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Thursday, March 7, 2013

—
Chair

Mr. Ed Komarnicki

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

We have some witnesses here today, and we also have two appearing by video conference.

I should bring to the attention of the witnesses that unfortunately, today we will have some disruptions in terms of House voting. We anticipate the bells will ring sometime during the course of your presentation, and that will require members of Parliament to attend at the House.

I propose to adjourn when the bells start ringing. I'm hoping we can get your presentations in. Unfortunately, we won't be able to get back here. My further intention is to suspend committee hearings after that, until 12:15, which would be after your time for presentation. The second panel would have to be abridged as well.

Keeping that in mind, we hope we can start as quickly as possible and hear the presentations.

We're going to start with the presentations here, and then move to the Canadian Association for Supported Employment and hear from you as well.

We'll start with you, Ms. Moreau. You represent SPHERE-Québec.

Go ahead.

[Translation]

Ms. Nancy Moreau (Director General, SPHERE-Québec (Soutien à la personne handicapée en route vers l'emploi au Québec)): Good morning. I would like to thank the members of the committee for inviting us to present our views on employment for persons with disabilities in Canada.

SPHERE-Québec or Soutien à la personne handicapée en route vers l'emploi au Québec, is a non-profit organization whose mission is to foster the participation in economic and social life of a greater number of people with disabilities. Our mandate is to support the creation of quality adapted jobs by participating in meetings with experts in order to transfer knowledge and practices, and by cooperating with many partners in the development of initiatives that foster the emergence of new models for workplace integration.

Our board of directors is made up of representatives of employers, unions and leading organizations that care about our mission. SPHERE-Québec receives its primary funding from the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, a program run by the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

The clients supported by SPHERE-Québec are mainly people distanced from the workforce, meaning that they have little or no training and work experience. For instance, in 2011-2012, 85% of those clients had a secondary school diploma at most, and 55% had not worked for five years or more or they had never worked. Therefore, our clients are under-represented on the labour market.

Yet, since 1997, more than 5,000 people with disabilities distanced from the workforce have acquired significant work experience thanks to SPHERE-Québec's global intervention philosophy.

My colleague Lyne Vincent will now give you a few examples of concrete projects and the results achieved through our approach.

Ms. Lyne Vincent (Development Coordinator, SPHERE-Québec (Soutien à la personne handicapée en route vers l'emploi au Québec)): Good morning.

To meet the needs of our clients, SPHERE-Québec has developed over the years an innovative approach allowing persons with disabilities who are eligible for our services to enter the labour market.

I would like to tell you about two concrete examples of projects that have made a difference for our clients.

First, we have worked with a number of partners and developed adapted training models. We have adapted professional training programs that are available in our educational institutions. The content, the teaching style and the length of training have been adapted. We have worked on those types of projects in the retail sector, providing training for grocery clerks and floral assistants, as well as in the restaurant industry, providing training for assistant cooks.

The model makes it possible to alternate between internships and studies. Employers whose companies welcome the interns commit to keeping the participants who complete the program employed. Seventy per cent of participants complete the program and are integrated into the labour market.

We are currently working with other partners on implementing this type of training in a number of regions. Our main partners include Emploi-Québec, vocational training centres and school boards in the regions in question, employment services for persons with disabilities and rehabilitation centres.

If needed, at the end of the training, SPHERE-Québec will still be involved in the integration of participants into the workforce, with a customized action plan that will include measures such as salary subsidies, adaptation of workstations, special equipment, interpreting services, travel expenses, and so on.

Another model that is working very well is the one based on having an attendant or mentor in the workplace. For instance, we have trained many workers in a number of Rôtisserie St-Hubert franchises in Quebec. A person from outside the company or an employee whose schedule is freed up for a given number of hours per week provides support to the workers in their training. This customized support makes it possible to adapt the teaching methods based on individual needs. This is to the employer's benefit because, in the end, they are keeping a person who is trained according to the company's needs.

In our current economy, the labour shortage is becoming a problem in a number of economic sectors. Employers are looking for competent people to work in their companies. On our side, we have people who are actively looking for paid work, who are motivated and who are only asking to be trained.

Those projects meet the needs of both employers and the persons with disabilities.

Thank you.

• (1110)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much for that. Does that conclude your presentation?

[Translation]

Ms. Nancy Moreau: And this brings us to the conclusion.

In those examples, the results speak for themselves. To allow persons with disabilities to be part of the solution to the labour shortage problem, we would like to respectfully recommend that the committee maintain the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, because this program makes it possible to develop projects that meet the needs of both the persons with disabilities and the employers.

Given that, over the years, SPHERE-Québec has built an effective network of partners, has developed a variety of tools that facilitate the employment integration process of persons with disabilities and has become closely acquainted with its clients, we recommend including SPHERE-Québec in the renewal process of the terms and conditions for the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dale, go ahead.

Mr. Joseph Dale (Executive Director, Founder and Manager, Rotary at Work, Ontario Disability Employment Network): Good morning.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to the committee today.

My name is Joe Dale. I am the executive director of the Ontario Disability Employment Network, and I am the founder of the Rotary at Work initiative here in Ontario which has been a catalyst for a number of employer engagement initiatives and strategies.

I have three key issues I'd like to speak about this morning. They are: ensuring effective services and supports for people who have a disability; employer engagement and support; and youth employment for kids with disabilities.

