



# Inquiry into hate in the pandemic: Hearing transcript

Transcription prepared by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

**Presentation date:** March 2022

**Presenting organizations:** Wavefront Centre for Communication and Accessibility

**[ORGNAM] attendees:** Christopher Sutton

**BCOHRC<sup>1</sup> attendees:** Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender, Sarah Khan, Carly Hyman, Alan Arslan

*Please note that third-party personal information has been removed from this transcript.*

**[Introductory comments by Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender not included in transcript.]**

**Christopher Sutton:** Good morning, and thank you, everyone.

I was rushing to my office, but my EA told me there's a lot of construction going on, so, I didn't want a lot of background noise, so, I'm using one screen, so forgive me if I look like I'm wobbling all over the place at times. I want to thank you for inviting Wavefront Centre for communication accessibility, to the inquiry into hate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is Christopher Sutton, and I'm the chief executive officer of Wavefront Centre for communication and accessibility, and my pronouns are he/him, and my visual descriptions are I'm white cis male, in my forties, with short dark hair, with some grayish white hair, closely trimmed beard which also is dark with some light.

I wear square rimmed glasses, and I'm wearing a navy shirt sweater with a white shirt underneath it. My background is a beige wall, with several photographs, and a large window to my right. I am calling virtually from my home office. I am also privileged to be on the same unceded territories, that we all call home.

So, Wavefront Centre was established in 1956, and serves people who are deaf, blind, and hard of hearing, and those with communication challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

We are registered, not for profit charitable organization that operates as social enterprise, and we are the largest provider of accessible communication services in Western Canada. Which includes ASL interpreting, captioning, English to ASL translation, audio to video descriptive, and plain language services.

In addition, we provide a wide range of audiology services, and our revenues from these programs support our charitable programs, which consists of a hearing aid program for those with low income, a better at home program for where we support seniors with various activities, so they can live independently in their own homes, appointment services, and we provide support to organizations to ensure they can be accessible for their employees, their customers, and those that they serve.

We also have a deaf blind program where we provide a variety of intervening supports and services.

Most of our work is done in the province of British Columbia, and last year we served roughly 30,000 people.

Wavefront Centre, and it's strange to be saying this today because most people are working virtually, but Wavefront Centre is very proud to have built, and occupies, what's been made as the most successful facility in Canada, underneath the Rick Hansen Foundation accessibility certification program

Throughout the pandemic we've provided essential services in person, and very little services virtually given the nature of the populations we serve, and we have 3 locations on the lower mainland.

We envision a society where people that are deaf, deaf-blind, and hard of hearing can interact freely without any communication barriers, and what we value, inclusiveness, participation, quality, teamwork, and advocacy.

Hearing loss is fastest growing disability in North America, and many of us associate hearing loss with age, and age definitely is one of the factors for people to acquire hearing loss.

But over the years, we're seeing the growing number of people experience hearing loss from noise-induced hearing loss, and especially seeing much younger people. In Canada, we have roughly 4 million people who identify of having some form of hearing loss. Roughly 20% of those are working adults, 377,000 Canadians identify being deaf and use a sign language, and 76,000 Canadians identify as being deaf blind.

Hearing loss and deafness does not discriminate. People who are deaf, deaf blind, and hard of hearing come from all walks of life, social economic backgrounds, ethn-- ethnic groups, religious backgrounds, and people of various gender identities and sexual orientations.

We all live, in an all of our communities, so it definitely isn't targeted to one area.

Some of our communities identify as people living with a disability, and other parts of our community identify as being a language minority. However, the majority of our communities, do talk about the barriers that they face each day, and the continued barriers they have when it comes to unemployment and underemployment. We tend to make less money than our hearing



counterparts, and we experience higher rates of oppression, we're prone to polls, and are subject to other medical conditions, if our hearing loss is not properly treated. I know you invited me today to discuss the experience of hate during the Covid-19 pandemic, and I have several samples.

