

## Issues relevant to correctional staff with disabilities

It is difficult for me to attempt to speak for staff with disabilities, even though I am a wheelchair user. Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous population. In 1986, Statistics Canada estimated that 7.3% of the Canadian working-age population identify themselves as having some sort of disability. However, many of these people might not appear to be disabled.

Further, even when disabilities are apparent (such as some physical disabilities) a wide variety of problems can restrict, to varying degrees, individuals' productivity, career mobility or their comfort on the job.

The role of the Correctional Service of Canada's National Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities is to advise the Commissioner on issues relevant to staff with disabilities. The committee members are also active in regional advisory groups. Last year, the committee held focus groups across Canada to draw out ideas and recommendations for action on priority issues. Three key areas were emphasized: physical barriers and accessibility, awareness training, and recruitment and career development. Physical barriers and accessibility The Correctional Service of Canada (as well as other federal departments) is required to comply with the Treasury Board policy on accessibility, which applies to all "real property" owned or leased by the federal government. In practical terms, "accessible" property (according to this policy) enables persons with disabilities to access federal government services. The standard not only applies to easy physical access for wheelchair users, but also requires accommodation for persons with visual and hearing disabilities.

The Treasury Board's directive allowed five years for the completion of all modifications. Therefore, most federal government establishments should be accessible by March of 1995. Accessibility will be achieved by investing in adaptations to existing buildings when they are renovated and by observing the Barrier-free Design Standard when planning any new construction. Specifics on aspects of building planning and design that accommodate all kinds of disabilities are fully laid out in the standard. Each individual's experience of disability is unique, so it is clearly not enough to ask a particular staff member if renovations are suitable for his or her needs and then from this generalize the needs of all.

However, close compliance with the standards is monitored only if the costs of renovation exceed \$100,000. This could affect some correctional staff because the construction or renovation costs of parole offices, community correctional centres and agency-sponsored facilities are usually far less than for institutions and may not reach the \$100,000 "minimum."

For example, recent renovations to a community correctional centre had to be reworked after it was discovered that there was limited wheelchair access to the shower and that use of the kitchen was potentially unsafe for residents or staff with disabilities.

Some facilities, on the other hand, have adopted standards beyond the bare minimum set by legislation and policy. The William Head Institution in British Columbia is an excellent example of how barrier-free design can be arrived at through consultation with user groups and compliance with standards. The National Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities is available to assist regional Technical

Services departments in ensuring architectural accessibility in accordance with the Treasury Board requirements.

By and large, many offices and facilities in the community could improve access and, thus, the comfort of staff by making minor inexpensive physical changes to their facilities or by coming up with some operational solutions. Physical changes could include adequate parking with conscientious snow removal; doors that are not too heavy to open from wheelchairs; washroom mirrors placed at the appropriate height for anyone in a wheelchair; elevators that don't have buttons too high to reach (from a wheelchair) and do not require special keys that have to be requested from staff, who are not always available; and hallways and corridors free of clutter. Operational solutions could be as simple as relocating conference rooms and services to more accessible floors.

Another way of accommodating employees with disabilities is to provide them with technical aids that will enable them to work to their full potential. Assistive devices are available for temporary use from the Technical Aid Loan Bank (Public Service Commission of Canada). There have not yet been funds allotted for purchasing assistive devices for the permanent use of staff.

Expert advice on accommodating individuals with disabilities is available from the Job Accommodation Network (funded through Employment and Immigration Canada). In some circumstances, employees with disabilities may wish to arrange work assignments so that they can sometimes work at home, or work part-time or on a flexible schedule.

Reference material in an alternative format (such as sound recordings and large-print material) and Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf (TDDs) should also be available in each region. Attendant services can be made available on a contractual basis for employees who require assistance with daily activities, especially for occasions when duties or training require travel. Awareness The National Sub-Committee on Persons with Disabilities acknowledges that both overt discrimination and more subtle discrimination arising out of lack of awareness can be an obstacle for employees with disabilities. Discrimination can directly obstruct career development when, for example, employees with disabilities are passed over for assignments, training or conferences because their supervisors believe these employees would be too limited by their disabilities or when employees who become disabled are discouraged from returning to work because managers are unaware of how these employees can now fit into the work environment.

Further, a lack of awareness on the part of managers or colleagues who use insensitive or offensive terms, labels or humour may cause distress to employees with disabilities.

Members of job selection boards should be aware of ways to accommodate candidates with disabilities during job competitions. Members should also be familiar with recruitment programs that facilitate the hiring of qualified candidates with disabilities, such as the ACCESS program or Special Measures Program (funded by the Public Service Commission).

In the coming months, the National Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities will be working with regional staff colleges to develop an awareness training program on issues related to disability. This

program could then be delivered in conjunction with other employment equity awareness training. Training programs such as these teach participants to value diversity by providing a fair recruitment process and a supportive environment in the workplace. Recruitment and career development The proportion of staff in the Correctional Service of Canada who identify themselves as having a disability increased from 0.2% in 1984-1985 to 2.0% in 1992. Nevertheless, the numbers still fail to match the proportion of persons with disabilities in Canadian society (estimated at 7.3%).

Employment equity programs and programs that successfully integrate new recruits into the Service (such as the ACCESS program mentioned earlier) have helped increase the number of staff members with disabilities. Also, a recent Public Service Commission report outlines practical suggestions for recruiting qualified staff with disabilities.<sup>(2)</sup> Once recruited, however, employees with disabilities do not seem to be promoted as quickly as employees without disabilities. Certainly, as a group, staff with disabilities are under-represented in high-level decision-making positions.<sup>(3)</sup> However, programs such as a mentoring system and inter- and intradepartmental exchanges that provide developmental opportunities have been successfully implemented in other federal departments. The ultimate goal When one employee with disabilities was asked what the ideal work environment would be, he described a workplace where his performance is not limited by physical barriers, where co-workers with disabilities are not uncommon and where colleagues without disabilities are comfortable with his limitations and yet acknowledge his contribution.

The Advisory Committee recognizes that policies of fiscal restraint tend to restrict employment equity initiatives. However, given the core values that the Correctional Service of Canada upholds, the goals of fair representation of persons with disabilities in the workforce and the provision of a reasonable, comfortable and supportive environment for all employees are defensible under any social and economic conditions.

---

<sup>(1)</sup>Dr. Lynn Stewart, District Psychologist, Correctional Service of Canada, Main Floor, 330 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M6P 2K7.

<sup>(2)</sup>*Creative Recruitment Practices for Persons with Disabilities* (Ottawa: Public Service Commission, June 1992).

<sup>(3)</sup>Consultation Group on Employment Equity for Persons with Disabilities, *Looking Beyond What You See: Report to the Deputy Ministers' Advisory Committee on Employment Equity* (Ottawa: April 1992).