

**The Polus Center Proposal for
a Project to Increase Public
Access for Persons with
Disabilities in León, Nicaragua**

Report of the Consultant

*March 8–14, 2001
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The evaluation report was conducted under the auspices of the United States Agency for International Development. The evaluation was conducted by the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund and War Victims Fund Contract (CRN-C-00-98-0037-00). The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or Professional Resources Group International, Inc.

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ACRONYMS

CEPRIL	Centro de la Promoción de Rehabilitación y Integración de León
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NGO	nongovernmental organization
ORD	Organization of Disabled Revolutionaries
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
PWD	person with disabilities
WU	Walking Unidos

WALKING UNIDOS

The investigation was carried out from March 8 to March 14, 2001. The consultant spent the first four days meeting with the Polus Center's partner organization, Walking Unidos (WU), and others in León, Nicaragua, and the final day visiting relevant organizations in Managua, Nicaragua.

WU is a small, local nongovernmental organization (NGO) in León (Nicaragua's second major city). WU has been in existence for two and one-half years and primarily provides free prosthetics (and some orthotics) to needy Nicaraguans with disabilities. Managed by a board of directors who meet monthly and who come from various backgrounds, the organization has eight employees (five technical and three administrative). The technical team consists of a technical director of the workshop and four trainees. Three of the trainees (two men and one woman) are themselves amputees. The two men are veterans of different sides of the Nicaraguan civil war who were proposed by their respective veterans' associations. An executive director, a secretary/receptionist, and a cleaner/runner compose the administrative side. Accounting and payroll are handled by a contracted outside accountant who visits twice a month.

The WU workshop sees about 20 new clients per month, many of whom have been referred to the center by either the León Hospital or the children's hospital in Managua. Of those seen, an average of 15 clients per month are accepted for treatment and put on the waiting list. Approximately 10 clients are called up from the waiting list per month for measurement for prostheses or orthotics. Children automatically move to the head of the waiting list unless they require some special treatment. Also moved to the head of the list are the one or two clients per year who can afford to pay for the equipment. Other clients are called up on the basis of date of registration. Once called, clients generally receive their equipment in less than two weeks. The center finds temporary lodging with local families for patients coming from out of town and frequently covers the transportation costs of these patients as well. Because more clients are accepted per month than the workshop can handle, the waiting list, currently about 80 persons, continues to grow. With the exception of 10 wheelchairs that were donated to the center last year, WU does not usually provide wheelchairs and does not currently maintain a wheelchair waiting list.

The technical director has long experience throughout Central America in the design and manufacture of prostheses and orthotics. The equipment provided by WU, though of simple design, appears to be durable and of the highest quality. Each prosthesis or orthotic is carefully custom crafted for each client, and the client receives use training and fitting follow-up after delivery. For prostheses, WU uses the polypropylene-based model developed by the International

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for developing countries. For orthotics, WU uses a plastic-metal combination type. Materials for the prostheses and orthotics are imported. One adult prosthesis costs the center approximately US\$500 in materials, and one full-leg orthotic costs roughly US\$100. The workshop is equipped with all the minimum basic tools (drills, grinders, ovens, etc.) for the manufacture of the prostheses and orthotics.

Financial support for Walking Unidos comes primarily from Polus Center of Worcester, Massachusetts, which is the organization most responsible for WU's creation. Some of the materials and equipment have, however, been obtained through grants from other organizations. Because Walking Unidos has no substantial income, the Polus Center continues to cover most of its operating costs, including staff salaries. WU has recently opened a small restaurant in downtown León (for which the Polus Center is providing eight months of support) that is anticipated not only to become self-sufficient but also to make sizable monthly contributions (more than US\$1,000) to defray the operating costs of Walking Unidos. The restaurant, in operation now for just two months, has not yet reached financial independence but has made significant progress in that direction. Efforts are currently under way to secure a donation of computers, which will be used to turn the restaurant into a place where the public can access the Internet (a true "Cyber Café") and where persons with disabilities (PWDs) can learn computer use free of charge.

