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Local organization supports professionals with disabilities

By Matthew Gauk

A grassroots organization dedicated to addressing the needs of professionals with disabilities is spreading out across Canada from Victoria.

Paul Gilbert is the co-founder and vice-president of the Canadian Association of Professionals with Disabilities (CAPD). The group was formed two years ago in Victoria.



"Having a disability and being a professional, it just kind of came together," said Gilbert, who had been discussing with friends the problems that professionals with disabilities face in the workplace.

Gilbert cited a study by the Canadian Council on Social Development that found that over 30 per cent of male post-secondary graduates with disabilities and 40 per cent of their female counterparts were not employed in 1998, compared to just three per cent of male and 10 per cent of female post-secondary graduates without disabilities.

Gilbert said the unemployment rate among professionals with disabilities is roughly the same as it is among people with disabilities and no post-secondary education.

"There's a lack of education about that," said Gilbert, "and nobody has been representing professionals with disabilities."

Professionals with disabilities are often screened out through the hiring process, said Gilbert, but the government has shown an interest in alleviating this problem.

The CAPD had its first big event Jan. 30, a consultation for professionals with disabilities where they were invited to discuss in small groups the barriers they face in the workforce and to network to attain their goals. Gilbert hopes the meeting will spin off into a local affiliate of the national organization, designed to improve the chances of professionals with disabilities in Victoria. "The issue of localization is important," said Gilbert. "Each city is affected differently due to available resources and such."

This first workshop, which was attended by about 35 people, will be the first of many as CAPD members, including Gilbert, plan to travel across Canada in the coming months to host more events. Vancouver and Edmonton are next on the docket.

"We don't really have any choice—we have to grow," said Gilbert. "We've been getting calls from all over the world to set up other organizations—from Israel, from New Zealand."

Because the organization is grassroots and decentralized, CAPD affiliates in any Canadian city would be able to share information with affiliates in other cities. While different groups might not share the same situations, they would share similar ideas and goals and therefore be of service to each other, according to Gilbert.

The grassroots community level is where needs are actually met and it lets the organization be healthy and proactive, he said.

"The traditional organizational design for non-profit societies is a pyramid," said Gilbert. "But we're turning it upside down so that all the power is local."

For more information about the Canadian Association of Professionals with Disabilities, visit www.canadianprofessionals.org.