The International Year of Disabled Persons:

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Harold O’Flaherty

We are pleased to present these remarks from the Keynote Address given by Harold O’Flaherty, Executive Director, Federal Interagency Committee for the International Year of Disabled Persons, at the AOTA Annual Conference, San Antonio, Texas, March 6, 1981.

The world community comprises, in part, 450 million individuals who have a physical or mental impairment. The 31st Session of the United Nations General Assembly acknowledged that there are still unmet needs by declaring 1981 as The International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP). In our country there are some 36 million physically and mentally disabled individuals, and it is estimated that these individuals directly touch through familial relationships another 64 million, or roughly, 100 million of our compatriots. Although the problems surrounding disability are great, the progress has also been significant. It is now law that Federal establishments be accessible, and individuals who are born with a physical impairment have the right to an education, and, indeed, have the right to participate fully in a life experience in this country.

I was asked the other day how I would capture the true meaning of the International Year—what historical perspective would be used to project the present status or hoped-for status for disabled persons. My response was that a young Virginia lawyer on a July day in 1776 wrote a very poignant document, a document that most schoolchildren either in whole or in part have committed to memory. Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” As you analyze this statement, it becomes quite clear that Jefferson did not write the Declaration of Independence with a parenthetical insert that stated that the guaranteed rights did not apply to disabled persons. America’s disabled adults, who number 28 million, are acutely aware of their rights and will use the forum of the International Year to pursue a full measure of rights of citizenship.

Much remains to be done in the areas of jobs, housing, education, and access to health care, but if the Federal government has a modi-
cum of success in working in tandem with its private sector counterpart, the U.S. Council, during this International Year, it will be the achievement of a greater sense of awareness on the part of our 220 million citizens that there are disabled persons who have contributions to make and whose needs remain unmet. It is the new sense of "come let us reason together" that has facilitated the Federal government's program to celebrate the IYDP. In 1976, the 31st General Assembly of the United Nations declared 1981 as The International Year of Disabled Persons. In our country two modes of response have come to fruition. In the private sector, the U.S. Council for the IYDP was established September 1979. Its prime mission is to organize, to coordinate, and to communicate with industry, voluntary agencies, and local governments about the mission and needs and programs that should be and ought to be mounted to celebrate the IYDP. Its goal is to build the concept of partnership. The previous administration established a Federal interagency committee that represents 30 Federal agencies, departments, and commissions, and its job was to develop an appropriate Federal response. The committee, which was appointed in October 1979, functioned in a less than optimal capacity for approximately 9 months. Last summer, when it became clear that the year was less than 6 months away and that the government had no program, new executive leadership was appointed at the committee level representing the Departments of State, Education, and Health and Human Services, to guide the committee's actions. The committee then hired me to serve as Executive Director. I began to plan and work with the committee and the other agencies on September 22, but, there was no staff to work with. The committee had not adopted goals, established time frames or objectives, nor received an operating budget through administrative or legislative processes. This meant that the resources with which to operate were somewhere between nil and nonexistent. Being strongly committed to the philosophy that written goals direct the day-to-day operation of the program, we worked around the clock the first week to put together a strategy statement. The strategy, which I will discuss shortly, was adopted within 4 days of my coming on board and has been the underpinning philosophy of our operation for the last 5 months.

Our first goal deals specifically with building capabilities of the Federal government to become responsive to the needs of disabled employees as well as those who are the recipients of services made available by the government. In other words, programs should be carried out to commemorate the IYDP that are retrospective in nature and prospective in potential. Agencies were directed to look intensively at their affirmative action programs, at their hiring practices, and at the way they interact with disabled consumers who are not located in Washington. Several principles were put in place to guide the development of these plans. The first principle was that no program should be put forth that had not been tried, tested, evaluated, and found to be effective and cost efficient. The second principle was that the program should reflect a particular agency's historical as well as legislative mission and mandate. More than 200 projects have been submitted. These projects cover the gamut of types of services needed—housing, health care, jobs, transportation, etc. The Congress and the American taxpayer have not been asked to supply one additional dollar to fund these 200 projects. The agencies have funded these programs from existing budgets.

