

Rating the accessibility of Ontario's federal institutions to people in wheelchairs

When I was asked to write an article about the accessibility of federal institutions, I immediately thought, "But I don't really have a disability." Although I happen to be in a wheelchair, and have been for six years, I don't consider it a handicap any more.

I spend a lot of time in Ontario's various federal institutions as an in-reach worker; trying to motivate inmates serving lift sentences (I am a lifer myself). The following article is **my** view of Ontario's federal institutions - the perspective of somebody who gets around on four wheels instead of on two feet. Millhaven Institution Millhaven Institution has two parking spots reserved for people with disabilities but, unfortunately, they are only the size of normal parking spots. This presents a problem for somebody like myself, who is in a wheelchair but drives everywhere. The lift on my van opens and lowers from the side, so I need an extra four feet on one side of a parking spot to allow me to lower myself on the lift, roll off the lift, wheel to the front of the van, and close the lift.

These designated parking spots are usually taken, but the two times I used them, somebody parked beside me and I was unable to get back into my van. I now park beside the curb at the front entrance of the institution. I can get in and out with my lift, and nobody can park beside me. If the normal width of three parking spots were divided into two spots, persons with disabilities would have the necessary space for effective parking.

Once out of my van, I am also unable to enter the building and sign in where everybody else does because there is a step at the entrance. I have to go to the side door, and the officer on duty brings the sign-in book out to me. I then proceed to the side gate and roll on into the institution.

Further, after a recent snowfall, the long walkway and steps leading from the registry office to the institution had been shovelled, but the two ramps that provide access for those in wheelchairs had not. The fellows doing the shovelling were not in wheelchairs, so I'm sure the ramps weren't uppermost in their minds. An officer had to push me up the ramp because the snow was too deep for my tires to get any traction.

I also have to make sure that I go to the bathroom just before leaving for Millhaven, since the washrooms in the institution are not easily accessible to people in wheelchairs. In case of an emergency, I would have to travel the excessive distance to the institution hospital to find an accessible washroom.

Another problem is entering the units to conduct interviews (as I often do) because the interview rooms are not accessible to people in wheelchairs. Mind you, at six-foot-one and more than 400 pounds prior to becoming a wheelchair user, I might always have been prevented from walking into one of those little rooms because the entrances are so small. Consequently, I have to conduct my interviews in the common room.

Despite these problems, Millhaven is, on the whole, a pretty accessible institution. On a scale of excellent to good to fair, Millhaven would fall into the good category, unlike some of the public buildings I have had to work in. Bath Institution Although the visiting area is being remodelled, Bath Institution already

has excellent facilities for people with disabilities. There are designated parking spaces of the proper size, a portable aluminum ramp that can be moved to make any entrance accessible, and easily accessible washroom facilities. Overall, Bath Institution rates as excellent on my scale. Kingston Penitentiary Kingston Penitentiary recently designated (for the first time) several parking spaces for people with disabilities. The entrance was remodelled, and a ramp was added to give people in wheelchairs access to the back of the penitentiary. The washrooms are accessible, and the interview rooms are large and have wide doorways.

I would also give Kingston Penitentiary an excellent rating. Although Millhaven is a much newer facility, the renovations and redesign of Kingston Penitentiary provide wheelchair accessibility. Prison for Women The only way I can access the Prison for Women is through the sallyport: the gates where large vehicles normally enter the grounds. I then have to wheel around the building and go in through a back door. There is a ramp inside that will allow me to go to the gym, but that's as far as I can get within the institution. To the best of my knowledge, none of the washrooms in the Prison for Women are accessible to people in wheelchairs. There are, however, two designated parking spots of the proper size close to the sallyport.

I would still rate the Prison for Women as good, but I hope institutional officials will consult an organization representing persons with disabilities before beginning any renovations. Collins Bay Institution The parking at Collins Bay Institution is excellent, and a ramp provides easy access to the institution. There are also good sized interview rooms and a washroom that is accessible to people in wheelchairs. Getting around the institution is easy - I can even visit the shop areas and the school. Collins Bay Institution rates as excellent on my scale. Frontenac Institution Although this institution has come a long way, it is one of the newest institutions, so it is disappointing that full wheelchair accessibility is taking so long. It is only recently that a ramp was put in, and there is now one designated parking spot for people with disabilities.

However, there is still no washroom that is accessible to someone in a wheelchair. Once again, I have to be sure to answer "nature's call" before entering the institution. Frontenac Institution rates only as fair. Joyceville Institution This institution really has no proper parking facilities. I usually have to park illegally so nobody can park beside my van. Again, I have to enter through the sallyport because the main entrance has a high step that is big trouble for a wheelchair.

Once inside, someone in a wheelchair will find the interview rooms and a washroom fully accessible. I would rate this institution as good -the parking problem prevents me from giving my top rating. Pittsburg Institution Pittsburg is an older institution and, unfortunately, I can gain access only to its visiting area. The main area, where the offices are located, is simply inaccessible to anybody in a wheelchair, as are the washrooms. At least the designated parking area is first rate. However, rating this institution overall is difficult because I cannot get around inside. Warkworth Institution Warkworth Institution recently put in four excellent parking spaces for people with disabilities - they are huge, and they are right at the front of the institution. There is also a ramp providing access to the main entrance, and the interview rooms are completely accessible.

However, there are no washrooms accessible to people in wheelchairs. A lot of the main blocks within

the institution are also inaccessible to me (or anyone in a wheelchair).

The problem I run into at Warkworth Institution, far more than at any other, is that when I come out of the institution in the afternoon, the parking spaces for people with disabilities are always full. It seems that when the late afternoon shift arrives, some people park in these spots because they are closer to the front door. In all fairness, it is probably difficult to find a parking spot anywhere at that time of day because the staff from two shifts are parked there at the same time.

I don't get really upset when I see this (or at least not for long), because I figure that it is just an example of people not thinking. They see a spot and they park. I don't believe that people are trying to be vindictive or offensive by parking in these spots any more than I believe that people deliberately make washrooms inaccessible. Unless you are in a difficult situation, you don't even think about it.

Another problem at Warkworth is a two-inch curb that you have to wheel over to get from the sidewalk to the parking lot. Most people can just step over it, but it is very awkward to manoeuvre a wheelchair over it - you could very easily tip yourself out of the chair.

I would rate Warkworth Institution as fair, keeping in mind that some of the staff "need some educating" about their parking habits. It probably wouldn't hurt for all institutions to send the same message to their staff. Beaver Creek Institution All of the buildings at Beaver Creek Institution are fully accessible, as are the washrooms and interview areas. The parking is also excellent. Beaver Creek certainly rates as excellent. Regional Headquarters Since Regional Headquarters was renovated about three years ago, it has been very accessible. There is an excellent ramp at the main entrance, and an elevator provides easy access to all levels. What can be done? I want to make the point that the staff at these institutions have always been very helpful and considerate toward me. I also understand why I cannot get into or around some buildings. Most of them were designed by people who could walk, so it is perhaps only natural that they failed to consider those who can't. The biggest hurdle designers need to overcome to make facilities accessible is the tendency to see things from only one perspective. Something I would like to see done, if the Correctional Service of Canada is truly concerned about making its institutions more accessible, is to have management and staff try to negotiate their way around the institutions in wheelchairs for an hour or so. To become aware of the obstacles a person in a wheelchair faces daily, you must actually experience being in a wheelchair, even for just a short period of time.

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