

## **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER A PERSON WITH A VISIBLE DISABILITY**

### **A Tip from the Accessibility Initiative Committee**

**by Anita Sloane**

Have you ever encountered someone with a visible disability on the street and have been unsure of what to do? Maybe you see someone who uses a cane or a wheelchair and they appear to be struggling – you think maybe you should offer them help, but maybe they'll be offended?

Many people just avoid these encounters because of embarrassment or discomfort. They look at their phones or the sidewalk and walk away OR they jump in to the situation without seeing what the person actually needs.

Most people with disabilities only want to be treated like everyone else to the extent that is possible.

What should you do first? ASK. Say, "Can I help you?" or "Do you need any assistance?" The person will usually appreciate the offered help and, if they don't need it, they will just say no.

If you encounter someone who has a support person with them – a relative, a friend, a sign language interpreter, a support worker – always speak directly to the person with the disability. By doing this you are affording the person the dignity that comes with being addressed directly. Don't treat the person as if they can't communicate.

Don't treat the person with pity or as if you feel sorry for them. This doesn't make anybody feel good. The person you're talking to is definitely a person with a great deal of strengths and capabilities, they may just need some support in that particular moment or with a particular aspect of their life.

Please keep these things in mind when you meet someone like this. You will likely be greeted with a smile and a thank you.