I'm also going to speak to, how our communities how-- excuse me, how our communities we serve have reported increased inequalities, continued barriers and lack of opportunities. For many, and their well-being, access to help and social interaction and access to services, they've drastically been reduced or cut off as a result of the pandemic. At the onset of the pandemic, so much information was being circulated. It was a constant non-stop news cycle, and what we learned about this new threat, the virus of Covid-19 was constantly evolving, and for many of our communities, access to this information was very limited, or non-existent.

Most broadcast and press conferences lacked communication access, including sign language, captioning, and what's not presented in plain language. Our communities had to rely on limited information, which sometimes was lifesaving, and that was only available from sources that not always could be trusted.

Eventually, after accuracy with the Government of Canada, province of British Columbia, and other provinces, we started to see sign language interpreting and capturing on the daily broadcast, and announcements that were provided. Some governments, not in British Columbia, actually chose to provide auto captioning through YouTube, and other things, which was highly discouraged because it's not— the accuracy is not always reliable.

We often witnessed, at the beginning, how our communities rallied together, how we were in this together. How our frontline workers and hospitals staff were supported by the community, we were the heroes.

Often our staff are proud felt proud to be the part they played to ensure communities had access to accessible information. How we continue to provide services to our community, and how we work together with our partners, to ensure communities have the technology, so they can get the information, and to be able to have some social contact with the world.

Our ideology clinic was the only one open in Canada, and we provide essential services to anyone in need.

Excuse me.

However, many of our staff and clients, particularly those of sub-Asian descent, reported increased verbal harassment. When walking on sidewalks to work, when taking public transit, or going into public, they were often targets of hate, profanity, and some even reported people spitting on them, or even on one of violation of one's personal space.

It seems that, much language is being adopted from political figures, and from other jurisdictions, and it really increased, the feeling of being unsafe.

Personally, I encountered one incident where I was in a mall after the restrictions were being lifted, and the security guard basically forced me against the wall, because apparently, I wasn't hearing his instructions to move to the other side, and apparently, he was yelling at me which, when I didn't comply, he thought I was ignoring him, but I couldn't hear him due to the use of his mask.



When such incidents are reported, our organizations took these very seriously. We provided counseling for our employee assistance, program We offer ride sharing for transportation, and we were their support, whoever was in need. We encourage those incidents to be reported to the authorities, which rarely happened. Internally, we spoke about these inequalities, and we try to create a dialogue for people to be-- feel safe and to be able to talk about these issues.

Unfortunately, we suspect for many of our staff, who are people with disabilities, who are deaf or hard of hearing, they actually weren't aware of such hate being projected on them because of the— the inability to hear some of the stuff that was being directed towards them.

Unfortunately, for many of our communities, reporting such incidents of hate have been challenges.

Why we have video relay services, TTY's, interpreting services, and so forth.

Many individuals are not comfortable reporting such incidents to the authorities.

Often, many do not even know how to, and unfortunately, access interpreters are often delayed due to shortages in the labor market.

Why we have partnerships with various authorities and have worked on sensitivity training, and best practices for communication accessibility. There seems to be limited trust and understanding by our communities to how this system works.

This year, we actually developed a partnership with the Vancouver Police Department, and the Vancouver Police Foundation, to develop a visor card, which was where-- used in various situations where there's limited interactions being conducted with authorities for people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

For example, person may be pulled over, if they're speeding or something they pull out the visor card and have a conversation with limited interaction.

This is particularly more important as the continued use of mask, and non-clear mask continue to persist.

In the summer of 2021, Wavefront Centre published a report on the impact of Covid-19 on communication accessibility.

This was designed to gather information about the impact the pandemic has had on the daily lives of the people who are deaf, deaf-blind, and hard of hearing, with particular focus on communication accessibility, and access to information. The survey was made available for a ten-day period between March and April and was completed by 656 adults who identified as deaf, or hard of hearing, and this was done throughout Canada.

Surprisingly, this is actually the largest survey done, we had a number of surveys for the disability community with 3 or 400 participants, and this survey was actually the largest one conducted, even though it was still a small number.

Each survey question was written in English, and embarked with a link, a video translation, and American sign language.



