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ANOTHER VIEW: Candidates ignore people with disabilities

How Obama, McCain, Clinton get it wrong, how the UN got it right

By **MARK P. MOSTERT** | Saturday, May 24, 2008 10:52 PM PDT ∞

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Sens. Barack Obama, John McCain and Hillary Clinton have been almost completely silent on issues crucial to a very large core constituency that will have a significant impact on November's election results ---- people with disabilities.

In the U.S. they comprise nearly 50 million people. While the presidential candidates have quite carefully calibrated their messages to African-American voters, women, those concerned about health care, environmental issues, as well as scores of other special interest vectors, they appear to have ignored a group of voters who, by their disability, make up the largest minority group in the United States ---- by far.

Disability advocacy groups and blogs have been burning up cyberspace in frustration and more than a little anger. I think their irritation is justified.

Perhaps U.S. politicians appear clueless about the issues facing people with disabilities because we in the developed world often assume that the rights of people with disabilities are already protected. That's true, but often only to a point. In many other places, those with disabilities are, at best, ignored.

Much more often, they are cruelly abused and horribly exploited.

We're not going to be able to label the United Nation with the nearsightedness of Obama, McCain and Clinton. The U.N. has long been aware of two critical points in looking beyond the developed world (and addled politicians) to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

First, 80 percent of the 650 million people with disabilities worldwide live in developing countries, where their lot is usually pitiful and shameful. They are routinely denied even the most basic human rights of survival, shelter, nourishment, care, education and a host of other things that many of us take for granted.

Second, the U.N. delegates have understood that disability cuts across almost every other human interest one could imagine: Ethnicity, gender, political, national and religious affiliation, human rights issues, health care and education, to name a few. They are committed to encouraging member-states to shape their societies in basic precepts of human worth and dignity: That people with disabilities have a right to equal treatment before the law, that they should be afforded unfettered opportunity to become productive and fully participatory citizens, and that member-states were to actively work against the oppression and discrimination of people with disabilities.

Earlier this month, the U.N. reached a milestone in these exemplary efforts. In a two-hour celebratory ceremony headlined by U.N. Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon, a large audience gathered in the great hall of the General Assembly to celebrate the adoption of a formal international agreement, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The convention is regarded as the first new human rights treaty of this century. Not only do signatory countries pledge to enact their own disability laws and measures to improve disability rights, they also promise to eliminate discriminatory legislation, customs and other practices that negatively impact their citizens with disabilities.

Among the convention's 50 stipulations are articles specifying that member-countries should have no laws discriminating against those with disabilities, that women with disabilities are the most vulnerable and therefore in need of the most protection, that governments are to engage in significant efforts to raise disability awareness, that programs are needed to allow those with disabilities to live independently within their communities, and as equal citizens, that people with disabilities were to remain free from violence, abuse, and from any degrading form of treatment because of who they were.

It goes without saying that the issues of education, health and rehabilitation, and the right to work and employment, as well as all forms of social protection, are specified in the convention.

Clearly, it is only a paper tiger unless its articles are enacted on the ground in each country. There is no question that the challenges are formidable.

For instance, in many places, the relatively simple task of awareness-raising, perhaps a prerequisite to enacting many of the other Convention articles, will prove daunting. To be sure, overcoming societal prejudices will not happen overnight. Things become even more complicated around articles requiring across-the-board education or health and rehabilitation care.

Irrespective, we should congratulate the U.N. for a job well done. Never again, on the international stage, will we be able to say that people with disabilities don't matter. As well it should be, because they do matter. They matter as much as anyone who believes that they are disability-free.

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Climate of fear and intimidation

[\[-\]](#) wrote on May 30, 2008 7:41 AM:

The one area you didn't touch upon is the wide-spread practice of the drive-by ADA Access Lawsuits that are constantly being filed by what are supposed to be "disabled" persons, but in actuality, are going to great lengths to get quick settlements from the unwary and unaware. Many of the attorneys do little else in their practices except assist these "disabled" that in many cases are not disabled and that fabricate untruths in attempts to make money. There have got to be laws enacted that permit the compliance with the myriad of ever-changing and sometimes contradictory rules, with specified time limits for the "corrections" and the method of extortion needs to be eliminated. The repeat offenders need to be chastised as well. These new crimes that have been allowed to occur are creating problems for the very people the laws are there to protect. The climate of fear and intimidation has created a huge industry that does absolutely nothing except make money and not give help to the disabled.

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