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Self-advocates lead fight for bus pass program

Friday, February 2, 2007 -- By John Driscoll

The future of a pilot program in Ottawa providing subsidized bus passes for people with disabilities has been threatened during the city's budget discussions but passed the first hurdle Wednesday (Jan. 31), thanks in part to the efforts of self-advocates.

The transit commission voted unanimously to recommend to city council that the successful program be continued and the subsidized bus pass made a regular part of the fare schedule for the local transit system.

Self-advocate Laura Stewart thanked the commission after the decision and was roundly applauded by a delegation from LiveWorkPlay, a not-for-profit organization, "supporting people with intellectual disabilities to live as self advocates and contributing citizens," says Keenan Wellar, CEO of LiveWorkPlay.

"Our self advocates were obviously very pleased with this decision," Wellar said after the meeting. "The bus pass subsidy makes a big difference to them. All of our clients have to take the bus every day. It's vital to them."

Under the program introduced last year, people with disabilities pay \$28.75 for a monthly adult bus pass instead of the \$87.

Many people with intellectual disabilities live on ODSP payments of about \$950 a month and have very little disposable income, Wellar points out. "To lose \$50 of that income would make a huge difference."

Because \$600,000 of the program cost was not part of the regular budget, it will be eliminated this year unless council finds room for it in the regular budget.

LiveWorkPlay became involved in the campaign to save the program with clients explaining to the media and politicians why the program is important to them. They also got involved in the municipal election and according to Wellar had a 100 per-cent turnout of 31 eligible voters at the polls.

The next hurdle for the program is a council meeting at the end of February, he said.

"This is an excellent opportunity for Ottawa to take a leadership role and set an example for other municipalities in Ontario," he says. "If Ottawa does this, other cities might take it up."

LiveWorkPlay is a grassroots organization with 51 clients aged 13 through adulthood. "Our main push is for self-advocacy," says Wellar, a co-founder of the organization.

The organization's SMILE (Skills and More for Independent Living and Employment) program involves "a partnership with other agencies, the private sector and government to provide supports to help adults with intellectual disabilities to establish goals, develop a plan to pursue those goals and access resources they need to realize their goals," according to the LiveWorkPlay website. It is available at <http://www.liveworkplay.ca/>

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