With respect to providing effective services and supports, people who have a disability can work, and they have the capacity to make a significant contribution to the workforce. This is a fundamental fact that we must understand and accept. Another fact is that we in the non-disabled community, both in government and in the disability profession, have only just begun to scratch the surface in our understanding of how to recognize this capacity, and how best to exploit it.

There is no tool or instrument that we have today that can effectively measure or assess capacity, or help us determine the employability of people who have a disability. Whenever we set out to measure employability or capacity to work, we invariably set the bar too high, discriminating against those who we deem too severely disabled to work.

This was made eminently clear to me recently, when I was fortunate enough to travel to Connecticut and visit a Walgreens distribution centre, where 47% of their employees have a disability. I would think a few of you would be familiar with the Walgreens story.

What was of particular interest to me was a statement made by executive vice-president Randy Lewis. Mr. Lewis recounted the early hires when they embarked on this journey of hiring people with disabilities. He talked about a young man with severe autism and significant behavioural problems, who was to be their first hire. Someone made the comment to Mr. Lewis that it seemed he was intentionally hiring people with significant challenges. Mr. Lewis responded, "Yes, we did, because we thought if we could get that first difficult one right, the rest would be easy. What we learned though, is that we didn't go low enough, because the capacity of people is far greater than anything we had ever imagined."

I think that was a profound statement, coming from a business operator.

Indeed, we believe today that perhaps the most effective measure of employability is more properly gauged by each individual's motivation to work, as opposed to their skills and skill sets.

Having said that, it's important that the services and supports that each person needs are available, and available in a way that make sense. We need to consider ease of access to employment services and supports, that it makes sense to the individual job seeker, and when they show up at the door looking for help, they can get that help as soon as possible and in a seamless way. Nothing takes the motivation out of someone faster than being bounced around from service to service, process to process, assessment to assessment, and so on. If the job seeker comes looking for help and they are sent to one door for an assessment or an eligibility determination, to a different door to get an employment plan, to another to get the case manager they didn't even know they needed, and so forth, not only have we lengthened the process and made it extremely costly to deliver, but that person is at a very high risk of losing their initial motivation, and are much less likely to follow through on the end goal of getting a job. Even those who endure it all often end up back at the original door they first went to with a request for help to find a job.

Services should be available using a wraparound process. There is little, if any, value in having silos of service with multiple service agencies, each providing a different component of the service. Employment agencies should be entrusted with providing as much of the support as is needed to assist people to meet their career and job goals. If, through the career exploration process, it is determined that a competency-based assessment or specialized training is required, that employment agency should broker or case manage the services on behalf of the job seeker in order to ensure continuity.

Job seekers with disabilities need access to the full spectrum of services and supports, pre- and post-employment. Those with limited education, training, and work experience often need pre-employment supports. These include employment-related life skills, an understanding of workplace culture and responsibilities, resumé preparation and interview skills, and so forth. This should be based on time-limited, curriculum-based programs or training modules. These programs also serve to help the employment agency assess motivation, help determine the skills, abilities, and aspirations of the job seeker, and give a solid understanding of the supports needed to ensure a successful job match.

• (1115)

Supports don't stop at the point of job placement. Employers also need support, and it is the post-placement support that has the greatest impact on job retention and career growth. Employers need to see the employment agency as a specialist or as a disability consultant. As one employer once told me, "I'm an expert at making coffee, not understanding disability."

Workplaces evolve and jobs change. Often, retraining and even revisiting and revising accommodations are necessary. The preventive maintenance that comes from good customer service with the business owner can often prevent terminations, nipping problems in the bud before they become much more for the business to contend with.

With respect to employer engagement, through the Rotary at Work initiative we've learned two very important lessons. First, we must make a solid business case for hiring people who have a disability. We can no longer soft-sell on the basis of it being the right thing to

do, or by appealing to charitable and feel-good notions. Second, we've learned that the peer-to-peer method of delivering that message works best. People respect and listen to their peers. In the broadest sense, this is evident when we use the business-to-business approach. Business operators speaking to other business operators in the same language and understanding each other's motivation of profitability gets traction.

On another level, however, the peer-to-peer method can be used within employment sectors, as evidenced by the mayor's challenge, where we have the mayor of Sarnia, who has challenged his colleagues and peers in other municipalities to hire people with disabilities in the municipal workforce; or the police chief's challenge, where London's police chief, Brad Duncan, has put out the challenge to other police chiefs across the province. These challenges are followed up with in-person contact and support peer to peer.

The peer-to-peer method is also transferrable on a more micro level. We've used the peer-to-peer approach now with several Canadian corporations to develop strategies within their own rank and file, where we have delivered strategies where department managers are talking to their counterparts and peers in other divisions, departments, and branches not only about why we should include people with disabilities in the workplace but also about how to successfully on-board people with disabilities.

There is still a lot of work to be done to engage employers in many segments of business and industry, but we are now seeing the tide turning on this issue. For many businesses the question is changing from why hire to how do I hire. In this regard we would recommend establishing a business-driven association of experienced employers along the lines of the U.K. forum on abilities. Such an entity could carry on the important educational work that has begun to make the business case for hiring people with disabilities, while adding to its capacity peer support for advice and consultation services to assist those who are having difficulty with implementing recruitment strategies and on-boarding employees from the disability sector.

Wage subsidies as a strategy to gain employment opportunities for people with disabilities is a hotly contested issue across the country. The Ontario Disability Employment Network and its members do not support wage subsidies as an employment strategy. We have seen far too many abuses where there was no intention to retain the employee beyond the term of the subsidy.

