

2020

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO
MOTION ON AUSLAN SUPPORT DURING EMERGENCY SITUATIONS**

**Presented by
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Madam Speaker

On 12 February 2020, the ACT Legislative Assembly passed the motion titled *Auslan Support During Emergency Situations*. The agreed motion calls on the Government to:

- a) ensure that all communications policies and procedures for emergency situations include provision of Auslan interpreters on screen and live captioning as well as briefing of media representative including camera operators on the needs of deaf and hearing-impaired people;
- b) continue strategies, incentives and potentially scholarships to assist people to become National Accredited Authority Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) accredited in Auslan to build local capability; and
- c) report back to the Assembly on progress against (a) and (b) by June 2020 and present the Government's communication protocols or policies/procedures.

I'd like to start by correcting some of the statements made by Ms Lawder during the discussion of this motion on 12 February 2020.

Ms Lawder claimed that the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community had been neglected by the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) during the emergency events of December and January this year. This could not be further from the truth.

Ms Lawder stated that radio is the prime source of information in an emergency. In the past this may have been the case, however, information is now accessible through print media, graphics, and video both live and pre-recorded.

The ESA consistently reminded all members of our community that during an emergency they need to ensure that they have multiple avenues to access their information. There are many different scenarios in an emergency event, one of them being that your primary source of information may not be available at a particular point in time. This is why we ask the community to be resilient and prepared.

Ms Lawder also claimed that there were no policies and procedures in place to engage Auslan interpreters during emergency situations, and that the only reason the ESA engaged Auslan interpreters after the heavy smoke event in late December was due to the number of complaints received. Again, this is not correct.

I table for the information of Members the ESA's Operating Guides on *Emergency Information for Communities of Concern* and *Auslan Interpreters and Live Captions*. I also table the Partnership Agreement between the Deaf Society and the ESA.

The ESA Operating Guides have been in place for several years and are updated regularly to assist the ESA in meeting community expectations. They have also been updated recently in light of some of the lessons learnt from the bushfires earlier this year.

An agreement between the Deaf Society and the ESA has been in place since 2015 and has also recently been updated following the recent bushfire and storm events in the ACT.

The Partnership Agreement guides collaboration between the ESA and the Deaf Society in the following ways:

- a) provision of Auslan interpreting services for announcements and information sharing during emergency events;
- b) training for ESA personnel on working with Auslan interpreters and deaf awareness;
- c) translation services for key safety information on the ESA website; and
- d) communication with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community outside of emergency events.

Consistent with the requirements of all jurisdictions across Australia, an Auslan interpreter is engaged when emergency services need the community to start taking action to a potential threat.

The heavy smoke event in late December was as a result of the bushfires on the NSW coastline. The information on the health effects of smoke were being coordinated through ACT Health. The ESA's role in relation to the heavy smoke was to reassure the community that there was no imminent threat to Canberrans from the bushfires.

An Auslan interpreter was engaged by the ESA on 2 January 2020, as soon as a State of Alert was declared. This was in line with the ESA Operating Guides I have just tabled.

Claiming an emergency services agency has neglected a portion of the community, as Ms Lawder did in her speech on 12 February, is a strong claim given that their very existence is to protect all members of the community.

Many members of the Cabinet all spent time at the ESA Headquarters throughout the Beard and Orroral Valley fires and we saw first-hand the considerations of the ESA during these operations. We know how unfair Ms Lawder's criticism of the ESA is in this instance.

The ESA has the responsibility of communicating information about emergency events to the public via its website and social networking platforms, as well as media outlets. Providing effective messaging to all sectors of the community including the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community is vitally important to ensure their safety.

With the minimal number of trained interpreters available in the ACT and NSW, and only one Certified - level three trained- interpreter in the ACT, the ESA actively made arrangements for alternative methods of messaging for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community during the State of Alert and State of Emergency.

In situations where the ACT Deaf Society was not able to provide an interpreter, the ESA made arrangements for appropriately trained interpreters to travel from interstate. However, this was not always possible due to the high demand for Auslan interpreters during the bushfire crisis being encountered across Australia.

As an indication of how adaptive the ESA was during the bushfires, when there were no local or interstate interpreters available to attend ESA Headquarters in person, they would re-record press conferences with a remote interpreter and publish this on their communication platforms a short time later.

The ESA Commissioner and Emergency Controller during the ACT's State of Alert and State of Emergency, Ms Georgeina Whelan, actively thanked the interpreters after each broadcast formally and informally acknowledging the work they have undertaken in support of the ESA, and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community in the ACT.

Commissioner Whelan also worked proactively with the interpreters and camera operators, prior to broadcasts, to ensure messages were clearly expressed and the importance and tones of each message was clearly conveyed.

Once again, thank you to all the Auslan interrupters – Mandy, Alana, Bek, Rhonda, and Susan – who assisted the ESA during the emergency events in January.

Another example of the ESA's flexibility and determination to get messages out to all members of the community, was their use of live captioning.

The ESA had undertaken enough pre-planning work on live captioning to activate it during the emergency incidents in January. While the ESA was satisfied with how its live captioning was received it has been identified as an area of improvement, and with some refinements it will be further strengthened.

What the ACT Government were unaware of during the hazardous smoke and bushfire events of December and January that put the ACT into both States of Alert and Emergencies respectively, is how soon the ACT, along with the rest of the nation and indeed the world, would be experiencing its next State of Emergency – a global pandemic.

The current COVID-19 public health emergency has highlighted, again, the importance of ensuring all citizens are able to equitably access important, relevant and timely information that enables them to know and understand the latest public health advice and restrictions – which means providing clear, understandable information in a variety of formats, including Auslan interpretation.

The current COVID-19 public health emergency has also again highlighted the scarcity of Certified Interpreters in the ACT.

It takes several years for people to achieve the level of proficiency needed to achieve a Certified Interpreter qualification. As such, there's no fast solution to increasing the number of Certified Auslan Interpreters in the ACT.

Skills Canberra is currently offering subsidised places in the Certificate II in Auslan and Diploma of Interpreting (Auslan) courses, providing opportunity for Canberrans to learn Auslan and make progress toward the Certified Interpreter qualification.

However, to complete the Certified Interpreter qualification, it is necessary to travel interstate, for both formal study and practical application which is currently not possible under public health advice around travel and physical distancing restrictions.

When the current State of Emergency has ceased and the current travel and physical restrictions have lifted, the Office for Disability will work with Skills Canberra and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate to identify the pathway and costs for ACT residents to become accredited Certified Auslan Interpreters, and ways this may be further supported, such as through scholarship opportunities.

It is evident that the Canberra community see value in providing Auslan interpreting for important live announcements and press conferences. Indeed, there is an opportunity to leverage people's general interest in Australian Sign Language that they are seeing almost daily during the

COVID-19 emergency, to action toward learning and understanding Auslan and Deaf culture in the ACT.

The ESA will actively encourage and support any of its volunteers or staff who would like the training and education to become NAATI accredited in Auslan.

In closing Madam Speaker, I would like to once again pass on my sincere thanks to all involved in assisting the community to remain safe. This includes everyone responsible for communicating information to the public.

ENDS