



By David Fleischer

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Most of us picture wheelchair ramps and braille when we think of accessibility, but Donna Hardaker knows there are barriers even more difficult to overcome.

Ms Hardaker, a specialist with the Canadian Mental Health Association's York Region branch, joined the region's accessibility advisory committee last year, hoping to bring attention to the barriers facing those with mental illnesses.

"People don't understand that mental illness could be a disability," she said.

At last month's meeting, council approved the 2009 accessibility plan (dubbed "Access-Ability") and as important as it is to remove physical barriers, communication issues and inflexible workplace attitudes can be just as difficult to overcome, Ms Hardaker said.

She speaks from experience, having battled depression and abandoned a dynamic career in the process.

As her symptoms worsened, co-workers began to avoid her, exacerbating the situation.

"Nobody had the understanding to be able to step back and say, 'what's wrong with her?'" she recalled.

"Whole lives are destroyed when they really could have been helped at work."

While there is a long way to go in shifting attitudes and while stigmas and stereotypes still surround depression and other issues, she does see progress.

While addressing council, Ms Hardaker praised the more than 500 barriers - physical, informational and otherwise - removed by the region the past six years.

"Building a strong, safe, caring and accessible community is a vision we all share," she said.

She cited improvements at municipal parking lots, changes to the region's web site and the announcing of stops on YRT buses.

The region estimates 140,000 of its residents have disabilities and it is a number expected to climb with a growing, aging population.

Increasingly, the focus is on removing barriers for invisible disabilities which can include mental illness, hearing and cognitive problems, Lisa Gonsalves, a manager with the region's health services department said.

"The whole idea is treating individuals with respect ... to create an environment that's more inclusive," she said.

Removing those barriers may not require construction vehicles but it does require education and nothing is as effective as people such as Ms Hardaker, regional director of policy and program support services said.

"When you have someone's personal experience and the barriers they've faced, it's very, very powerful," she said.

Ms Hardaker is one of eleven community members working with the region's accessibility advisory committee. Finding people who want to help is not a problem, but ensuring a wide range of situations are represented is, Ms Abankwa-Harris said.

Ms Hardaker was lucky enough to find a second career helping others avoid her fate and led one of the lunch-and-learn sessions held at the region during awareness week.

"I'm vulnerable, but I tell my story because I don't want this to happen to anyone else," she said.

Nearly 80 initiatives are being considered this year - nearly half of them dealing with invisible disabilities- and Ms Abankwa-Harris acknowledged their work is far from over.

For more information about the plan, or to order a copy, visit www.york.ca and click on the plan under "important links."

Learn more about mental health issues at www.mentalhealthworks.ca

ACCESS-ABILITY HIGHLIGHTS

- The CAO's office will implement a corporate training strategy about the provision of regional goods and services to people with disabilities;
- The Administrative Centre's ceremonial entrance will be redesigned to include ramps. Inside, the cafeteria salad bar area and signage will be improved;
- Brochures and web pages will be resigned to help those with sensory and cognitive challenges.
- Continued instillation of audible pedestrian signals at identified intersections, and;
- York Regional Police will partner with the York Support Services Network to investigate potential funding so the Mental Health Support Team can expand its services.