



## Vulnerable and left in the dark

Jul. 26, 2006. 01:00 AM

[CAROL GOAR](#)

Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur has been flitting across the province since her appointment in April, making announcements about all the good things her government is doing for people with disabilities.

She promised new accessibility standards for commercial buildings, praised Cineplex Entertainment for becoming a "building champion" by voluntarily improving its service to customers with disabilities, highlighted the \$11 million investment in sign language interpretation in the latest provincial budget and revoked her ministry's four-month limit on retroactive payments to Ontarians waiting for their disability benefit applications to be processed.

"We are making progress on protecting our most vulnerable citizens," she said at each stop. "We are on the side of Ontarians with disabilities."

But on the ground, a different story was unfolding.

Individuals who depend on disability support and their caregivers were waiting in various stages of bewilderment and frustration for the 2 per cent increase announced in the government's March 23 budget.

It wasn't a lot of money; \$19.18 a month for recipients eligible for the maximum monthly entitlement of \$959. But for people living well below the poverty line, every dollar counts.

Eventually, a few phoned the *Star* to find out what was going on.

No implementation date was listed in the budget or any of the documents accompanying it. Nor was there any clue on the Ontario government's websites — finance, community and social services, health, the premier's office — when the increase took effect.

Being a journalist, I could tap into other sources. A contact at a low-income advocacy group told me the increase kicks in next November. A media relations officer at the Ministry of Community and Social Services confirmed that and added an exact date: Nov. 30. A legislative aide in a Liberal MPP's office provided the same answer, but said he'd had to scramble around internally to get it.

Puzzled by this haphazard style of communication, I called the ministry's media hotline a second time and asked how a person directly affected by changes in disability support is supposed to get basic information.

A long silence ensued. To his credit, Paul Doig of community and social services did get back to me. He said an insert would be sent out with November's disability support cheques, explaining the increase. As well, the staff at municipal and provincial welfare offices had been briefed to answer clients' questions.

But getting to a welfare office isn't easy for a person in a wheelchair. It may be impossible for someone who is severely incapacitated or recovering from surgery. Even those with mobility are often afraid of looking pushy or being labelled troublemakers.

In any case, I had already called Toronto's social services division (twice), only to be told that no one could provide details about impending changes in disability support. The information had to come from the province.

My afternoon of phoning, mouse-clicking and being sent elsewhere did yield two useful pieces of information:

- The best website for facts and figures about social assistance (disability support is considered a form of welfare) belongs to the Income Security Advocacy Centre, which provides legal aid to low-income Ontarians. It can be found at <http://www.incomesecurity.org>.

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A second good place to go for help is the office of Deb Matthews, MPP for London North Centre. Her aides will navigate the province's labyrinthine social services bureaucracy on behalf of citizens with disabilities.

I never did find out why the government neglected to tell disability support recipients they'd have to wait until November for their increase.

Perhaps it was because no one thought they'd complain. Perhaps it was because no one wanted to explain the eight-month delay. Perhaps it was an oversight.

All of this is hard to reconcile with Meilleur's statement last May: "We believe that everyone deserves to be treated with respect, no matter what struggles they face."

Leaving vulnerable people in the dark is an odd sign of respect.

It is equally hard to square the government's behaviour with the words in Dwight Duncan's budget speech: "The people we are privileged to serve are, one by one, being lifted up."

The 215,000 people whose disability benefits haven't gone up by a cent aren't feeling terribly uplifted.

Before the Legislature resumes, Meilleur might want to rethink her priorities. New building standards and accessible cinemas are nice, but what Ontarians with disabilities need most is an economic lifeline they can trust and the dignity of not having to beg for public information.

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*Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.*

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# Letters

## Deaf deserve movie captioning

*Re Vulnerable and left in the dark*

Column, July 26.

As the Chair of the Caption Movies Now Coalition, I would like to comment on Carol Goar's article.

In general, I am appalled at the lack of regard and respect for persons with disabilities. I believe there is a negative view that persons with disabilities are anxiously waiting to collect cheques in the mail, rather than actively contribute to society by either volunteering their skills or by obtaining employment.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The people I have met in the "disabled persons" community all take great pride in their accomplishments and are actively seeking to be gainfully employed. They don't want "handouts," they want jobs! They may need financial support while working toward their goals of further education and employment, but where is the respect and the dignity for them? Where are the opportunities for the jobs?

