

30 Years and Counting...

A History of the Prince Edward Island Council of the Disabled



Foreword

The PEI Council of the Disabled celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2004 - 2005. What better time to look back at the Council's accomplishments, challenges and stories?

In accordance with our Mission Statement, as the voice of Islanders with disabilities, the Council has worked for thirty years to "promote the full participation and inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of Island society".

This history tells a compelling story about the formation of the Council and its ups and downs. It gives the reader the perspectives of those involved in doing the work as well as the public's view of what went on. Good times, challenging times, hard work, community service, and activism are all a part of the Council's story. We hope that you enjoy reading it.

Barry Schmidl,
Executive Director,
September 2004

Acknowledgements

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The 1970s

In 1973, two Islanders by the name of Richard Montigny and Kay Reynolds went to Toronto for the National Disability Rights convention. It was from this conference that the Coalition Of Provincial Organizations for the Handicapped [COPOH] was born. It was also at this conference that Reynolds and Montigny got the idea to initiate a similar conference on Prince Edward Island.

With the financial backing of the provincial government, the three-day conference was held in March of 1974. Just like the national conference the year before, the PEI Conference focussed on five different areas: Transportation, Health and Safety, Employment, Recreation, and Accessibility. Close to 100 Islanders converged on the Charlottetown Hotel from March 29th to 31st. Over the three days, the conference heard from several guest speakers, including Mona Weinberg, the editor of *Contact Magazine*, and Wilf Race, the director of the Canadian Rehabilitation Council for the Disabled. "I have been to several well-intentioned conferences which piled resolution upon resolution, but finally fizzled out," Weinberg said at the opening of the conference. "If we do not tell the authorities what we want, the authorities will only give us what they think we want. These are often two different things."

The theme of educating the non-disabled community about the needs of those with disabilities was a focus of the conference. In his speech to the delegates, Wilf Race pointed out the case of one 22-year-old who was limited only in her mobility, yet was placed in a residence for the "senile and mentally deficient."

"The responsibility for educating the public is ours. There is no weapon so powerful as informed public opinion," Race told the conference.

The conference was also attended by several government officials, including Bruce Stewart, then Minister of Health and Social Services, who told delegates "to become more active and vocal in matters and affairs of direct concern to themselves as citizens of our province".

The Guardian published an editorial that week urging that the message of the conference not be lost on its able-bodied readership: "After a while, one forgot the wheelchairs, crutches and muscle spasms," the editorial read. "[The conference] was a great learning experience."

The delegates at the conference passed 29 resolutions that would form the basis of a proposal to the provincial government on ways to improve the lives of the Island's disabled population. One of the recommendations was the formation of a permanent body advocating for the rights and interests of the disabled on PEI. It was from this recommendation that the PEI Council of the Disabled was born.

In that same year, a Steering Committee was formed to create the new body. It was generally agreed that while there were many groups operating on PEI advocating on behalf of specific disabilities, there was no voice for *all* Islanders with disabilities. This is why the word "of" in the PEI Council of the Disabled became so pivotal: the original idea for the Council was to be a group composed of people with disabilities advocating on their own behalf. As Richard Montigny explained, those with physical limitations did not need the "able-bodied" speaking on their behalf; only those who live with disabilities can truly understand the challenges and barriers faced by people with disabilities.

With that in mind, the Steering Committee set out to create a permanent body, made up of people with disabilities advocating for the rights and needs of all of PEI's disabled, based on their own first-hand experiences. The Steering Committee was made up of only five people: Kay Reynolds, Milton Fitzpatrick, Kevin Walsh, Phil Bower and Richard Montigny as the Chair.

The delegates at the conference also recommended the creation of a new portfolio in the provincial cabinet – a minister responsible for the disabled. The province responded, and by the end of the year, Catherine Callbeck became the first Minister Responsible for the Disabled.

In January of 1975, the PEI Council of the Disabled held its first meeting. During that first meeting, the Steering Committee voted in an Executive of the newly-formed Council. It also formally adopted the Memorandum of Association which spelled out the Council's philosophy and terms for membership.

