

**President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev responds to
questions posed by children with disabilities – participants of the
International Conference on Inclusive Education**

My dear young friends,

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking your time to approach me with your concerns. I'm glad that you are advanced Internet users and the questions that you pose are quite serious.

I support your view that people with disabilities are far from being comfortable in their lives in this country. To address this situation, we have adopted a special state program entitled "Barrier-Free Environment" and assigned a sizable amount of money – about 47 billion rubles - for its implementation. This five-year program has been launched this year.

In 2011-2012, the methodology of building a barrier-free environment will be developed and tested in Russia's three pilot regions – the Republic of Tatarstan, the Tver and Saratov regions – where public transportation vehicles and various facilities are to be fitted with ramps, specially designed lifts and other equipment and appliances for disabled people. Whereas in the Republic of Khakassia, the Republic of Udmurtia, and the Tyumen region, international methods of disability certification are to be introduced for the first time ever in Russia. The best practices generated as a result of the project implementation would allow us to speed up the creation of an efficient barrier free environment throughout the whole country.

What do we expect to achieve? First, appropriate conditions are to be created in all Russian regions which would enable you to gain unimpeded access to museums, theaters and cinemas and would allow you to play in children's playgrounds or train in fitness centers. E.g., by 2015, about 1,500 (1,411) specialists will have been trained to assist people with disabilities in developing badly needed skills.

Second, the number of schools with a versatile, barrier-free environment is expected to increase tenfold, from about 2% to over 20% (up to 3,600 schools). Children with disabilities will be able to attend such schools and study side by side with their peers who have no health restrictions. 10,800 professionals – members of psychological, medical and pedagogical commissions - will be providing the required assistance to disabled schoolchildren.

Third, by 2015, about half of all TV programs broadcast on federal TV channels will have been subtitled.

In response to Iliya's question concerning the situation in Arkhangelsk I would say the following: In your region, the "Barrier-Free Environment" program has also been implemented since 2011. In particular, the program envisages installing ramps at medical and all other facilities offering a range of social and rehabilitation services to children with disabilities (there are nine such facilities in total operating in the region). 8 buses fitted with low-level steps offering comfortable boarding are operating on cross-town lines in the city of Arkhangelsk. In 2012, a training ground for visually impaired children is to be put into operation in Arkhangelsk school No.5. The Arkhangelsk City Administration has devised a specific plan to implement the "Barrier-Free Environment" program, and I hope the program goals will be fulfilled. However, your question, Iliya, does not only concern the interests of visually impaired people and people with other disabilities. Actually, your question is about the quality of urban infrastructure and environment as a whole; the quality of roads, pavements, territories adjacent to apartment buildings, courtyards, etc. In fact, it is not only visually impaired people who feel uncomfortable walking along makeshift wooden planks instead of a pavement. Though, for them, such a situation presents particular challenges. Similar problems exist in many Russian regions. This is not to say that regional and municipal authorities are not trying to address these problems. But they have been progressing slower than expected. Municipalities should have more powers, including financial, to enable them to make life in their cities and towns more comfortable for their residents. We are currently dealing with this problem, trying to improve inter-budget relations. The outcome of these activities will impact the daily life of every Russian resident.

And last but not least, today, when designing new premises to accommodate social, transportation, engineering and other infrastructure facilities and reconstructing old ones, the requirements concerning their accessibility for people with disabilities are to be taken into account. This is the current practice in the most advanced countries in the world.

All these issues are an important part of daily activities carried out by governors and heads of municipalities. The efficiency of their work should be judged by their ability to cope with these challenges. Moreover, the interests of people with disabilities should be legally protected. That is why we are currently focusing on improving considerably the Russian legislation and are getting ready to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We intend to finish this work next year.

One of the most important goals to be achieved is to change the attitude of our society towards these issues. I can see, increasingly more often, when Russian citizens become more caring and responsive to the needs of those people who, due to some unfortunate circumstances, are unable to cope some difficulties on their own. Any person may find himself or herself in a difficult situation and in need of assistance. Everyone should be aware of this.

I wish you, my dear young friends, success and realization of all your dreams and plans. And all the best to your relatives and close ones!