



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into access to services
and information in Auslan

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Submission by Amanda Dolejsi

Inquiry into Access and Information in Auslan

Please accept the following as my submission into the ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Access and Information in Auslan.

Background

My husband Ivan is profoundly Deaf and uses Auslan as his primary method of communication. Ivan attended the Victorian School for Deaf Children in Melbourne and has been a member of the Deaf Community all his life. Our family all use Auslan to communicate.

I am a Certified Auslan/English interpreter with nearly 40 years experience in the profession. I have also been an active member of the Deaf Community for much longer having been a founding member and President of the ACT Deafness Council (now known as the ACT Deafness Resources Centre) as well as the ACT branch of the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA). I was also President of the national ASLIA body.

I also taught Auslan and Auslan Interpreting courses at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) for over 20 years.

Aged Care

My husband is now of the age where he receives services through My Aged Care to support his independence at home. I am extremely fearful of ever having to consider an Aged Care facility for him as there are none in the ACT that could support his communication needs. Ivan does not lipread and needs Auslan to communicate. He also has a significant vision loss and I fear for his mental health and general wellbeing if we are ever faced with this decision.

I know that many other Deaf seniors have similar fears of the isolation they would experience in Aged Care facilities where no one is able to communicate with them using Auslan. While some Deaf people do use lipreading skills to assist them in communication they have learned to lipread an English speaker with an Australian accent. Second language English speakers have an 'accent' which is very difficult to lipread.

Solution

The Canberra Deaf Community would very much like to see a specialised Aged Care facility that can support the language and culture of Deaf Canberrans. This does not need to be a stand-alone facility but can be incorporated into an already existing facility where the staff have regular training in Auslan and Deaf culture and where Deaf people can be employed to provide language and communication support to residents. Interpreters would need to be on-call or on staff to always ensure that clear and accurate medical information is being provided to residents and medical personnel.

Deaf staff members could provide recreational communication access and other supports to residents to ensure they have ample opportunity to express themselves and be understood.

Education and Training

Mainstreaming does not work for our children. Isolating them from their peers is not acceptable for our Deaf and HoH children.

For many Deaf people their education was a traumatic experience. The education policy of mainstreaming Deaf and HoH children forces them into an isolated educational experience. These children are usually the only Deaf or HoH child in a school where Auslan is not taught as a LOTE subject and teachers and support staff have little if any specialised training in having a Deaf or HoH child in their classroom.

The child may get the services of a visiting Teacher of the Deaf (ToD) for a few hours per week but other than that the child is left to manage on their own. They do not have regular contact with other Deaf or HoH children to develop appropriate peer relationships and many go through school having no real friendship group. They are often bullied and alone most of the time. This does not bode well for their developing personalities, and I have a genuine fear for their future mental health.

Some children may have access to Auslan assistance in the classroom but there is no formal NAATI Certification in Auslan required by the ACT Education department for these assistants. While it is considered a 'desirable' requirement it is not seen as 'essential'.

However, probably for the first time ever, most of the Auslan Assistants currently working for ACT Education do have either a Diploma of Auslan Interpreting or a NAATI Provisional Certification. A Diploma of Auslan Interpreting should be the minimum qualification required to undertake this role. These people are, after all, the language models for the Deaf students and therefore should have evidence of their fluency in the languages they are working with.

This level of fluency should also apply to the Teachers of the Deaf (ToD). Currently, one of the (ToD) has a NAATI qualification, while another is Deaf and uses Auslan fluently. The remainder of the ToDs do not have fluency in Auslan.

Many of the parents have NDIS funding for Auslan Classes in the Home so that the whole family can learn at the same time. However, there is currently only one Deaf Auslan tutor available to provide this service.

Solution

I firmly believe that bringing all Deaf and HoH children into one facility is the most beneficial educational option for our children. There is a lot of research available that will attest to this practice being more beneficial to Deaf and HoH students. The Deaf Community also agree that educating Deaf children together has far better educational and mental health outcomes than does mainstreaming. This above all other reasons should be enough to create change for it is the Deaf Community who have the lived experience of mainstreamed education and have first-hand knowledge of its detrimental impacts not only on their education but on their mental health.

I would recommend that the ACT Education Department establishes a Deaf/HoH Education Facility which would comprise a cluster of schools in a particular location where we can educate our Deaf and HoH children together from Pre-school through to Year 12.