Also during this first meeting, the Executive passed a resolution calling on government to issue a Health Card to all people with disabilities receiving government Welfare Assistance in order to obtain emergency drugs both in and out of the province.

John Eldon Green spoke at this meeting, and urged the Council to "fight more and talk louder" on behalf of Islanders with disabilities. "The disabled have so far to go; they cannot afford to be divided," Green said. "Stop being so patient and polite."

Philip Bower was elected the Council's first President. Richard Montigny was hired as the Council's first Executive Director. It was also decided early on that the Council would retain the five sub-committees used at both the national and provincial conferences: Housing, Transportation, Recreation, Health and Safety, and Employment.

The PEI Council of the Disabled was formally incorporated on March 25, 1975.

Much of the Council's early work involved finding sources of funding for projects, as well as personal advocacy and establishing a membership. One early study conducted by the Council involved canvassing Islanders to get a better understanding of how many people had disabilities, which kinds of disabilities, and how their disabilities affected them in their daily lives.

The Council was also very vocal in its support for Pat and the Elephant, the newly created bus service for those with mobility challenges. Phil Bower, in 1976, called on the provincial government to provide funding for the service. The Council was also successful in obtaining an exemption for its members from paying the charge for dialing 411 information. The Council also began issuing membership cards, which entitled members to an exemption from paying for access to Provincial Parks. Vernon Richards, as chair of the Housing sub-committee, worked tirelessly to secure a mortgage from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Commission to build an affordable, accessible housing development.

However, by 1978, it was the Council that was in need of funding. Dire need. Just three short years after incorporation, the provincial government was threatening to pull the rug out from under Council, just as it was finding its footing. The controversy stemmed from a misunderstanding relating to the government's commitment to the Council in 1974. The Executive of the Council was under the impression that the government would provide long-term funding. However, when the Council requested a \$25,000 grant, the government approved a grant of only \$2,500, arguing that the Council should be self-sufficient.

The controversy that erupted over the government's unwillingness to support the Council financially spilled over into the media. Montigny charged that Callbeck had made representations to the Executive for long-term funding. The Health Minister at the time, Dr. A.E. Ings, publicly questioned the benefit of having a Council of the Disabled.

Executive Director Richard Montigny was given the opportunity to address the legislature, and in doing so outlined all of the positive work that the Council had accomplished since its inception. "If the Council were to fold," he argued, "we would be back to the old days when everything was done for the disabled without their advice or participation."

The public outcry in favour of the Council was enough to compel the government to offer another \$3,500 in addition to the \$2,500 if the Council agreed to fundraise for the balance of its operating budget.

However, at that point in 1978, the Council did not have enough funds even to initiate such a fundraising campaign. It was thought that if the government did not come through with more money, the Council would have to cease operations at the end of June that year. In response, the Public Service Alliance published a scathing criticism of the government: "We simply cannot understand why the government is not prepared to give this very minimal assistance to the Council. I would have thought the government would have wanted to be associated with the fine work the Council is doing." The opposition parties were equally harsh in their attacks on the Campbell Liberals.

"I believe that the merits of what the Council are trying to do for their membership is so generally recognized that the government should be prepared to assist the Council further until their work can become self-supporting from public donations," Opposition Leader Angus MacLean said at the time.

"What kind of government and leader do we have that sees fit to give a large grant to wealthy race track owners, increase their own salaries, and then refuse a small grant to people who in many cases are existing with the bare necessities of life so they can help themselves," NDP Leader Aquinas Ryan asked.

Eventually the government relented, and an agreement was reached for a three-year,

\$12,000 grant. The agreement was based on a "Fee for Service" arrangement with the provincial government, whereby the Council would have to provide services to the province in relation to their work advocating for people with disabilities. For instance, the following year the Council was charged with the task of surveying all of the Island's public buildings to determine how accessible they were to those with disabilities.

