

## CCP Summary — Dec 7, 2023

### Meeting information

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| <b>Title</b>            | Consumer Consultation Panel (CCP) for Canadian Administrator of VRS (CAV)  |
| <b>Date</b>             | December 7, 2023, from 13:00 to 15:15 Eastern Time   |
| <b>Type</b>             | Consultative meeting   |
| <b>Location</b>         | Zoom   |
| <b>Subject</b>          | Platform & Technical Priorities  |
| <b>Present</b>          | <p>Chris Kenopic, Facilitator</p> <p>CAV Staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suzanne Laforest, CEO (Chief Executive Officer)</li> <li>• Diane Underschultz, Administrative Assistant</li> <li>• Paula Bath, Director of Regulatory Compliance and Strategy</li> <li>• Chad Taylor, CDO (Chief Digital Officer)</li> </ul> <p>CCP Members or Representatives (Present)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Andrew Stadnicki (Ontario Video Relay Service Committee)</li> <li>• Megan Youngs (Silent Voice Canada)</li> <li>• Catherine McKinnon (Toronto International Deaf Film and Arts Festival)</li> <li>• Benoît Landry (Association des personnes vivant avec une surdité de Laval)</li> <li>• Leah Riddell (Ontario Cultural Society of the Deaf)</li> <li>• Richard Belzile (Canadian Association of the Deaf)</li> <li>• Elliott Richman (Deafness Advocacy Association Nova Scotia)</li> <li>• Véronique Leduc (Maison des hommes sourds)</li> </ul> <p>CCP Members or Representatives (Absent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dellalee Piper (OVAD – Okanagan Valley Association of the Deaf)</li> <li>• Marie-Hélène Couture (La Maison des Femmes Sourdes de Montréal)</li> </ul> |
| <b>Interpreters</b>     | English-ASL, ASL-LSQ   |
| <b>Additional notes</b> | Meeting Languages: ASL, LSQ, English   |

**Disclaimer:**

**This document is provided for informational purposes only. It does not necessarily represent the view points of CAV. It is intended to provide a clear and accurate high-level summary of the topics discussed and removes identifying detail of participants. It is not a verbatim transcript or intended to provide quotes of participant comments. In the event of translation errors or any concerns with accuracy, please signal your concerns to: [publications@cav-acs.ca](mailto:publications@cav-acs.ca).**

**Introduction**

The first Consumer Consultation Panel (CCP) meeting was held with nominated members from CAV registered stakeholder groups from the Deaf community to discuss Canada VRS.

A nonpartisan facilitator, Chris Kenopic, was invited to facilitate the meeting. The facilitator started introductions and explained the meeting agenda and process. General points covered included: a group picture to take place at the end of the meeting, and to identify now if you do not want to be included in the group picture; A summary of the meeting will be shared publicly with names removed. The online meeting needed a few technical adjustments: give multi-pin rights to all attendees, tech assistant should spotlight individuals.

The CAV CEO, Suzanne Laforest, introduced the CAV team present, which included Chad Taylor, the new CDO, and Paula Bath, the Director of Regulatory Compliance and Strategy. Chad introduced himself, a Canadian entrepreneur and founder of CONVO and later an Interpreting Service company (Linguabee) and brings extensive experience in the technical field. Suzanne believes Chad is a perfect fit for the CAV team, as he understands the community's needs and will have the opportunity to develop technical priorities for 2024. Paula introduced herself, being in the position of Regulatory Compliance and Strategy with CAV since April and previously as the Director of Technology and Operations, and prior to that Manager of VIP operations. Before joining the CAV team, she worked at the CRTC as a Senior Policy Analyst, focusing on accessibility and social equity policy development, and prior to that was a sign language interpreter for 20 years. Diane Unterschultz, the Administrative Assistant, recently changed positions. The CAV team expresses gratitude for the participants.

The panel members discussed their backgrounds and experiences in various organizations.

A point was brought up regarding the lack of representation on the panel from the Prairie and Western provinces and a larger presence of representatives from Ontario and Eastern areas. Suzanne explained that the CCP sought nominations from Registered Stakeholder groups, with the goal of including seven ASL and three LSQ participants. The intention is for Stakeholder groups to nominate from their membership and to keep representation and diversity in mind when nominating.

## **Theme: VRS Platform and Technical Priorities**

There was a discussion about the CAV platform and the technical priorities of the Canada Video Relay Service (VRS). The CAV staff focus has been on issues raised in the CRTC Notice of Consultation (TNC CRTC 2021-102) review and updates were shared. The goal is to discuss issues and establish priorities of features and functions.

### *9-8-8 Calling*

CRTC has implemented 9-8-8, Suicide Crisis Helpline, and Canadians can access the mental health service now through the VRS app. Canada VRS has a trained cohort of interpreters ready to provide interpreting services in mental health situations. Call queues are separated between 9-1-1 and 9-8-8, and they are given priority. The service was recently released on November 30<sup>th</sup> and VRS customer can call the service by dialing 9-8-8 in their Canada VRS app.