Wage subsidies also undermine the value proposition that we are creating about hiring people with a disability. It also sets people up to often be treated differently from their co-workers.

Employers who understand the value that people with disabilities bring to the workplace rarely, if ever, access wage subsidies. Smart employers tell us that when they pay wages, they are in fact investing in that employee, and by investing, they are more vested in achieving a successful outcome. When it's free or subsidized, the relationship is not the same.

• (1120)

The Chair: Mr. Dale, would you bring your presentation to a conclusion, please.

Mr. Joseph Dale: Yes.

Concerning student employment, much greater emphasis and resources must be invested in kids who have disabilities. Students with disabilities are also shut out of the labour market. They graduate from high schools, colleges, and universities without any work experience on their resumé. We must get kids engaged at 15 and 16 years of age in summer jobs and part-time after-school jobs so they can gain the valuable work experience they need to learn workplace culture and life skills, and to establish career goals and paths. A 2012 U.S. study found that the number one indicator of successful labour market attachment for people with severe disabilities upon graduation from school was having had a paid job while in school.

We have experienced that first-hand through the Rotary at Work initiative. In 2010 we were approached by a young man, Adam, who, due to his disability, had never worked. He had been called to the bar in 2004 as a fully qualified lawyer. He had never worked not only in his profession but in any job, and was willing to serve coffee if that's what it took.

We were fortunate to get Adam connected with Deloitte, where he was eventually hired in one of their legal departments. His manager, however, clearly stated that they went out on a limb for Adam, and that he was sorely lacking in the soft skills and had a poor understanding of workplace culture.

The Chair: Mr. Dale, I'm going to have to interrupt you. Our bells are ringing.

Is there any appetite in the committee to hear from those standing by via video conference? We could go for five minutes, maybe. Is there unanimous consent to go for five minutes?

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): We're on Queen Street.

The Chair: I know we're on Queen Street, but going for five minutes would probably still give us time to get there. Are there any objections to that? No? All right.

I know we'll have to cut your time short. I'm going to give you five minutes, but after five minutes we'll have to interrupt. So I'll give you two and a half minutes each. Perhaps you could do your best to make your presentation.

We'll start with Tracy Williams from Brandon. Your MP, Merv Tweed, said you might be a bit nervous, but today you won't be asked any questions.

I'll give you two and a half minutes, and then we will move to Mr. Wiltshire and conclude with that.

You have two and a half minutes, and I'll watch the time pretty closely.

Ms. Tracy Williams (President, Canadian Association for Supported Employment): My name is Tracy Williams. I'm the executive director of the Westman Coalition for Employment Opportunities in Brandon, Manitoba. I sit on the executive of the Manitoba Supported Employment Network, and currently I am the president of the Canadian Association for Supported Employment, CASE.

CASE is a national network of supported employment specialists and concerned citizens, including employers, who are committed to the full participation of persons with disabilities in the Canadian labour force.

An important topic that CASE is exploring this year is the development of a best practices framework for supported employment agencies. Currently, Canada does not host such a framework. Our best practices are borrowed from other countries, such as the U. K., the United States, Scotland, and Australia. Yet when we compare our level of practice, we are often exceeding the practices of those countries. The time has come for Canada to promote and ensure that supported employment best practices are recognized and adopted nationwide.

The results from the panel on labour market opportunities for persons with disabilities found that there were 795,000 people with disabilities, 340,000 of those having a post-secondary education and a disability that does not prevent them from working, yet they were still without employment. Like the report states, this is a significant talent pool that is currently being underutilized.

Many of the agencies that are part of the CASE membership service clients with very complex needs, and we are able to support them successfully, providing them with full inclusion within their own communities. Saying this, if these agencies can support individuals with complex needs, they are more than able to work with those whose disability does not prevent them from working, thus resolving some of the skills shortages within the Canadian economy.

In fall 2012, CASE circulated a survey to a wide audience from across Canada to ask their thoughts on best practices in supported employment. In the brief that I prepared for you today, which should have been distributed to everyone, I have broken down the results for you. It basically states that the majority of Canadians polled believe that everyone can be employed with the right job match and the right supports available to them.

We are hoping to implement an educational website this year that will be an interactive tutorial on best practices to assist individuals and their support networks to understand the processes and challenges of maintaining paid employment within their field of choice.

Because we are not a funded organization and operate solely on our revenues from past conferences, we are going to be exploring funding options to try to proceed with this tutorial.

Are you ready to cut me off now?

• (1125)

The Chair: I'm going to have to. I apologize for that, but unfortunately, we have to do that. We have your brief and it will be distributed.

We'll move to Mr. Wiltshire for two and a half minutes. I'll have to interrupt at that point, because we do have to leave.

Go ahead.

Mr. Sean Wiltshire (Board Member, Canadian Association for Supported Employment): Thank you very much. I'd like to say how much we appreciate the time the committee has given us.

My name is Sean Wiltshire. I am the CEO of Avalon Employment, and I'm the founding president of the Canadian Association for Supported Employment. I want to thank the committee members for their time in addressing an issue that can affect the productivity of Canada as a whole.

I want to start and probably finish, because I don't have very much time, with a quote from your own report. The Standing Committee on Human Resources and Skills Development for 2013 says that under-represented groups, including people with disabilities must be tapped to resolve some of the skill shortages in the Canadian economy.