Overall, Walking Unidos appears to provide a critical service to the population of León and to PWDs throughout Nicaragua. As a result of the civil war, the country has an elevated number of PWDs in the population; yet, because Nicaragua is also one of the poorest countries in Central America, most persons with disabilities cannot afford to pay even a tenth of the cost of a prosthesis. Although all members of the Walking Unidos staff appear dedicated, the vision and energy of the executive and technical directors clearly constitute the driving force behind the center's success and growth. The technical director is a strong believer in small-sized, lean, and nonflashy operations with local control (having seen, in many years of work in the field, numerous large centers for PWDs fail for reasons of either bloated personnel or dependency on external management). WU's emphasis is on quality equipment and proper care for each beneficiary rather than high volume and high profile. The executive director shares this vision and has been adept in finding support for the center from various sources.

THE NATIONAL REHABILITATION PLAN

Among other benefits or rights for persons with disabilities, Nicaragua National Statute 202 of 1995 provides for the creation of a National Rehabilitation Council. The statute did not come into effect, however, until August 1998, and the council did not have its first meeting until late January 2001. The council is coordinated by the representative of the Ministry of Health and also includes representatives from the Ministry of Social Action, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Family, and various NGOs.

Representatives of the various ministries on the council are now meeting once a month. They have been assisted by two consultancies sponsored by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO): a consultant from the 20-year-old Ecuadoran National Rehabilitation Council came to assist with the council's organization, and two consultants from the 25-year-old Costa Rican National Rehabilitation Council provided workshops on how to elaborate a plan and budget. PAHO plans to continue encouraging and supporting this cross-fertilization approach and will sponsor the return of one of the Costa Rican consultants in April 2001.

Since the first meeting in January 2001, the National Rehabilitation Council has accomplished three goals:

1. Elaborating an action plan for 2001
2. Writing and adopting bylaws for the council itself
3. Finalizing a proposal intended for presentation to the National Assembly for modifications of National Statute 202, including an annual budget to provide for real activities to support persons with disabilities

The council has further agreed to make the heavily populated west coast provinces of León, Granada, and Chinandega a priority in all initial efforts. The city of León has been identified as the place where new activities will begin, starting with a two-day, PAHO-sponsored "awareness" workshop on the issue of accessibility, to which critical public and private actors will be invited in April 2001.

The National Rehabilitation Council has identified two initial programmatic priorities:

1. The elimination of physical barriers to mobility (with access ramps in public places such as government offices and recreational areas preceding an effort to pressure the private sector to follow suit)
2. The formation of Banco de Ayudas Técnicas (a governmental structure for addressing the equipment needs of PWD)

Activities in the first priority area have already begun (e.g., the planning of the León awareness workshop, as well as the publication and distribution to all provincial heads and mayors of a booklet containing the architectural standards for building access modifications and new construction). What more the council will be able to accomplish depends to a large degree on the success of its budget proposal to the National Assembly. All activities to date have depended heavily on PAHO support because the council had no funding of its own.

THE PROPOSED ACCESSIBILITY PROJECT

General Description

As originally proposed in the concept paper, the Mobility and Social Access Project has four parts:

1. Providing wheelchairs and a repair and seating clinic:

Through Walking Unidos, the Polus Center will set up a wheelchair repair facility. The Center will provide a small metalworking shop, tools, [and] welding equipment and train a repair technician.

The Polus Center will contract for the purchase of 50 wheelchairs from a disabled-run organization in Managua, Nicaragua that builds low-cost, durable wheelchairs suited for Nicaragua's tough conditions. The chairs will be personally fitted and distributed at modest or no cost to low-income disabled participants identified through the working relationships with León's disabled community, disability advocacy organizations and health clinics that served as the basis for planning and implementing the Walking Unidos clinic.

A seating clinic connected with the wheelchair repair facility will be established to address the problems of decubitus ulcers, scoliosis and contractures to which wheelchair users are especially vulnerable. The Polus Center will provide materials and train a seating specialist. The wheelchair repair shop and seating clinic will start in and be incubated by the Walking Unidos clinic. When fully functional, it will be spun off to function independently.

