E ngā mana, e ngā reo, raurangatira mā

Tena koutou katoa

Ko Paula Tesoriero ahau

ko au te Kaihautu Tika HauAtanga mō te Kāhui Tika Tangata ki Aotearoa.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

Mauri tangata, Mauri ora

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I have been asked to talk about myself and the role, and I wanted to be here to get to know more about you all and the work of Blind Citizens. I also want to listen to you about your thoughts about the key issues for the disability community, and especially the issues you face as vision impaired/blind citizens.

But first, a little about me and how I got here. The journey to me taking up this role has all been about a BIKE. When I was 5, I was the luckiest kid alive-my parents brought me a blue healing sixteen bike.

But it was far more than just a bike for me. I could not keep up with other kids running and walking, and I was acutely aware I was a bit different. I had “different” legs to others, and ultimately had part of one amputate and the other has limited movement and limited blood-flow. But my bike gave me a sense of freedom and a sense of fitting in- I was not different riding a bike. I was just as fast as everyone else. And I used to ride everywhere, daring to imagine that I might become one of the fastest people in the world on a bike.

But off the bike, I did not have a sense of belonging or being the same. I was in hospital while my friends were at school, ongoing surgeries were just part of life. I was never sure going into a surgery, exactly how I’d turn out the other side. I grew up with a profound sense of no control over my body. My bike was always an escape from this.

During my University years, I did not ride much at all. But at this time, I made a deliberate choice to shut disability out completely- I ignored it on the basis this would be the only way to make it in the world. But then I was drawn back to the bike. I started racing duathlons with friends

In order to realise that dream I had as a kid of being the fastest in the world, and be a paralympic athlete, meant I had to confront disability.

This remains the hardest thing I have done. But in the end, without such a giant chip on my shoulder weighing me down, I flew on my bike. My medals and world records are not the things I am proud of. It is the journey to truly integrating disability into my world. When I stood in a Paralympic village for the first time, I finally understood that I am not who I am despite my disability- I am who I am because of it.

I was born and grew up on the Kapiti Coast before studying law and Politics at VUW. After practising for several years, I worked in senior management roles at the Ministry of Justice and Stats NZ.

After retiring from sport, I wanted to give back. My sporting journey has given me an opportunity to play a part in key organisations allowing me to begin my journey of advocacy. Serving on the Boards of the NZALS, Halberg Disability Sport Foundation and Paralympics NZ, and gaining invaluable governance experience on a range of other non-disability bodies.

Working with these organisations gave me some insight into some of the barriers disabled people face in areas many people take for granted - getting a job, going to school, finding a house to live in – and made me question what I could do with my professional background and passion for disability issues to help reduce such barriers. And so here I am.

I am now just over two months into the role as Disability Rights Commissioner where I have a statutory responsibility to protect and promote human rights for people with disabilities. I have been deliberate about listening to people for the first couple of months in the role to help inform my understanding of issues and also to help me firm up my priorities in the role.

My role could easily focus on reactive issues of the day. To make meaningful progress, I want to focus on addressing systemic issues important to enable better outcomes for disabled New Zealanders.

My priorities sit in two categories. The first being the top 5 priorities I want to spend most of my time and resource on. The second are a set of areas I will be deliberate and purposeful in undertaking strategic advocacy on.

How did I arrive at these priorities and categorising them in the way I did?

Firstly, we looked at where we are at as a country.

While there have clearly been improvements for disabled New Zealanders have come a long way, but not as far as other population groups and are not where we need to be.

* Disabled New Zealanders are behind other kiwis across a number of key well-being indicators, affecting their life-course and outcomes.
* The picture of disability data in New Zealand is unclear; what can’t be counted leads to untargeted and possibly unsuccessful interventions and service design
* Attitudes towards disabled people remain at best indifferent, at worst discriminatory, underpin how disabled New Zealanders are treated (and resulting outcomes) from conception to death and how they are valued for their contribution to society
* New Zealand cities are not as accessible as they need to be for a range of users
* The Disability sector is not as representative or united in its focus as it could be
* A number of recommendations from the UN and various Inquiries not yet adequately dealt with across a number of areas
* Information is not accessible for a wide range of disabled New Zealanders, primarily those who are deaf, blind or have learning disabilities

So, there is a lot to tackle.

I am a firm believer on sorting out key priorities and focusing on those, rather than trying to do a thousand things. So while all these issues are important, I had to go through a process of figuring out the areas where my specific and unique role could be effective in creating change.

The key input into determining these areas was all the listening I have done since day one in the role – My priorities reflect what people have emphasized meeting after meeting.