I would now ask you to reference this quote:

Government must place a high priority on expanding meaningful employment opportunities for the disabled. Society can no longer tolerate the massive waste of human resources that is inherent in keeping the vast majority of disabled individuals on the unemployment lines.

This quote, ladies and gentlemen, was from the "Obstacles" report in 1980. Thirty-three years ago, we said the exact same thing.

I would like to reference comments from my colleague and friend, Joe Dale. He talked about subsidies. I would like to echo his comments. They don't always work in urban and rural areas. Many employers are looking for very different things, so we need the ability to be flexible.

I would also like to reference youth. Many people do not transition from school and they spend many years on income support programs before finding the right path to employment. As Joe said, finding a job while you're in school means getting a job when you're out of school.

If you're looking for other information on ways that you could find new employment, engage. Whether it be the Canadian Association for Supported Employment, the Canadian Down Syndrome Society, or individuals in their own right, everybody would have an idea on how to improve these systems, but the consultations that you're undertaking today and will be undertaking in the future are critically important to how programs are developed.

While the labour market development agreements have been devolved to the provinces, it's critically important that the federal government continue to stay very much involved in how those agreements are worded, what criteria are included, and how people are scored for success. The definition for success for every Canadian is different, but what we do know is that the inclusion of people in citizenship includes a real job with real pay in a real community.

The Chair: Thank you for that presentation. We will take your briefs into consideration, but we must leave.

I will suspend until 12:15.

• (1125) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

I appreciate everyone coming back in time after the vote in the House. As you know, we have had some voting disruptions this morning, which have certainly played some havoc with our schedule in committee.

We have our second panel standing by, some by video conference.

I see Lisa Tara Hooper is here, from L. Tara Hooper and Associates Inc. We'll hear from you a little later

We also have Debbie Hagel, from my hometown of Estevan, Saskatchewan, along with Nancy Zeleny and James Noble. We'll be hearing from you as well.

We also have David Lepofsky, chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance.

We'll hear from all of you. We will have to suspend at about 10 minutes before one o'clock because we have some committee business that we need to deal with. We won't necessarily get the full round of questioning, but hopefully we will get everyone at least to present and perhaps we'll get one round of questions. We'll see how that goes.

We'll start first with the presenters in Regina, Saskatchewan. From Estevan, Debbie Hagel, Nancy Zeleny, and James Noble. We'll hear from you first, and then we'll move on to Mr. Lepofsky.

Go ahead, Debbie.

Ms. Debbie Hagel (Executive Director, Community Advocates for Employment (CAFÉ), Southeast Advocates for Employment): Good morning.

I would like to recognize our chair, Mr. Komarnicki, and fellow members of the standing committee, and ladies and gentlemen.

Here it's a balmy minus 20 today with the wind chill, so I hope it's warmer where you are.

The Chair: It is.

Ms. Debbie Hagel: First, Southeast Advocates for Employment is an Estevan and Weyburn area based career and employment service, providing specialized services to individuals with multiple barriers to employment. Individuals are pre-screened prior to their referral from the Ministry of the Economy, labour market services branch. With the specialized services within our organization, individuals are provided with the necessary tools to commit to an enhanced employment plan to understand their individual capacity and become attached to their local labour markets.

It is with satisfaction, accomplishment, and dedication that the existing board and staff of this organization strive to promote the agency and each of the individuals we serve.

The unique nature of our service allows us to be innovative in our approach. We have partnered with many services within our service area to continue to promote and expand our service.

One such endeavour is with youth currently in the high school setting, who have been identified with a disability and need transitioned support from high school to the world beyond. We believe this same method of transition should and could be expanded to include youth within the high school setting who are at risk of dropping out of high school. At this time, while the demand is for many, the opportunity for funding is limited. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a challenging time. Youth and young adults must make complex decisions regarding education, work, finances, and personal relationships. Many of the accommodations and learning methods youth find in school environments will be different or nonexistent in work environments.

Youth with disabilities or youth at risk often do not do as well as their peers in traditional classroom settings, in the work world, or in social settings. Adding to these challenges, these youth often experience social isolation and lowered self-expectations.

When provided with support, youth are capable of becoming successful in any environment—academic, work, and social. Youth services play a critical role in providing guidance and representation for youth to ensure they are able to reach their potential in school and the world beyond.

Southeast Advocates for Employment, through the transition to the world of work program, ensures that the youth of today are better equipped for the challenges that lay ahead. Working in a student-centred approach, captivating the team that exists formally and informally in the life of the youth, builds not only stronger communication among resources, but empowers the student by making informed decisions based on their unique needs and wants.

At this time I'd like to present Nancy Zeleny, to continue with the brief.

• (1220)

Ms. Nancy Zeleny (Transition Coordinator, Community Advocates for Employment (CAFÉ), Southeast Advocates for Employment): I would like to talk a bit more about our transition program and what we specifically provide for you.

We have a very unique collaboration and partnership with the South-East Cornerstone Public School Division. Our referrals come directly from the teachers in the division, who see the program as a benefit to the students they work with.

Once a student has been referred to our program, we begin with an intake. We spend some time learning more about the student and creating goals that we'll work toward regarding their transition. Action plans have included such goals as graduation, obtaining a driver's licence, continuing to post-secondary schooling, along with various other goals in the aspect of the career world.

We also offer community-guided job searches, which have been beneficial. We'll take a student within their own community, with a resumé, after they've mastered interview and job search techniques and skills, and we'll apply for paid employment positions. We'll provide the support and encouragement as needed.