2. Improving social access through elimination of architectural barriers to public places:

The Polus Center will work with León's disabled-run advocacy organizations to develop an access plan that identifies where and how to eliminate the architectural barriers in [a 10-block] area that prevent citizens with disabilities from realizing the benefits of personal mobility. Through organization building activities, the Polus Center will assist the disabled community in forming a Working Group on Access that will present the plan to the Mayor and other community leaders.... The Center [will] also provide technical design assistance and construction materials to the municipal government as needed to implement the access plan.

... the Polus Center will [also] bring together the Bishop of León and representatives of disability organizations to develop a plan to increase the physical and programmatic accessibility of the parishes and encourage priests and lay workers to invite persons with disabilities to participate in the religious, social and recreational activities of the parishes.

3. Increasing public awareness through an education campaign on social access:

To inform the disability community and the public at large about the Mobility and Social Access Project, the Polus Center will supervise a public awareness and education campaign through radio, television, newspapers and posters. The campaign will feature the theme of inclusion and positive images of people with disabilities. The Polus Center will enlist students and faculty from the journalism and communications departments of the University of León to help develop campaign materials and will conduct sessions with journalists and editors on the use of non-pejorative descriptive terms in their reporting on disability issues.

4. Executing small-scale demonstration projects in housing and transportation:

The first pilot project will be to equip the Walking Unidos van with a wheelchair lift. [The van] will ... be available to transport members of the Working Group on Access to planning sessions and meetings with community leaders.

In the second project, the Polus Center will fund the construction of two wheelchair-accessible model houses on lots donated by the city. The houses will be rented or leased at a low rate to low-income families with a wheelchair-using member.

Objectives of This Consultancy

Central questions for the consultant (during interviews with the Nicaraguan National Rehabilitation Council, the Pan American Health Organization, and local authorities, as well as in meetings with representatives of León University, the Catholic Church, Walking Unidos staff members, and other local NGOs oriented to PWDs) were the following:

- Does a need exist for a project of this type?
- Is Nicaragua, in general, and León, in particular, ready for this type of project?
 - Are the more basic needs adequately covered?
 - Are key public figures aware of the project and willing to participate?
 - Is there a legal framework?
 - Are there established standards?
 - Are there identifiable targets?
 - Is there a basic infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks) to work from?
 - Are the necessary human resources available?
 - Is León an appropriate place to start such an effort?

- Are the Polus Center and Walking Unidos the best organizations to implement such a project?
 - Are they sufficiently well connected with other key organizations in Nicaragua?
 - Do they have, or can they find or train, capable personnel?
- Does the project fit well with the National Rehabilitation Plan?
- Is there commitment from participants and beneficiaries?
- Have all the key actors and collaborators been identified?
- Is the university aware and involved?
- Is the proposed project possible, and will it have cost-effective impact (i.e., what are the costs, and how many people will benefit)?
- Should the Leahy War Victims Fund participate?

Findings and Recommendations for a Revised Proposal

Findings

A clear need exists in León for an effort to address the architectural barriers to mobility for persons with disabilities. With the exception of one tiny park, virtually no public places have provided for entrance by wheelchair users, even though the entrances to almost all public places are well above street level and separated from the street by high curbs. Even in the central plaza—the main gathering place for the population of the city—the consultant personally saw persons in wheelchairs having to be lifted by others to gain access and later to exit. In the private realm, only the newly constructed cinema complex is reported to have interior ramps to facilitate access by PWDs (although outside the building there is no facilitation of access to the cinema complex itself). An estimated 400 people use wheelchairs in the immediate León urban area. Many reportedly do not go anywhere because any excursion into town requires that the person be accompanied by someone who can help raise and lower the wheelchair and this spectacle serves to decrease confidence and feelings of independence among PWDs while increasing their self-consciousness.

Nicaragua, in general, and León, in particular, seem to be ready for a project addressing access issues. As has been noted previously, the National Rehabilitation Council is finally getting started, and both León and the issue of access have been given priority. Although the more basic mobility needs of some of those with disabilities in León have not yet been met—Walking Unidos has a waiting list for prosthetics, and other organizations have waiting lists for wheelchairs—the city has a sizable population who are already equipped and who would be able to take advantage of the increased mobility and independence that the León access project would provide. The high level of awareness among the local authorities of the need to provide access for PWDs suggests that, at least among the more educated sectors of the society, a high degree of consciousness

of the problem and a high degree of acceptance of the importance of addressing the issue already exist.

