



November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019

**Re: Formal submission for the BC Framework for Accessibility Legislation from Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility**

The Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, now operating as Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility, is the largest charitable non-profit organization in Western Canada providing services that help Deaf and Hard of Hearing British Columbians achieve full communication accessibility. Established in 1956, Wavefront Centre provides services in Audiology, Employment Counseling, Seniors Outreach, Sign Language Interpreting, Communication Devices as well as projects for clinical research and knowledge translation. Wavefront Centre embraces and values a diverse and inclusive work environment as our staff come from a variety of backgrounds, experiences and cultures. 32% of our staff, 50% of our Board and 85% of our volunteers have direct lived experience with hearing loss and deafness. In fall of 2019, Wavefront Centre moved into a new facility that was purpose-built to create a welcoming and accessible space for those with hearing/communication, vision, mobility and aging challenges.

We salute the BC Government's initiative to develop a formal framework for accessibility legislation. We look forward in providing support through further consultations and to provide recommendations and advice based on our 63 years of experience in providing services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Several of our staff and Board have attended public consultation meetings, and we are additionally providing a formal submission. Below are our answers to the questions posed during the consultation process.

**What Accessibility Legislation Could Look Like in BC**

1) What is most important to you about accessibility legislation for BC?

Accessibility legislation provides a legal and formal framework that has the authority to set a standard to ensure that all British Columbians with disabilities will be able to fully participate in their communities, whether it be public social spaces, educational and work places. Wavefront Centre is deeply invested in the sphere of accessibility related to communication. Our mission is to serve Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, their families, and the community by delivering innovative programs, products and solutions to achieve full communication accessibility. Our vision believes in a society where Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Hearing people can interact freely without communication barriers.

Communication is fundamental to creating strong social connections with one's family, social, workplace and community networks. Hearing loss and deafness affects the establishment and stability of social connections, leading to poorer mental and physical health outcomes. For our growing senior population, social connections are particularly important to healthy aging and longevity. Those with hearing loss with reduced social connections have a higher risk of social isolation and loneliness, falls and injuries, frailty and depression, cognitive decline, and mortality compared to those with normal hearing.

To achieve a strong sense of belonging and agency, seniors are encouraged to participate in community activities to reduce social isolation and loneliness. Although there are many seniors centres and programs in BC, most are inaccessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing seniors due to

a lack of accommodation for their communication and culturally Deaf needs. Many Deaf and Hard of Hearing seniors require hearing aids, assistive listening and alerting devices, or they may communicate through American Sign Language (ASL). Deaf and Hard of Hearing seniors, already at risk for social isolation by being a senior, are further marginalized by their hearing loss and deafness. For those in our DeafBlind community, the dual sensory difficulties further places them at risk for reduced social connections.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing seniors often report reluctance in attending regular seniors programs offered in community centres. They worry they will not be able to hear the instructor or presenter. If they are Deaf and use ASL, they will not understand the instructor and be left with feelings of frustration and isolation. Deaf and Hard of Hearing seniors often withdraw from these opportunities because they do not feel they can actively participate.

Having accessibility legislation is very important for those with hearing loss and deafness. Legislation will help ensure built environments, public spaces, programs and events will be designed or modified to be communicatively accessible. This will empower persons with hearing loss and deafness achieve full access to all of their environments, leading them to live full and inclusive lives, and build healthy connections within their communities.

Recently, Wavefront Centre built and moved into a new facility designed with communication accessibility as a key priority. We gratefully acknowledge and appreciate the BC government's support of our building project. We are now eager to share our knowledge and expertise of this built environment to help develop guidelines that will transform public spaces, programs and services so that they are accessible for all - Deaf, the Hard of Hearing and Hearing - because communication accessibility benefits everyone.

2) What do you think about the suggested model for legislation and scope of legislation?

We agree with the suggested model and scope for legislation as it supports coordination and consistency between provincial and federal accessibility legislation. Ideally, accessibility is universal, such that a person travelling from one province to another will be able to experience access and accommodation equally. Both federal and provincial legislation should share the same core principles that will establish guidelines to ensure public, educational and workplace environments are designed and built to accommodate persons with disabilities such as hearing loss and deafness. We also appreciate that the legislation not only outlines objectives for accessibility and inclusion, but also ensures the standards and regulations will be developed in conjunction with stakeholders, including specialized organizations such as Wavefront Centre. It's also important that those with direct lived experience of a disability have a strong voice at the table when these standards are developed.

3) Do you have other ideas for the model for legislation and scope of legislation you would like considered?

