

Asistence o.s.

Asistence civic center was founded in 1995 and provided services to students and graduates of Jedlička Institute and Schools. Since 2005, Asistence has been working with clients with physical or multiple disabilities in Prague. It offers services of personal assistance, supported employment and transition programs as well as free time activities and sports, with the main focus on inclusion people with disabilities into mainstream society to a largest extent possible.

In 2008, almost 150 people used the services of Asistence, with more than 20 000 hours of personal assistance, mainly accompanying clients on their way to work, school or other daily activities.

As it is our aim to make our clients as independent on social services as possible, we have been trying our best to raise awareness of general public in various issues, in particular in eliminating barriers in public transport in Prague.

Not only that these barriers contribute to exclusion of people with disabilities from society, they also make lives of people with small children and seniors extremely difficult, both those of residents as well visitors of Prague.

We're in it Together

Participants in the project go their usual way to work or school, using public transport in Prague. What makes their routine different is that there is a personal assistant waiting with a wheelchair for them in front of their house. The journey takes longer than usual and they have plenty of time to learn in detail what is ordinary life of a disabled person all about. Presence of a companion who is a person with disability is an added value and has had a most positive response among participants.

There are three people working on the project on a long term, two of them themselves on a wheelchair, all employees of Asistence: personal assistance coordinator Michal Prager, personal assistance instructor Jakub Neubert and head of assistance services and deputy representative of Asistence Erik Čipera. They accompany participants and ask for their feedback, which is then publicized on Asistence's web site www.asistence.org/jedeme.php.

Some Excerpts from the Feedback:

Jan Pičman, head of Jedlička Institute and Schools:

„I was assisted by a young man, people smiled at me on the bus, which normally doesn't happen. A media photographer joint us at the subway station. Looked at the „sack-of-a-person“ on the wheelchair, shook hands with my assistant and started working. Then I said something and it turned out I knew something about the whole issue and saying good-bye, the photographer offered a handshake to me first and then to my assistant. I don't think he was even aware of the change.“

Petra Kolínská, City Councillor:

„...asked to pull out the ramp so that we can get on a modern low floor bus the driver uttered something about about a comfortable life of a disability pensioner...“

Jaroslav Dušek, actor and performer:

„I believe we are living in a period in which gaps between people are disappearing and barriers are collapsing, slowly, all over the world and across the universe, after thousands of years of existence. I am talking about barriers between men and women, adults and children, people and animals and also barriers that have been built around people with disabilities. The totalitarian regime has done

its best to build even more barriers. Anyone who did not fit in to the average, mainstream society was closed into a ghetto that the other either did not know about or at least pretended so. This people were restricted to a limited space, it was not easy to move around. Suddenly, after 1989, these people became visible and the mainstream society was surprised to learn about their existence. I am convinced that your project makes a difference. Old Toltecs teach us that there is no error or imperfection in the Universe. Every creature is born exactly what s/he should be. As to my experience with the project, I am pleased to have met Jakub who kept me company and we talked a lot. It was wonderful to meet somebody who, in spite of his so called disability, loves his life and makes the best of it, here and now”.

Cooperation with the Charles Univesity

Lecturers of the Charles University were among first who were offered to participate in this project, namely those from the Special Pedagogy Department. We failed to convince the teachers but we won the participants from two school grades. We had an introductory meeting where the students learned about challenges faced by people with disabilities when using public transport. We explained what is assistance, showed an instruction video, agreed on schedule for borrowing our wheelchairs. Then the students, in groups of three, kept going to school, library or elsewhere, with a wheelchair. One was in the wheelchair, another one assisted and the third documented the journeys and helped whenever are wherever was necessary.

After 54 journeys of 150 students had been completed, we had another meeting, with participation of several university students with physical disabilities. We read from the feedback chosen by the students themselves, the response was amazing. The students were not used to this on-the-job style of learning skills. The more practical, the more they liked it. Ten of them started working as personal assistants.

Czech Minister of Education, Youth and Sports Ondřej Liška,

after having seen presentation of the project in person, said:

„This project makes a big difference. I believe it will open the eyes of the authorities so that they can see who are the users of public transport and they will see individuals instead of an anonymous crowd rushing to and from work.“

Bedřich Zuzánek, student of Special Pedagogy at the Charles University in Prague

„I wanted to pick up my LCD display from repair. There was a young lady sitting behind the counter and was obviously embarrassed by the fact that I was in a wheelchair. She was so astonished that even though it was me who was talking to her, she asked my assistant to tell her my name and address. When my assistant saw this, she walked away a bit so that the lady had to talk to me which was really difficult for her and I could hear all the embarrassment and fear that I could not fathom.“

Ivana Knoblochová, student of Special Pedagogy at the Charles University in Prague

„In a tram, there was an old lady sitting next to me. I was in a wheelchair, having a cheerful conversation with my friends. The old lady was watching us all with deep admiration – my friend and myself in wheelchairs, but also our assistants, who were treating us as anybody else, as “normal” people. You could see in her eyes that she was happy to learn that the world today is not as bad as many of her generation believe.“

Daniela Pokorná, student of Special Pedagogy at the Charles University in Prague.

„We wanted to visit a friend who lives close to the city center. There is just one low floor tram per hour going to his place and we just missed it...“

Politicians and Media.

Senators, members of parliament and city representatives from all parties have joined the project. We have been doing our best in co-operation with media. There were numerous articles, web, TV and radio broadcastings covering our events. Public awareness has been raised and the people with disabilities themselves had an opportunity to present their perceptions, views and feelings about the topic with their own words.

Josef Klíma, Lidové noviny daily newspaper – feuilleton “The Last Word”

„The largest barrier to wheelchair users is the blindness and deafness of the authorities that have not realised yet that it is virtually impossible for a wheelchair user to change lines in the Prague subway without an elevator or at least a transport platform. It is a major challenge for parents with baby prams, too. Thus two relatively big groups of citizens are practically prevented from using many from subway stations in Prague.“

A Petition to Prague City Council “Prague Public Transport Accessible (to Everybody)” „Za MHD přístupnou“

Together with other NGOs assisting people with disabilities, families with small children and seniors, we drafted a petition describing the major barriers that these people have to face when using public transport. The petition was received positively by general public and was signed by more than 10 500 Prague citizens and visitors. After we have presented it to the Prague Magistrate and things started moving - there was a task force created under the auspices of the Prague City Hall named “For Prague Open and Barrier free”, with representatives of the Magistrate and NGOs to discuss topics and assign tasks to fulfill.

Future

We are preparing a Book of Experiences, with the best of feedbacks, developments in the project and examples from other municipalities. The Book will be distributed among passengers in the Prague subway and also publicized as a supplement to a daily newspaper.

Thanks to continuous and focused effort regarding construction of a new multifunctional building in Prague City Center, just above the Národní třída subway station, we succeeded in getting Prague City Hall committed to have an elevator built there. The elevator was not foreseen in the original arrangement.

There are still 24 subway stations with no barrier free access left, as well as several hundred tram stops without a ramp.

It is not all over. Fund for Prague public transport have been cut down for this year and it will need a constant public pressure to make more stations and stops barrier free.

We will continue in our activities, find new allies. Prague is not unique with its barriers, there are other European towns and cities facing the same challenges. We will create an overview of barrier/free cities in Europe, highlight achievements and the examples of best practise will be presented to general public and Prague City representatives.