

Good afternoon / Bon apres-midi

My name is Linda Cundy; I work as an Education Consultant for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Edmonton Public Schools. I have served on Alberta Association of the Deaf Board for many years; I have been involved with VRS Task Force in Alberta from the beginning. I feel privileged to represent Albertans, Deaf, HH, DeafBlind and Hearing alike. The ASL to English interpreters are Tiffany Goodkey and Marty Taylor. We thank Alberta School for the Deaf in Edmonton our community partner for making their videoconferencing room available today.

We believe that AAD has the longest history of efforts to implement VRS in Canada. Canadian Association of the Deaf has been trying for a national VRS since 2004. AAD actually began deliberations with TELUS in 2003. I vividly remember the exact place one grey afternoon when AAD attempted to demonstrate to senior management of TELUS how VRS worked. Then they showed us their innovative “in-house signer” on their website. It was a blurry inset of a signer relaying the dialogue between two callers. That was 2003. We attempted to explain the importance of picture quality for visual clarity; hence we offered free consultation. At that time AAD thought it would be more tangible to implement VRS on the provincial level before it would become nation-wide. As history would have it, TELUS underwent a major union strike moments after our historical demonstration. Today being the first day of the public hearing, it seems appropriate to start with a bit of background. Throughout the week you will hear from experts representing stakeholders, consumers, businesses and Telecommunications Service Providers (TSP). By the end of the week as the hearing concludes, hopefully you will feel confident about the implementation of VRS. We anticipate this week being the final hurdle – soon to be a milestone in CRTC history through Deaf eyes.

In the U.S. magazine, People on September 6, 2004 printed this article about the creation of the videophone and VRS titled: “A Quiet Breakthrough: You’re deaf, and you want to make a simple phone call. Hopeless” – that is until they invented the videophone and video relay service.

We know it is not hopeless for Deaf people to make a simple phone call anywhere in Canada possibly as soon as the Year 2014. Little do people realize how long we have waited.

*A quote from the CRTC’s Three-Year Plan 2013-2016: “Canadians are at the centre of the communication system and should have access to a world-class system in which they are reflected, that promotes innovation and contributes to enriching their lives as citizens, creators and consumers. The CRTC strives to be an institution that is trusted by Canadians.”*

According to the plan, CRTC’s activities are based on three pillars: create, connect and protect. We understand that VRS has fallen under the “connect” pillar. However, we believe VRS falls under all three.

First with the “create” pillar, CRTC “encourages the creation of programming that reflects Canada’s diversity and enables Canadians to participate in their democratic and cultural life.” Deaf Canadians fit right in the diversity category as they lead rich cultural lives, using two languages being either ASL and English or LSQ and French.

Next is the “connect” pillar which the CRTC includes services that facilitate access to a communication system for Canadians with disabilities. As many of us believe Deaf people are a linguistic minority group who constantly experience systemic discrimination through societal attitude and environmental barriers that disable them from equal access to communication. Hearing people benefit from VRS as well. The majority of Deaf people’s families, doctors, employers, employees, lawyers and government service providers are hearing and therefore also rely on VRS to communicate. VRS will eliminate systemic discrimination and communication barriers.

Under the “protect” pillar, the CRTC promotes compliance with its regulations. We recommend the inclusion of community agencies that provide interpreting services which enable the CRTC to protect the quality of VRS over a long period of time. Those agencies employ interpreters who are evaluated and held accountable for quality of interpreting service.

AAD proposes the following model: it would be close to your example of Model A for VRS funding and administration. Model A clearly outlines the funding method, revenue source, administrator, platform, locations, network and consumer devices. The only exception to the Model A is that VRS provider invites competitive bid for one provider for ASL and one provider for LSQ.

We agree that there would be only one provider and one location for LSQ; that is through, for example, SIVET in Montreal. As for ASL/English service, we like what is in Model B: “Each TSP will be responsible for providing the service through a third party.”

As you can see in our proposed model, TSPs “create” VRS by providing internet access. Infrastructure is widely available so TSPs also provide existing infrastructure for VRS.

In the middle diagram, we emphasize one platform with access to two bilingual communication systems: ASL/English and LSQ/French. One platform would reflect interoperability through centralized contribution funds. Funds are accumulated through a designated formula such as percentage of telecommunications revenues that is determined through CRTC mandate for TSPs.

On the bottom diagram, we see community interpreting agencies serving as call centers for VRS with funds channeled through TSPs. TSPs would be mandated by the CRTC to collaborate with VRS providers.

Most importantly, we expect a mandated VRS Advisory Board that brings in a Deaf voice throughout the process of implementation and for sustainability. The board is composed of D/HH and hearing representatives from each province.

For Canadians who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind and Hearing, functional equivalency is the most important feature in VRS.

It means that Deaf, HH, and DeafBlind people have exactly the same opportunity to pick their own devices as hearing people based on their preferences, budget and needs. The same calls hearing people make and how they make them, Deaf, HH and DeafBlind people deserve the same opportunity to do so.

Interoperability is another important consideration. Deaf people should be able to access VRS with whatever phone systems that they so choose, e.g. iPhone, IPAD, mobile phones, personal computers. There are multiple off-the-shelves Apps and software that could support VRS in Canada. For functional equivalency and interoperability, Deaf people must be able to use different products that allow access to VRS with whoever, whenever and wherever.

You know how people in real estate emphasize three points: location, location and location. In the same thread, Alberta Association of the Deaf's position is that the three most important features for VRS are: 1. functional equivalency, 2. functional equivalency and 3. functional equivalency.

AAD looks forward to an immediate implementation since we have had ten years of "dialogue, research, pilot and feasibility studies conducted."

All in all, this might seem like a prelude of what you will be hearing this week; yes, it is a prelude. Participants in this public hearing will emphasize basically the same thing that we have discussed today.

Alberta Association of the Deaf thanks the panel for your dedicated commitment to provide communication access that is unique to Deaf, DeafBlind, HH and Hearing Canadians. Such access allows all of us to be in touch with each other, be it for employment, legal, medical, educational or social related calls.

We leave the fate of "world-class communication access" in good hands, pun intended. Thank you very much. Merci beaucoup.