Over 80% of the respondents reported difficulty understanding others who were wearing face mask.

Other findings included, over 60% of respondents reported difficulty understanding those who were behind pixel barrier glass— pixel glass barriers, excuse me. About 45% of respondents with severe hearing loss, understood less than 50% of a video call with family or friends, and even less than 25% during a virtual event, or a gathering like this we're at today.

More than 60% of respondents indicated why improvements to microphone technology, and captioning were available, they still had very-- a lot of problems understanding, and, they felt very disconnected, and isolated from their communities.

Other key accommodations are to use strategies such as facilitating speaker, to be heard using visible clear communication, and so forth.

78% of respondents also use remote medical care, and one in four respondents with severe or profound hearing loss, noted that they were not able to access remote medical care because they were unable to hear the medical professional, even during video conferences, and so forth.

60% of respondents that noted that their mental health, and self-esteem have been negatively impacted as a result of the pandemic, and 19% of respondents reported using virtual mental health services.

Many respondents also indicated key areas of difficulties in their day-to-day lives, as a result of the pandemic. One quarter of respondents reported reduced employment hours, 22% reported reduced educational opportunities, and one third of respondents even having the difficulty being able to obtain essential life services such as food, medication, and so forth, because of experience-- with difficulty experience on public transit. They often know that increased isolation, as a result of disconnection from social networks.

This report had a number of recommendations, including improved enforcement of Covid-19 health and safety measures. In public settings, they used a clear face mask for communication. More staff training about communication with masks and pixel glass, and more visual and written clues for consumers using public transit, and shopping in grocery stores.

In addition to some of these things, which I really know is not necessarily related to hate, many of our clients reported conflict in the workplace.

Many have indicated that, due to lack of accessible clear communication, they have been reprimanded by their employers, or seen as being difficult for not being responsive or ignoring their coworkers just because they've not been able to know that there's even communication taking place. Many of the times, Wavefront Centre has gone into the workplace to be a mediator, and to provide additional training. But unfortunately, for many of our clients, they were terminated from the workforce.

We've also seen many inequalities such as access to the Internet, community centers, and hubs that were closed, and being able to support access to various Covid-19 supports because of the complexity of information, and such. Many of our seniors and deaf-blind clients, without access to our programs, they would be completely isolated, and unable to access basic necessities such as food, medication, and have limited social interaction.



While the pandemic has had a huge impact on the world, I believe we've also seen some positives, as well. Communication accessibility has been highlighted, and now we see the use of interpreters during Government press conferences.

We have highlighted the need for more mental health support services, and the gap for some most vulnerable need to be addressed.

I want to thank the Commission for the opportunity to speak with you today, and to congratulate you for your efforts to address the hidden inequalities, witnessed and experienced throughout the pandemic.

I'm pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time. Thank you.

**Commissioner Kasari Govender:** Thank you for that, Chris.

It was-- It's such an important picture you've painted for us, about the experiences of that of those in the community you serve.

I'm wondering, you spoke about some of the incidents of hate, and you gave us some sense of why you think some of those may have happened.

I wonder if you could give us anymore— any more understanding of what— why you think those incidents of hate against people in the community of deaf and hard of hearing folks, who— why would the pandemic increased incidents of hate against that community?

**Christopher Sutton:** Oh, I think one of the some of the things that we witnessed is that I think people are more aware of the situation.

I think, for some of the communities that we serve, especially people of color, and may I, unfortunately, some you and other political figures, etc. etc., really promoted this as being a virus from a particular area in the world, and I think, unfortunately, as a result of that, a lot of people were unnecessarily and unfairly targeted.

Which we know that viruses travel, and regardless of where they originate from it, it doesn't mean that it's a virus a particular group of people are carrying. I think, because of misinformation, and probably different social media, and all of that, unfortunately, it's so easy to access today. People were becoming raw and vulnerable, and they wanted somewhere to trigger their displeasure and hate towards. And unfortunately, some of our most vulnerable communities became targets, of those particular incidents. As I noted, I think for our particular communities, due to the barriers of accessibility and communication accessibility, often we didn't get a lot of report of this I think what we saw for more reporting was an incidence in the workforce, and so forth, because individuals just felt so isolated, and they actually spoke up about these incidents that they may not have spoken up about before. They were being targeted because of maybe in the workplace, they were seen as being rude, or not listening to directions, and so forth.

