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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 on

Inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan

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This submission addresses the disadvantage and discrimination faced by Deaf people due to lack of access to services and information in Auslan, focusing on the education sector.

Disclosure: I am a deaf Auslan user. Although I do not live in the ACT, I have been a regular visitor for the past 30 years. I have maintained good friendships within the Deaf community there, including supporting one deaf friend through a terminal illness. My son has lived there for the past five years.

During my 20 years as a lecturer in Deaf education, I trained teachers of the deaf from all Australian states, including the ACT, which gave me familiarity with the ACT deaf education system.

Auslan in the ACT

The ACT Deaf community has been impacted by the lack of consistent high-quality service provision in Auslan. This has been most pronounced in the education sector. Although there have been many dedicated teachers and other professionals involved in the education system, there have never been bilingual education programs offered at any level, and there have been very few teachers and support staff who are fluent in Auslan.

It is important to note that providing Auslan programs in schools does not preclude teaching oral-aural skills as well. Many deaf children will become bilingual in both languages, but many others will not be able to fully access spoken language. If those deaf children without full access to spoken language are denied access to Auslan during the critical period for language learning, they are at risk of language deprivation – one of the most severe human disadvantages (Hall, 2017; Humphries et al, 2012).

The lack of well-supported Auslan programs in the education system has key flow-on effects:

- It makes it difficult to sustain an organic community of Auslan users in the ACT, who are exposed to and use Auslan in all life stages and a wide range of settings. This creates a natural linguistic community which generates information-sharing, authentic language teaching and a network of native signers who are a resource for those wishing to provide services. This kind of Auslan-using community is a feature of other Australian states, and is almost always a result of having a core of lifelong users of the language.
- Not providing Auslan in early childhood settings means that families of deaf children have limited opportunities to learn the language in appropriate settings and facilitate accessible communication for their deaf children in family and community life. Families who have such opportunities are better able to offer essential support and ally-ship across their child's lifetime.
- When a deaf population is almost entirely mainstreamed (even if they have some Auslan provision), there are often delays in their shared awareness of what accessible and equitable communication and information provision looks like. That is – deaf individuals can become inured to missing out on information and be unaware of the extent of their disadvantage. After leaving school, they can require intensive awareness-raising and information sharing to be able to recognise their experience of disadvantage and discrimination. This recognition is, of course, a requirement of being able to self-advocate for their needs.

Australia now has legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), it has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and it offers

government programs such as the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). But these protections are limited if there is not matching capacity and awareness. In the ACT these limitations are evident in the long-standing shortage of Certified Auslan interpreters. This has multiple effects on deaf people's access to services and information:

- It limits deaf people's options for further education and training, which in turn impacts their employment opportunities.
- It can compromise their equitable access to health literacy and health care (Beaver & Carty, 2021). This was evident to me when supporting my terminally ill friend in the ACT some years ago.
- It threatens their access to the justice system.
- It can leave deaf people with incomplete understanding of media announcements and emergency services orders – as highlighted in recent natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. Auslan interpreters have become more visible in these settings in recent years, but this is sometimes at the expense of their availability for other areas.
- While deaf people have long been resourceful at creating their own social networks, Auslan interpreters offer an important extension of social opportunities, extending through the lifespan into aged care.

Recommended options to strengthen and enforce legislation and policy to increase provision of services and information in Auslan in the ACT include:

- Recognition of Auslan as a language of education and service provision in the ACT (De Meulder & Murray, 2017).
- Inclusion of high-quality Auslan services in each stage of education.
- Ensuring that appropriately qualified people – with fluency in Auslan – are available as family support workers, teachers, support staff and counsellors.
- Adopting targets for higher numbers of Certified Auslan-English interpreters within the ACT.

References:

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