

Pilon, Janet

Subject: Deafness and discrimination

From: a michaluk

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To: Office of the Mayor <Officeofthe.Mayor@hamilton.ca>; Municipal Law Enforcement <mle@hamilton.ca>; clerk@hamilton.ca; Public Health Services <publichealth@hamilton.ca>; info@hamiltonhealth.ca; veenema@hhsc.ca; wilsonan@hhsc.ca; singhnav@hhsc.ca

Subject: Deafness and discrimination

Hello,

I know some of you have seen this before - Fred, I'm looking at you - in the last 2 years but a reminder, as we move towards ending the mask mandates.

Those of us who are deaf have had an incredibly difficult time communicating with our fellow humans for the last two years. And this has been an accessibility and discriminatory issue.

Since the beginning of this pandemic there has been an enormous lack of awareness around deafness and the added difficulty of communication with the introduction of the masks. And there has been little initiative on the part of our leaders in this province, or the municipalities, nor doctors, to understand this aspect of the pandemic.

There are approximately 3.12 million Canadians who have hearing loss and 357,000 Canadians who are deaf. In Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 'Every individual in Canada is considered equal. Governments must not discriminate on any of the mentioned grounds or in its laws or programs.' So, here is my question. With our current 'laws and programs', why wasn't deafness and the impact of standard masks more seriously considered? And has it not been, in fact, a legal obligation to insure accessibility?

I think folks can have a misunderstanding that all those who are deaf sign, but this is not true. Many are 'oral' deaf. And of course, even sign language doesn't help much as every doctor, scientist, store clerk, business, police person, hospital, bank, teacher and library staff etc would have to be schooled in signing for it to be of any assistance. A blanket statement to wear a mask does nothing to address that the standard masks have been an immense obstacle for people who are oral deaf and rely on reading lips - an heroic task even without masks.

And what has arisen these past two years is discrimination against those who have a 'disability' - often in others eyes - as more people became frustrated on both sides of the exchange. **Deafness is not a learning disability.** When we don't respond to queries at the front door of a business, the reaction is often anger or frustration, or both. Sometimes in mistreatment or abuse. Employees wearing clear face shields have been in the minority and hearing people need to remember how much the world revolves around community and communication. Those who are deaf have always been expected to accommodate to the hearing world and these past two years we have been given another communication barrier. Is hearing not health care?

You must take the time to educate yourself about this significant issue as we continue to move through the reality of things. The lack of this demonstrates a very deeply rooted prejudice to deafness. Awareness has been key. Diversity is a fact and inclusion is a choice we all have every day.

So alongside your individual fears, you should be talking about and considering, *finally, easing a bit of the stress for those of us who are deaf. Undoubtably, we will still have to attempt to communicate with people behind masks but at least this will return us somewhat to the struggles we had before all of this. And please encourage people and their businesses who wear masks, to have tools in place, such whiteboards, clear masks and/or stepping back and removing their mask. About keeping a keen eye out for hearing aids. And about compassionate methods of communication during this time.

You have a choice to acknowledge the significant barriers to inclusion that those who are deaf have been facing. And in fact, always face, the pandemic has simply added to the stress. We all need to play a part in providing access. Consider what we have experienced each time we have encountered someone wearing a mask that we must communicate with. For those of us who are deaf, the end to the mask mandates, for most of us, what WE are feeling in this moment is relief.

Thank you,
Andrea Michaluk

Ps I could not find Dr. NinhTran's contact info. Please forward this on to him and other humans who can benefit. Which is pretty much everyone.

<https://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/share/clear-masks-help-patients-see-better-to-hear-better/>