

**Technology Accessibility for Canadians with Communication Disabilities

Report Summary**

The goal of this report is to provide timely and useful findings, analysis, strategies, tools and recommendations to strengthen marketplace attention to Canadians with communication disabilities and to remove barriers to their participation in that marketplace.

We note the importance of telecommunications as threefold: facilitating societal communications, contributing to community development across Canada, and providing a vital safety and security infrastructure for Canadians.

Canadians without access to technologies, and communications technologies especially, are disadvantaged in the global economy. Access to software programs, professional networking sites, and dedicated websites work to connect people professionally and advance careers; those without full communication access to these networks and programs are therefore significantly disadvantaged when it comes to making connections in their professional lives.

Many emerging technologies are social in nature and work to expand the social experience of users. Devices as simple as mobile phones, or even landline phones, serve the purpose of keeping their users connected with their social networks. Social networking sites could actually break down social barriers that often exist between individuals who are DDBHH (Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Hard of Hearing) and individuals who are hearing.

When designed properly, technology developments have the potential to benefit people with disabilities in the same way they benefit the general population. For example, telemedicine is a growing and developing method of delivering health care services. Scholars have noted a trend in the rise of videoconferencing, a trend enormously accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Deaf participants overwhelmingly prefer communications through video calls using mobile phones or webcams because these allow for signing and lip-reading, whereas texting and emailing can prove a challenge to the Deaf users’ literacy skills.

The past few years have seen the release of many new accessible technologies to the market, as well as the improvement of older systems. Audio amplification devices utilizing AI, emergency alert services, other alerting technologies (e.g. for environmental sounds, and “smart home” kits), relay services, sophisticated two-way communication devices and apps, user-driven captioning choices, and avatar interpretation are all examples of emerging communications technologies. Our report cautions that the difference between failure and success in such technologies is quite often the involvement of DHHDB people in the research and development, testing, and marketing stages: unfortunately, such involvement is found in few cases, as more often non-disabled people create devices and technologies that *they* think will be useful for and desired by DHHDB people.

A section of this report reviews legislative and regulatory frameworks, both in Canada and elsewhere in the world. This includes the Accessible Canada Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and WCAG.

It is followed by a comparison of accessibility plans, packages, contracts, and services that may be available for the benefit of people with disabilities from the Canadian internet and wireless service providers. This information is supplemented by a report on consumer experiences with these providers and their packages, as well as consumer preferences.

The report wraps up with a set of recommendations including the following examples:

**Recommendation:** The Canadian government should established a program to support low-cost, high-data, high-speed connection for persons with disabilities.

**Recommendation**: Improve Telecom Relay Services (TRS) in Canada, establishing minimum standards for TRS providers that are as strong as those already set by the USA.

**Recommendation**: AI-assisted captioning may drive down quality standards for captioning; Canada must continue to be diligent in demanding high quality captioning.

**Recommendation**: Canada needs to study both positive and negative lessons learned from the global COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that both the new normal and future emergency situations are permanently improved from the perspective of the DHHDB community in Canada.