

Guide dogs must be given right of way

I REFER to the letter "Shocked over No Guide Dogs Allowed" (*The Star*, Feb 3), where the writer complained about the "No Guide Dogs Allowed" signage at the main entrance of the KL International Airport.

The views of the writer, who pointed out that it was not fair to the visually-impaired who should be allowed to be assisted by a legally-accredited and trained guide dog, are legitimate and must be considered by the relevant authorities.

Such views have been frequently expressed by the visually-impaired over the years but to no avail.

There is a pressing need to foster the participation of, and dialogue among, various stakeholders, including government, civil society organisations and the scientific and academic communities to promote awareness of the plight of the visually-impaired in Malaysia especially when it comes to access of their guide dogs.

Malaysia's commitment towards protecting vulnerable members of society was clearly visible when it became one of the first signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol in 2007 which culminated in the passing of the Persons with Disability Act 2008. It was truly a step in the right direction.

However, it is unfortunate to note that the 2008 Act made no mention of access to guide dogs which is such an important "tool" to the visually-impaired. I recommend that the Act be revisited and appropriate action be taken to rectify the matter.

While we do take cognizance of the fact



that we are living in a Muslim majority country, where issues pertaining to ownership of guide dogs by Muslims may be sensitive, we should at the same time take note of the Syariah Council in the United Kingdom back in 2003 which ruled that the ban on dogs did not apply to guide dogs. In effect, it meant that visually-impaired Muslims would be able to get a guide dog to help them with their day-to-day routine.

What the visually-impaired need today is not sympathy but an opportunity to func-

tion like any other able member of society. They seek to contribute to the nation but in order to do that, they must be able to manoeuvre in their surroundings with ease.

Shopping malls, eateries, office and residential properties must be open to the idea of allowing the visually-impaired access to their premises accompanied by their harnessed guide dog.

Public transport must allow both dog and handler in. State and federal administrations must work out a cohesive plan to allow the visually-impaired access to harnessed guide dogs and for those dogs to be allowed entry into buildings and trains where special enclosed seats can be provided.

Guide dogs are very important to the visually-impaired because of the following:

(a) they instil confidence and mobility among the visually-impaired to move around freely;

(b) they are highly trained to help the visually-impaired move around obstacles safely when the person is in unfamiliar territory; and

(c) they have also been proven to bring about psychological and social benefits, provide companionship, and make interacting and socialising with sighted people easier for the visually-impaired person.

In this day and age, it is unconscionable that people with a disability continue to face discrimination in our community.

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