   e) inviting recreation staff to community information fairs on disability as well as to general information fairs which have an added focus on disability
   f) setting service priorities
   g) keeping track of referrals.

CONCLUSION

This document has summarized the feedback received from the individuals who participated in the Getting Services Right for Torontonians with Disabilities public and staff consultation process as well as from disability service agencies. It also provides a snapshot of where the Division currently stands with regard to the provision of programs and services for people with disabilities in Toronto, identifies existing program and service gaps and proposes recommendations as identified by respondents.

The collective input of individuals, agencies and staff provides PFR with a clearer understanding of Toronto’s disability demographic. This feedback also supports the Division’s three disability-specific recommendations as outlined in Our Common Grounds. These are to:

A. provide physical activity opportunities and leader in training programs in partnership with other agencies for youth with a disability or special need
B. develop partnerships to improve programs for children with disabilities
C. increase the number of Torontonians with disabilities in registered programs by 1,000 per cent.
When given the opportunity to make additional comments on how to improve participation, most respondents expressed their gratitude to PFR for undertaking a project aimed at capturing the views of people with disabilities. Comments such as: “Thanks for the chance to offer feedback: I don’t remember doing it before” and “This is a fabulous project: keep up the good work” were quite frequent.

These comments suggest that current and potential participants will be more likely to partake in municipal recreation opportunities when their concerns and input are solicited by the Division. The research project opened up an important avenue of dialogue between PFR and people with disabilities across the city; a dialogue which will need to be sustained in the future.

Although this is the first demographic study of disability conducted by PFR, one of the messages that came through loud and clear is that community members and the agencies that represent them believe that the City has produced enough public consultation reports that “all too often end up sitting on a shelf and never get implemented.” They are encouraging the Division to get on with it and “just do it” and are excited about the implementation of these recommendations.

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