

## Most Hard of Hearing People Do Not “Sign”

Deaf Canadians whose primary language is sign language received good news this past week. On August 11, 2006 the Honorable Mr. Justice Richard Mosley of the Federal Court of Canada ruled that all Government Services must be made accessible, free of charge, to Deaf citizens who use sign language. This means that the Government is responsible for providing and paying for interpreter services to allow access to the RCMP, Passport Offices, Revenue Canada and other Federal establishments.

Justice Mosley states that “as Canadians, Deaf persons are entitled to be full participants in the democratic process and functioning of government” He also wrote that “it is fundamental to an inclusive society that those with disabilities be accommodated when interacting with the institutions of the Government”.

Unfortunately, this ruling has no benefit whatsoever for people who identify as hard of hearing - a group conservatively estimated at 3.2 million Canadians - because the vast majority of them neither use nor understand sign language!

Hard of hearing people, represented in Canada by the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA), use speech and residual hearing to communicate, augmented by a variety of strategies such as amplification, speechreading, assistive listening devices and print interpretation such as closed captioning and realtime captioning. Therefore, when the ruling restricts the definition of visual interpretation to Sign Language, the overwhelming majority of hard of hearing Canadians are shut out.

People who are Deaf and who use a signed language such ASL (American Sign Language) or LSQ (langue des signes québécoise) deserve this ruling. However, the ruling also identifies hard of hearing people as benefiting, and this is not the case. Hard of hearing people depend on both sound and visual technology to communicate, and to allow full access and participation in the workplace, educational settings and the community at large and of course provide access to Government services.

In the future this ruling may make it easier for hard of hearing consumers to have print interpretation as a similar option to access Government services but at this point does not support the needs of the hard of hearing. The identities, needs and challenges of Deaf and hard of hearing people is complex, especially for those new to the issue. While there are similarities between these two groups, there are profound differences as well and to ignore them is a great injustice to all people with hearing loss. These problems can be solved by education, information and dialogue. .

CHHA is very pleased for the Deaf community and congratulates its members on their victory; however, the true needs of the majority of people with hearing loss are not represented in this ruling. The demographics of people with hearing loss show that this is a rapidly growing group – due to the aging population and rising incidence of permanent noise-induced hearing loss. CHHA will continue to advocate to increase public awareness of the needs of Canadians with hearing loss.

Myrtle Barrett ... a late deafened person

President: CHHA Newfoundland Labrador Chapter

Director: CHHA National