We appreciate that the suggested model is broad-based but still aims to develop specific objectives. When developing the objectives and tools to form the accessibility standards, consideration should be made so that the primary objectives benefit and "work for all" because a recommended standard for one disability is not always feasible for another disability. For example, voice enunciators are recommended for elevators to help provide clarity for riders so they are better aware of floor levels. However voice enunciators are not well suited for those with hearing loss, as some may misunderstand or misinterpret the voice, or become alarmed

when they hear something they can't understand, especially if they are riding alone in the elevator.

In another example of conflicting priorities for accommodations, desks that are lined up along the walls in an office may improve mobility accessibility, but can create a barrier for communication accessibility. Desks that are spaced along the walls of an office allow for an optimal turning radius for wheelchairs. However, this layout may also require a person to be seated with their back towards the door. Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons rely heavily on visual and tactile cues, to help with spatial awareness and orientation. Having them sit with their back to an open office door will create a communication barrier as they will not hear someone entering the room.

Some accommodation features have a broader scope of accessibility. For example, wider hallways improve mobility accessibility for those who use wheelchairs or walkers for support. Wider hallways also improve communication accessibility as people now have space to walk or move side-by-side and concurrently carry out face-to-face verbal or sign language communication.

It is therefore important that when developing accessibility standards, that a best practice model is designed to meet all persons with disabilities, but to allow room for variance as accommodations that benefit one disability may inadvertently create a barrier for another disability.

- 4) What do you think about the suggested purposes and principles for legislation?

We greatly support the concept that promoting accessibility involves collaboration to help ensure accessibility supports all disabilities.

- 5) Do you have other ideas about the purposes and principles that should guide accessibility legislation?

We believe strongly that a consortium where experts with lived experience work closely with government to help guide the principles for accessibility legislation.

- 6) What do you think about the suggested approach to accessibility standards?

We agree with the suggested approach as it captures the areas of accessibility that would be important for one's personal, social and vocational living. We also appreciate the two levels of voluntary and mandatory accessibility. This ensures a minimum standard for all, and creates opportunities for organizations, businesses, etc to aspire to a better standard whenever and wherever possible. It is hoped that in time, standards that are considered voluntary today will become a new norm over time, and thus become a mandatory standard when technology and supports develop over time.

- 7) What do you think about the suggested approach to timelines for accessibility legislation?

We appreciate the government believes in the urgency of developing accessibility legislation and is considering expediting the development of accessibility standards by adopting or building on existing standards used in Canada and around the world. However, it is important to note that with accessibility standards pertaining to communication, there are few formal standards established and it will take time for proper research and review by experts, stakeholders and

communities from the relevant fields. Moreover, existing guidelines should be reviewed to ensure these guidelines are representative of current models of accessibility and current viewpoints and needs of persons with disabilities.

- 8) Do you have other ideas about the development of accessibility standards or timelines for accessibility standards?

It's important that accessibility standards are developed with a variety of stakeholders providing input. With hearing loss and deafness this should include persons with direct lived experience with hearing loss and deafness, along with their families and support networks; hearing health professionals such as audiologists and gerontologists; counselors; educators; sign language interpreters; employers; architects; acoustic and electrical engineers; and other experts who work with and support those who have hearing loss and deafness;

- 9) What do you think about the suggested approach to governance for accessibility legislation?

We agree with the suggested approach to governance and support the structure of the Accessibility Directorate, the Standards Development Board and the Accessibility Commissioner.

- 10) Do you have other ideas about governance for accessibility legislation?

Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility recommends when setting up the members for the Standards Development Board, membership on this board is through an open and transparent application process to ensure that a wide variety of stakeholders have opportunity to apply to be a member of the Board or allied committee. The application process should ask for evidence of relevant expertise and experience, with supporting references. We also recommend that different Board committees be developed for specific disabilities or challenges, so that they can develop recommendations specific to their needs. The Standards Development Board could then review the recommendations from all the committees and be tasked with developing standards that will be the best fit for all. The Board should plan an annual review of the standards to ensure these standards are still in keeping with current trends in disability supports and philosophies. For this type of legislation, we believe it is important to introduce a consortium where experts with lived experience work closely with local establishments to ensure they agree on guiding principles.

- 11) What do you think about the suggested approach to incentives, compliance, and enforcement for accessibility legislation?

We are supportive of this approach that provides incentives to help organizations meet accessibility standards. Compliance and enforcement measures are key to ensure businesses and organizations fully embrace the principles behind the accessibility legislation.

In developing processes for compliance and enforcement, we recommend a process where there is active oversight, where it is more than a checklist that businesses can "tick off" areas of compliance. In our experience of over 63 years, we have observed many situations where our clients with hearing loss have worked for organizations and businesses that appear on the surface to be accommodating, but do not necessarily put accessibility principles to practice. In such cases, clients have faced dismissiveness, discrimination, reduced opportunities for career

advancement and even dismissals. We have had to intervene on behalf of our clients, and provide intervention through consultative meetings and sensitivity training workshops.