We also looked at:

* The 2013 Disability survey
* Various UN reports and concluding observations
* Domestic reports
* Complaints made to the HRC

As a result of all of this, my top 5 priorities are, in no particular order:

*Education:* Currently 42% of young disabled kiwis aged 15-24 are not in education, employment or training. Engagement with education is one of the most critical indicators of a life course. Our education system is not as inclusive as it needs to be. 17 years of reviews and reports have progressed some positive steps, but we need a systemic look at what it will take for our education system to be truly inclusive and work for all parties involved. We simply cannot afford as a country to have another generation where 42% of young people are not in education, training or employment.

*Employment:*

The recent HLFS survey revealed that 25% of disabled people participate in the workforce, compared with 75% of non-disabled kiwis. This is simply unacceptable in a country like ours and is essential we close this gap to ensure financial and economic security for disabled people.

I want the conversation to shift from “it’s nice to have some disabled people in the workforce, and it’s the right thing to do” to “ this is about New Zealand’s economic and social progress as a nation and to achieve the benefits we all want from a strong performing economy relies on disabled people being in the workforce”.

Education and employment are what I describe as the 2 top Policy priorities.

And I could simply add more policy topics to this- but I think the better thing to do is address some foundational things that will help shift a greater number of other Policy issues in the long-run.

*Shifting hearts and minds*

Attitudes are the bedrock that a lot of issues can arise from as symptoms. Disability can still be seen by many people as either an ‘other’, a source of stigma, or something to manage medically rather than something fundamental to a person’s identity.

Unless we change the hearts and minds of New Zealanders around these things, we wont see a shift to disability being “business as usual” in how kids are educated, how employers think about disability, how services are designed, how cities are built- the list goes on.

I intend to find funding to run a significant social change campaign, in partnership with others.

*Supporting a stronger sector*

I have thought hard about what my role is in helping build a stronger sector. The Sector itself and decision-makers tell me the sector is not as strong or united as it needs to be. Part of the success of my role depends on a strong successful sector and many have suggested that the independence of my role allows me to question and guide the sector to achieve better outcomes for disabled New Zealanders.

Social change requires unity of purpose and priorities and strong capability and is your capability in the right place?

I encourage the sector to challenge itself: are you as strong and organized as you need to be; are you as representative as you need to be- because I am not hearing the voice of young disabled kiwis or Maori disabled people come through. What can be done about this?

Finally, the 5th priority relates to data. It is well accepted that there are large gaps in disaggregated disability data in New Zealand. What can’t be counted can lead to unsuccessful outcomes and unintended consequences. We must build a better picture of disability in New Zealand so we know we are addressing the right issues in the right way.

I am building a program of work around these 5 priorities and will be working in partnership on all of them.

There are also a multitude of other issues in addition to these. I am committed to deliberately and purposefully advocating on these issues: Housing, accessibility to building, infrastructure and information; bio-ethical issues, state-abuse and the range of issues affecting those with neuro-disabilities.

A good example of strategic advocacy across one of these areas is I have an opportunity to address a group of Mayors and Council Chief Executives at a meeting where I plan to raise the need for, and benefits of, making cities accessible in all aspects, from information, to the built environment, to transport, and housing. After all, as we all know, disabled people make up a quarter of the population – so being accessible brings with it a huge amount of economic and social benefits.

Another way we will be addressing key issues is through the upcoming CRPD shadow reporting happening over the course of 2018/2019. As some of you will know, New Zealand’s progress in implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities gets reviewed every 4 years. As part of this, the Commission, as part of the Independent Monitoring Mechanism, alongside the Ombudsman and DPO Coalition of which Blind Citizens is a part, will write a report to the UN Committee highlighting key issues and areas for the Committee to question the Government – and ultimately make recommendations – on.

I am currently preparing my briefing to incoming Ministers to raise all of these critical issues and help create a platform for change. I have met with a number of Chief Executives already, Ministers, the SSC, local government and taken opportunities where I can in the media.

I intend to take a strategic approach to this role working in partnership where I can to shift the dial for disabled New Zealanders.

DPOs like Blind Citizens play a pivotal role, both in contributing to this process and in ensuring disabled people are represented and advocated for in relevant work done by Government as mandated in the CRPD. I understand Blind Citizens have advocated strongly on a range of issues affecting their membership – including education, employment, the built environment, transport, and technology.

I look forward to working together with Blind Citizens in my role to both highlight the barriers faced by disabled New Zealanders in these areas and to strategise about solutions, so that all New Zealanders, regardless of disability, or stage in life have their rights fully realised.

I look forward to hearing your experiences and ideas for making this a reality.

I ask for your support in my role, and your guidance. I will shepherd this role carefully and wisely. I invite you to hold me to account – not in social media, but by raising things directly with me on what you think I should be doing.

Together, I am confident we will shift the dial for disabled New Zealanders.

ENDS