This "Fee for Service" arrangement was completely agreeable to the Council and consistent with its mandate. "We didn't want charity," said Montigny. "We simply wanted the opportunity to be treated as equals."

Meanwhile, the work of the Council continued. The Transportation sub-committee lobbied for a public transportation system in Charlottetown and Summerside. The Housing sub-committee secured a \$400,000 mortgage from CMHC to begin construction on housing units for the blind, hearing impaired, and mobility challenged on Dorchester Street. The Employment sub-committee worked to find jobs for people with disabilities through the federal Manpower Project. The Council lent its full support to the creation of Joyriders, a therapeutic horse-riding program for people with disabilities, which continues to this day. The Council also worked diligently during this time to build up an extensive Disability Resource Library, for the use of the general public, housed at the Council's office.

The Council also continued working to debunk public misconceptions about people with disabilities and their abilities. To that end, a bi-annual Disability Awareness Day was devised as a means of dispelling many of the myths that still plagued Islanders with disabilities. "A disability is only as big as we make it," President Hatton said at the time. Catherine Callbeck recalled that, as part of that first Disability Awareness Day, she and several other MLAs spent the entire day in wheelchairs in order to better understand the challenges faced by those with physical limitations. "It was a wonderful idea, and I think everyone should have to try it just to see just how difficult it is." said Callbeck.

The Council began raising its profile by setting up information booths at the Kensington Community Harvest Festival and the Summerside Lobster Carnival, and began entering a float in the annual Gold Cup and Saucer Parade. To that end, the Council also began a bid to obtain membership in the United Way, a move that it was thought would heighten the Council's profile, give the Council more credibility, and

provide access to more funding for new projects.

By 1979, with its funding restored, the Council began studying the idea of a Reserved Parking system for those with mobility disabilities, based on the one instituted in Saskatchewan. Executive Director Richard Montigny met with the Highways Minister, Irwin Jenkins, to discuss the feasibility of a Reserved Parking system. It was decided during that meeting that PEI would institute a sticker system, whereby the Council would issue pairs of stickers, one for the front windshield and one for the rear.

The 1980s

As a result of the Accessibility Study of public buildings, as well as the ambitious registering of all of PEI's people with disabilities, the Council prepared a brief and presented it to the provincial government, in 1980. The brief called for more staffing in government Welfare Assistance offices to deal with the individual cases of people with disabilities, as well as for a property tax exemption for all Islanders with disabilities. The brief also made mention of just how dismal the employment situation was for the Island's disabled population: at this point only 15 percent of Islanders with disabilities were gainfully employed.

The brief put forward several suggestions on how to create more employment opportunities for those with disabilities. The brief suggested the implementation of either a quota system or a system of employer incentives to get more people with disabilities into the workplace. As the brief made clear, studies done by the Council had shown again that it was public misconceptions that were holding those with disabilities back. The employer survey that the Council undertook found that most employers simply did not have an accurate idea of what a disability entailed, and in many cases mistakenly equated physical disabilities with intellectual ones. It has always been the Council's position that, in order to dispel myths surrounding disability, the public must be given greater exposure to those with disabilities, in order to understand that the person always comes before the disability; the abilities of employees must be emphasized over their disabilities.

The brief also dealt with another interesting matter. In 1975, the Prince Edward Island Human Rights Act was passed. The Act enumerated the "Handicapped" as grounds on which discrimination was forbidden. The Council took issue with this. The Executive felt that the singling out of the "Handicapped" was contrary to the notion of equality that the Council consistently strove for. The Council also took issue with the term "Handicapped," and clarified that a handicap is a result of public prejudice to a disability. The reasoning goes that a disability is a physical limitation. While a handicap is unfair treatment that is extolled on those who have such limitations. The brief strongly urged changing the wording of the Human Rights legislation.

While the government of the time was receptive to the suggestions brought forward by the Council, it would be some time before any tangible action would be taken on

any of these matters.

