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ADDRESS BY MR TEO CHONG TEE, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (SOCIAL AFFAIRS), AT THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON "TOWARDS A BARRIER FREE ENVIRONMENT" AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL ON SUNDAY, OCT. 18, 1981, AT 9.20 A.M.

I am very pleased to be here this morning, on the occasion of the opening of the seminar on "Towards a Barrier Free Environment" organised by the Community Service Volunteers of the Singapore Council of Social Service. One of the aims of this seminar, I note, is to create a greater awareness of the problem of accessibility faced by the disabled. I feel that this is an important pre-requisite as there must be public understanding of the problems the disabled face in this area, before a barrier-free environment for them can be achieved in Singapore.

Whenever I think of accessibility, I am reminded of a picture I came across recently - perhaps some of you have seen it too - of a boy in a wheelchair, sitting by the window of his flat and looking at the street below. It is very simply captioned, with the words "For Him, It Is Never Sunday". I feel that for this boy, it is never Sunday not only because he cannot go out to enjoy himself as other people are doing, but he cannot go out to school or to work on the other days. So why should Sunday be any different from the other days?

Like this boy, many of our disabled persons are deprived of opportunities to take full advantage of the resources our community has to offer. Even though they may have the ability to learn, to work and the capacity to enjoy social and recreational activities, they will be confined to the home and to the limited places available which are accessible to them. Such segregation and isolation will not help the disabled; rather we should, in all possible ways, make our environment as convenient as possible for them to be involved and integrated in the mainstream of community living.

I am therefore happy to note that a good start has been made both by the public and private sectors towards creating a barrier-free environment. Pedestrian walkways are designed with the necessary

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slopes to facilitate movement of the disabled on wheelchairs. The HDB has, on its own initiative, incorporated barrier-free features in all new HDB estates such as in Ang Mo Kio and Woodlands New Towns. Similarly, planners for the Changi International Airport spared no effort in meeting the special needs of the disabled. Again, barrier-free features have been incorporated in a few community centres. The more enlightened private developers have wisely followed suit. Good examples can be seen in new shopping complexes and hotels.

A study team was commissioned by the Ministries of National Development and Social Affairs to study the design and provision of accessibility in Buildings for the disabled early this year. The study has been completed and the detailed report will be submitted to the government soon. Pending the adoption of the minimum requirements in building designs for a barrier-free environment, private developers are well advised to consult the Singapore Institute of Architects on the salient features for incorporation into new buildings. They should also be featured in all new community centres. The additional cost involved is marginal, but it would cost considerably more to make modifications at a later stage.

Improvement in accessibility to buildings needs to be complemented by an improved transport system to enable the disabled to travel to and from these buildings. These communication needs are presently met by a handful of mini buses run by voluntary organisations and taxis. Voluntary welfare organisations should consider providing a few more such mini buses. The NTUC can also play an active role in this respect. It should conduct a sample survey on the travel needs of the disabled population. It can then set aside a few mini buses to operate a pilot scheme to gauge the response. Bookings for the service can be made in advance by telephone. A few months ago, taxi drivers were shown how to fold wheelchairs and how to assist disabled persons to get in and out of taxis. Similar demonstrations can be arranged for mini bus operators.

Members of the public can also assist disabled persons by giving them a helping hand wherever the situation requires, in much the same way as helping aged persons to cross the road.

Assistance can also be given to the disabled to help them purchase the necessary aids to improve their mobility. This would enable them to move around with greater confidence and ease.

Finally, a barrier-free environment does not mean just architectural barriers alone. The Acting Minister for Social Affairs had, in his speech on the occasion of the inauguration of IYDP, mentioned the "attitudinal" barriers that exist, and which have to be removed before the disabled person can achieve integration and full participation in society. Given the necessary encouragement, I am confident that disabled persons will respond positively and make better use of shopping centres and walkways which are specially designed with them in mind.

I have great pleasure in declaring this seminar open and I wish you every success in your deliberations.
