

Moving forward for better communication for the Deaf and hard of hearing – Wavefront Centre

BY GRACE SHYNG AND CHRISTOPHER T SUTTON

Now more than ever, guaranteeing accessibility and inclusion is a vital need for people of all abilities. The Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility in Vancouver, BC, is a model on to how to effectively address these issues and serve the Deaf and hard of hearing community.

The Wavefront Centre reception.



The DeafBlind Program is one of the many social service programmes at Wavefront Centre.

Medical Sign Language Interpreting is one of the services offered through Wavefront Centre.

Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility, the operating name for the Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, is the largest non-profit charitable organisation of its kind in Western Canada that provides services to enable persons who are deaf and hard of hearing to achieve communication accessibility in any aspect of their lives. Wavefront Centre’s vision is to create a society in which people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing can interact freely without communication barriers.

“As one of the largest employers of sign language interpreters in BC, Wavefront Centre has over 120 freelance interpreters in its roster”

Established in 1956, Wavefront Centre provides a variety of innovative services: Audiology, Employment Counselling, Sign Language Interpreting, Communication Devices, Seniors Outreach and Clinical Research. Wavefront Centre operates as a social enterprise, and its profits go back to directly support social service programmes that benefit the community, e.g. Lend an Ear Program, which provides refurbished hearing aids for those who cannot afford them; Seniors Outreach Program, which helps isolated seniors regain independence and social connectedness through the help of volunteers matched for communication accessibility; and the Employment Counselling Program, which helps clients find, secure and maintain gainful employment.

In May 2019, Bill-81, the Accessible Canada Act, was passed by the Government of Canada, which sets forth legislation to ensure all Canadians can participate fully in society without barriers. Wavefront Centre’s work directly aligns with the directives of the Accessible Canada Act, as its programmes enable those who experience

hearing loss and deafness to live full and inclusive lives, free of communication barriers. Given that demographic projections indicate the proportion of seniors will continue to increase rapidly for the next 20 years, and that hearing loss is most commonly associated with ageing, the demand for services provided by Wavefront Centre and related organisations will grow significantly in the years ahead.

To meet this expected demand in communication accessible services, Wavefront Centre relocated its head office to a new purpose-built facility, located at 2005 Quebec Street, Vancouver, in October 2019. This facility is one of the most accessible buildings of its kind and sets new benchmarks for accessibility, encouraging efficient and successful communication and services for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and for people of all abilities. The space includes curved corridor corners to enable clear sightlines; wide corridors for improved mobility access, and to facilitate face-to-face communication needed for lip reading and signing; and also well-lit meeting spaces that are equipped

with assistive listening systems and large visual monitors to simultaneously project live captioning and interpreting during presentations.

With the move to the new facility, Wavefront Centre is working on expanding all service areas. The audiology department is equipped with five new audiology sound suites and specialised hearing aid assessment rooms. It has an expanded clinical education and research division that has formal affiliation with the UBC Faculty of Medicine’s School of Audiology and Speech Sciences. The department provides diagnostic hearing assessments, hearing aid dispensing services with the latest hearing aid technology from seven major hearing aid manufacturers, aural rehabilitation classes, a drop-in hearing aid services programme, and is currently developing a new hearing health virtual care programme.

Wavefront Centre has also proudly provided Medical Interpreting Services for BC since 1998. As one of the largest employers of sign language interpreters in BC, Wavefront Centre has over 120 freelance interpreters in its roster, of which 82 are currently qualified to provide medical sign language interpreting. Given the technological improvements in the new facility, Wavefront Centre is currently expanding its sign language interpreting programme, so that live and virtual interpreting and captioning services can be delivered in the most efficient, cost-effective and accessible manner possible.

Wavefront Centre’s Communication Devices Showroom, which features amplifying and alerting devices for the home and workplaces, now has a larger space to showcase products that will help people better monitor their environments for safety and communication needs. In addition, the Employment Counselling Program has expanded to provide both live and virtual employment services and job assistance workshops for the Deaf and hard of hearing. The Seniors Outreach Program in particular has been recognised for its innovative work in helping isolated DeafBlind seniors gain independence and build stronger

social connections with their communities.

During COVID-19, Wavefront Centre was one of the only centres of its kind to remain open to provide essential hearing health, sign language interpreting, counselling and seniors outreach services to some of the most vulnerable populations, even when other related organisations closed. Wavefront Centre was there to advocate for accessible communication with broadcasters, governments, and others to ensure information related to COVID-19 was fully accessible for our communities. In addition, Wavefront Centre translated government press releases and other materials into American Sign Language for the community so that they could access information to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. Wavefront Centre remains committed to being a leader in the provision of vital and quality services for the Deaf and hard of hearing community.

In April 2020, Wavefront Centre appointed a new Chief Executive Officer, Christopher T. Sutton, to lead the agency to new heights. Christopher has a unique background, as he has worked for many public, private and non-profit organisations on behalf of people with disabilities and was very involved in the development of Bill C-81. He also has a direct lived experience with deafness, using both a hearing aid and cochlear implant, and communicates fluently in spoken English and American Sign Language.

As the population of Canadians who are impacted by hearing loss continues to grow, so will the need for ear and hearing health services. Wavefront Centre, along with related organisations and practices of the ENT and audiology communities, will need to evolve their services to meet this increased demand, and also be ready to embrace initiatives brought forth by accessibility legislation.

With 2020 being such a unique year in our history, Wavefront Centre remains committed to being at the forefront of providing consultation, services, advocacy and programmes that enable the Deaf, hard of hearing and hearing to achieve communication accessibility everywhere. Without a doubt, Wavefront Centre will continue to help people like Crystal Bramwell return to work for years to come: “This is a place I can always count on. Wavefront Centre was there for me in spades



Wavefront Centre offers a full range of audiology services.

from services to new hearing aids, earmolds, job search counselling, and funding services. Even when I didn’t know I needed help, they knew. It’s not just the quality of service, but it’s the people that make this place special, hands down.”

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility, please visit: www.wavefrontcentre.ca
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