

Communication access 'ramps' needed

Communication Disabilities Access Canada advocates for people with speech, language disabilities not caused by hearing loss

GINABETH ROBERTS TIMES & TRANSCRIPT



Kalika Webb, a Sackville woman with a communication disability, and Michael George, the father of a Saint John young adult with a communication disability, show off Communication Disabilities Access Canada's new symbol for access. The organization hopes the symbol will be used by communities, businesses and organizations to signify their commitment to helping those with speech and language disabilities.
PHOTO: GINABETH ROBERTS/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

A national non-profit organization wants people with communication disabilities to have better access to businesses, services and opportunities, something its executive director says is a social justice issue.

Barbara Collier, with Communication Disabilities Access Canada, presented the organization's national strategy – Communication Access Now – to health professionals, service providers, municipal government representatives and community members at the Community Peace Centre yesterday.

The strategy, released in Vancouver, Edmonton and Quebec in the last week, aims to increase awareness of communication disabilities through empowerment, education and legislation as to what essential and emergency services and business and organizations can do to make their services accessible for people with speech and language disabilities not caused by hearing loss.

“There needs to be some obligation on the parts of businesses and services to make these services accessible,” Collier said. “The same way you have ramps for wheelchairs, we want ramps for communication.”

The organization has developed a Communication Access Symbol to complement such signs as the International Symbol of Access (wheelchair), braille, volume control telephone or sign language interpretation, which Collier hopes – along with online training – service providers become better equipped to serve people with communication disabilities.

The symbol is an image of two faces facing each with a double-sided arrow in between, relaying the organization's message, “It Takes Two to Communicate.”

Kalika Webb, of Sackville, believes the sign will help her communicate with service providers.

Webb was in a car accident in 2005, and has difficulty speaking due to a brain injury, among other disabilities.

“It's very important,” she said of the campaign and symbol. “I'll walk

into some places and they just brush me off. ... It's very frustrating, especially when people say they know what I've said, but they really have no idea what I said."

She wants service providers and members of the public to "just ask" her to repeat something if they can't understand what she's saying.

Collier says accessibility rights and accommodations required by people with communication disabilities are not well understood by the public, which creates "major barriers" to services despite the fact Human Rights legislation in Canada obligates business and organizations to give equal access to goods and services to everyone.

Almost half a million Canadians have disabilities affecting their ability to communicate, such as cerebral palsy, autism, cognitive disability, aphasia, traumatic brain injury, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis and Parkinson's Disease.

"This is a population that's very diverse," said Collier. "You have people who have speech disabilities. They understand what you're saying, but their speech may be slurred or difficult to understand – or they may have no speech at all and they may use other ways to communication."

"Then you have people with language disabilities," she said. "That is the ability to understand what somebody else is saying and to process what's being said."

These communication disabilities could affect a person's reading and writing and may also be combined with physical, visual or hearing disabilities.

People with speech and language disabilities communicate by many different methods, including speech, gestures, body language (including sign language), displays and devices.