In general, León seems to have accepted that PWDs should be provided with needed equipment and should be encouraged to participate in the normal working and social life of society rather than be segregated. The city has reached the stage where acceptance must be gained, especially at the popular level, for actively assisting with integration of PWDs into society and for dealing with the physical and psychological barriers still interfering with that integration. Indeed, the consultant had the impression that León's civic pride could easily be touched by an access campaign. People are aware that in more developed societies access for those with disabilities has already become standard, and they seem anxious that their city should progress to this level of enlightenment and social consciousness. Human resources will thus not be a problem. Special technical skills required are minimal, and PAHO is ready to provide any technical capacities that are not locally available.

Further favoring action now in Nicaragua is the fact that the nation possesses a strong law requiring that special access be provided for PWDs that is now beginning to be implemented (as evidenced by recent organization and regular activity of the National Rehabilitation Council) and that could use some concrete support to increase its profile and credibility. Significant and helpful as well is the fact that construction standards have been published and circulated (though not yet incorporated into local law). León seems to be an ideal place to start a national campaign to address the access issue. Not only is it Nicaragua's second major city and chosen by the National Rehabilitation Council as its first priority, but also León, with its many sidewalks and concentrated downtown—containing many easily identifiable initial target sites such as the mayor's office, the electric company and water company bill payment offices, the central plaza, supermarkets, and banks—is physically an easier and more high-profile location for an initial effort than many other Nicaraguan cities.

León may be ripe for a project of this type, but the question remains whether Walking Unidos (and its international partner, the Polus Center) is the appropriate implementing organization for an initial access project. Although one can easily find organizations that by name or self-description are more naturally suited for a project that works with groups on a citywide level (WU up to now having concentrated on the specific medical-equipment needs of individual residents of León), the fact is that other organizations oriented toward serving persons with disabilities that operate in León, though strong in commitment to the cause, are not particularly strong organizations and have very limited experience managing major grants or even taking on large activities. Walking Unidos already has grant-management systems in place and considerable experience in meeting accountability requirements. Though not particularly well connected or well known at the national level, the organization has strong ties to the local network of NGOs serving persons with disabilities and has a high level of local credibility both with those organizations and with local authorities. WU will have to find additional staff members who are more expert in social mobilization and construction than its present staff members, who possess highly specific technical knowledge. However, the WU director is himself a good motivator and mobilizer with good connections and will no doubt be able to find appropriate personnel for this new type of task. PAHO can be counted on to provide external technical assistance when needed.

Another important consideration is the extent to which there is buy-in from local authorities and fit with their overall plans for the country and city. The extent to which the project is a perfect match with the priorities of the National Rehabilitation Council has already been discussed. It is perhaps important to add that the National Rehabilitation Council is still a very weak structure with little profile and few accomplishments. The Polus/WU access project will undoubtedly have a beneficial effect on the council, both strengthening it and contributing to its national profile and credibility. The project can serve as a model to be featured in media events and to be replicated in other locations. Lessons learned from the WU project will be critical in facilitating the council's approach to other cities in the country.

To assess the degree of awareness and commitment of local authorities, the consultant met with a PAHO representative, the mayor of León, the chief architect, and the chief engineer of the city. All agreed that it was important for the city to address the accessibility issue, seeing the need and seeming to sincerely understand the difficulties the current situation posed for PWDs. They readily admitted, however, that little had been done to date, except for the construction of some poorly designed ramps at one small public park in 1988. No one could explain whether the newly built cinema complex had provided for accessibility. (In fact, such provisions were made in the interior of the building, but no way exists for people in wheelchairs to get up to sidewalk level.) In response to the consultant's questions about building statutes, the architect responded that a proposal exists for new building codes and statutes that include provisions requiring accessibility for PWDs, but the proposal is still far from becoming law. She indicated that the city was currently contemplating an interim measure dealing specifically with the accessibility issue that could be made to enter into effect immediately. Both the architect and engineer expressed their availability to work closely with Walking Unidos and others in forming a committee to study the problem and seek solutions. The PAHO regional director for rehabilitation informed the local officials that some work on standards had already been done at the national level by the National Rehabilitation Council that would readily be made available to the city. The PAHO representative also discussed with the mayor the National Rehabilitation Council's plans to assist in forming local rehabilitation councils, starting with León—an idea that the mayor welcomed enthusiastically.