Once they've established a position in the workplace, our support doesn't end there. Our agency will provide all necessary support to

them for success in their workplace, in collaboration with the employer.

Post-secondary supports are also available through our agency. We can set up everything from an information interview with counsellors at the post-secondary school of their choice, all the way through to the option of sitting in on a class or having a tour. Once they've decided on post-secondary schooling, we'll assist them with applications, student loans, dorm applications, and funding or scholarship options.

Finally, I'd like to talk about one of the most successful tools we use within our agencies. It's called PATH, which stands for planning alternative tomorrows with hope. This activity is highly visual, celebratory, and it has two facilitators who guide the activity. What we end up with is a cohesive action plan that's highly visual.

We've created countless action plans in this way, and the power behind this activity never ceases to amaze me. When you place the power in their hands and show the students what they are capable of achieving, the excitement is instant and the results are everlasting.

James has a story that began with PATH, so I'll let him tell you a bit of his story about working with our agency.

Mr. James Noble (Client, Southeast Advocates for Employment): I'll talk about how they helped me.

At first we had planned to search for a job, but that didn't work out due to the fact that most jobs I was capable of doing I was underqualified for. They helped me to explore all my options regarding post-secondary education.

Once we had decided that university would be the best bet for me, we went through an action plan, which really helped to make it clear that going to school was what I wanted to do. I was kind of on the fence before we went through that plan, and once we went through that I knew without a doubt that was best for me.

From when we made that decision, they helped with everything along the way, such as applying to the school itself, and for student loans, finding my living accommodation, and even registering for classes. They were very helpful throughout the entire process.

I don't think I could have done it without them, or at least it would have been much more difficult.

• (1225)

Ms. Debbie Hagel: Just to enlighten you, James is in his second semester of his first year at the University of Regina, in pre-journalism.

If we are not allowed to advance the hope of youth today before they run the risk of leaving the system to which they are currently attached, we as a society have failed. We have not only failed those individuals who could have made an impact on society in a positive and constructive manner, but we have failed ourselves.

Looking to impact on the future of those with barriers to employment or education would and could be less intrusive if we looked at the manner in which funding is provided, the restrictions that funding bodies place on application, and the systemic barriers that currently exist between systems. More flexibility in how programs could be administered would allow service providers the ability to be more creative in their application. Through the collaboration of decision leaders and professionals, more youth could become self-sufficient adults who experience personal and employment success.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present our brief to you today.

The Chair: We certainly appreciate hearing from you, as well as hearing your story, James. It is certainly encouraging to hear that.

We're hoping we can get back to some interchange between you and the committee.

We will move on now to Mr. Lepofsky.

Go ahead.

Mr. David Lepofsky (Chair, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance): Thank you. I very much appreciate the opportunity to present to you this morning.

I have the privilege of serving in a volunteer capacity as chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance. We are a non-partisan, province-wide coalition that advocates for a fully accessible Ontario for all people with a physical, mental, or sensory disability.

We encourage the House of Commons and the federal government to learn from our experience in Ontario. As a result of a decade-long campaign, from 1994 to 2005, our community won the enactment of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which is unprecedented legislation in Canada. It requires Ontario to become fully accessible to all people with disabilities. It sets a deadline, 2025, which was 20 years out from the year it was passed, and it puts in place the machinery we need to develop, implement, and enforce accessibility standards that will get us to that destination.

We encourage the federal government to keep its commitment made back in 2007 to enact a Canadians with disabilities act. We are delighted that the Government of Manitoba has announced that they're going to pass a disabilities act. We would encourage the federal government to set a national standard so that people don't have to reinvent the wheel province by province, and to ensure that all federally regulated workplaces and service providers meet national standards for accessibility.

Why do we need this legislation, and what can you learn from our experience? We need this legislation not because we don't have the right to equality; we do. We have strong equality rights and human rights codes across the country federally and in the Charter of Rights. The problem is that to enforce them requires individuals with disabilities to litigate barriers one at a time. That is, in the end, a very costly, burdensome, and trying process. We always have to have resort to it, but we need a proactive law that would get us to full accessibility without having to litigate one organization and one barrier at a time.

That's what Ontario set about to do in our disabilities act. Now you can learn from Ontario's accomplishments and from where we can do better, but here are the key ingredients.

First, the federal government should set a deadline in legislation by which federally regulated organizations, including the federal government itself, become fully barrier-free as a place to work and as a place that provides good services and facilities to the public.

Second, the federal government should set national standards for accessibility, not ones that override the charter or the Human Rights Code, but ones that will do their best to fulfill their equality commitments and that are tailored to the needs of different organizations. We encourage you as well to provide a mechanism whereby provinces that don't now have a disabilities act could opt in to those federal standards so that interprovincial businesses don't have to worry about patchwork accessibility requirements, but can meet the strongest requirements across the whole country.

There are a couple of practical suggestions that could be part of this. Let me offer a principle with which I would suspect that anyone from left, right, centre, or nowhere on the political spectrum would agree. Not one dime of public money should ever be used to create, perpetuate, or exacerbate barriers against people with disabilities. Why not have the federal government now as a matter of policy proclamation but also in legislation require that no federal money will be used to make things worse for people with disabilities?