Our second goal is predicated upon building Federal awareness of both the needs and the capacities of disabled persons. This awareness must begin in Washington and circulate to the field. We deal with the press offices of the 30 participating departments and agencies and their representatives on the Federal Interagency Committee sharing proclamations signed by the President, resolutions passed by the Congress providing briefings and overviews of the Federal plan. We are encouraging disabled employees to become involved in the policy process, in the budget review process. We are extremely committed to the fact that this is the year OF and not the year FOR Disabled Persons. The White House is now formally educating each of the new cabinet members and giving them their marching orders with respect to the need to participate in the program of the Interna-
national Year. When President Reagan signed the Proclamation of February 6, 1981, he made it abundantly clear that Federal agencies were to put forth their best and be full participants with the private sector to ensure that significant actions are taken to address the plight of 36 million disabled persons. Such actions are being taken as each agency becomes “The Agency of the Month,” and they will have a public information program to observe the year, their mission and mandate, and how they are now making services available to disabled persons.

Our third major goal deals with a national awareness program. Not only is it appropriate that we communicate with our counterparts in the government, but we must also communicate with the people. Our communication should focus on the fact that there are 36 million disabled persons, that these disabled persons are making a significant contribution to their government, communities, and families, but as yet the policy agenda has not been completed, that there are still unmet needs, and that this is the year to develop the strategy on the community level, the state level, and the Federal level for the immediate as well as long-term resolution of these problems. This media program will include television, radio, and print media as a public service. Also, we are going to make a film that will be available to Federal agencies, TV, and voluntary agencies, such as the AOTA, that will promote awareness at every level.

Our fourth goal will deal specifically with an international information exchange. As we review health care and rehabilitation practices in developed countries, it is clear that we have much to learn from our western European neighbors. The Scandinavian countries particularly have distinguished themselves in practices of rehabilitation. Therefore, we must disseminate through the vehicle of our Federal plan those practices that can be replicated through the context of our delivery system. In addition, we must be in a position to share those technological advances, research findings, training modules we have developed that could be replicated in other systems. Moreover, we should keep developing countries in mind and share innovations that would preclude disability.

As you can see, the IYDP offers considerable potential, not only nationally, but internationally. However, as a program manager, I am aware that a program is only as strong as its foundation. What are the foundational principles upon which The International Year of Disabled Persons Federal program has developed and been disseminated? The philosophy can best be encapsulated by the story I once heard of a Persian prince. The young prince was deformed, he was bent double, he could not straighten his body, he was in pain most of the time. When he was about to celebrate his 12th birthday, he called for his father. The king asked his son how he would like to celebrate his birthday. The prince responded by saying that he would like to have a statue of himself built straight placed outside his bedroom window. The prince decided that he was going to take it upon himself to work out his physical problems and that the best way that he could change his situation was to develop a new concept of himself, indeed, himself standing straight.

So he began to bend and stretch and exercise, receive therapy, manipulate his body, take medicine, and attack the problem of his disability. On the prince’s 21st birthday, he was able to stand straight. What did the prince do? In my judgment he did four things that had a significant impact upon his life:

1. He had a goal and wrote it down.
2. He developed a very positive self-concept.
3. He developed a requisite knowledge based on how to change his situation.
4. He had a commitment to excellence.

It is that philosophy and it is that approach to management, program development, and a lifestyle that I share with you. This four-point approach has greatly influenced my life; more specifically, it has enabled me to overcome blindness.

Gertrude Stein once wrote, “For a difference to be a difference, it has to make a difference.” Are you making a difference? As you tread the pathway that will lead you to the court of social justice, will your hand be held high in a victory salute by the angel of accomplishment? Will you hear the voice of progress whisper sweetly in your ear, “Well done.”? As the International Year comes to a conclusion, we will be frustrated because of the things we have left undone. But these not accomplished areas or things will become the policy agenda for the rest of the century. How about you as an individual? How about your agenda? How about you as an organization or as the deliverer of service? Will your agenda be completed or do you have one? If you are going to make a difference, this will be a good time to do so.