



Communication Disabilities Access Canada

June 15, 2015

Re: CRTC Public Consultation on Message Relay Services for People with Speech Disabilities

Dear Colleague,

We are requesting your assistance to highlight the barriers to telephone communication for people with speech and language disabilities (SLDs), not caused by hearing loss.

Many people with physical and SLDs disabilities are living in institutions because there are no reliable, accessible, affordable telephones for them to use. Other people who can access phones, experience significant barriers that could potentially be addressed through improved message, video or speech-to-speech relay services. As Canadians age, there will be increased demand for accessible telephone communication for people with strokes, dementia and age related disabilities that impact on speech and language abilities. Access to telecommunications may make the difference between living safely in the community, and moving to residential care facilities.

The Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is currently conducting a public consultation on the use of Message Relay Services (MRS) for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or who have a speech disability. This is an operator-assisted service for people who can type their messages. It is primarily used by people who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

This is our opportunity to inform the CRTC that people with SLDs can face significant barriers to telephone access. We are asking the CRTC to bring a national focus to the needs of this population in terms of the provision of reliable, affordable, accessible telephones and appropriate telecommunication services such as message relay services (MRS), video relay services (VRS) and speech-to-speech services. MRS and VRS exist for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing and could potentially be adapted for people with SLDs. Speech-to-Speech Relay services could be developed and used by people who have unclear speech or use speech-generating devices. Like people who are Deaf, people with SLDs will require a number of options to address their telecommunication needs.

There are 440,000 people in Canada who have speech and language disabilities, not caused by hearing loss that significantly interfere with their ability to speak and / or understand what others are saying. Disabilities that affect speech and language can be caused by a number of underlying conditions such as cerebral palsy, stroke, autism, intellectual disabilities, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, traumatic brain injury and other conditions. Depending on the nature of the disability, a person's speech may be difficult to understand, or they may have little or no speech and use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). AAC refers to picture, letter or symbol boards, gestures, body language and speech generating devices. Other people may require assistance to understand what is being said to them due to disabilities that impact on their ability to

process spoken language. People who have SLDs do not necessarily have a hearing loss or an intellectual disability. Many people with SLDs also have physical disabilities. The incidence of speech and language disabilities increases with age. For more information, please go to our website.

Telephone access is important for everyone. However, it is essential for many people who have severe physical and communication disabilities, as it is the primary way they contact their personal support service providers. These services allow people who would otherwise live in hospitals and institutions to live with dignity in communities and to access their support services for safety as well as personal services such as dressing, hygiene and meal preparation. Yet many people with SLDs and physical disabilities cannot use the existing telephones, such as RC200 and Fortissimo due to unclear speech, quiet or no speech and / or physical access issues as well as issues relating to cost, and reliability. Because of lack of access they remain in hospitals and institutions and are denied opportunities to live in their communities. For some people who rely on ventilators to breath at night, this lack of access can be life threatening.

People who have SLDs and who do access telecommunications, tell us that they experience significant communication barriers. Some of these barriers over the phone include:

- People not understanding their natural speech or the speech they generate from their communication device.
- People hanging-up on them because they think their unclear speech is due to being drunk or that their device is an automated sales call.
- Not being able to physically access a telephone from a wheelchair or bed, which may impact on one's ability to safely live in the community or use personal support services.
- People not accepting assistance from a communication interpreter that they authorize to assist them communicating on the telephone and /or people assuming their assistant has power of attorney to make decision for them in critical communication situations.
- Not being able to use automated prompts (numbers to navigate the phone system) due to physical disabilities.
- Not being able to participate and effectively communicate in teleconferences.
- Not knowing about message relay services that are typically marketed to people who are Deaf or have a hearing loss.
- Not being able to effectively use message relay services because operators are not trained in facilitating people who have unclear speech or who use AAC.
- Increased cost of telephone services due to slow rate of communication.
- Businesses and organizations not accepting ways other than the telephone to access services (e.g. text, email, or assistance).

In January, 2015, Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC) sent a letter to TELUS outlining the need to address telecommunications accessibility for people with SLDs and requesting funds to conduct a study to address these needs. TELUS erroneously responded that "Speech-to-Speech Relay is the desired solution for people with SLDs" and they informed us that they have enlisted an internal accessibility consultant to identify and prioritize the needs of this population. We believe that the CRTC can play a leadership role by ensuring that the accessibility needs of people with SLDs are defined by an organization, such as CDAC with expertise and experience in the accessibility needs

of this diverse population and linkages to key stakeholders and that Speech-to-Speech Relay services are viewed as one solution within a larger picture for people who have SLDs.

At this time, we ask that you to join us in requesting that the CRTC bring a national focus to the needs of this population in terms of the provision of reliable, affordable, accessible telephones and the improvement and development of appropriate telecommunication services such as message relay services, video relay services and speech-to-speech services.

Please post your message or cut and paste from our posts on the CRTC site by going to http://consultation.crtc.gc.ca/?utm_source=consult&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=mrs

Deadline: June 29, 2015.

For more information, please read our posts on the CRTC website and check out our website and social media.

Thank you for your participation in this initiative.

Sincerely,

Barbara Collier Reg. CASLPO, F.ISAAC
Executive Director
Communication Disabilities Access Canada