The mayor brought up his concern that any effort by the city government be accompanied by a strong public awareness campaign so that the citizens of León would understand why the work was being done and why it was important. Only through an extensive mobilization campaign would others begin to take the accessibility question into consideration in their own homes and in future construction plans. The PAHO representative, who had already stressed the importance of public awareness, mobilization, and participation in earlier conversations with the consultant, fully endorsed that key concept at this meeting. He took advantage of the opportunity to inform the mayor about the upcoming joint PAHO/National Rehabilitation Council seminar to be held in León in April 2001, to which local authorities, as well as civic groups, would be invited. The mayor assured the PAHO representative that the city could be counted on to participate actively. All agreed on the need to carefully coordinate accessibility projects with other city departments, including especially the police, to ensure their full cooperation and the successful implementation of the project as well as proper use of any wheelchair ramps or other construction modifications. The city's support, given its many needs and very limited resources, is likely to be primarily technical in planning, logistics, and execution.

The consultant met with representatives of the two other key actors cited in the proposal—León University and the Catholic Church. Like the local authorities, both the vice-rector of the University of León and a priest who is also León's most noted orthopedic surgeon (as well as a member of WU's board of directors) were very much in favor of initiating accessibility projects in León, not only to begin to relieve the problem but also to promote the issue by raising the profile of the accessibility question and bringing remedies into greater focus.

The vice-rector enthusiastically pledged his full support for the accessibility project and stressed his willingness to mount an awareness campaign among the university students. He assured us that volunteer labor would not be a problem. Because the vice-rector has a vision of the university as having important social responsibility roles, this project clearly fits in well with his plans for greater student involvement in the affairs of the community. The vice-rector thought some limited funding for support of activities on campus could be found. He admitted that the university had not yet done any architectural modifications (he made a mental note to see if some new construction already in progress could still be adapted), but noted that the university had recently been more than willing to move some classes from the second floor to the first floor to accommodate some students with disabilities in the law faculty.

The surgeon/priest encouraged Walking Unidos to pursue the accessibility question with Caritas and with parish priests, who he felt would react positively to the suggestion that parishioners be motivated at least to solve the problem of access to specific churches.

In an effort to identify other potential key actors and collaborators in an eventual accessibility project, the consultant met with various local NGOs whose programs are oriented toward PWDs. These included Organization of Disabled Revolutionaries (ORD), Centro de la Promoción de Rehabilitación y Integración de León (CEPRIL), one school for the disabled, and one wood-working training facility. Though these organizations confirmed the need to address access problems and pledged their support, the consultant did not have the impression that they had yet been brought into the discussions of this particular proposal. None appeared to have anything but minimal resources, and although they appeared to possess much goodwill and motivation, their activities were necessarily limited.

Recommendations

With respect to the general question about the potential impact of the project and its overall value and effectiveness when the beneficiary-to-cost ratio is considered, some aspects of the proposal appeared to have greater value than others. Evaluation of the various components of the project follows:

- The construction of ramps and handrails both inside and outside buildings frequented by the general public, including both government-owned and private sites, seemed to have a high cost-effective value. Walking Unidos constructed a trial ramp for under US\$100 total expense, with the majority of the cost being materials. Although the high-quality, built-to-specification ramps that will need to be constructed in downtown León will undoubtedly cost more, the increase should not be more than 100 or 200 percent, and the ratio of material-to-labor costs can probably be maintained.

- The proposed social mobilization and profile raising are critical for getting the most impact from the ramp and handrail construction effort. The community and government must be involved if the effort is to have any lasting effect. Therefore, the component of the project that has the grantee providing assistance in the formation and support of a varied-actor local project oversight committee must be given the highest attention and priority. Fortunately, even though this component is crucial, it should not involve significant costs.
- Less cost-effective, but no doubt of some major symbolic and profile-raising importance to the project, is the proposed purchase of 50 wheelchairs. Undoubtedly, more than 50 people are in need of wheelchairs in León, so this procurement alone will not solve the present problem of insufficient equipment in the city, let alone help with future needs. Because each wheelchair (depending on type) will cost US\$240 to US\$320, this component is expensive in terms of per beneficiary cost and significantly drives up the overall cost of the project.