You're looking at employment for people with disabilities. The world we face now is that an individual who wants a job or has got a job and wants to keep it faces barriers. Either they have to seek voluntary compliance by their employer, or they have to litigate against their employer one barrier at a time. The workplaces of the future will not become fully accessible just by requiring individuals with disabilities to fight barriers one at a time. They will become accessible only if we require those workplaces to set about now [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] ...for the future, planning on how, in an orderly way, to remove the barriers they now have, along reasonable timelines, and ensuring that they never create any new barriers after the present.

We have ideas from Ontario both about how we're doing it well, and frankly, about how it could be done better than what we're doing in Ontario. We'd be delighted to share those.

● (1230)

Let me just conclude with two ideas for you to think about.

It is wrong to think about accessibility and employment for people with disabilities or equal opportunity for employment for people with disabilities in isolation. You can't get a job if you can't get to the job. The federal government spends a lot of money helping provinces and municipalities fund infrastructure. How about making it a condition of any province or municipality that takes that money, that creates infrastructure such as public transit, that not one dime of it will be used to create an inaccessible public transit? Don't make things worse.

How about when it comes to federal money that flows through places of education in any province ensuring that there's equal educational opportunity for kids with disabilities? If you can't get an education, you can't qualify to get a good job.

Don't think about employment in isolation. We've got to tackle the barriers across the board. Transit, education, and employment must all be tackled together. The same barriers hurt in all contexts.

My last point, with which I will conclude, is this. As I'm speaking, you might ponder to yourself how much all this is going to cost. The fact of the matter is, providing for a fully accessible future won't cost money; it will save money. By getting more and more people with disabilities into the workplace so they can become taxpayers and off social assistance, we expand the public purse. By having more and more people with disabilities able to pursue employment, we make our workplaces more competitive. By having more and more organizations able to provide accessible customer service, we broaden their customer base so that they can make more money.

Accessibility is a win-win-win solution for people with disabilities, for government, and for business. Not mandating accessibility, not making it mandatory and putting in place the machinery to make sure that it actually happens is the one way to rack up costs for the public, costs that we'd like to avoid.

I've welcomed the opportunity to present to you and, if time permits, I'd be delighted to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Lepofsky, and also your comments about not spending money to make matters worse, which is obviously a good point.

We're going to move to Lisa Tara Hooper. We'll hear from you before we start our rounds of questioning. Go ahead.

• (1235)

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper (President, L. Tara Hooper and Associates Inc.): I would like to thank the standing committee for allowing me the opportunity to share my thoughts, experiences, and viewpoints.

I've been working with people with disabilities for the past 15 years in my own business. Our goal is to assist our clients with finding employment or exploring self-employment opportunities. We work with individuals who have any type of disability.

I would like to acknowledge that there are some positive steps taken in the area of employment of people with disabilities. The opportunities fund has been a huge asset in providing funding for programs such as ours and funding to individuals with disabilities, assisting them to reach their goals. It is important to build on what's already there. Let's also look at programs around the country. There are a lot of creative ideas out there. Maybe one community is achieving great success with an idea that could be passed on to another community to benefit from.

There are essentially two sides to this issue: the person with a disability who is looking for work, and the employer. I'm going to come up with some suggestions or concerns.

The first is eligibility for programs. Through the opportunities fund, we offer enhanced employment services for people with

disabilities. Currently, if someone is eligible for EI or is reachback, they're not eligible to participate in our program. This is a barrier for some people, as they may not have had a disability when they were working previously, but have acquired one since they were last in the workforce. They need the extra support provided in programs such as ours. On occasion, exceptions have been made and individuals have been granted permission to participate, but that's not always possible.

The suggestion would be to remove this potential barrier for anyone who has a disability, even if they have been in the workforce previously. On occasion, people with disabilities have been discouraged from looking for work if there isn't support available. Not all services are geared to address the issues specifically related to disabilities.

Persons with disabilities have limited or no work experience. We've worked with many individuals who have the education they require to get the job but do not have the required work experience. For any number of reasons, they have not had the opportunity to work and, in many cases, will not even be considered for a particular position because they have limited or no work experience. In some cases, a wage subsidy for a short work placement can be beneficial. For example, an employer may create a position for a specified period of time to give the individual work experience. This can also increase the person's self-esteem and confidence, and they're able to get a work-related reference from the employer. The question that appears to have no answer is, how can they get experience if no employer is willing to give them the opportunity?

We should raise the profile of persons with disabilities in the workforce. One of the biggest barriers to employment is the attitude people have toward those of us with disabilities. From personal experience, I know that people fear what they don't understand and many do not understand disability if they have not known anyone with a disability. Often, people have preconceived ideas of the abilities of people with disabilities based on the disability alone. One way to start to change this is to profile people with disabilities who are in the workforce. Perhaps it could be a weekly or monthly article in a newspaper that also includes a profile of the employer, a booklet or newsletters profiling success stories. It could be through local television, or national television for that matter, through news stories and commercials. There is also the idea of developing role models. Profile some role models with disabilities. This can go a long way to someone believing in themselves if they read about someone with a disability who has achieved a level of success.

Included under the broader heading of attitudinal barriers are bullying and harassment. These are alive and well in workplaces and educational institutions. This is a huge barrier faced by people with disabilities. I've heard many horror stories of harassment and bullying to such a degree that the person with a disability was unable to complete school and was afraid to go into the workforce for fear the experience in the workplace would be similar to the school environment. Personally, I have experienced both harassment and bullying in the workplace due to my disability. I recall I was told to seek counselling for my problem in the workplace. Never underestimate the power and negative impact bullying can have on the individual with a disability. The scars left by bullying remain with you forever. Anyone who has lived with bullying knows exactly what I mean.

