**Junior Disability Games: 6-7 October 2017. Paula Tesoriero, Disability Rights Commissioner**

E nga mana, enga reo, raurangatira ma

Tena Koutou katoa

Governor General, Dame Patsy Reddy, spectators, families and athletes – I am honoured to be the Ambassador of this important event.

Sport plays an integral role in breaking down the barriers to participation for disabled people.

There can be NO exception to young people with disabilities participating in sport. NO EXCEPTION. Such participation affects our communities, our economy and our place of standing in the world.

The right to participate in sport is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities -and calls for countries to ensure that provision is made for inclusion of those with disabilities in sport. The United nations estimates that 15% of the world’s population has a disability –that’s over 1 billion people!. In NZ, 24% of Kiwis identify themselves as being disabled. If we want sport to be universally accessible, then it must be accessible to those with disabilities.

But the reality is that to make it accessible for young people with disability, additional money and time is needed. In many cases, a simple adaption may be required. For others, it requires complex adaptions that can take some time to perfect, it can require sports clubs to make their sport accessible.

This is why the work of the Halberg Foundation is so critical to enable accessibility to sport. I have been honoured to be part of the organisation until recently standing down to take up the role of Disability Rights Commissioner.

So, why is sport so important for kids with disabilities?

There are of course the universal benefits of sport: learning to work with others, healthy lifestyles, encourages kids to take risks and leadership opportunities, better educational outcomes and the contribution sport makes to our economy. All of these are equally vital to people with disabilities. But there are some added outcomes for those with disabilities. I base this on my own experiences of growing up with a disability in New Zealand.

Sport has the ability to change perceptions about disability. It does this by focusing attention on kids abilities, moving disability to the background. It helps with social cohesion in class-rooms. When able bodied kids see kids with disabilities accomplish a sporting activity, it changes those kids’ attitudes towards disability. Sport brings together kids with and without disabilities – because sport is bigger than that.

Sport changes the lives of kids with disabilities in a profound way. It gives kids self-confidence, it creates choice for kids- it’s not just about watching sport from the sideline or focussing on the academic side of school. It allows kids the opportunity to be part of a team – a concept most richly felt on the sports-field. It provides leadership opportunities for kids and opportunity to belong, to be accepted into a team. Ultimately it provides freedom and empowerment to be what kids want to be.

Sport has always been a part of my life. I could not name a disabled athlete as a kid – I certainly had no disabled heroes. Great sports-people that I knew did not have only one leg like me. Now, through the growth of Paralympic sport you and I have many disabled sports heroes.

The Paralympic Games is now one of the largest sporting event in the world. Many of the most successful athletes in NZ are our Paralympic athletes.

It does not matter whether you are here to try a new sport, compete in your chosen sport, are aiming to be a Paralympian – the fact you are here is what matters. Your generation will change the face of disability in NZ.

It is your responsibility to bust down the myths of disability.

Sport is a great tool to allow you to do that. Have fun, be the best you can be over the next couple of days.

I look forward to watching you and talking with you and your families.

ENDS