However, in 1980 the Council embarked on what would become its most visible campaign: the Reserved Parking system. When it began in 1980, the Council used a set of stickers, available at the Council office, for a cost of \$3.00 per set. It was also up to the Council to lobby municipalities and businesses to set aside spaces for designated parking. This would prove to be much more difficult than anyone would have imagined. Debates raged in the media over the need for such spots. Many decried the idea of reserved parking, writing angry Letters to the Editor questioning the logic of tying up already-scarce parking spots for such a small segment of the population. The public outcry over the parking system betrayed the public's continuing ignorance of people with disabilities and disability-related issues. As Jerry McCormack, a columnist at *The Guardian* at the time who, himself, had a disability, made the point that the population of people with disabilities on PEI was much larger than any of the "able-bodied" would know, simply because the lack of accessible transportation and public places essentially kept those with mobility issues out of sight. And as Kay Reynolds had said, "A lot of people won't go out if they have to be carried up and down stairs."

One town councillor in Souris went so far as to suggest that there was no need for designated spots in his jurisdiction because there were no people with disabilities in Souris. His comments drew a rapid response, and he was quickly proven incorrect.

In addition to the Council's uphill fight to convince the public, the business community, and the various municipalities of the merits of designated parking, there were also problems with enforcement. The few spots that the Council was able to get designated were often ignored. The fine for parking in a designated parking spot in Charlottetown was a measly \$25. That's assuming the perpetrators were caught, which was difficult given that enforcement was split between city workers and private businesses. The towns and cities could only ticket those vehicles parked in spots provided by the cities. It was up to private businesses, such as malls and plazas, to tow away cars parked in their designated spots.

Audrey Gilles, the Council's Secretary at the time, remembers that the Parking System made the Council busier than it had ever been before. The Council fielded requests for stickers, as well as complaints about parking violations, and lack of designated parking. In response to the flagrant abuse of designated spots, the Council

printed off their own “tickets” – a slip of paper to be placed on cars in designated spots not sporting the required Council stickers. The slip of paper was intended to be a reprimand to those not respecting the designated spots. Yet Gilles recalls that in some cases it was not much of a deterrent: “We put a flyer on one car, and they cut out the Council logo and used it to make their own [makeshift] disabled-parking sticker!”

Despite the added hassle of administering the new Designated Parking system, the Council continued to expand. Much of 1980 was spent in preparation for the upcoming United Nation’s International Year of the Disabled Person (IYDP). A special committee was formed in preparation for the upcoming year. The “PEI Supports the International Year of the Disabled” committee was made up of Council members, disability advocates and government representatives, including Pat Binns, Catherine Callbeck and Dr. Gustave Gingras.

It was in 1980 that saw the Council expand geographically, as well, hiring Eleanor Peters to be the staff person in Summerside. By this point, membership in the Council had ballooned to over 2,500 people, more than justifying a physical presence in Prince County.

In the lead-up to the 1981 IYDP, the Council’s membership in the United Way was approved, thus providing an additional \$13,000 in funding that year.

The International Year of the Disabled Person got off to a promising start when *The Guardian* named Kay Reynolds as their Islander of the Year. Reynolds, who was a founding member of the Council and a member of the Executive, said that though much had been accomplished in the past six years, people with disabilities would “continue growling” for necessary services. “We want our basic human rights,” she told *The Guardian*.

Throughout 1981, the Council worked tirelessly to raise public awareness about disabilities and disability-related issues. A series of public meetings were held across the Island which, much like the original conference of 1974, featured guest speakers, representatives from government, and people with disabilities. The idea was to bring members of the community together in discussion to better understand the needs of those with disabilities and put forward suggestions for improvements to services.

In much the same vein, a Disability Awareness Week was held in June. Each day of the week was designated a theme: transportation, education, recreation, employment, and housing.

As the year came to a close, the Council, in an attempt to maintain the momentum garnered throughout the year, established the “Beyond ‘81” committee. The purpose of this new committee was to carry all of the energy and enthusiasm of 1981 into the coming years so that disability advocacy didn’t fall by the wayside when the IYDP had concluded.