More attention needs to be given to our youth with disabilities. The issues with bullying, as an example, are prevalent among youth. It impacts their esteem, confidence, and worth as human beings. All of these factors have an impact on how an individual decides to move forward with their life following high school.

● (1240)

One way of engaging private sector employers regarding hiring people with disabilities is to create an award that is given to employers who currently hire from this labour pool. This creates a win-win situation for everyone. The employer who already hires people with disabilities is acknowledged, and other employers who may not, hear about their colleagues' experiences and consider the possibilities of expanding their own labour force to include people with disabilities. A ripple effect is created.

The business case for hiring people with disabilities can happen in any number of ways, including the award mentioned above. It is about employers talking to employers about their experience, business to business. This can be accomplished by developing employer panels in local communities. Workshops could be designed where champion employers would talk about their experience and then be available to answer questions to talk about next steps, etc.

There could be incentives to hire people with disabilities through wage subsidies to employers. We have found it to be a useful tool, especially with employers who are skeptical about hiring. In many cases, once the individual is in the workplace and given the opportunity to prove they can do the job, the employer realizes the ability and potential they now have access to.

With regard to financial assistance with job accommodations, although we know that most job accommodations cost less than \$500, many employers think it's going to cost a lot more. All they see are dollar signs, and they don't see anything beyond that. Greater education on the truth about job accommodation is critical. It's necessary to dispel the myths and misconceptions surrounding this issue.

On financial assistance with physical accessibility, we suggest offering some tax incentives or other financial incentives that would encourage employers to make their workplaces more accessible. Many times we speak with employers about accessibility and they'll say, "Oh, there are a few steps to get into the building, but once you're inside we're completely accessible." There needs to be a greater awareness of what accessibility is. It doesn't mean that it has

to cost a lot of money. It's about perception, and we need to work at changing the perceptions that employers have.

Many times we hear from employers that they don't know where to start or what to do if they want to hire someone with a disability. Employers are appreciative of the pre-screening that we do, the support we provide in an interview, or the job coaching services for our clients. Employers have found this to be extremely helpful with the training and extra support that the individual with a disability may require. Employers need to know how to access government services or funding to assist with job accommodations, etc. An insert in a mail-out could include information about hiring people with disabilities or information related to accessibility or accommodations.

Many of the suggestions I've provided today can be easily accomplished without a huge price tag. I'm realistic, and I do know that if we're truly committed to increasing the profile of people with disabilities in the labour force, money will need to be committed and action taken.

The task you've undertaken in the development of this report is an important one. The information contained in the final report and the action taken as a result of this report will impact the lives of all Canadians with disabilities, especially the ones who dream of inclusion in our workforce. Hopefully their dream will become their reality.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hooper.

We certainly appreciate your presentation. You gave insightful, thoughtful remarks and suggestions and we'll certainly take them into account.

We will start a round of questioning with Mr. Julian, and we'll conclude with Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Julian, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses. You are giving us a lot of insight today; it's very important.

James, you seem to be a very intelligent and bright guy, so I'm sure you'll be an asset to whoever hires you once you finish your school. Good luck with that.

I think we all know how dire the situation is. About 50% of the nation's homeless are people with disabilities and about half of those who have to line up in the food lines and bread lines of this country are people with disabilities. So the situation for people with disabilities is very dire in this country, there is no doubt, in part, because of neglect. The solution, of course, as you have all pointed out, is putting into place the support networks that allow Canadians with disabilities to get the kind of gainful employment they need. That certainly would help them fully contribute to this country.

The problem seems to be the lack of supports in the workplace. I was part of a consortium that founded the Disability Employment Network in British Columbia. What we found is that people with disabilities would get to the job site, and as you mentioned, Ms. Hooper, it was supposedly an accessible building, but they couldn't get past the stairs; or there would be accessible washrooms in a non-accessible building; or an accessible building on the first floor, but no accessible washrooms. For deaf Canadians, there would be a lack of interpretation that would allow them to go through the job interview. So we put in place a variety of supports and were very successful.

This was a decade ago. A lot of those support programs have been eroded. The funding is simply not there.

I guess my question for all three of you, starting with you, Ms. Hooper, is this. How important is it to have in place those disability supports, those job accommodation supports that come from federal government funding so that we can provide that opportunity for employers really to see how interesting and exciting it is to hire a Canadian with disabilities? We know the loyalty is much higher and the turnover is much lower for Canadians with disabilities once they get the job. How important is it to have those supports in place that the federal government has neglected, to make sure they do get the job?

• (1245)

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper: It's critical to have the supports in place. That's very important. Tied to that is also education about what accommodations are, because we find that employers don't really understand what they are, so they come up with their own ideas of what they perceive to be accommodation. Education needs to take place with employers as well, but definitely there need to be dollars available, absolutely, if we're going to change this at all.

Mr. Peter Julian: Have you seen an erosion over the past decade, as well, in those types of programs and those types of supports? We've certainly seen that in British Columbia.

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper: To some degree....

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Mr. Lepofsky.

Mr. David Lepofsky: [*Inaudible—Editor*] alike rose to applaud in May 2005 as they voted in unison for a law that made accessible workplaces legally mandatory. Supports are important. Education is important. Encouragement is important. You need detailed, enforceable, strong, and effective accessibility standards and a deadline—we have 2025—or all of those other tools will not live up to it.

