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Advocacy

COMMENTARY

December 3—International Day of Persons with Disabilities

An Opportunity to Advocate for Equal Opportunities

ABSTRACT

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In 1976, The United National General Assembly proclaimed 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons. It called for a plan of action at the national, regional, and international levels, with an emphasis on equalization of opportunities, rehabilitation, and prevention of disabilities.

The theme of International Year of Disabled Persons was “full participation and equality,” defined as the right of persons with disabilities to take part fully in the life and development of their societies, enjoy living conditions equal to those of other citizens, and have an equal share in improved conditions resulting from socioeconomic development.¹

The United National Decade of Disabled Persons was held from 1983 to 1992 to enable governments and organizations to implement measures aimed at the improvement of the lives of persons with disabilities all throughout the world. On October 14, 1992, as this decade drew to a close, the UN General Assembly proclaimed December 3 as the International Day of Disabled Persons. This day was first observed on December 3, 1992. On December 18, 2007, the assembly changed the observance’s name from the “International Day of Disabled Persons” to the “International Day of Persons with Disabilities.” The new name was first used in 2008.²

Themes from previous years are listed in Table 1. The theme for 2012 is “Removing Barriers to Create an Inclusive and Accessible Society for All.”³

An editorial in *Lancet* (December 3, 2011) entitled “Championing Good Health for People with Disabilities”⁴ pointed out that the increasing age of populations has resulted in an increased incidence of chronic diseases affecting an estimated 10% of the world’s population, 8% of whom reside in developing countries. Persons with disabilities are also often further burdened with poor health along with discrimination. One in four people is also affected by persons with disabilities as caregivers or family members.

Persons with disabilities are all too often marginalized, found among the very poor and victims of social stigma and discrimination. They are importantly largely

TABLE 1 Themes from previous years

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|------|--|
| 1998 | “Arts, Culture and Independent Living” |
| 1999 | “Accessibility for All for the New Millennium” |
| 2000 | “Making Information Technologies Work for All” |
| 2001 | “Full Participation and Equality: The Call for New Approaches to Assess Progress and Evaluate Outcome” |
| 2002 | “Independent Living and Sustainable Livelihoods” |
| 2003 | “A Voice of Our Own” |
| 2004 | “Nothing About Us Without Us” |
| 2005 | “Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Action in Development” |
| 2006 | “E-Accessibility” |
| 2007 | “Decent Work for Persons with Disabilities” |
| 2008 | “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Dignity and Justice for All of Us” |
| 2009 | “Making the MDGs Inclusive: Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and Their Communities Around the World” |
| 2010 | “Keeping the Promise: Mainstreaming Disability in the Millennium Development Goals Towards 2015 and Beyond” |
| 2011 | “Together for a Better World for All: Including Persons with Disabilities in Development” |

devoid of the necessary instruments of power and influence to ameliorate their circumstances. This is unfortunate because persons with disabilities are uniquely qualified by dint of personal experience, to contribute to the economic efficiency involved in their care by offering direct counsel to those in power. Everyone, including able-bodied individuals in addition to persons with disabilities, benefits over the course of time with the creation of economic opportunity. Those concerned with and who are in a position to determine economic policy at the national and international levels are well advised to budget adequate funding for persons with disabilities as a means of economic expansion.

Thus, it is imperative that development efforts around the world include disability issues when determining policies, as well as allocating funds for developmental programs and projects. Mainstreaming disability is a strategy for achieving equality for persons with disabilities.⁵

COMMEMORATING THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Include

Observance of the day provides opportunities for participation by all stakeholders—governments, the United Nations system, civil society, and organizations of persons with disabilities—to focus on issues related to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in development, both as beneficiaries and agents.

Organize

Hold forums, public discussions, and information campaigns in support of the themes of ISPD

2012 to find innovative ways and means by which persons with disabilities and their families can be of further development to this agenda. People from many countries worldwide participate in various ways to promote this day. Events may include art exhibits promoting artwork by people with disabilities. Other events take the form of projects to highlight the difficulties that persons with disabilities have in playing a full role in society.

Celebrate

Plan and organize performances everywhere to showcase—and celebrate—the contributions made by persons with disabilities as agents of change and development in the communities in which they live. The theme of 2012 provides an opportunity to focus on promoting accessibility and removing all types of barriers in society such as education, transportation, and accessibility in your communities.³

This is especially well done in Europe, often led by Psychiatry Professional Societies. The date itself is not well known in the United States, although on December 3, 2010, President Barack Obama proclaimed this date and called all Americans to observe this day with appropriate ceremonies, activities, and programs. 2010 was the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has paved the way for countless Americans with disabilities to share their talents and strengthen communities.⁶ This date does not seem to be known or endorsed by the medical providers or societies in the United States. What are we willing to do to correct this situation, and will the Association of American Psychiatrists take the leadership position?

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