### *DeafBlind Study*

The CAV is conducting a DeafBlind feasibility study focusing on the needs of the DeafBlind community. Two companies are partnering to conduct the research. CB Linguistic Services (CBLS), a deaf-led organization in Canada, is partnering with Touch Seeds, an American company with experience in tactile education advocacy and lobbying for the American DeafBlind community. Interviews with Canadian DeafBlind individuals will be conducted to gather their thoughts and feedback. The study also considers features to accommodate low-vision individuals, such as those with Usher syndrome. The conversation highlights the need for Canada VRS to accommodate the needs of the DeafBlind community, as 20% of them already use the service.

The feasibility study will be posted on the VRS website in 2024, possibly within Q1.

### *Platform Improvements (2.0)*

Platform improvements are planned for Canada VRS, which currently runs Platform 1.0. An enhanced Platform (2.0) will be implemented in 2025.

In 2024, other platform provider options will be explored within the Canadian market for Canada VRS, considering the changing VRS/tech industry landscape since the services launch. An RFI (Request for Information) will be initiated to identify companies, services, and technological advances in the VRS industry. However, the RFI process will not begin until the CRTC publishes their final decision for the CRTC Notice of Consultation (TNC CRTC 2021-102), as policy and regulation requirements may need to change. The feasibility study focuses on DeafBlind and low-vision individuals and those considerations will be incorporated into the RFI as well. The CAV is waiting for the CRTC' decision before implementing any changes, but they are eager to gather information and start the process.

Discussions continued on the need to implement full redundancy systems within the Canada VRS platform to ensure there are backups that can take over during outages. Platform 1.0 currently lacks redundancy, but Platform 2.0 plans to have it built into the system. The hope is to reduce outages which results in lost calls.

### *Remote VI Teaming Feature*

During the pandemic, the CAV developed a technology feature which allows video interpreters to team remotely, allowing two interpreters working in different locations to connect on the same VRS call. When placing a VRS call, if the interpreter calls a second/supporting interpreter, they should be notifying the deaf caller. Clarification with the user that this feature is being used does not happen on every call and depends on the situation and the interpreter needs. 90% of interpreters in Canada VRS are now working remotely, and the CAV wants to ensure high level of interpreting quality.

### *Transfer Feature*

There is frustration in the community with interpreters using the transfer feature. Users occasionally experience dropped calls during a transfer, which can disrupt calls and cause confusion for non-deaf people. There is also the issue of hearing a different voice when transferred to a new interpreter, which can confuse hearing people and make them uncomfortable. In the discussion regarding the issues of call transfers, using the teaming feature is regarded as a good option. A reminder to interpreters was suggested for improving how they communicate their time remaining on their shift to deaf people. It was also suggested that interpreters should call a second interpreter to team with them for a while before the first interpreter disconnects from the call to allow for a softer transfer experience from the user perspective. Another technical issue was brought up about video screens disappearing and not reappearing after a transfer. It was also suggested that deaf people should have the ability to, in the system, mark and block VIs they do not want to have their call queued and transferred to.

### *Digital Literacy and Plain Language*

Deaf seniors in the community need support in setting up their technical devices. It was suggested to provide step-by-step, visually appealing instructions that cater to both newcomers to Canada and senior citizens rather than relying on English, French or sign language communication.

The conversation also touched on the need for technical support with some suggestions of a return of Outreach having booths and attending fairs to provide education to the public. The discussion highlighted the importance of providing clear and accessible technical support for seniors and newcomers.

### *Discussing New Features and Functional Priorities*

Several features and functions were identified to discuss, plan, and prioritize. The discussion highlighted the importance of redundancy in the VRS platform and the need for more comprehensive features and functions to meet the needs of the Deaf community. The following features and functions were discussed:

- One-click VRS, which allows users to make phone calls with an interpreter by clicking on a phone number on a company website.
- The ability for deaf callers to provide visual information to the VI (i.e. screenshots, documents) during VRS calls, to help clarify communication.

- Develop web portal for the VRS app. The app is currently available on iPhone, Android, PC, and Mac. The portal would be to access the VRS app without needing to own a device or having to download it.
- Transfer VRS phone calls to larger devices, making it easier to see the interpreter.
- Make call notifications more visual, with flashing lights connected to smartwatches and vibrating phones.
- Point-to-point calls interoperable with other VRS systems, allowing them to call another deaf person in the States or other country.
- Make the app compatible with Chromebooks, a Google-based device elementary school students use.
- Enable the ability to see the hearing caller, not just the interpreter.

These ideas are based on transcripts from the CRTC virtual discussion, and the members prioritized the features they thought most important.

The Canada VRS app enables communication for deaf people, but a lack some features which still limit their calling experience. Communication is a human right, and that equal access should exist. The primary constraint is the CAV budget, which has a \$30 million cap, but the CAV submitted a budget request over the cap for 2024. Some panel members are hoping for a removal of the cap as well as additional funds to develop additional technology.