But there was little worry of that. In 1982, the Council would create its most successful project yet – the Outreach Program. Modelled on an Outreach Program in New Brunswick, Outreach was to be a branch of the Council that would focus solely on employment and training of Islanders with disabilities. A survey conducted among Islanders with disabilities the year before revealed that attitudes of employers were the number one barrier to obtaining employment. The Outreach Program would work with Islanders with disabilities to promote a better understanding of the capabilities of those with physical limitations in the workplace. Tony Dolan was the first Employment Counsellor for the program, and he was soon joined by Sally Cole. Within the first year of the program alone, the Outreach program was able to find full-time employment for sixteen people. Outreach also worked with clients on job action strategies, which often involved having the client return to school or getting retrained, and in many cases, training placements as well.

Reminiscing on Outreach some twenty years’ later, Dolan recalled just how difficult it was to persuade employers and educators of clients’ abilities. “Many [potential employers] were very receptive to what we were doing, but a lot couldn’t see past the disability. It was our job to emphasize the abilities over the disability.” Dolan himself was well-versed in workplace accessibility issues. A first-rate chef before an accident assigned him to a wheelchair, Dolan was forced to give up his profession. He then enrolled in Holland College’s Early Childhood Education program. After attending only a few classes, the program was moved to the top floor of another building. Given that there was no elevator in this building, Holland College personnel suggested that he withdraw from the program.

Dolan remembers that his case was not all that unique back in those days. Many buildings were still inaccessible, and many employers and educators were still

reluctant to hire otherwise qualified employees simply because of unfounded reservations related to a disability. According to Dolan, this was a perfect example of the distinction between a disability, physical limitation, and a handicap, an unfair burden placed on the individual because of the physical limitation.

Yet it wasn't long before the Outreach Program was showing real results. A series of articles written by Sally Cole for *The Guardian* portrayed workplace success stories coming out of Outreach. By the following year, Outreach's client base had almost doubled, and it continued growing from there. Though the program has undergone a name change and is currently known as the Employment Counselling and Services Program, most acknowledge that Outreach and its current incarnation are one of the Council's greatest achievements. It emphasized all of the Council's goals – inclusion in the workplace and community, public education, better accessibility, equality and dignity of the person with a disability, and independent living.

It was also an excellent opportunity to restore confidence to those who up to that point suffered discouraging results in the job market. "Often the greatest disability the disabled face is their own negative attitude," Sally Cole remarked in describing the justifiably-so pessimistic expectations of job-seekers with disabilities in 1982. The Outreach Program helped to turn that all around. "[People with disabilities] have the same needs and desires as everyone else does. One of these needs is to work and contribute like the rest of society. ... We study resumes sent in by disabled people and try to find jobs suited to their abilities. Often their disability has no effect on how they can do their jobs."

By 1986, the Outreach Program had a large clientele. That year the Council undertook to register all people with disabilities potentially looking for employment into one centralized database, and had a list of over 300 people. The initiative, funded through the Canada Employment Centre, was to provide potential employers with quick access to potential employees.

Outreach certainly wasn't the only service that the Council was offering to Islanders during the 1980s. The Council's referral service staff worked with clients to access agencies and organizations providing needed services. The Development Officer, which was funded through the Secretary of State, worked on providing new projects and programs aimed at bettering the lives of individuals with disabilities.

It was also during the eighties that the Council initiated the Parking Awareness Day. The annual event was meant to heighten public awareness of the Designated Parking system. As the parking system continued to expand across the Island, so did the need for better enforcement.

In 1988, the Council presented another brief to the legislature. This brief called on the provincial government to extend full rights to the Island's people with disabilities in accordance with the "reasonable accommodation" standard. According to the brief, equality does not mean the same treatment for all. "In the provision of goods and services, a little extra attention to those who need it is no excuse for denial. This means that when employers or those who offer goods and services to the public, including governments, can make adjustments, without undue hardship, to meet special needs, they should do so." The brief called for an amendment to the PEI Human Rights Act that took into account the inherent structural and systemic barriers faced by people with disabilities.

