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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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Speech by Assoc Prof Koo Tsai Kee at the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD)-DBS-HOPE Education Programme Awards Presentation on 15 Jan 2000 at Grand Hyatt Hotel on Saturday, 15th Jan 2000 at 1.00 pm

Chairman of SPD

General Manager of Grand Hyatt Hotel

Ladies and Gentlemen

When I was in San Francisco recently I took a walk from Fisherman's Wharf to Union Square. Those of you who have travelled this way will know the terrain I am referring to. One has to walk up a very steep slope and then down a similarly steep slope. That is one reason why many people use the cable car to make the journey. But that does not intimidate the wheel-chair bound Californians. On that

Sunday, I was extremely impressed to see a lady manoeuvring her way through Chinatown alone on her motorised wheelchair. She had no hands and legs. She was controlling the levers of the motorised wheelchair with her artificial hand. If you are surprised, do not be. San Francisco despite its terrain, is a disabled friendly city.

2 When we think of the disabled we think of people who are physically handicapped. So we put them in the minority. Yet few of us realise that they are a growing constituency. At some point in our lives, many of us may suffer some form of physical disability. Physical disability does not mean we need to be in wheelchairs. Physical disability can also mean simple problems of aging like difficulties in walking and climbing steps. So taking care of the disabled today, means taking care of ourselves in old age.

3 Let me give you an example. When HDB first started building flats in the '60s and '70s, Singapore was poor. The population was also young. So it was the correct decision to build high rise flats with lifts which stopped on selected floors. It was cheaper, and it saved residents from paying higher maintenance charges. Incidentally, the physical routine of climbing steps kept the population healthy. Remember the rugged society?

4 Over time, the same residents grow old, and some now find it difficult to climb steps. They are the elderly disabled. The demand for lifts upgrading programme which allow lifts to land on every floor grew. The government recognised the shift in demographic landscape from young to old. Thus, in every upgrading programme, top priority is given to lift upgrading. Where lifts can be upgraded, it will be. However, we also have to recognise that not all blocks can be

retrofitted for lifts to land on every floor. In such cases, elderly residents who cannot climb steps are not without choice. They can upgrade to a new HDB flat. All new HDB flats come with lifts which land on every floor. They can also buy resale flats with lift landing in the same town.

5 Even in affluent cities like Sydney and Melbourne, low rise apartments up to four stories do not have lifts. Lifts are very costly items to build and maintain. As a percentage of the total construction cost, lifts are disproportionately high for low-rise apartments, so they are seldom provided. How then do the old climb stairs? The government there doesn't have programmes to put in lifts. When the young families grow old, they usually sell out and allow younger families to take over.

6 The Singapore government is able to afford the billions of dollars on upgrading and building new flats with lifts which land on every floor because of our accumulated budget surpluses. If we run into successive deficits, then it would not be possible to provide such facilities even though the need is imperative. The reality is that in many parts of the world, apartments up to 7 storeys have no lifts. Many Singaporeans visit China. The next time we go on holidays, you may wish to take a look at the apartments. In housing scarce China, almost all apartments have three generation families. And the elderly grandparents just have to walk up the flats, or be carried up.

7 I am confident Singapore will become even more barrier free and disabled friendly. The barrier free access building codes are already in place and the pace of implementation of this code will be driven by commerce as much as by compassion. A small but growing army of rich retirees will force all operators to

look at implementing the barrier free code faster.

8 The USA is possibly the most disabled friendly country in the world. The reasons are compassion and commerce. Some may think this answer is preposterous. But it is the truth. Americans do not have a monopoly on compassion. We all have. But Americans have the largest mass of affluent people who are elderly.

9 Let me use airline travel in the US as an example. One of the greatest fears of the physically disabled or the elderly disabled is flying. It is not flying per se, but the logistics of getting on and off the plane. Think of all the physical hurdles one has to overcome to finally reach the plane seat, and then from the plane seat to the final destination. Even the physically able finds it a challenge to navigate the cramped aisle of the plane.

10 But in America you will be amazed by the number of old people in wheelchairs, who routinely fly coast to coast to visit their children and grandchildren over the weekends and on holidays. Air-travel in USA is relatively cheap for the affluent Americans, so it is a form of mass transport. US is a big country so flying is also a necessity. Their airports are busier than our busiest bus interchanges. Airport “golf carts” shuttle elderly grandparents who cannot walk non-stop from the aero-bridges straight to the waiting relatives or taxi stands. Airline crew make it a point to seek out the elderly, and young passengers give way to the senior citizens. Why do airlines bend over backwards for such services? They don’t charge extra. Surely the retirees slow down the airline operations? Well, yes, but they are also good for business. Retirees in

Americans have huge purchasing power and all organisations - hotels, restaurants, airlines, etc - want a share of their business.

11 Those who are physically disabled as well as the elderly disabled may find the pace of implementing barrier free access in Singapore still too slow. I can understand that. But do take heart. I think better times will come sooner rather than later because of the convergence of compassion and commerce.

12 On behalf of SPD, I would like to thank DBS and Hope for supporting this education award.

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