



By **Belinda Owen**

AODA UPDATE

This September 20th marks the 20th anniversary of the committee that brought about the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

The landmark legislation of the AODA, which builds on 2001's Ontarians with Disabilities Act, has been in effect since June 2005. This law develops mandatory accessibility standards that aim to identify, remove and prevent barriers for people with disabilities in key areas of living. Milestones in accessibility are established with a target of surpassing them every five years or less, with an end goal of accessibility for all Ontarians with disability by 2025.

The AODA is focused on five key areas: Accessible Customer Service, Accessible Information and Communications, Accessible Built Environment, Employment Accessibility and Accessible Transportation.

Currently, Ontario is the only province in Canada to have something so significant in place. With over 1.8 Million people in Ontario with a disability and the number predicted to rise due to an aging population, these changes are essential and time is of the essence.

One group that has taken up the challenge to ensure these changes occur is the AODA Alliance. The Alliance's mission is: "To



contribute to the achievement of a barrier-free Ontario for all persons with disabilities, by promoting and supporting the timely, effective, and comprehensive implementation of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act."

David Lepofsky, chair of the AODA Alliance, has been advocating for accessibility since the legislature was passed. His involvement has been crucial in making sure these goals are met, using the Alliance to draw attention to important issues and bring about action in places where it is lacking.

Through advocacy efforts, the Alliance has ensured that the AODA remains a unanimously supported agenda item among all three Ontario political parties. There are not many political issues that get the same type of attention.

During the last election

campaign, the Alliance achieved great media attention including coverage in the Toronto Star, the Toronto Sun, the Kingston Whig-Standard, the Waterloo Record, CBC Radio, CBC TV and TV Ontario.

With numerous achievements under their belt since its conception, the Alliance is currently working on ensuring that there is a high level of accessibility for the 2015 Toronto Pan/ParaPan American Games.

They are also focused on raising accessibility issues with candidates across Ontario in the upcoming October municipal elections and expanding their support within these circles. In particular, they aim to draw attention to education, health-care and housing.

I recently relocated from Adelaide, Australia to Toronto. As a new member of SCI Ontario and a new member of

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the Ontario community in general, it is almost overwhelming to see the impact that the AODA has had here so far. Compared to the systemic discrimination I faced as a wheelchair user in Australia, it is remarkable. People with disabilities are much more a part of Ontario's diverse community. I still have to stop myself from automatically asking if there are accessible bathrooms available in restaurants and public places.

Australian disability advocate and journalist, Stella Young, recently said in an article of her trip outside of Australia "There's such a difference between feeling like you're *allowed* somewhere and feeling like you *belong*."

The tenacity of people like David, the AODA Alliance and other advocates is paying off, making amazing progress towards a barrier-free Ontario, but also towards creating that feeling of belonging through their unwavering dedication to the AODA.

A friend of Mine, Kelly Vincent, MLC is the first Australian politician to use a wheelchair for mobility and the first person elected on a disability rights platform. In a conversation we had after I moved

here, she told me that back at home, at the Universal Design Conference, Ontario was used as an example for accessible standards, especially in regards to transportation. Something for all the advocates here to take pride in.

It's quite exciting to be in a city that is pioneering things in this area, and even more exciting for me to be involved with an organization like SCI Ontario that has knowledge, resources and services – all never been available to me before.

While the work is far from finished, there certainly is progress since twenty years ago. The Ontario we live in today deserves to be not just acknowledged on this special anniversary, but celebrated.

As Ontario progresses towards the goal of accessibility before 2025, there are many opportunities for people to contribute along the way. You can find out more information about the AODA Alliance at www.aodaalliance.org or, sign up for e-mail updates by sending an email to aodafeedback@gmail.com. You can also follow @AODAalliance on twitter or Facebook. ●

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