

Statement to the Legislative Assembly
by
The Honourable Alden McLaughlin JP
Minister of Education, Training, Employment, Youth,
Sports & Culture
On the service provision to Persons with Disabilities

Madam Speaker, I rise today to provide this Honourable House with an update on the efforts which have been underway for some time now in respect of improving the provision of educational and training services for persons with disabilities. In doing so Madam Speaker, my update will cover the provision of services for the very young through the Early Intervention Services Unit, educational provision to disabled students at the Light House Developmental Centre (formerly called Light House School) and services to the adult clients at the Sunrise Adult Training Centre.

I am privy, Madam Speaker, to the contents of the Own Motion Investigation Report Number 10, prepared by the Office of the Complaints Commissioner (OCC) and titled *Sunrise Adult Training Centre: Does the government provide adequate day-care centre facilities and education for adults who are mentally and physically disabled?*, and well aware of the various issues raised in the last meeting of Finance Committee.

Madam Speaker, in the development of the strategic plan for the transformation of our education system I ensured that provision was made to address the needs of all young persons in an equitable manner

irrespective of any disability which might limit their ability to access main stream educational services.

Efforts therefore focused initially on restructuring the Early Years program within the Department of Education Services expanding our ability to assist in the identification and assessment of children with disabilities at an early age with the aim of identifying the appropriate interventions needed to ensure that these children were ensured the best chance to succeed when they reached school age.

Beyond that Madam Speaker, my government introduced a new level of preschool assistance which for the first time ensured that families with very young children with disabilities could access preschool services in support of their child's particular disability.

Madam Speaker, all our efforts are focused on ensuring that each child has the best chance to succeed in our mainstream education system and where this is not possible that there is a clear transition for them to achieve their best in a more structured and appropriate environment.

Moving on Madam Speaker, attention was given to the range of provision at what was formerly called the Light House School. Over the course of the past academic year we have introduced the ASDAN program which has shown significant success with our students there.

ASDAN (the Award Scheme and Accreditation Network) is an awarding body based in the UK which now operates in many countries. It accredits programmes which predominantly focus on life skills and careers.

Lighthouse Developmental Centre is currently implementing Transition Challenge - which is a programme for Key Stage 4 (14-17) year olds. This programme uses activities within the subjects of our national curriculum to accredit life skills and to prepare special education needs students for life beyond school.

Madam Speaker, I was most pleased to attend the school leaving exercises in late June of this year when the 4 graduates from the Light Developmental Centre all received their certificate of successful completion of the ASDAN programme and had already acquired jobs with local companies. I was also pleased to learn of the special interest each of these companies have taken in these young adults in supporting them going forward.

Madam Speaker what became clear from the outset was that in order for us to make meaningful change for this sector we needed to take a holistic look at it in much the same way we did at main stream education. To that end my ministry set up a Steering of technical personnel and parents which was aptly called The Steering Committee *“Planning the future for Persons with Disabilities in the Cayman Islands”*

This body was set up as an Advisory body to the Minister comprised of public sector personnel working in the various related programmes serving these clients, Personnel from Special Olympics parents of disabled children as well as persons with disabilities working in partnership on the wide ranging issues impacting the lives of persons with disabilities across the Cayman Islands.

Its goals were to record:

- A Comprehensive understanding of the problem.
- Develop recommendations for the establishment of Legislation for Persons with Disabilities
- Develop a public awareness campaign which sought to sensitize the community to the issues of persons with disabilities.

Madam Speaker I am delighted to record my thanks to all the persons who have served on this Steering Committee which has to date fulfilled all three of the set goals.

Early on in the work of the Committee a subcommittee was established which produced a report on the status of services to persons with disabilities as well as it included wide ranging recommendations for enhancing service delivery to this population.

This was followed by the creation of a Legal subcommittee of the Steering Committee, to craft recommendations for the draft legislation.

Here again Madam Speaker I wish to record my thanks to these persons who put in many long hours ensuring that the outcome of their efforts would include consideration of the several other pieces of legislation that will need amending in order to ensure that persons with disabilities will have clear safeguards in place for their fair and equal treatment as citizens of these islands.

I am told Madam Speaker that this report should be completed shortly and I am looking forward to receiving this body of work as it will allow us to work towards producing what will become the first such piece of legislation in these islands to address in a comprehensive manner the needs and rights of persons with disabilities within our society.

Taking forward the range of recommendations which we know will emerge from this legislation as well as the obvious need to enhance the program offerings in the short term for this growing population requires that we develop a work plan with identified targets over the next 12 months. This approach will allow us to stay focused on improving services to existing clients, developing our personnel capacity for an expansion of our programmes including addressing the needs of this population in the Sister Islands. To this end my Permanent Secretary and the Principal of Lighthouse Developmental Centre will be attending a policy meeting later this month in Washington DC which will specifically focus on policy formulation and improving service provision for this population.

Madam Speaker over the past few months there has been much media attention on the Sunrise Adult Training, particularly in respect of the inadequacy of the facility. Madam Speaker it is important that this Honorable House is fully apprised of the circumstances which surround this matter.

Madam Speaker, the duplex which the Sunrise Training Centre occupies is the same building it has occupied since I assumed office in 2005. In recent times I have come to learn that it has never received a Certificate of Occupancy from the CPA for the change of use from a residential facility to a training facility for persons with disabilities despite the request from the Building Control Unit to the previous administration that this was a requirement when it was initially leased over 5 years ago.

This discovery came to my Ministry's attention in May of this year when the Building Control Unit advised us of this and that unless the requirements which had been provided to the previous administration some 5 years ago were not met within a specified time frame the programme would have to be closed down at its present location.

My Ministry has worked tirelessly over the summer with the Building Control Unit to ensure that all requirements were met and further the application for change of use is with the CPA.

Madam Speaker, whilst we do not have the Certificate of Occupancy yet due to the fact that the CPA will not hear this matter until 8th October we have been issued special permission to occupy the building, Building Control Unit has approved all required renovations made by us to bring this building up to code for use as a training facility for persons with disabilities. These renovations now ensure that not only are we fully compliant with the Cayman Islands Building Code (CIBC) but also with the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

Madam Speaker, this facility which we have just brought up to code is in no way and I dare say never was truly suitable for the adequate provision of the range of services which we should be providing to the adults members of our society with disabilities.

Madam Speaker my government recognizes that we must address this long standing issue of the provision of a purpose built facility with some degree of urgency.

I am pleased to advise Madam Speaker that preliminary work has already begun to work on identifying a suitable location for the construction of such a purpose built facility and it is my intention God's will to ensure that funds for the design of such a facility are in next year's budget.

Madam Speaker, work is also well underway in the area of improving the operating systems and programmes currently in place at the Sunrise Adult Training Centre to ensure that we bring additional value to our clients.

In the area of administration we are looking to revamp our record keeping systems and reporting structures and develop a closer working relationship with the parents and guardians of our clients In the area of programming we are looking into two of the ASDAN schemes - Towards Independence and Workright.

Towards Independence provides a wide (and almost inexhaustible) array of modules that cater to the entire range of disability. The adult learners are assessed using a graduated level of response - such as gestural help or physical help - that enables even the most challenged individual to experience the learning environment.

Workright is a means of accrediting the less challenged adults in a working environment again focusing on life skills.

Madam Speaker the journey towards transforming our education system whether for those in main stream education or for those who may be disabled continues as we seek to bring equity in the provision of education and training services to all of our people of all ages, a commitment which I made at the outset of assuming this office.

In spite of obstacles, in spite of opposition, my commitment to improving services to this sector of our community - persons with disabilities remains steadfast.

Thank you Madam Speaker.