This would be a stand-alone facility which could be embedded within an already established school cluster. However, the staff and the whole school community would need to be committed to this way of educating Deaf and HoH children and be prepared to teach Auslan as their LOTE language. This should be a place where children progress in peer groups through their Pre-school, Primary and Secondary school education – just like Hearing children do.

This facility would be an Auslan friendly educational environment where Auslan is taught to all students as their LOTE language and where Auslan is the language of instruction for Deaf students from Pre-school through Primary school. Secondary students would be supported with qualified Auslan/ English interpreter support and additional tutoring provided by ToD.

Students who prefer to develop their oral/aural skills can do so on the same campus with appropriate support and still benefit from learning about the linguistics of Auslan and Deaf culture as well. History has proven that many of these Oral/Aural students will find their way to the Deaf Community after years of anger, frustration, and isolation. They will learn Auslan later but never become truly fluent. Making sure that these children have an understanding and some skills in Auslan will help to smooth that transition and help to elevate those feelings of not belonging anywhere. They may function quite well in the 'Hearing World' but at least they know where to find their Deaf peers when they need them.

Above all, students would have a choice and they may move between the Auslan and Oral communication streams as they wish knowing that their choices will be supported and nurtured.

This facility could also have the capacity to provide Playgroups/ Parent groups with early intervention Auditory and Auslan programs for newly diagnosed babies and their families. A place where parents and children can come for unbiased information and support and feel safe and supported on their journey. This would be a facility where their deafness is nurtured and developed and not seen as an impairment or a deficiency.

Emergency Services

000 Emergency Calls

To the best of my knowledge there is no SMS contact for 000 emergency number. If there is a number, then it is not widely publicised.

Emergency Alerts

The Deaf Community do not understand how the emergency SMS alert system notifying you of bushfires etc. works. More information in Auslan is required about this service.

Emergency Departments

Neither emergency departments at Canberra or Calvary Hospitals have an effective process for contact Auslan/English interpreters should a Deaf person present at their ED and require one.

There have been many instances where Deaf people have asked for an interpreter and many reasons that they are told that they cannot have one. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

- It is out of hours so they can't contact the interpreter service.
This is incorrect.
- They cannot find the contact information for the Auslan Interpreter service and ask the Deaf person for the contact information.
They DO have the contact information for the 24-hour Emergency Auslan Interpreter Service. It has been provided to the staff there many times.
- They don't have the payment code for the service so they must wait until the accounts department opens to get approval before they can book one.
This really should not be an issue. I find this excuse to be quite baffling. If it hadn't happened while I was present, I wouldn't have believed it. The Deaf patient was so fed up with negotiating an interpreter that she booked one via the Emergency interpreting service herself using her NDIS funding.
- They contact TIS (Telephone Interpreter Service) and are told that there are no Auslan interpreters.
Auslan interpreting services has never been provided by TIS.

Mental Health, Domestic Violence and Rape Crisis

None of these services can be accessed by Deaf people using an SMS number. If a Deaf person is in crisis, they cannot access crisis help. If the service is accessed by other means, ie a hearing person makes a phone call on behalf of the Deaf person, then it is usual that the service does not know how to book an Auslan interpreter. These services often believe that the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) is their first point of contact for all interpreting needs. Their confusion I believe stems from the posters that are visible throughout all ACT Health services telling patients and staff to contact TIS for their interpreting needs. TIS has never provided Auslan interpreting Services.

I am aware of at least one Deaf person who presented at ED experiencing a mental health crisis. The staff did not know how to book an interpreter and the person was sent home. This person was suicidal.

Solution

Contact information for the 24-hour Auslan Interpreter Service and the Deaf Connect Auslan Interpreting Service be placed on the staff intranet and other easily accessible hospital information sites.

Posters be developed containing the contact information and outlining Deaf patient's right to access Auslan interpreting services be placed next to ALL TIS posters in ALL ACT Health facilities.

Health Care

Hospitals

I have outlined the issues regarding access to the Hospital Emergency Department in the previous heading.

However, patients who are admitted into hospital also have great difficulty accessing interpreting services. The Ward staff have little if any knowledge of how to go about doing this. Most Deaf patients would see their visiting medical professionals on their morning rounds without having an interpreter present. This is not informed health care.