As a deafened mother who raised three hard of hearing sons while struggling to find work, I know personally what it felt like to have difficulty accessing information. Doors were closed in my face time and time again, as I was told I could not do a certain job.

I would like to address the issue of the apparent support for

Cineplex Theatres by Madeleine Meilleur, minister of community and social services. While it is wonderful that Cineplex has made some efforts to provide rear window captioning in a handful of theatres, this in no way represents accessibility for the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing. Cineplex owns, leases or has a joint venture in 131 theatres with 1,295 screens in Canada. There is rear window captioning on only 28 screens out of 1,295. This is very limited and provides the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing with few options.

I am very disappointed that the minister appears to support Cineplex over the deaf complainants in the Human Rights Tribunal hearings. I would like to urge the minister to support the objectives of the Caption Movies Now Coalition, and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Association.

One hundred per cent captioning is needed in all movie theatres, as a duty and a legal obligation to break down one of the many barriers the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing face in their everyday lives. The inclusion of all citizens to have access to cultural, social, and recreational activities should be a basic right in this day and age of such advanced technology.

**Lori Archer**, Chair, Caption Movies Now Coalition, Brampton

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**AUG 29 2006**

Ms. Lori Archer  
Chair  
Caption Movies Now Coalition  
26 Stoneledge Circle  
Brampton, Ontario  
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Dear Ms. Archer:

Thank you for your e-mail regarding closed captioning in movie theatres. Although my schedule does not permit me to meet with you, I am pleased to respond to some concerns you raised in your e-mail.

As you know, the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005* (AODA) became law on June 13, 2005. The AODA sets standards as the building blocks of accessibility, helping to ensure that real and effective change takes place.

We are moving forward with implementing the AODA by developing three new accessibility standards that will make Ontario a world leader in improving accessibility for people with disabilities. The new standards will cover the areas of information and communications, built environment and employment. They join the first two standards in transportation and customer service, which are currently being developed.

Standards will make it possible for people with disabilities to participate in the social and economic life of the province. This government is working hard to remove the barriers that people with disabilities face and to achieve an accessible province by 2025.

Each proposed standard will be developed by standard development committees (SDC) that include people with disabilities or their representatives, representatives of industries or sectors, government representatives and professionals with relevant expertise.

Ontario's Building Code provides regulations that set out minimum requirements that must be met when a building is constructed, renovated or undergoes a change of use. Enforcement of the requirements of the code is the responsibility of municipalities, health units or conservation authorities.

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A public consultation on over 40 proposed accessibility and barrier-free design changes to the Building Code was held in early 2003. Building code technical advisory committees have reviewed the proposed changes and the public's comments and have made recommendations to the government. Subject to government direction, it is expected that the next edition of the Building Code will come into effect in late 2006 and will incorporate most of the recommendations of the technical advisory committees.

The technical advisory committees recommended that the next edition of the Building Code contain a requirement that new movie houses be equipped with rear-view captioning devices. This requirement would have applied to a proportion of movie screens within each facility. However, significant concerns have been raised about the appropriateness of requiring a specific technology, in light of rapid changes in technology and a lack of production standards for barrier-free movies within the motion picture industry.

Further proposals related to barrier-free access captioning requirements may emerge as part of the Built Environment SDC or Information and Communications SDC. The movie industry has introduced a number of initiatives in the area of accessibility. For example, some theatres have introduced wheelchair accessible facilities, rear-window captioning and descriptive video services, as well as free admission for attendants of persons with disabilities. There is an opportunity to build upon these practices through the standards development process.

Applications for those interested in being a part of the new standards development committees will be accepted as follows:

Information and communications	Fall 2006
Built environment	Winter 2007
Employment	Spring 2007

Once the application process is open, forms and information will be available on the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario's website at [www.mcass.gov.on.ca/accessibility/index.html](http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/accessibility/index.html).

For additional information, or for application packages in alternate formats, please call 1-888-520-5828, or toll-free at TTY 1-888-335-6611.

Once again, thank you for writing and sharing your concerns with me.

Sincerely,



Madeleine Meilleur  
Minister