

EO Files (September 2010)

“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief”

### **“Why Should We Care?”**

We tend to take things for granted. For example, travelling smoothly from home to office, or taking a bus or the MTR and being right on time, or entering a restaurant and being served without fuss. These simple daily routines seem to come effortlessly to many of us.

Now imagine you are a wheelchair user, or you are using a crutch due to an injury. Imagine if you are about to enter a building, only to find that the entrance is outfitted with steps that you cannot climb. Imagine having to wait for an hour to get on the few buses that are fitted with platforms for wheelchairs. Imagine you have to climb 30 odd steps with your crutches out of some MTR stations because they do not have lifts. Imagine seeing friends at a restaurant becoming a near-impossible task, because the restaurant raises its entrance onto a platform to stop rain water from coming in, or because its hallways are too narrow for your wheelchair.

Such are the struggles that persons with disabilities (PWDs) face on a daily basis. Such are the struggles that keep Hong Kong from becoming a truly friendly city.

Are we fit to call Hong Kong a world-class city if this is our treatment of PWDs? And before you think that these difficulties do not concern you, think again: the line between persons with and without disabilities is much more blurred than you might realize, and the problems PWDs confront actually affect us all. Perhaps you are now taking care of your elderly parents. Perhaps you are a mother who uses a baby-stroller. And, inevitably, all of us will grow old, and many of us will require assistance in our old age. The activities we take for granted now, such as boarding a bus or eating at a restaurant, may one day become an exhausting and frustrating affair. In short, many of us may one day become PWDs, and would we not then wish for facilities to ease our lives?

Universal design is already an internationally accepted access design concept that we should adopt to foster a more friendly world undivided by different levels of accessibility. Indeed, improving accessibility makes economic sense, since it allows PWDs to participate more fully in the marketplace and bring about greater business opportunities for all. One wheelchair user told us, “If there were improvements in buildings and roads, we could benefit from more employment opportunities, which would lessen our reliance on the government’s assistance.”

The government should do more – indeed, they should lead this fight to ensure accessibility for all. In June, the EOC announced our findings of the Formal Investigation (FI) on Accessibility to Publicly Accessible Premises. After inspecting sixty government-owned buildings, we found that government-owned premises are doing a far from satisfactory job in providing barrier-free facilities. And at the last LegCo By-Elections, despite the fact that the EOC had raised this issue ten years ago, a full 15 percent of polling stations remained inaccessible to PWDs.

So what can the government do to rectify this situation? The EOC has already laid out both policy and operational recommendations in our FI report, but I would like to emphasize a few points here.

First, policymaking should not be piecemeal. A holistic approach is required, one that takes equal opportunities as one of its mainstream considerations. The needs of PWDs and the larger aim of integrating all sectors into our society must be factored into the formulation of government policies.

Second, we need a change of mindset. Too often, indifference is the cause of the shortfalls in accessible facilities. I believe indifference stems from a lack of empathy, a feeling that this is not *our* issue. But accessibility is everyone’s issue, and we must move beyond being concerned merely for today’s convenience in order to adequately prepare for the assistance we all may require tomorrow. We need to start looking at universal design as a necessary and beneficial-for-all arrangement.

Hong Kong people expect the government to show their commitment to building a world-class city. It is only fitting that the government acts now to seriously tackle the accessibility problems. By going for universal access, the government sets a powerful example and shows us that, yes, they do care.

We must also call on the private sector to join in the collective effort to provide universal access, so that together we can live up to our aspirations as a civilized and inclusive society.

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[\*EOC's Formal Investigation Report on Accessibility\*](#)