There was a debate for a while whether you could achieve this through voluntary measures. Through the unanimous vote of our legislature in 2005 it was made clear that debate was over. It's got to be strong and effective mandatory accessibility legislation. If you want to learn more about this, I'd be happy to give you more at another time, but if you go to our website, aodaalliance.org, you'll see that we put forward proposals for how to implement the law and put in those supports that are entirely sensitive to difficult budget and deficit times.

The Chair: You have about 35 seconds. You might want to move to hear from the third group, Debbie Hagel.

Mr. Peter Julian: Absolutely, Mr. Chair, that's exactly what I was going to do.

Ms. Hagel and Ms. Zeleny.

Ms. Debbie Hagel: One of the things we advocate, and I think it might have come across, is we really are about empowering individuals to speak for themselves and their own accommodations that they need. I think James can attest to that.

Sometimes my going in and talking to an employer is way more intimidating, perhaps, or it's the employer's thinking. Just through the natural progression of a job interview, if employers are prodded to ask the question, "What accommodation might you need?", certainly empower and educate the individual to speak for themselves and do that. It is sometimes far less intimidating to the employer. That's just been our experience.

James, would you like to speak to that?

Mr. James Noble: Yes. I think if you change the employer's perception, there will be less of a problem for a potential employee to perceive. They won't perceive it as much of a problem; they won't have the same problem going forward. Allow each individual to reach their fullest potential because when that happens, society reaches its fullest potential.

• (1250)

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. McColeman, and we'll conclude with your questioning.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. Special thanks to Lisa and James, who are actually living it and showing through their lives the example to others that many things are possible that people thought not possible in the past.

As you know, the government received a report called "Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector". That report focused around need. One of the points brought out today was the need for employers to fully recognize the abilities that are out there. This morning we heard from Joseph Dale and a program he started called Rotary at Work. It talked about exactly what you said, Lisa, which was that the peer-to-peer model is the best in his estimation from his experience; in other words, a place like Brantford Volkswagen telling someone else in our community. It also talks about the need for employers to make investments based on this being a business case that makes sense for them to be a better company, more profitable, etc. There's lots of incentive if we can get the awareness to the employer level.

I've known you personally, Lisa, for quite some time and the work of your agency in connecting persons with disabilities to employers. Can you describe what you've seen as some of the best situations that have worked for you practically in connecting people and how the employers have reacted once that has happened?

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper: Usually we found that some employers have been very receptive to hiring someone with a disability and open to what could transpire. Once the individual has been in the workplace, the employee with a disability has just blossomed in terms of their abilities and their self-confidence. Their whole life takes a turn upward because their confidence is increased and their self-esteem is increased. Brantford Volkswagen that you mentioned is an ideal example of that. They saw the benefits in hiring someone who was committed to having a job and determined and loyal, and all of those things. They saw that when they hired Norman. That just shows there's a real positive impact on the whole organization.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Right. I spoke with the owners of Brantford Volkswagen last Friday. They say that it's actually such an enhancement, such a business case for them to tell their story to other employers, small, medium-size, and large employers. We heard this morning that in the U.S., 47% of Walgreens' workforce are persons with disabilities.

Mr. Julian brought up the case of declining funding. The provinces across this country carry the ball in large part for assisting people with disabilities. Am I correct in saying that?

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper: That's my understanding.

Mr. Phil McColeman: The provinces do support persons with disabilities. I live it too. My 26-year-old son is intellectually disabled, and I know from being a parent that the provinces have a deep responsibility when it comes to making sure of many of those supports. The federal government has responsibilities too, but to characterize it that the federal government has let the disabled community down I think is an absolute falsehood. I think the provincial governments have restructured things in ways and means, and perhaps in some provinces—I'm aware of Ontario—it's more severe than other cases, but to characterize it as a national situation is, as I said, a falsehood.

You're an exceptional entrepreneur. By the way, Lisa was awarded the first ever Woman of the Year award in our community two years ago for her outstanding accomplishments. Lisa, you're an entrepreneur who runs a company that connects people as more or less an employment agency. It ties in exactly with Mr. Dale's comments this morning, that these agencies such as yours are critical to the people

who have disabilities to be able to connect and to employers who need a simplified process.

• (1255)

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper: Absolutely.

The Chair: We'll conclude with your response to that if we could.

Go ahead, Ms. Hooper.

Ms. Lisa Tara Hooper: Yes, employers need help making that connection. Services such as ours are critical in making the connection between the employer and someone with a disability. There aren't a lot of services available that offer that specifically for people with disabilities. That has declined.

The Chair: Thank you for that. I apologize for having to abridge the time we have for questions and answers. I might say that if any of the members of the committee wish to pose specific questions to any of these or the previous witnesses, you may wish to do that through the clerk. The clerk will then forward them on to the specific person, but you have to indicate the question and to whom it's directed.

It's interesting, by video conferencing we were able to have people testifying from Brandon, St. John's, Toronto, and Regina. Unfortunately, we didn't have all the time that we would have liked to have.

With that I'm just going to suspend ever so briefly so we can deal with some committee business. Thank you very much for presenting and joining us today.

All right, there's a motion made to deal with committee business, which relates to the two motions, in camera. We'll have a vote on that motion.

An hon. member: A recorded vote, please.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote on that motion.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: Okay, we'll go in camera to deal with committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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