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The provincial government recently announced plans to have an 11-member Provincial Accessibility Committee (PAC) advise the minister of social development and poverty reduction on issues related to accessibility.

The PAC is in response to the government's Accessibility Act that was passed in June 2021. As part of the roll-out of the Accessibility Act, 750 various public sector organizations were required in September to establish their own accessibility committees, their own accessibility plans and to build processes for taking feedback on those accessibility plans.

"I think the idea – and it's a good idea – is that there needs to be formal planning in the public sector on how to engage with people with disabilities," said Douglas King, executive director of Together Against Poverty Society, a local organization that often assists people with disabilities. "I think in the past there was a very top-down approach in government. The idea around this legislation is to start bringing in that voice and actually having it a part of the governing structure, so I think that's a positive thing."

While King said the government's goal to have 750 public organizations all have their own accessibility committees is ambitious, he's hopeful those agencies will all be able to fulfill those plans.

"One thing I know ... is typically initiatives like this are only as strong as the accountability mechanisms attached to them, and I think most would agree that's not really that strong in this case," he said. "The mandating of public feedback mechanisms is a really positive thing."

Joanne Neubauer, president of the Action Committee of People with Disabilities, agreed that the establishment of accessibility committees for public organizations is a good first step for providing people with disabilities more access to public resources and services. But she hoped the committees will filter down to organizations such as educational institutions, and make reading materials, for example, available in alternate formats.

"I think this is an important move," Neubauer said. "Access is more than just the physical structure. When (society talks) about inclusion . . . a lot of times they talk about the easy things," she said.

King is hopeful that by government taking action, the private sector will follow on making progress on accessibility issues.

"There's an open question about whether or not the goal here is to have this apply to all agencies in the private sector as well and if that were to be the case, then certainly what we learned from the government sector would actually be very important in making that a reality," he said.

King said he hopes the government will adopt the broadest definition of accessibility possible so that people with disabilities will be able to more fully participate in society.

“Accessible is a very broad word. It’s a very non-specific word and it can be interpreted in a lot of different ways. At the end of the day these accessibility committees that are being created, how do they define what accessibility means and ultimately what standards do they set for doing that?” he said.

Six of the 11 members of the PAC need to have lived experience of disability. King said that will be a key part of recommending change that actually works for people with disabilities. The government will need to take the PAC’s recommendations seriously and fund any requests the committee makes in order for the legislation to be effective.

“Ultimately, how much power that committee will have is also one of the other big questions,” he said. “Is the communication going to be there from government to make sure that the committee’s voice is heard and it’s honoured, those are some of the outstanding questions,” he said.

Neubauer said while she applauds the PAC needing to have half its members with lived experience of disability, those members need to have a broad understanding of disability rather than simply how their disability impacts them personally.

B.C. joins four other provinces in establishing accessibility legislation. But King said B.C. is only now catching up to some other jurisdictions in the United States who have robust accessibility legislation in place.

“It’s time to start making sure there’s a strong voice in the disability community for how the public sector ultimately presents itself,” he said, noting the government needs to properly fund the objectives it sets out to accomplish.

The government plans to review progress on implementing the act by issuing a report each year, and getting an independent review done every five years, for at least the next decade.

Neubauer said while she applauds the government for implementing an annual review of the Accessibility Act, each of the public sector committees needs to do their own internal annual review to make sure each organization is listening to its own committee and that the disabled people those organizations are serving are actually benefiting from the organization’s services. Sometimes, she said while organizations have the best of intentions, processes aren’t monitored well enough, which causes unintended consequences.

King said he hopes the government will follow through with the external five and 10-year reviews and it will implement any recommendations set forth.

“The nature of government sometimes when these type of things are instituted is things can . . . get stalled. There needs to be somebody who’s ultimately accountable for making sure that these metrics that have been put in place, and these committees that have been put in place, are performing,” he said.