

(Scott, M., 2021)



A new government body will focus on the needs of the one in four New Zealanders with access needs from next year. Photo: Getty Images



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SOCIAL ISSUES

How an ageing population needs a Ministry for Disabled

A ministry for disabled people is an incredible step forward - so long as it's well-resourced and led by the right people

It's a group of over a million New Zealanders that up until now has been overlooked and forgotten. But last week's announcement of a ministry for disabled people is cause for hope.

So says blind disability advocate Minnie Baragwanath, who has been working for decades to help address and shift the stigma around the term 'disability' and create programmes to invest in people with access needs – an untapped worldwide sector of \$12 billion annually.



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Baragwanath set up the Global Centre of Possibility, an enterprise that helps disabled entrepreneurs and business leaders to network and incubate their ideas with the aim of harnessing the innovation it takes to live as a disabled person in the world.

She says the introduction of the new ministry, which is still yet to be officially named, is one of the biggest changes for disabled people in New Zealand's history.

“As someone who lives with an access need and has worked for decades trying to drive change, the feeling it generates in me is hope and optimism,” she said. “It feels like this community is being taken seriously - and many people would say it is incredibly overdue.”



Disability advocate Minnie Baragwanath says the latest announcement is one of the biggest changes in disability in New Zealand's history. Photo: Supplied

And for New Zealand, the need for a government body focused on the needs of disabled people is only set to grow, with the Ministry of Health forecasting there will 1.18 million Kiwis over the age of 65 by 2051.

Declining fertility, increasing life expectancy and the relative size of the baby boom generation are changing the ratio of old people to young. And older people are much more likely to have specific access needs - with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs reporting more than 46 percent of people aged 60 and over around the world live with some form of disability.

The volatility of a world under Covid-19 adds some fuel to the fire. Long Covid - ongoing symptoms such as organ damage, fatigue and brain fog long after the usual time of recovery - has been recognised as a disability under the American Disabilities Act.

It's hard to pinpoint how many New Zealanders will end up dealing with symptoms of long Covid as case numbers increase, as studies are still underway to determine exactly how and why it is caused. However, the Office for National Statistics in the UK has reported one in 10 people experiencing a range of symptoms more than 12 weeks after their initial diagnosis with the virus.

Percentage Disabled of Total Population, Ministry of Health, 20

	Māori		
	Males	Females	Total
0–14 years	19	10.6	14.9
15–24 years	20.3	23.5	20.9
25–44 years	24.7	22.2	23.3

“That’s another layer,” Baragwanath said. “The numbers [of people with access needs] are not about to drop.”

She said if the ministry were well-resourced and well-led, New Zealand had a chance to get out in front of the problem.

“Japan was completely caught off-guard by its ageing population and the disability correlation,” she said.

And it could provide a lesson to New Zealand. “We can look at that and think how can we front foot this as a society. We’re not world-leading at the moment, but we could be.”

She said New Zealand had taken a lead in this area in the past, but at times the pace has dropped off.

“We did lead the UN convention on the rights of disabled people,” she said. “But then we’ve been so slow to get a ministry and access legislation - the thing we’ve got to learn from this is we have these waves of momentum, but we can’t just let them peter out.”

New Zealand took a leading role in developing the UN convention, which enshrines the rights of disabled people. By signing it in 2007, the country committed to following the convention in all new laws and policies.

Baragwanath was happy that partnership with the disabled community featured heavily in the announcement, but said there would need to be some further clarity on how partnership would work.

P **The ministry intends to work *with* disabled people** as opposed to *for* them - but exactly what the difference is to this Government will only be revealed once it is up and running.

“The good intentions here do need to be married up with some quite rigorous work around defining what ‘with’ means,” Baragwanath said. “And the how and who of the access community - because at more than a million New Zealanders, who exactly are we partnering with in that incredibly diverse community?”

She said the concept of partnership should be of particular importance to New Zealand society. “With the Treaty, we spent many, many, many decades unpacking the concept of partnership and often didn’t do it brilliantly. But I think there is a real commitment to really deeply understanding partnership in that context, and this is an emergent context which needs the same degree of exploration and understanding.”

Understanding is often where people fall short when it comes to the access community. Although the announcement may have first conjured up images of making public buildings accessible for people who use wheelchairs, access needs come in all guises.

Baragwanath pointed out the many leaders of creative and business fields with dyslexia and other learning disabilities, who may not have achieved success were it not for allowances made for their particular needs.

According to the announcement last week by Ministers Andrew Little and Carmen Sepuloni, the ministry should be in place sometime in the middle of next year, and will come with a reassessment of support services with an eye to ensuring accessibility.

Grey Power Federation president Jan Pentecost welcomed the development as much-needed.

“For far too long disabled people had no option but to mutely accept what was done, supposedly on their behalf, but without their input or advice,” she said. “I think it is a very courageous move that the new ministry will be led by disabled people who are the only ones who really understand what they have put up with for many years and what they really need to be able to function and participate in society at all levels.”

Pentecost also hoped the new ministry would solve confusion between the different approaches of ACC and the Ministry of Social Development when dealing with senior disabled people.

Little’s speech last Friday suggested the ministry would look to treat access needs more holistically, rather than confining them to a purely healthcare response.

“In the past, disability support issues have been treated solely as health issues,” he said. “We know, and you have told us again, they are not. Disability issues span the full range of social issues that any community faces, and affects one in four New Zealanders.”

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