

Opinion: Will our new Government take the chance to fix Accessibility Bill?

By Peter Reynolds, New Zealand Disability Support Network CEO

I'm holding my breath - hoping for better Accessibility legislation that delivers world class support for all disabled New Zealanders.

There's work to do before we get there. Earlier this year, the Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill was crafted and sent to Select Committee.

Public consultation, including NZDSN's submission, roundly dismissed the Bill as ineffective and toothless, largely creating a committee to create a committee. There's no definition of accessibility, no enforcement mechanism, no wide-reaching requirements to ingrain in our community, not just in government departments.

For all the great things achieved by the Office for Disability Issues, now subsumed into Whaikaha, they struggled to get buy-in from other government agencies toward accessibility. Annual reports achieved, reported and promised little. Under this proposed Bill, that wouldn't change.

Whaikaha CEO Paula Tesoriero has stated that part of her new Ministry's role is working with her fellow Ministry CEO's to press the case for improved accessibility across government. That's helpful and to be applauded, but the paucity of accessible facilities and attitudes for anyone not working in government isn't addressed.

So, why am I holding my breath on this issue? I understand the National-led coalition government has decided to carry over the Accessibility Bill from the last Parliament.

They have the opportunity to send a clear message that the Bill doesn't go anywhere far enough to assure change will happen and the accessibility rights of disabled New Zealanders will be assured. I understand that progressing the Bill is unlikely to be debated this year, and it's nowhere in the Government's 100-day plan.

The new Government has laid out the agenda up to Christmas already, but expect this Bill to feature again in the New Year. We all live in hope that a significant re-write is in their thinking.

NZDSN's submission on this Bill pointed out other parts of the world have effectively dealt with this issue. Rather than re-inventing the wheel, international examples could easily show us how to develop a much more robust approach. We specify how the proposed Bill falls significantly short when compared to similar legislations, like the United States' Disabilities Act 1990 (ADA), which shows how effective accessibility legislation can be constructed to address the very list of issues multiple submissions have raised as lacking in the Bill. If we can take the best of this example and put in in place here... then just maybe I can breathe out again.

NZDSN will be making these points with the incoming Minister of Disability Issues, Hon Penny Simmonds, and continuing to advocate for meaningful and effective accessibility legislation.

New Zealand Disability Support Services Opinion Piece

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