While the Council had achieved an incredible amount of progress during the 1980s, it was clear that the Council had much work to do. Of particular interest to the Council was the ongoing problem of accessibility. Too few public buildings were fully accessible. To this end, the Council, in 1988, began its annual Accessibility Awards campaign, which acknowledges those businesses and organizations that have worked to improve accessibility on their premises. But it was clear that in order to achieve more substantive change, legislation would be needed.

The 1990s

Due in no small part to the intensive lobbying of the PEI Council of the Disabled, the provincial government commissioned a committee to study Barrier-Free Design standards. The committee was made up of government officials, the Construction Association, engineers and architects, the Federation of Municipalities, and of course the PEI Council of the Disabled. There was a general consensus that PEI lagged behind other provinces in terms of the regulation of building design. While both Charlottetown and Summerside subscribed to the National Building Code, the only provincial legislation dealing with accessibility standards was the Access to Public Buildings Act, which was, at best, a weak set of guidelines with no enforcement. It was hoped that the Barrier-Free Design Committee would be able to agree on a set of recommendations that could form the basis for stronger legislation.

At the same time, a committee was struck to establish a transitional living centre in Charlottetown for those with disabilities. The Charlottetown waterfront was completely renovated and made fully accessible. The Council collaborated with the Downtown Business Association to produce a guide to the most accessible businesses in Charlottetown. Clearly the theme of the Council's work at the start of the 1990s was accessibility.

Unfortunately, the Council could ill-afford to neglect its other responsibilities. New statistics released by the Outreach Program revealed that unemployment among the Islanders with disabilities was a staggering 80 percent. Flagrant abuse of the Designated Parking system continued. While editorials in *The Guardian* and *Patriot* praised the Council for all its work over the previous fifteen years, there was clearly much work to be done.

Through the late 1980s and well into the 1990s, with the growth in the self-help movement, the Council was involved in assisting in the development of self-help organizations for people with disabilities. Among many other groups, the Council provided development assistance to people with Parkinson's and acquired brain injuries.

In 1991, the Outreach Program changed to a community-based Employment Counselling and Services Program. The change meant a lot more flexibility in the

services that the Council could offer. Now, in addition to the employment counselling and job placement services that the Council offered, it could also initiate its own training projects. The first such project, funded through Employment and Immigration Canada, was the Computer and Office Skills Project. The program took four participants with disabilities and provided them with four weeks of intensive training, followed by a seventeen-week work placement. The idea was to work with employers to provide job-specific skills to job-seekers with disabilities, with an eye to increasing their marketability in the workforce. Given that all four finished the program and moved on to full-time employment, the Council moved quickly to obtain funding for similar “Employability Improvement” programs.

In 1992, construction began on the Kay Reynolds Centre for Independent Living. The centre was planned to be one of the first of its kind in Canada: an 18-unit building designed entirely for those with physical disabilities. The Kay Reynolds Centre was a dream that had been a long time in the making, and was finally made possible with the help of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). The Council had a great deal of input in the design of the building. Unfortunately, in August of that year, the building caught fire during construction, destroying five of the building’s units. The Centre was originally slated to open in November of 1992, but it was clear after the fire that the opening wouldn’t take place until the next year.

However, a different sort of building was unveiled that Summer at Old Home Week. Co-sponsored by the Council and the CMHC, the Barrier-Free House was a miniature model of the ideally accessible house that the public could tour. Not unlike the Kay Reynolds Centre, the Barrier-Free House was a shrine to independent living, and demonstrated what could be done when those with disabilities are given actual input into the design of a building.

During the Summer of 1992, the Council collaborated with Parks Canada to renovate PEI’s national parks so as to make them more accessible to people with disabilities. This mammoth project cost over \$3 million, but was yet another important step in making PEI more accessible not only to Islanders with disabilities, but also tourists with disabilities.