On the positive side, however, 70 percent of the employees of the company from which the chairs will be purchased have disabilities, and the company produces locally chairs of impressive quality. One of the company's models—a multispeed tricycle—is particularly well suited to the rather rough streets and sidewalks (and lack of disability-friendly public transportation) of León. Widely popular in some other developing parts of the world for the great long-distance travel capacity they provide, chairs of this type, if supplied by the project and adopted by more users, could greatly improve the mobility of PWDs in Nicaragua and other less-developed parts of Central America while they wait for their governments to be capable of providing public transportation systems with wheelchair-accessible buses. Some high-profile new wheelchairs will be needed for the awareness campaign that will accompany the access-improving activities. Wheelchair distribution is an aspect of the project that could be taken on by the smaller (and weaker) partner NGOs in León that deal with PWDs and, if well supervised, could contribute to their credibility, profile, and institutional strength.

The Polus Center should carefully review this component for cost versus value before it is included in any revised proposal. Its retention, if justified, should be well explained. A provision in any eventual grant might also allow for the proposed León Access Committee to reallocate any resources earmarked for this component to another activity (such as more ramps) should the committee not agree with the plan.

- Other components requiring careful analysis and review before inclusion are the proposed wheelchair repair facility and the seating clinic. The latter seems much too specialized an activity to be cost-effective because the number of cases is not extremely high. The need for and usefulness of the wheelchair repair facility require further justification. If many wheelchairs are currently not getting timely repairs or any repair (which is what several advocacy organizations for PWDs told the consultant), it is unclear whether the problem is the lack of an appropriate facility or the lack of resources on the part of the wheelchair owners. If the latter is the problem, adding a specialized wheelchair workshop that will have to charge customers to become self-sufficient (so as to be spun off from Walking Unidos) would not seem to be of much help. Is a specialty shop required, or could existing bicycle repair shops handle the cases with just some specialized training? Do the Polus Center and Walking Unidos want to take on this potentially time-consuming

and resource-draining activity when other organizations (CEPRIL and ORD) have indicated that they have wheelchair repair workshops in their plans? Might WU's expansion into this area cause some inter-NGO tension?

- A wheelchair lift for a van that could carry PWDs to meetings of the León Access Committee and set an example would be a welcome addition to the city's infrastructure and capacity. However, to give this rather expensive piece of equipment a good cost-per-beneficiary ratio, its use would ideally not be limited to once-a-week meetings by selected delegates to a certain committee. In fact, any organization possessing such equipment will likely be deluged with requests from PWDs in León needing transportation from one point to another (or from other organizations in the area assisting them). Walking Unidos must carefully consider whether it wants this responsibility—when WU itself in its own activities rarely needs to transport people in wheelchairs—or whether it would be better to outfit another organization's vehicle for that purpose. Is another viable partner available for this component?
- The construction of two new houses to illustrate good design from the accessibility perspective and to serve both as models for future construction and as living facilities for two needy families with members with disabilities appears of rather limited value in terms of cost-effectiveness. The cost of new construction would be great but would really benefit only two PWDs, and the need to have available models could be addressed by much less costly renovations to a few existing houses with the beneficiaries to be selected, perhaps, by lottery. In any event, the need for such models should be confirmed by careful re-evaluation.

With respect to the ramp construction component and accompanying awareness program, the consultant offers the following suggestions to the project proposers:

