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Accessible Information and Communication – the Deaf perspective - Karen Lloyd, Manager, Australian Association of the Deaf

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to talk with you today. We do not often have an opportunity to meet so many people from different government agencies in one room to talk about the Deaf perspective on accessible information and communication.

Have you had much contact with Deaf people? When you think about Deaf people, what springs first to mind? Cochlear implants? Hearing aids? Sign language?

When I meet a hearing person for the first time and let the person know I'm deaf – eg if I go into a bank, or I'm checking in for a flight at the airport – there are several almost “standard” responses. They include:

- “Ummm...ummm...” hand to mouth, nervous what-do-I-do-now reaction.
- “I'm sorry I can't sign.” – smiling, nervous.
- Blank look, and continues talking as if I have not said anything while I stand there uncomprehendingly.
- Nod, smile, speaks calmly to me/waits to see what I do – do I speak? Do I ask for pen and paper or produce my own and begin writing?
- And increasingly now...makes an effort to use the (usually limited) sign language they know.

The last two reactions are much more common now than they used to be. Access is improving for Deaf people. But there is still a very long way to go. The first three types of reaction are still very common. Progress is very slow and information is still difficult for Deaf people to access.

So what can government agencies do to make information and communication accessible for Deaf people?

Information and communication occurs in various contexts. How we make it accessible depends on the context. I will talk about three broad contexts, but there is some overlap between them.

Verbal/in-person information and communication

The examples of common responses that I used earlier happen in verbal, in-person situations. If you have front line staff who deal with the public, these staff will sooner or later meet a Deaf person and have to communicate with them. The best thing you can do to make sure this communication is successful is to include Deafness Awareness Training as part of regular staff training programs. These Deafness Awareness Training programs should be conducted by Deaf people so that

communicating with a Deaf person is part of the training itself. A hearing person standing up in front of a bunch of hearing people and talking about Deaf people does not have the same impact.

In one-on-one communication situations where the message is relatively simple and predictable, eg as before, at the bank teller's counter or the airport check-in counter, we can usually find a way to communicate effectively – there is always pen and paper as a last resort.

However, Deaf people's primary or preferred language is Auslan and many are not fluent in English. This means that if the communication is not a simple and predictable transaction situation it is important to bring in an Auslan interpreter. Even if the Deaf person is fluent in English and has good speech, the oral (lipreading and speech) communication method is unreliable and there are situations where an interpreter is required. An interpreter is also usually required if there are a number of people involved in the communication.

All government agency staff who deal with the public should know when and how to involve an interpreter. They should also know that if a Deaf person requests an interpreter in order to communicate with them, then it is their responsibility to arrange and pay for interpreting. It is unfortunately common for government agencies (and business too) to resist providing interpreters when they should be providing them, or to not understand their obligations to provide them, and this issue needs to be addressed. Information about this should be included in regular Deafness Awareness Training programs for staff and in internal policies and procedures.

Technology based information and communication

Did you know that when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone he was trying to find a way to help deaf and hard of hearing people? Bell was a teacher of the deaf and his wife was deaf. It was his interest in deafness and his fascination with acoustics that led to his invention of the telephone.

This little piece of history is well known in the Deaf community. But how many of you knew it? It is one of life's supreme ironies that the telephone went on to become one of the most disabling inventions ever for deaf people. We have struggled ever since to make telecommunications-based technology accessible for us.

For decades now we have had TTYs – telephone typewriters. But a TTY can only communicate with another TTY. How many government agencies have a TTY – and staff who know how to use it – so that Deaf people can call them direct for information?

Of course, after a decade of lobbying by AAD, we now also have the National Relay Service which means that a text user (TTY, telebraille or computer) can communicate with anyone on a voice telephone via a human Relay Officer. The Relay Officer reads the text message to the voice caller and types the voice message to the text caller. How many of you know what the NRS is, what it does, and how to use it? How many of you have actually used it?

Information about the NRS and how to use it should be available to all staff of government agencies and included in Deafness Awareness Training programs.

Today a common sight is a group of Deaf people conversing in Auslan while one or more of their group is using a mobile phone. Deaf people with mobile phones? We use them for SMS messaging and SMS is taking over from TTYs as the preferred telephone contact method – between Deaf people themselves and between Deaf and hearing people. Of course SMS has limited uses, but government agencies should think about how they can harness developments like this as a method of making their information and communication accessible.

Email also is a very useful and popular way to communicate with and provide information for Deaf people. It gets around the problem of the telephone – even though we have TTYs and the NRS there is still a lingering perception among hearing people that using them is difficult. This is of course just fear of the unknown, but nevertheless this reluctance is there. Most of my own work contact with hearing people now is done through email. But again, be aware that email is English-based and not all Deaf people are fluent in English.

Written/stored and distributed information

When you provide information in a written format, it is important to consider how it is written. Is it easy to understand? Is it clear and concise? These things help everyone to understand information and they especially help Deaf people whose primary language is not English. This applies to all text information, from pamphlets to websites.

Information should also be provided in formats that the user can most effectively access. For Deaf people this means Auslan. Since Auslan is a visual language, information can be translated into Auslan and stored and distributed on video.

Auslan video clips can be put on websites. Although there are technical issues involved with this we hope to see these issues resolved in the near future and information distribution in Auslan over the Internet become more commonplace.

And finally, when government agencies produce information on video – ie standard video for everyone – or for television advertisements or video clips and audio information on websites, these videos, advertisements, video clips and audio information need to be captioned. Even if a video or advertisement is totally silent with no audio information, there should be captions to tell the Deaf viewer there is no sound! Otherwise we naturally assume we are missing out on information that might be important.

I hope this brief information gives you some ideas of relatively simple ways you can make your information and communication accessible to Deaf people. We at AAD are always happy to talk with you about these issues and to provide advice and further information that will help you on the road to equal access for our Deaf community.