

Councillors approve new TransHelp criteria after hearing inspiring delegate

By Bill Rea

Peel Region is revising its eligibility policy to use the TransHelp service.

Regional councillors recently approved the revisions put forth by staff, which were aimed at helping to bring the policy into compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

To be eligible for TransHelp, a client will have to demonstrate they live in Peel, that they are a person with a disability and that owing to the disability, they are not able to use conventional transit some or all of the time.

The staff report to council pointed out AODA requires TransHelp to make various changes by the end of the year, and Peel actually started addressing that in 2012.

‘The Region’s current eligibility, as mandated by council, is to serve persons with physical disabilities who are unable to take conventional transit and require the support of a mobility aid,’ the report stated. ‘There is a significant demand for TransHelp service that exists outside the current mandate, including persons with cognitive disabilities, visual impairments and sensory disabilities.’

It added that compliance with AODA means a new set of eligibility criteria has to be developed.

Council also heard from Palgrave resident Marian Sansalone, who was very upbeat and energetic in advocating for accessible transportation to include attended care for her two grown sons, who both have an advanced form of autism, as well as global developmental disability.

‘I’m here because of love,’ she told councillors, adding they need transportation assistance in order to get needed services and to participate. ‘My sons need help, such as transportation.’

Sansalone said her sons are not capable driving any vehicle, adding she’s their primary care giver and she’s aware she will die one day.

‘My last breath and my final word will be in advocacy of my sons,’ she said.

Caledon Councillor Annette Groves commented there had been a lot of confusion about this issue.

Public Works Commissioner Dan Labrecque said the report before council last week was one of a series, or ‘one step in the legislative process.’

He said it was recommending adoption of a definition of disability, as set out by the Human Rights Commission, that lets the Region look at all the people it serves. He also told Sansalone that her sons received service through a pilot project run by the Red Cross and funded by the Region. He added a lot of people using this service will be able to access TransHelp, but not all. He also told Sansalone she will be able to decide what service she wants for her sons.

Several of the councillors were impressed with Sansalone.

‘Thank you for your big smile,’ Brampton Councillor Gael Miles said to her. ‘You’re amazing.’

‘I have so much to smile about,’ she replied.

Miles observed Sansalone would understand the system better than most people because she lives it.

The Region has been running a Passenger Assistant Program (PAP) since 2009. It was aimed at helping people with cognitive disabilities who were outside TransHelp’s mandate get to day programs. The staff report stated most PAP clients will be able to access TransHelp. Those who require a support person to travel with them might not qualify, since that person might remove a barrier to travelling on transit.

Miles said they couldn’t promise Sansalone that PAP would be available.

‘I’m in for the long haul,’ Sansalone replied. ‘I’m never going to retire.’

She added eventually her sons will get into residential programs.

‘I don’t mind driving with them,’ she added. ‘I actually enjoy their company.’

But she added transportation is one issue she has to deal with, and sometimes things get overwhelming.

‘I have moments, I don’t want to admit it, but I’m angry sometimes and I fight it because I think I’m doing a disservice to my sons and to God,’ she said. ‘I’m a Christian, first and foremost.’

She also commented that her husband had cancer surgery earlier this year, and there are other family needs that need to be addressed too.

‘I don’t know how much I’m going to take,’ she added. ‘I’m a Christian and I’m patient and I find happiness where people find nothing.’

‘I can assure you God has a very, very special place for you,’ Mississauga Councillor Nando Iannicca told her. ‘It’s a hell of a way

to live. You need to know it's going to be looked after.?

?Your family is so blessed to have you,? Regional Chair Frank Dale added.

Labrecque told Brampton Councillor Martin Medeiros there are about 128 clients being served by PAP, adding there more than 1,000 others who access day programs through other means.

He added the new policies are going to involve various agencies coming together, like Local Health Integration Networks (LHIN), some 14 transportation providers in the region, etc.

?It's a journey, not an end,? he said.