And these are some of our communities that are like frontline workers, and some of the most poorest members of our communities, who really depend on the their jobs to be able to provide for their families.



So, I think there there's always been this underlining hate, and that, but I think we've also saw an increase of, with our— with a number of incidents during the pandemic, where communities stood up and spoke out, and we became more aware of these inequalities, and I think the discussion really highlighted the need to speak out about these events.

**Commissioner Kasari Govender:** Thank you for that.

Can you speak to us more about what you see, as some of the solutions, or recommendations that you'd make, next time we-- next time we have a pandemic, or next time we're in a crisis, or for the rest of the pandemic. And I do-- I did hear you about some of the improvements you've seen over this time, and I wonder if you could just elaborate that-- on that, and tell us what you would, what's the recommendation for change?

**Christopher Sutton:** I've been very fortunate to be a part of a number of committees.

Myself, I was one of the members who was advising a minister on accessibility issues during the pandemic, had to make sure our communities weren't necessarily left behind. Unfortunately, people with disabilities, I'm sorry that I'm not just focusing on hate, I apologize, and I might be too general in my conversations, but I think people with disabilities were proportionally left behind even more during the pandemic than some other communities.

The Federal Government, for example, and I don't mean to sound disrespectful. They were-- there was so much support being provided out there, for people to be able to get, if they were laid off, etc. etc. Many people with disabilities didn't even qualify for those supports, and if they did, there would be claw backs on their other supports that they would get from government, so they weren't even eligible. Then in November, of 2021 there's a one-time payment, I think, of \$650.

That went up to people that got the tax credit— disability tax credit, and that really for a lot of people was very upsetting, because for so many people with disabilities, especially if they had caretakers and so forth had to spend so much more extra expense to ensure that they had protective gear for that individual.

They were spending extra money on transportation services. They weren't even able to, ... they still had to go to their workforce, and so forth.

So, I think there were definitely a lot of inequalities, and we... we continue to speak about them to the to various government officials, and so forth.

I don't think any of us want to live through another pandemic that we've lived through the last 2 years, and if we do, we definitely do have to highlight the need for having an equity lens on how we approach this. So many people, and—and, actually, I rarely work from home, but had the fortunate ability to work from home during the pandemic. But so many of our communities have been rallying that for years, and they've said, "Wow, people with disabilities have wanted to work from home." But for many people that are deaf and hard appearing, they've actually taken a step back, 10 or 15 years, because working from home hasn't allowed them to have an interpreter on site, has decreased their ability to interact with co-workers, to get projects done. And unfortunately, many people were frontline jobs and they're unable to work those because the barriers to communication.



When we look at how we can address these inequalities, I think, and I highlighted communication accessibility is so critical. We still need to make sure that information that we provide us accessible, whether it's in sign language, videos, or captions, make sure that we use plain language. That doesn't just help people with disabilities or communication disorders.

We are country that are proud of having so many immigrants and newcomers coming here, and having plain language, is such an essential part, or aspect of being able to understand communication.

I think, we also as a society, we need to take a deep look inside, and to look how we-- how we evolved through this pandemic. How we went through being such a supportive community, and really rallying around our communities, to becoming so raw where people are just spreading such hate, and targeting people because of their color, or their— their work that they do, and how they live or the choices they make.

I think I'm prolonging my response. I apologize, I'll end it there.

**Commissioner Kasari Govender:** Thank you. Thank you, Chris. Those are my questions, Sarah, did you have some follow-up questions?

**Sarah Khan:** Thank you thank you so much for your presentation today. And I'm interested in your thoughts on how we could develop a reporting process for hate incidents, or that that could be accessible and welcoming to people in the community that you serve.