I know of one patient who was seen by his attending surgeon prior to surgery without an interpreter being present. The patient believed that the surgery was to clean and scrape some infection from his foot. The patient woke from anesthetic post operation to find that toes had been amputated. Apparently, this was some important information that was imparted by the surgeon that the patient did not understand – nor consent to.

Health care websites

During the Covid pandemic there was a lot of important information being produced and placed on the department's website. Little if any of this information was in Auslan.

While it was wonderful to have Auslan interpreters on screen with the Health Officials during the pandemic this has not stopped. There is still important information being disseminated to the public about changes to regulations but none of this being interpreted into Auslan.

Solution

All information contained on the ACT Health website be interpreted into Auslan. There are very professional Auslan translation services available in Australia and I am sure that a contract with one of these services to provide an ongoing translation service could be arranged.

I would also suggest that ACT Government research the Auslan Interpreting services provided by Convo. Convo provides real time Auslan interpreting services via Smartphones. Their services can be accessed pretty much anywhere with a Smartphone or iPad. Eg the Access Canberra Shop Front, Walk-In Nurse Medical Centers, Baby Health Clinics, GPs, Dental surgeries. It would be wonderful access for Deaf Canberrans if the ACT Government contracted Convo to provide real time Auslan Interpreting for their public contact services. This would help to take the pressure off the local Auslan interpreters who are providing the face-to-face on-site services.

Justice

Police

The ACT Police are a 'repeat offender' regarding their complete lack of knowledge around how to book Auslan interpreters.

Recently I received a request to do an AFP job. The request came via a SMS sent to my daughter from an AFP employee who happened to know my daughter and knew that I worked as an Auslan interpreter.

Deaf people who attend Police stations seeking help are often told they need to bring their own interpreter with them.

Police officers are not trained about how to communicate with Deaf people they are taking into custody. You cannot place handcuffs on their arms when they are behind their back. They need their hands to help to communicate visually. Handcuffing with arms in front of the body is just as effective and allows the Deaf person to still use their hands to communicate.

I am also attaching a very disturbing story of Police behavior towards a member of the Canberra Deaf community. I request that this story remain confidential and not be published.

Court

ACT Courts still have some issues around booking Auslan interpreters.

There are also issues around the Courts understanding that a Deaf interpreter might also be required when communicating with a Deaf person from overseas especially refugees.

Many Deaf refugees are not literate in the Mother Tongue of their country of birth. They generally cannot read or write that language, nor do they have a Signed Language from that country. It is common practice that a Deaf interpreter is employed to help facilitate communication between the legal professionals, the Auslan interpreter and the Deaf client.

Media

This is an area where the ACT Government has excelled during the recent bushfires and pandemic. Auslan interpreters were clearly visible on screen and most press conferences were open captioned.

Even in times when there has been no emergency declared, these press conferences should still be interpreted. If the need to communicate information to the community requires a press conference, then the need is also there to have an Auslan interpreter present.

Social opportunities

Deaf seniors do face significant problems when trying to access Aged Care services. They are not able to directly book community transport or use community buses because these services are not accessible by SMS. Many Deaf seniors have funding in their My Aged Care packages for this type of service but cannot use them.

Since the Covid pandemic, access to social opportunities has improved for the Deaf Community mainly due to DeafACT receiving some funding from the NDIA for community wellbeing activities. Deaf Seniors in particular, have taken advantage of this funding and

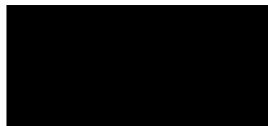
meet every fortnight for either a coffee and chat catch up or to go out to various venues for morning tea and/or lunch. They also venture interstate on short day bus trips to places like the Bowral Bradman Museum and to Yass. In September they will go to Sydney by bus to see a matinee performance of Mary Poppins that will be Auslan interpreted.

Since many of our seniors no longer drive and cannot access Community Transport, it is left to those community members who are still mobile to arrange carpools to the fortnightly catchups.

We sincerely hope that DeafACT can continue to support these activities as they are a lifeblood to our seniors who live alone and are isolated from communication.

In closing, I am more than happy to appear before the Committee to clarify any of the issues contained in my submission.

Signed:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the person submitting the document.

Date: 3rd July 2022