

MEDIA RELEASE

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For Immediate Release.

EOC's Message on International Day for Persons with Disabilities.

Some of the most problematic and disabling agents for persons with disabilities (PWDs) are the barriers in their environments.

This is the message from the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC/Commission) ahead of International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPWD), which is observed annually on December 3rd by United Nations members. This year, the theme is “Transformative Solutions for Inclusive Development: The role of innovation in fuelling an accessible and equitable world”.

According to EOC Chairman Ian Roach, “it should be commonplace to have ramps and automatic doors to access business places or essential services, appropriate accommodation from employers, proper infrastructure and teacher training in schools and so on. In other words, an unencumbered environment where we can all navigate with dignity, respect and independence”.

He stated, “If we make that shift towards inclusive development, not only would persons with disabilities (PWDs) benefit, but so too will other vulnerable groups, taxpayers and businesses. For example, employing PWDs can lead to greater economic self-sufficiency, which decreases demands on social assistance. Further, if employers are open to hiring more PWDs, we can expect to see a maximisation of the largely untapped potential that PWDs bring to the workplace.”

Available Statistics

According to the United Nations, approximately 15% of the world's 7 billion global population as of 2021 are individuals with an intellectual, hearing, visual, learning, or physical disability or a combination of these.

A 2011 Central Statistical Office (CSO) report noted that there are 52,244 persons with disabilities representing 3.93% of the population of Trinidad and Tobago. Based on global increases we should anticipate an increase in the percentage documented in CSO's updated report.

How does the EOC protect PWDs?

The EOC not only protects the rights of the disabled community through its investigative and conciliatory functions, but it offers invaluable information to its stakeholders on how more inclusive environments can be built. For instance, the EOC launched its Guidelines for Employers on Disability in Trinidad and Tobago in 2018, a crucial tool to ensure that PWDs have equal opportunities in the workplace. It is a guide on a transparent and consistent approach to creating equal opportunities for PWDs who are currently employed or seeking employment.

Further, the guidelines educate employers and employees on the consequences of not providing equal opportunities in employment such as, discrimination and liability costs, loss of productivity and lower morale, a negative impact on learning and development and damage to the reputation of organisations.

Generally, the Equal Opportunity Act provides a mechanism for the EOC to receive, conciliate and investigate matters of discrimination. If someone has been discriminated against based on their disability under the categories of education, employment, provision of goods and services and provision of accommodation, they can lodge a complaint at the EOC. Disability is one of seven (7) status grounds covered by the Act. These are sex, race, ethnicity, marital status, religion, disability and origin including geographical origin.

The Equal Opportunity Act (the Act) includes an exception for an “unjustifiable hardship” to accommodate a person with a disability. Using the example under the category, ‘Access to Goods and Services’, a small business located on the top floor of a building may not have the financial means to install an elevator for a PWD to access their business on the top floor. It would be unreasonable in the circumstance to expect that they must do so.

On the other hand, using a scenario under the category of ‘Employment’, this is how an employer can provide reasonable accommodation. A person in a wheelchair is the most suitably qualified person for a vacant post in a business. However, the office space for that particular role is on the second floor of the building and the company is claiming unjustifiable hardship to install an elevator. In this instance, the employer can utilise an office space on the ground floor of the building, without incurring any costs. Many times,

The EOC’s Advocacy Work.

Over the years, the EOC has continuously vocalised the rights of PWDs using various platforms including the annual Trade and Investment Convention (TIC), through its Facebook Live: ‘Know Your Rights Series’ launched in 2021, via its monthly newsletters, and public education inclusivity sessions. This is in addition to many appearances in the media throughout the years to raise awareness on the rights of PWDs.

More recently, some of these include:

Newsday column series: Over the last year, the EOC has published targeted information to raise awareness on inclusivity for PWDs via its columns, ‘International Day for Sign Language’,

‘Towards Inclusive Job Recruitment’, ‘Status Under Equal Opportunity Act’, ‘What is Reasonable Accommodation’, ‘Reasonable Accommodation in the Workplace’, ‘Quality Education for All’, ‘Reasonable Accommodation: Role of the Employer’, ‘Focus on Blind in October’, and “Different in Ability, Not Capability.”

Blindness Awareness Month in October- EOC representatives presented at CODE-F’s panel discussion in Point Fortin; raised awareness via its “Information Capsule” on social media; and made media appearances.

Staff Participation- EOC staff participated in the Blind Welfare Association’s ‘Walk for Sight’ and the Down Syndrome Family Network’s ‘Buddy Walk’ in November.

EOC Caravan- Many games focused on PWDs such as “Terminology”, raising awareness on the correct terms to use when referring to a PWD; and Do’s and Don’ts, which raised awareness on how to be respectful and truly helpful when interacting with someone who is blind or deaf. The content generated for this game were provided by the Blind Welfare Association and the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired.

Inclusivity Session- Also in November, the EOC presented to the Traffic and Highway Patrol Branch of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, as part of a collaborative outreach campaign with the Holy Spirit Project and the Trinidad and Tobago Occupational Therapy Association (TTOTA).

TTT Programme- The EOC launched the television series, ‘The Hard Conversations, Let’s Talk Equality’. The programme’s second episode, entitled ‘Different in Ability, Not Capability’, provided a platform for both persons with disabilities and advocates for the community to raise awareness on issues that affect them and discuss possible solutions.

Upcoming Programme- The national community can look forward to the EOC going one-step further in intensifying the calls of PWDs by hosting a conference in 2023 to gather more in-depth information about the differing needs and solutions of the disabled community. Information gathered from this conference will assist the EOC in developing specialized programmes, including public education programmes to raise awareness on the benefits of inclusivity and how we can provide an environment that promotes inclusion.

Further, the conference will endeavour to feature international, regional and local inclusivity experts to raise awareness on best practices worldwide and promote the human rights thrust that many nations and territories are now focused on.

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About the EOC

The primary task of the EOC is to oversee implementation of the Equal Opportunity Act Chapter 22:03, which prohibits certain kinds of discrimination and seeks to promote equal opportunity between persons of different status.

- The Act is concerned with discrimination in four broad categories - employment, education, provision of goods and services, and provision of accommodation - where someone has suffered less-favourable treatment:
- Because of their status, that is, because of one of the following personal characteristics: race, ethnicity, religion, sex, marital status, origin or disability;
- Or by way of victimisation, that is, in retaliation for doing certain actions that are protected under the Act, for example, lodging a complaint with the Commission or giving evidence in support of someone who has lodged a complaint.

The Act also applies to a third category of conduct known as ‘offensive behaviour.’

- A person who believes that they have been subjected to discrimination in any of the above areas may lodge a complaint with the EOC. The EOC is mandated to receive, investigate and as far as possible conciliate complaints.
- If the matter is unresolved, the complaint can be referred to the Equal Opportunity Tribunal (the ‘EOT’). The EOT is a superior court of record and its mandate is to hear and adjudicate on matters referred to it by the EOC. The EOT has the power to make orders, declarations and awards of compensation as it determines to be appropriate.

The EOC would urge all persons to be mindful of these provisions and to refrain from discriminatory practices which infringe the human rights of others.

For more information, please visit www.equalopportunity.gov.tt.

Contact:

Shelly Dolabaille

Manager, Corporate Communications

Equal Opportunity Commission

55-57 Manic Street, Chaguanas

Tel: (868) 672-0928 ext 231

Mobile: (868) 330-4791

E-mail: shelly.dolabaille@eoc.gov.tt