**Christopher Sutton:** Well, I definitely think first and foremost, when we look at reporting, we need to probably work with various community partners.

Sometimes they're-- and I don't want to just say police, but sometimes our communities are not comfortable working with authorities.

They want to come to their people, like their employment counselors, their mental health counselors, and others that we have on staff, because there's a clear communication. We don't have to use interpreters, they're there being able to use their first language. So, I think it's really critical to work with community partners to develop these tools, and for community partners to be able to access these tools to assist individuals to be able to put complaints in, or whatnot.

We also need to look at how to make them accessible. We need to make sure that they're in plain language, they're easy to understand.

That obviously... I want to say pre-recorded, but that's not the word I want to use.

Any text is translated into an assignment, which, so that, people that are deaf-- that need sign language, are able to easily see the English text.

Because why a lot of people that use sign language, unfortunately, their reading levels only to grade four, if not less, and American sign language itself is a completely different language with its own grammar and structure, and it's much more visual, So, a person that is staff that uses a sign language is able to understand that text. I think, the ability to be able to submit reporting through a sign language is very





critical as well, as people would be able to with any other language of their choice. And being able to do educational sessions with partners, to be able to educate people about the process, about the importance of reporting, how to protect themselves, and, some people are very scared to talk about this.

I know, myself, when I talked about the incident I faced, I felt very as a-- as a male-- as I'm not a small person, I'm 6 foot 2 and a half, being thrown up against the wall simply because I didn't hear a security guard, and struck me, was very threatening and very embarrassing to talk about, as well. So, I think, having clear communication, being able to work with community partners and making sure things are accessible from the get-go, is a very critical thing when you're developing these tools and resources.

**Sarah Khan:** Thank you.

You talked about the report that your agency had put out, in the summer of 2021.

I'm assuming that's available on your website, we'd be quite interested to read it. Is it available there?

**Christopher Sutton:** I'll be happy to send it to— was it Alex, I'm sorry, or Alan.

**Sarah Khan:** Alan.

**Christopher Sutton:** I'll be happy to send it to Alan, so he can distribute it, that would be easier.

**Sarah Khan:** Wonderful. Thank you so much. Kasari, those are my questions.

**Commissioner Kasari Govender:** Thank you for joining us here, Chris. It's been really important for us to hear from you, and through you, the experiences that you've been able to share with us, and I'm also really appreciative that you shared with us your personal experience.

Hearing how hard that was for you to share, I— I really appreciate that you've done that for us and, helped us understand what that experience feels like, and why it happened, which I think is so important to the work that we're doing here. So, with that, I— we-- I'll just pass it over to Alan actually for any final comments, but I did just want to say thank you again, and I really appreciate you making the time.

**Christopher Sutton:** Again, thank you for the opportunity, and I apologize that it wasn't probably in your traditional format of hate, but I do hope that what I was able to share today was able to give you some guidance, and perspective as well.

**Commissioner Kasari Govender:** Yeah, please don't apologize. Actually, it was incredibly valuable to us. It was exactly what we needed to hear, so thank you for that.

**Christopher Sutton:** So, I think I was very hesitant about coming today because I didn't feel I had a lot to share, so thank you for that.

**Commissioner Kasari Govender:** Oh, really. Yeah, you can put— you can put that could put that down aside we really haven't heard anything like what you shared with us, so, per bit of context. So, it's really important for us to hear this-- these experiences.

**Christopher Sutton:** Thank you.



**Alan Arslan:** and I got one word, Chris. Thank you very much for speaking with us today.

Just a reminder, there's [inaudible] and video submissions, March 31<sup>st</sup> of this year. And also, in terms of this recording, we will notify you beforehand-- before we post this recording, in case there's anything that comes up with it.

And I'll just pause again for a second, in case I missed anything from the rest of the group.

**Sarah Khan:** I don't think so.

**Alan Arslan:** All right, everyone. Thank you again, Chris.

**Christopher Sutton:** Thank you. Have a great day, enjoy your weekend.

You too, thank you so much.

Thank you, Chris. Take care, bye-bye.

