



Communication Disabilities Access Canada

Speaking Notes

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Senate Social Affairs, Science and Technology Committee on Bill C-81

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Thank you, Ms. Chair and good morning Senators.

I represent Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC) is a non-profit, disability organization dedicated to advancing access to services for people who have speech, language and communication disabilities, that are not primarily caused by Deafness or significant hearing loss.

CDAC participated in the consultations that led up to Bill C 81 and we commend the government for introducing this bill, which is an important step forward in creating an accessible Canada for all people with disabilities.

We fully support this bill and we want to see it receive Royal Assent as soon as possible. However, we think it should be strengthened and we endorse the recommendations put forward by the Arch Disability Law Centre, the Federal Accessibility Legislation Alliance and the AODA Alliance.

We believe that a strong Accessible Canada Act has the potential to advance accessibility for over half a million Canadians who have disabilities that affect how their understanding and processing of what people are saying, and who communicate using unclear speech or by using pictures, letter boards, speech generating devices or a communication assistant. I am talking about people who have speech and language disabilities due to cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, Down Syndrome, learning disability, fetal alcohol syndrome, cognitive or intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, aphasia after a stroke, dementia, head and neck cancer, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, or Multiple Sclerosis.

In October 2018, we presented to the House of Common's Standing Committee and we asked that the bill be amended to include communication as a priority area. This happened and as a result Bill C-81 is now the only accessibility legislation that we are aware of that distinguishes communication from information and communications. At this time, existing provincial, territorial and international accessibility legislation and guidelines tend to narrowly focus on information and communications such as accessible websites, plain language and alternate formats. While these accommodations are essential, they do not address the barriers experiences by people who have communication disabilities when they are interacting with people.

The Accessible Canada Act has the potential to develop meaningful communication accessibility standards and regulations, to ensure that people who have disabilities that affect their communication:

- can use their preferred communication methods
- can interact with people who are trained in how to communicate with them
- can get the accommodations they need to communicate in face-to-face interactions, at meetings and over the telephone
- can get the formal communication support services that they may need in critical contexts such as police, legal and justice situations and when giving informed consent in healthcare situations, especially end-of-life directives and medical assistance in dying.

Unlike the need for sign language interpreting services or translation services, accommodations and communication support services for people with speech and language disabilities are not known, typically omitted in regulations and seriously underdeveloped in Canada. Yet there is ample research that attests to the need for these supports in order for people with significant speech and language disabilities to access critical communication services.

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We have two recommendations that could strengthen the bill for people who have disabilities that affect communication.

First, we want the bill to clarify the term communication.

We recommend that the area of communication referred to in paragraph 5(c.1) be clarified in the definition section as *a two-way, interactive process in which people give and receive information, using a range of communication methods in face-to-face interactions, over the telephone, online and via reading and writing.*

This will guide the interpretation and implementation of the law.

Second, we recommend an acknowledgment that people have a right to use a range of communication methods and supports.

People communicate in different ways and they have a right to use the communication methods and supports that best suit their needs, the needs of the person with whom they are communicating and the context. We think it is important to specify exactly what that means.

We recommend adding a principle in Section 6 such as *“all persons have the right to communicate using their preferred communication method(s) and supports, which includes speech, writing, picture, symbol and letter boards, speech-generating devices and human services such as ASL/LSQ/ISL interpreting, captioning in real time, informal and formal communication assistance.”*

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

In conclusion, we support Bill C -81. We hope that you can strengthen it and take our suggestions on board.