The Kay Reynolds Centre was officially opened on May 31st, 1993, during National Accessibility Awareness Week. At a cost of \$1.3 million, the Centre featured two apartments for the visually impaired, two apartments for hearing impaired, and two

apartments were equipped with wheelchair-accessible showers. It was also home to the PEI Independent Living Resources Centre, which was to provide practical skills training to those with physical disabilities on how to lead safer, more independent lives.

In 1993, the Council of the Disabled obtained a \$25,000 donation from Ronald McDonald Children's Charities to begin construction on a Snoezelen Room at the Kay Reynolds Centre. Developed at the Hartenberg Institute in Holland, the idea of Snoezelen Rooms is to provide a recreational multi-sensory environment for children with severe learning and sensory disabilities. While Snoezelen Rooms were common across Europe, the Council's was only the second in Canada at the time.

In 1994, after four years of deliberating, the Barrier-Free Design Standards Committee finally released its recommendations. A series of public meetings were scheduled to coincide with the release of the Committee's proposals. After the public consultation process was complete, the final set of recommendations were presented to the provincial government. Within a year, the province announced the enforcement of new Barrier Free Design regulations, effective April 1, 1995. The legislation applied to the construction of new buildings and to "major renovation projects," but did not compel compliance in existing structures. Still, it meant that any new commercial, industrial, and institutional buildings would have to adhere to the new accessibility standards, as well as any new residential buildings with more than three units. According to a Council press release, it was "a step in the right direction."

However, one step forward was followed by one giant step backward; the same year that the province announced the new Barrier-Free Design regulations, the Callbeck government slashed the department of Health and Social Services' budget by 10 percent. The Council issued a harsh criticism of the cuts: "People with disabilities are among the poorest in our society. More than 60 percent have incomes of less than \$10,000. It is grossly unfair to expect the poor and people with disabilities to bear the burden of poor economic performance and bad management on the part of government."

The following year, the Council established five Disability Advisory Committees across the Island in order to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities were heard. The Advisory Committees became an excellent opportunity to voice concerns on disability-related issues, discuss ways to improve government services, and

increase community awareness of disability supports.

In addition to the harsh criticism which the Council levied at the provincial Liberals, the Council was furious to learn, in June of 1995, that the City of Charlottetown had hiked the fine for failing to pick up after one's dog to \$100, while the fine for parking in a Designated Parking spot was still only \$25 - unchanged in fifteen years. The Council's indignation over the discrepancy prompted the City to raise the minimum fine for parking in a designated spot to \$50.

In 1996, the Council launched the Preparation for Employment Project. The program, which ran from January to March, involved five weeks of job-skills training followed by eight weeks of on-the-job work experience. Project Manager Brian Bertelsen was optimistic about the Council's latest Employability Improvement initiative: "Quite honestly, businesses on PEI have been great with hiring people with disabilities. The bottom line is, can the person do the job?"

The 1997 federal election was an opportunity for the Council to get its members more politically active. The Council sent out fact sheets to Islanders with disabilities so that they could grill campaigning candidates on disability-related issues. It was a tactic that the Council would continue to use in subsequent federal, provincial, and even municipal elections to help its membership better understand where candidates stood on issues relating to disabilities. In many cases, the Council has sent questionnaires directly to the candidates, as well.

In 1998, the Council received additional funding from the Province to expand its services again. Half time Community Access Workers were hired for Prince and King's County, and with the full-time Charlottetown-based Information and Development Co-ordinator, offered advocacy, information, accessibility and other services across the Island.

A series of Annual Policy Conferences began in the 1990s including the "Speak-Up" Conference in 1999. That event was an opportunity to bring the regional Disability Advisory Committees together, as well as representatives from other disability advocacy groups, politicians, and guest speakers to discuss access to government services, inclusive education, and employment.

2000 and Beyond

The turn of the millennium was ushered in with some discouraging news. The release of the “Accessibility Focus 2000” study by the PEI Human Rights Commission revealed that only 2 percent, or 22 out of 1,047, tourism operations on PEI were fully accessible. After 25 years in operation, the Council clearly had much work left to do to improve the lives and conditions of those with disabilities on Prince Edward Island.

