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New law to help disabled

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Legislation being drafted by the Government will make it compulsory for the public and private sectors to provide facilities and job opportunities for the disabled.

The proposed law will also incorporate the social and civil rights of the disabled community.

National Unity and Social Development Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman said this was necessary to accelerate the provision of disabled-friendly facilities.

"There seems to be an oversight among most town planners and architects in providing these facilities. More commitment is needed from them," she said.

She also said the ministry wanted to help meet the quota for handicapped employees in the government sector.

Last week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad urged employers to open up more job opportunities for the disabled by hiring them.

Dr Mahathir drew their attention to the public sector's service circular No.10/1998, reserving one per cent of job openings in the Government for the disabled.

The Prime Minister had also said he hoped employers would see the full potential of the disabled and not view their hiring as merely part of fulfilling their social responsibilities.

Facilities for the handicapped are still lacking in buildings and public areas.

As for the social and civic rights aspects of the new legislation, Siti Zaharah said the ministry was looking into policies to form a social labour group.

"The disabled community has a right to be given fair treatment, especially when sharing common facilities like public transportation with the able-bodied."

She added that continual awareness of the plight of the handicapped was needed, especially in rural areas, as children in the city were already exposed to the disabled community.

"We are trying to make sensitivity programmes in schools a nationwide initiative, so that at an early age, children will understand the disabled community," she said.

Asked whether the implementation of the programme was contained in the new legislation, Siti Zaharah said she was unsure.

"This is the hard work of the technical working committee and when they submit the study on the proposed Bill, then I will have more information," she said.

The committee, which was formed last year, reviewed existing legislation affecting the disabled and found them inadequate.

It is made up of members of the Attorney-General's chambers, Bar Council, ministry officials and representatives of the disabled community.

The study will be submitted on Sept 19 to the National Advisory Council for the Disabled, chaired by Siti Zaharah, for further scrutiny.

The ministry's parliamentary secretary, Datuk S. Veerasingam, said there was no separate law governing regulations for the disabled, and the Government needed to have a new law to ensure their needs were met.

He was speaking at a Press conference after attending the "Disabled People's Interactive Family Day" at Lake Gardens today.

Veerasingam said the new law, if agreed to, should be submitted to the Cabinet by next year.

He also urged all disabled people to register with the Welfare Department so that they could enjoy certain benefits.

"When they register, then we will have a better idea of how big a budget to allocate to help them," he said.