By making the app accessible as a web portal, then compatibility with Chromebook will also be included. To transfer VRS calls between devices, there is a workaround for this issue. While on a computer, a cellphone can be placed in airplane mode so that not to receive VRS calls to direct VRS call traffic to the computer during that time.

The conversation discussed the importance of video relay service (VRS) for the Deaf community during emergency situations. Communication with emergency responders is also challenging because responders, like police, ambulance, and firefighters, do not have access to VRS on their devices. An idea was presented to enable the first responder to access VRS on the First Responder's phone without the need to unlock the phone or enter a password for the app in order to call through VRS and the ability to communicate during the emergency.

Emergency situations are unique and CAV allows Deaf callers to call 9-1-1 and for VRS interpreting services to continue, even though first responders and Deaf callers are in the same location, until they are no longer needed. However, other communication examples were discussed such as, not emergencies, but urgent issues such as a police officer arriving at a Deaf person's door or a Deaf person is in a car accident needing to communicate with officers and parties on site. In these cases, they do not call 9-1-1, rather some panel members would like to use VRS to communicate with on-site personnel in emergency and urgent situations.

It was agreed that there is a gap in the above situations. The CAV attended to this concern and also discussed Video Remote Interpreting (VRI), more general and that VRI is not a part of the CAV mandate. The funding for Canada VRS is from the NCF with receives funds from telephone service providers, who are responsible for providing access to telecommunication services. If the mandate and funding structure changes, then the CAV could offer VRI service, but it is not an option for now.

There is a need for separate platforms for Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) and Video Relay Services (VRS) for deaf individuals. The Deaf community often needs a service like VRS just for short interactions, but no service is

currently available. The lack of interpreting services, resources, and the increasing cost of in-person interpreters have led to a need for VRS to expand its mandate and services. There is a need for the community to advocate for VRI's inclusion. The discussion also touched on the need for the inclusion of VRI in the CRTC mandate for the CAV. There was acknowledgment that the responsibility to change the CAV mandate and funding structure comes from advocacy groups to the CRTC, as the CRTC has the authority to change it. A point was brought up that there exists a duo service of VRI and VRS in New Zealand, where both call types are allowed. The CAV position is that it follows its mandate and should VRI and VRS become interchangeable it will provide the service.

### *Discussing VRS Policy and Practices*

A new policy change is the self-announce policy, which allows deaf individuals to choose whether they want the interpreter to say a Canada VRS greeting, to the hearing caller upon connection, informing them of the Video Relay Service being used or not. VIs have been informed. Some businesses are hesitant of this greeting being removed, due to identify verification procedures, so there is still further discussion among CAV on how to address this request from some Deaf VRS users.

There was clarification with one policy, regarding VRS call duration limits. There is no call duration limit for regular VRS calls, only conference calls are limited to 1.5 hours. Without the call limit, it may overuse the available interpreting resources and also conflicts with the inability for the CAV to provide VRI services. The conversation touched on how this limitation means VRS is not being an equitable service in comparison to non-deaf individuals, who do not have a conference calling limit and that no such limitation exists in the United States.

Another policy change is to the three-VRS call limit, which was removed a year ago.

The final policy change is in relation to customer service hours and ASL agents. The customer services hours have been extended until 9 p.m. ET, due to Western Canadians' time zone. And, the CAV has increased the number of ASL-proficient customer service agents to align with the proportions of the two communities and will continue to add members to the team as resources become available. CAV also shared that they plan to hire more ASL-proficient Customer Service agents in 2024, as 40% of the customer service calls are from the LSQ community, and 60% are from the ASL communities.

Further discussions included the benefits of including the ability to see the non-deaf person on a call along with the Video Interpreter, need to improve the quality of interpreters, and the desire to have choice of interpreters.

### *Misc.*

Some members suggested it important to extend CAV's Customer Services hours (9050) to include overnight. And that CAV should lobby the CRTC to further include Deaf Interpreters in Canada VRS.

In Summary: Top 5 Priorities for CAV

Based on discussions during the meeting, the top 5 priorities communicated to CAV are:

- No Outages (planned or unplanned)
- No dropped VRS calls (long calls, on transfer still an issue)

- Improve VI Interpreting and call management quality, and no VI initiating VRS call transfers when the call has been connected for less than 5 minutes.
- Web-portal (extends VRS access to Chromebook and to low-income users with no devices)
- Improve PR and communications (be more diverse, inclusive of seniors and newcomers to Canada)

And additional top 4 technical feature requests, in order of priority are:

- Enable International calling and P2P
- Allow 3- way calling (seeing the hearing person)
- Develop 1 click VRS calling
- Increase call notification options

### *Closing*

The discussion concluded with the CEO acknowledging that the CCP meeting two-hour time limit was insufficient for the discussion and expressing her gratitude for the feedback. The conversation concluded with CAV commitment to addressing VRS quality in the future. The meeting was productive and concluded with the Facilitator thanking everyone for their participation, and the CAV for their coordination, tech support, and the interpreting team.