In September of 2000, the Council launched a series of “Skills Training Partnership” projects in collaboration with a call centre business, On-Line Support. The idea was to provide training to persons with disabilities in collaboration with the employer so that, at the conclusion of the training component, graduates would be qualified to work for On-Line Support. The Skills Training Partnership was devised in 1991 by the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, and had been successful in Atlantic Canada with over 200 graduates of the program.

And with the dawn of the 21st century came the launch of the Council’s website: www.peicod.pe.ca in December of 2000. The site was originally developed as a project by a group of three Holland College students. In September 2003 a much expanded web site was launched which featured many of the Council’s research and other publications as well as numerous other features.

In 2001, disability supports underwent a major change. In response to the growing concern about lumping disability supports in with General Welfare Assistance (GWA), the Disability Support Program was initiated. Prior to 2001, only those who relied on GWA were eligible for funding for expenses related to a disability. So, for instance, if one were gainfully employed and was in need of a new wheelchair, it would not be possible to access government money to defray the cost of the new wheelchair. However, if one were unemployed and receiving on GWA, it would be less difficult to access money for a new chair. The creation of the Disability Support Program (DSP) by the Province was intended to rectify this situation by making access to money for disability-related expenses unrelated to receipt of GWA.

However, a Council report entitled “What We Heard” revealed that there was widespread confusion and dissatisfaction with the way that the new program was

designed. One such complaint was the new rule that any person with a disability between the ages of 18-25 residing with his or her parents was ineligible for disability supports as an independent person. This artificial distinction became the basis of several Human Rights Tribunal challenges, and after aggressive lobbying, the Council and others were successful in getting this provision changed in 2003.

In 2001, the Council of the Disabled was successful in bringing the Kids on the Block program to the Island. The program, first developed in the United States in 1977, involves using puppets as a means of raising awareness of disabilities. The program was sponsored by Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC), and involved 13 weeks of training and practice. Like other Employability Improvement projects, the puppeteers are Islanders aged 17-29, many with disabilities, who were out of work and looking to increase their employment opportunities. The Council has run similar projects each year since 2001.

After the 13 weeks of training, the puppet show tours around to schools across the province, spreading a message of inclusion, tolerance, and understanding. Each performance concludes with a question and answer session aimed at eliminating misconceptions and replacing them with facts and sensitivity. The PEI troupe consists of three puppets: Mark Riley, an eleven-year-old boy with cerebral palsy; Jennifer Hauser, an eleven-year-old girl with a learning disability; and Melody James, a school-aged girl who asks Mark and Jennifer questions about their disabilities.

In 2004 the Council continued to dispel the myths surrounding the employability of persons with disabilities. They concentrated their efforts by completing a Social Marketing Campaign. Social Marketing involves using classic marketing techniques to sell an idea instead of a product. What the Council is selling are people's abilities not their disabilities. Over seventy employers were contacted through employer forums and one to one visits, and several strong employer relationships were developed. As a result of the project, the Employment Counselling and Services Program now has employers calling when they have vacancies and many employers have a better understanding of the community supports that are available to them if they want to hire a person with a disability. There is still much work to be done in this area but this project was a solid first step.

“The employment situation of people with disabilities in Canada is a disgrace,” Executive Director Barry Schmidl observes. “Only a long-term commitment to

employment measures for persons with disabilities will create the needed changes. Just over 50 percent of persons with disabilities aged 15 to 64 are not in the workforce, compared with 16.5 percent of persons without disabilities. ...With appropriate disability-related supports, and a workplace environment of acceptance and inclusion, people with disabilities can and will make a valuable contribution to the workforce. People with disabilities need jobs, equal access to education, and the necessary supports to ensure that they can participate in the labour market and training programs.”

As the Council celebrates its thirtieth anniversary, it is clear that there is little time for the Council of the Disabled to rest on its laurels; much work is left to do to ensure that the needs and aspirations of Islanders with disabilities are fulfilled.