Adaptive & Assistive Technologies

December 3rd is the United Nations International Day of Disabled Persons. The theme of this year's celebration, **E-Accessibility**, recognizes the importance of technology in the lives of persons with disabilities, as well as the need to improve access to information technology for persons with disabilities. To highlight the importance of this day, as well as its chosen theme, the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC) is releasing a series of four themed fact sheets in the lead-up to this day.

For people without disabilities, technology makes things convenient, whereas for people with disabilities, it makes things possible . . . [this] fact brings with it an enormous responsibility because the reverse is also true. Inaccessible technology can make things absolutely impossible for disabled people, a prospect we must avoid.

~ Judith Heumann, Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education

Keynote address to Microsoft employees and experts on disabilities and technology, Redmond, Washington, February 19, 1998

Fact:

❖ It is estimated that **369,000 people with disabilities in Canada use** or **require augmentative and alternative communication systems**.

❖ In a recent survey, **2/3** of **respondents with disabilities** using the internet **identified the need for special aids, adaptations or equipment**. [1]

❖ Although **assistive devices** and software are available, **unlike other forms of technologies** (like personal computers) they **have not decreased significantly in price**. [1]

❖ It has been noted that **careers in high-tech can be particularly accessible to persons with disabilities** because of **advancements in assistive technology**. [2]

❖ Several **barriers to access for individuals with disabilities still remain** including: a **lack of trained professionals to evaluate assistive technology**, difficulties **finding assistive technology for individuals to test**, **confusion around existing laws and policies** as they pertain to assistive technology, and **bureaucracy surrounding programs and insurance companies**. [2]

❖ A related study noted **that 26% of respondents with a disability reported needing equipment or technology to perform their job**. However, of the **10% who specified needing a computer**, **screen enlarger**, **special keyboard**, **voice recognition software**, **or speech synthesizer** to perform their job, **only 1.3% owned this equipment**. [3]

❖ **Funding** has been noted as the **greatest barrier to obtaining assistive technology**. [2]

[1] (2004) Pilling, D., Barrett P., Floyd, M. Disabled People and the Internet: Experiences, barriers and opportunities. Joseph Rowntree foundation.
[2] (2002) Burgstahler, S. The Role of Technology in Preparing Youth with Disabilities For Postsecondary Education and Employment. Unpublished Manuscript.
[3] (1997) Kaye. H. *Disability watch: The status of people with disabilities in the United States*. Oakland, California. Disability Rights Advocates.

Solutions:

✓ **Enabling technologies** can **allow persons with disabilities access to the internet**; a tool which offers incredible **potential for persons to develop social contacts**, and **create networks and communities of interest** thus enabling greater participation and **social inclusion**. [1]

✓ **CAILC** and **Independent Living Resource Centres** (ILRCs) can help individuals and businesses' **connect to the adaptive and assistive device expertise necessary to help ensure full participation**.

✓ **Persons with disabilities should always be consulted and actively engaged in the development of technologies** that will serve their communities. It is important to **work with all members of the disability community** to ensure the **diverse needs of all members are addressed**.

✓ By working with people with disabilities, **the Neil Squire Society**, a Canadian organization, **develops technologies and creates devices and products that improve the quality of life for people with disabilities**.

✓ Organizations such as the **Adaptive Technology Resource Centre of the University of Toronto** enable individuals with disabilities to **try out and evaluate adaptive technology and computer systems**. **Phone your local ILRC or disability organization to find a testing centre near you**.

[1] Disability and the Digital Divide: An Employers' Forum on Disability Briefing for SCR Practitioners. Available online.