

Manitoba Federation of Labour

Brief to the

Human Resources Committee

Of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly

On

Bill 47 Accessibility Advisory Council Act

June 13, 2011

The Manitoba Federation of Labour is pleased to speak in support of Bill 47, the **Accessibility Advisory Council Act**.

This Bill represents a good first step down the road to future legislative action to meet the accessibility needs of Manitobans. It establishes an Accessibility Advisory Council to advise and make recommendations to the minister about ways to improve accessibility for people who are disabled by barriers.

I understand the path that the government has taken on this issue and that is to, as much as possible, build broad-based community support for the remedies before taking more definitive action. This is a good public policy measure to take.

But having said that, there is no doubt that the need for action is apparent.

The Manitoba Federation of Labour has a vested interest in the removal of barriers that complicate the lives of people with challenges and easy access is a daily issue. We represent workers with disabilities from birth, injured workers and older workers who develop disabilities.

The Manitoba Federation of Labour has met with the principle advocacy group that is actively pushing that agenda forward. Barrier Free Manitoba is a non-partisan organization that formed in 2008 to provide a focus for campaign to make our society, our institutions and our buildings and other infrastructure accessible to all Manitoba residents.

Those talks made it apparent to organized labour that their goals are fair and well grounded in the principles of social justice. The removal of barriers is both realistic goal and attainable; it reflects good public policy.

The fact of the matter is, the right to equitable accessibility is encoded in both *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Manitoba Human Rights Code*. In fact, about 40% of complaints registered with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission each year, directly relate to the rights of Manitobans with disabilities.

The MFL formally endorsed the goals of Barrier Free Manitoba not long after that meeting. When we did, we joined hundreds of individuals and more than 100 coalitions and organizations representing the interests of the disability, seniors, health and labour communities.

These individuals and organizations span the political spectrum. I say that for a particular reason. When the Province of Ontario enacted accessibility legislation in 2005, it was passed into law with all-party support – something not easy to accomplish in a sometimes fractious Queen’s Park.

In our meeting with Barrier Free Manitoba, they summarized their view of future action this way:

Effective legislation would:

1. Establish a deadline for Manitoba to become barrier free for Manitobans with disabilities. For example, the Ontario law provides for a twenty year time-frame to achieve full accessibility.
2. Identify areas in which accessibility standards must be implemented. These would include customer service, transportation, buildings, information and communications, and employment.
3. Establish a process to develop accessibility standards. That process would be led by cross-sector committees, involving all stakeholders and a majority of whose members are persons with disabilities or their representatives.

4. Charge government with the responsibility to determine which standards are to be implemented to achieve full accessibility.
5. Establish a pro-active enforcement mechanism that includes regular reporting on compliance, in addition to acting in a timely manner on complaints. This is in contrast with the current system which is solely complaint-driven.

While we commend the government for bringing forth Bill 47 and restate our support for it, we like to end our presentation with the reminder that this has been a topic of discussion at policy tables for more than a decade now. The length of time that this drive for comprehensive legislation and policies has taken is sometimes discouraging. We hope that all legislators in the House will do their utmost to energize the process and quickly move us to the day when all Manitobans will be free from accessibility barriers.