

Living Beyond Closed Doors

Awareness is an important part of everyday life. Everyday abilities that may have been taken for granted become an everyday challenge or a source of frustration. Physically challenged individuals want to live, to work, to get an education, and be able to do simple everyday activities independently. After all, whether the mode of mobility is a wheelchair, a scooter, or an assistive device, everyone wants to be able to negotiate around the outside world. Following a physically-challenged individual through his or her daily routine gives an inside view into the small everyday challenges. This is the reality when you have limited mobility.

You enter the college through the electronic barrier-free doors and proceed to your class. In the back of your mind you know if you get to the classroom after class has begun, you will have the challenge of trying to get the door open. As you wheel up to the classroom you wonder if today the embarrassment and possible disturbance of class will be your reality. The door itself has a special handle so you can turn it, but there are still additional hurdles. There is also not adequate space to reach past the length of the wheelchair and over to the door itself. You manage to turn the cold metal door handle down and the thick heavy door reluctantly inches open. Opening the door requires having one hand on the handle and pulling the door in towards you. Your other hand is required to grasp the controller on the electric wheelchair while you try desperately to steer yourself back far enough to give the door sufficient space to open. As your arms ache and the door closes with a loud slam you become frustrated and ask yourself “why does everything have to be so complicated?”

There are two other options: if there's someone walking down the hallway you could ask them to open the door for you; or you could ask the instructor to suggest the students leave the door open a crack when they come in and out. Having the door slightly ajar allows you to pull the door open with your hand or foot.

In your heart, you hate having to ask for assistance because it could inconvenience another individual, and it takes away your independence, along with a small piece of your pride.

While accessibility and mobility within Edmonton has come a long way, it leaves one to wonder why the doors are thick and heavy, and what would the approximate cost be of changing.

Local architect Richard Vanderwell, explained that such doors are typically “metal or solid core wood construction.” According to Mr. Vanderwell, there are two reasons for the doors being fabricated that way: first, to meet “fire rating requirements between habitable spaces,” and secondly because it is “practical to give the door strength for day to day use and wear and tear.”

Two types of doors that can help with accessibility are the barrier-free push-button operated doors and electromagnetic doors. Mr. Vanderwell explained that “electromagnetic fire rated doors are used in hospitals and seniors centers. The doors are normally held open by an electromagnet, and when the fire alarm goes off, they close.” These are two wonderful options but what would the cost be? Mr. Vanderwell’s guesstimate of the cost per barrier-free door is, \$1,000 to \$1500 each. The cost to provide electromatically controlled doors would be approximately \$500 to \$800 each. There are many doors and many floors in most public buildings in the city and province. Upgrading may not be feasible but furnishing specific doors where equal accessibility is required would take away one less conflict.

Until the day when our city and province is considerably barrier-free, the small, everyday activities will continue to be a hurdle, for some of the population of physically challenged individuals. Thanks to studies and reports, major steps are being made so physically challenged individuals will achieve equal footing in society.