

## Hiranya Kamdar VoSAP Essay

For generations, the differently abled have been marginalized and oppressed by society, and at the first glance, VoSAP's vision of the "accessible city" seems far off. However, with targeted efforts, it is entirely attainable. I truly believe that we can realize this dream of an accessible city by accomplishing the following overarching steps: 1) accepting specially abled people and 2) empowering them.

The first step of the solution, acceptance, is largely social with a substantial psychological component. In the past, the differently abled people were considered a taboo topic and were hidden from society within families or even cast out. This generational oppression results in a widespread sense of helplessness in the community; since the specially abled were completely dependent on either family or the government for survival, they would be afraid to speak out on disparaging treatment. In fact, this was part of the reason that the first community Hitler targeted in the 1930s, with 100,000 victims before moving onto the Jews, Gypsies, and so on.

Eliminating this pervasive mentality will require years of effort from a grassroots level, and it is not just the families and friends of differently abled people that must be held accountable. It is everyone; through social media, rallies, and other community events, people can and will get inspired to stand as allies of the specially abled. Only once this movement takes hold at the town/city level can legislative action be taken to enable the basic mechanisms that make a city accessible (e.g. ramps, elevators, braille lettering on rooms, etc.).

The reason acceptance must be achieved before empowerment, at least in part, is the fact that currently the impetus is entirely on specially abled people to take control of their own lives and employment. It takes a village to raise a child, and future generations of differently abled children must grow up feeling accepted in order to have the confidence to lead an independent life. It is only once society accepts this community that it is feasible to fully integrate them into schools and the workplace.

The second step is a physical one. Once an alliance/consensus has been built in support of the specially abled, legislative action can be taken and funding raised in order to create the structures that enable independence for them. The most basic example of this is mobility-supporting mechanisms such as ramps and elevators. With such devices in place, the differently abled will be able to lead fully autonomous lives after being socially accepted by society. They will be able to go to the temple, grocery shopping, traveling, and engage in other lifestyle activities independently, which is a massive step in the right direction.

However, even if the specially abled can navigate their day-to-day lives liberated, they would still be reliant on their families or the government financially. This is why the last piece of the puzzle is employment, which requires both acceptance and empowerment. The acceptance piece is essential twofold: 1) differently abled people are inspired by social acceptance and 2) employers would be more open to the prospect of hiring differently abled employees once social acceptance is attained. As for empowerment, this is abundantly clear through the fact that there are physical barriers to overcome for the specially abled. Beyond the basic physical mechanisms discussed previously, there is more that needs to be done in order to drive employability in the specially abled community. For example, making education more accessible

through audio textbooks and ebooks, braille, and other alternative learning methods will work wonders in boosting the hireability of differently abled people. The ideal accessible city will have businesses reminiscent of Dialogue in the Dark, a restaurant group that hires exclusively blind “guides” to lead the experience for guests. This type of unique, inclusive business model can be generalized to a wide variety of industries, and furthermore, educational empowerment will make non-novelty jobs accessible to the specially abled as well.

The specially abled community is at a turning point, going through a revolution reminiscent of the Civil Rights movement. Through social acceptance, empowerment, and the efforts of VoSAP, the vision of the accessible city can and will be realized.