Accessibility is more than checking off a tick box, and hiring someone with a disability. It is more than installing a wheelchair ramp, a visual alerting system, or an amplified phone. The values and principles behind accessibility should be core to any organization's policies – where everyone, from the executive leader and the human resources manager, all the way down to the entry-level worker, believes and practices a culture of accessibility. In such organizations, if a person with a disability faced a challenge or barrier, the organization will strive to the best of its ability to help the person overcome the barrier.

More in-depth evaluation of compliance could include periodic on-site accessibility audits, self-evaluations by the employer and employee with the disability, interviews with the employee, workplace and public surveys, and developing activities that promote and educate the principles of accessibility.

Accessibility legislation with proper oversight, implementation and enforcement will help support a true culture of accessibility.

- 12) Do you have other ideas about how to achieve the right mix of incentives and compliance/enforcement tools for accessibility legislation?

We have witnessed that incentives are helpful to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities and to encourage architects and designers to create work, educational and public spaces that are free from barriers. Legislation will create opportunities for businesses to set exemplary examples of quality accessibility. Perhaps there can be creative and inspiring challenges set up between businesses and organizations to promote and achieve accessibility in the workplace. Once committed, businesses will need support from experts in the relevant field to help them reach compliance and these supports are best applied before or on the first day of employment. These supports can come in the form of sensitivity training workshops, education about the disability and accommodations, and on-site support to help with implementation. Regular reviews of the compliance should be undertaken, such as six to twelve months initially, reducing to annual or bi-annual depending on the compliance review outcomes. Positive reinforcement, tax benefits, awards and recognition are also strategies to contemplate to support the accessibility legislation.

- 13) What do you think about having reviews of accessibility legislation?

Regular reviews of accessibility legislation is absolutely necessary to ensure that the standards are up to date with current best practice models. A timeline and corresponding deadline for all businesses to meet standards is also recommended. Failure to meet this time frame should induce a penalty.

- 14) If you support legislative reviews, how often should they occur?

We recommend specialized disability committees be created, and they should meet one to two times per year (more frequently initially), and report annually to the Standards Development Board. The Standards Development Board should meet once per year (more frequently initially) to review current models of accessibility and make recommendations for legislative review. Legislative review should occur once per year initially, and move to every two years if the

legislation has been adopted well. The frequency of reporting and reviews can be adjusted depending on the compliance outcomes of accessibility standards.

15) What other initiatives or actions would you recommend to promote a culture of accessibility?

Regular and frequent public messaging about accessibility is very important, particularly for those disabilities with less public exposure. In our field, communication accessibility is often an afterthought – hearing loss and deafness is an invisible disability and it can be difficult to convince the public, employers, educators, funders about the negative effects of untreated hearing loss on social connections, which leads to poorer mental and physical health outcomes.

Messaging that is established and practiced by government that promote examples and models for communication accessibility will make a significant contribution in creating public awareness and establishing new norms for accessibility.

We encourage all video messaging to be captioned and interpreted with sign language; we encourage print media to have options that are accessible to the Deaf and DeafBlind; we encourage audio messaging to be delivered in clear speech with alternate versions provided with captioning; we encourage training of all government workers and employees to practice effective oral and written communication strategies, as good communication accessibility benefits everyone – the Deaf, the Hard of Hearing and the Hearing. We encourage all built spaces take into consideration the needs of those with hearing loss and deafness, and create communication friendly environments that benefit everyone, with or without hearing loss.

16) How else can accessibility legislation support cultural change and vice-versa?

Accessibility legislation can also support cultural change by requiring businesses and organizations to promote how their environments are accessible and what they are doing to contribute to accessibility. Correspondingly, those with direct lived experience with a disability, along with their support networks, be it their families, health and education professionals, etc, can be provided with options and incentives to speak of their experiences and recommendations in publicly attended forums and social media platforms. Workshops and health fairs can be planned between government, non-profits, businesses, disability groups to promote awareness and knowledge translation activities for a specific disability. The most important thing we can all do is to increase the community narrative around accessibility, so that accessibility becomes a new norm and a natural part of our daily living.

On behalf of Wavefront Centre, thank you for this opportunity to provide this formal submission. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email: [grace.shyng@wavefrontcentre.ca](mailto:grace.shyng@wavefrontcentre.ca) or phone: 604-736-7391 with any questions.

We look forward to the opportunity to contribute and be a partner in the development of this accessibility legislation.

Sincerely,



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