- Instead of selecting of a 10-block area of León to rehabilitate, a higher-impact strategy, given the limited resources likely to be available, would probably be to have the León Accessibility Working Group (with its presumably numerous members with disabilities) identify, in all of León, the buildings where PWDs most need to go, and then prioritize those sites (working down the list as far as resources allow). The aim should not be to create a single PWD-friendly area because resources will probably not allow such an area to be very big and, although the idea sounds appealing, its impact is questionable. Rather, a few high-impact blocks should be made accessible to provide useful models and simultaneously advance significantly the goal of getting the principle of accessibility well established and lending the accessibility lobby greater public profile and power. Much more important in the long term than any modifications made during the initial project will be the effect on future construction in León, should the León Accessibility Working Group succeed in creating enough momentum and public support for the idea that the municipality ends up adopting building statutes that require compliance with access regulations (as judged by some competent and invested structure) before the issuance of building permits.
- To the extent possible, the project should agree to provide only materials to the León Accessibility Working Group. Residents or commercial enterprises on the affected blocks should be persuaded to contribute the manual labor costs, and the city of León in all cases

should contribute design and supervision by its technicians. (The private sector might be susceptible to the idea that dealing with this issue now is wise, while funds for materials are available, rather than waiting and risking that at some future moment public statutes might require it to cover all expenses.) Labor costs for any renovations to the interior of public buildings should be borne by the building owner in the case of private property or by the city or civil society (e.g., Rotary, Chamber of Commerce) in the case of public property.

- Rather than build access ramps to individual buildings from the street, the LAC should identify whole street blocks containing important buildings and then plan for ramps at each end of the block and sidewalk repairs in between. In this manner, all buildings on the block become more accessible with just a couple of ramps, and all houses and businesses in the block can be approached for contributions. Additionally, the daunting problem of protecting internal block ramps from no-parking-zone violators is avoided altogether.
- The Polus Center's involvement in the accessibility effort in León should not be open-ended; rather, it should be conceived and implemented as a onetime, limited-term experiment in the launching of an accessibility campaign in a developing country. Limited resources should be committed to the effort, and the time frame for involvement clearly delineated. Walking Unidos should plan on relinquishing any leadership role in the León accessibility effort at the end of the project period (though the organization may want to remain a member of the Working Group) and should return its focus to its primary activities and objectives.
- So that a variety of models are available to serve as a reference for future new construction in León, the project may find it advisable to take on the renovation of a least one public bathroom and at least one internal building ramp. Elevators and other types of lifts should probably be avoided altogether because they are likely to have poor cost-to-impact ratios. (If an opportunity exists somewhere to install one relatively inexpensive lift to serve as a model stairway modification, this effort could be considered, but the enthusiastic approval of a majority of members on the León Working Group for Access should be required before funds are diverted from simple ramp-building activities.)
- It may be possible to take advantage of the university's willingness to participate by having student groups first participate in the León Access Committee decision-making process and then do most of the door-to-door campaigning and solicitation of funds in the prioritized blocks.
- To maximize impact in terms of public awareness and to strengthen the future lobbying efforts of the León Working Group for Access, very conspicuous publicity should accompany ramp construction. Such publicity should include, but not be limited to, inauguration festivities for each block (where the mayor and other key participants are present). Interblock competition might even be encouraged.

Given the level of awareness on the accessibility issue already evident in conversations with civic leaders in León, the consultant believes that a limited-scope, limited-time, well-focused, concrete, and conspicuous access project could significantly advance the cause of PWD-friendly construction and renovation in León and elsewhere in Nicaragua. The aim of the project should

not be to fix León, nor even to fix a major part of León, but rather to try to help get the ball rolling, ideally inspiring the initiation of other similar projects (financed differently), but minimally providing at least some useful models and experience as well as furthering the cause of institutionalization of accessibility for persons with disabilities in public statutes.

If the Polus Center and Walking Unidos can develop a limited project with a high level of focus involving a restricted range of high-impact, low-cost activities to be carried out within a relatively short and clearly delineated time frame, avoiding any long-term commitment or investment by either organization, the War Victims Fund should consider supporting the project. An effective organizational strategy for all parties might be for the donor to determine the amount of funding that could or should be made available for this type of project and to let the implementing organizations decide exactly how impact can best be maximized with that level of resources.

LIST OF CONTACTS

León

Walking Unidos

León City Government

University of León

León Hospital

CEPRIL

ORD

Special school for children with disabilities

Carpentry shop for PWDs

Wheelchair user

“Office Center” Internet facility

Managua

Organización Panamericana de la Salud (PAHO)

National Rehabilitation Council

ICRC/Cenaport

FUMI (wheelchair manufacturing plant)

USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development)