

Virtual Communications Research Project

Prepared by

Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility and
the University of British Columbia

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

1 Who undertook the project

Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility in partnership with the University of British Columbia, with support of an Advisory Committee, the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, British Columbia Chapter; and the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind Well-Being Program undertook the project. It was funded by Accessibility Standards Canada.

2 What this project is about

Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing people often face barriers when they need timely, reliable sign language interpreting or real-time captioning. These barriers limit their full and equal participation, safety, and access to opportunities across all settings like health care, government services, workplaces, legal settings, and community services. Virtual (online) delivery of sign language interpreting and captioning services has become an important way to expand access. Virtual services can help more people get access, but they do not always work well. This project looked at what helps virtual communication services work and what gets in the way.

3 Why this project matters

When virtual communication works well, people can get support faster and in more places. When it does not work well, people may miss important information or be left out. The project aimed to produce clear guidance for improving virtual communication services and supporting future accessibility standards development.

4 What the project asked

The project focused on three main questions:

- What do studies and reports say about barriers, supports, and best practices for virtual sign language interpreting and captioning?
- What do Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing people, sign language interpreters, captioners, and communication partners say is working now, and what still needs to improve?
- How well do on-demand virtual interpreting services work in real service and workplace settings, and what makes it easier or more difficult to effectively deliver these services?

5 How the team did the research

The team used three kinds of evidence. First, they reviewed published studies and reports from 2013 to 2023. Second, they interviewed people and held group discussions about current gaps and ideal conditions. Third, they tested on-demand virtual sign language interpreting services in two organizations to see how the services worked in real settings.

The project team also worked with an advisory committee. This helped keep the work grounded in community experience.

6 What the team found

6.1 Virtual communication can improve access

Virtual communication services can reduce wait times and help people in places where in-person services are harder to get. On-demand virtual sign language interpreting services can work well for short, unplanned interactions like quick workplace and customer service conversations.

6.2. Good access depends on basic conditions

Virtual communication can improve access, but only when barriers are addressed and key conditions are met. Common barriers included poor training, weak audio or video, unreliable technology, privacy problems, poor lighting or space, and unclear procedures.

Organizations need the right platforms, clear setup rules, and practical implementation plans. Participants in the project said that the best virtual experiences happened when the internet was reliable and the sound and images were clear. Good access depends on basic conditions that include:

- Reliable internet,
- Clear audio and video,
- Good lighting and camera placement,
- Enough screen space to see sign language interpreters, captions, and other visual information; and
- Platforms that let users pin or spotlight interpreters and control views of captions.

6.3. People and practices matter, too

The project findings highlighted that services worked better when:

- Qualified sign language interpreting and captioning professionals were providing services.
- Service users worked with known providers for better comfort and communication.
- Good preparation was in place that included technical checks before the session and materials shared in advance.
- Both service users and providers/staff got practical training on setup, roles, and troubleshooting so problems could be fixed quickly.

6.4. Virtual service is not right for every situation

Some situations needed in-person support or a mix of virtual and in-person (hybrid) support instead. Clear guidance is needed so people can choose the right option for the setting and the person's needs.

7 What needs to change

The project reached one main conclusion: Virtual communication access should be treated as essential accessibility support, not an extra add-on.

- Set clear minimum standards for sound, video, and platform performance.
- Make sure there is a backup plan when technology fails.
- Use accessible platform settings so sign language interpreters, captions, and other key visual information stay visible.
- Provide real-time technical support and a clear process for solving problems.
- Use standard preparation steps, such as pre-session checks, clear roles, and sharing materials ahead of time.
- Set clear rules for when virtual service is a good fit and when in-person or hybrid support is needed.
- Hire qualified professionals, provide training, support quality checks, and reduce worker fatigue through better scheduling.
- Improve access to devices and internet service so support does not depend on a person's income, especially for DeafBlind and low-vision users.

8 Conclusion

The project showed that virtual sign language interpreting and captioning can improve access, reduce delays, and support fuller participation of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard or Hearing persons in all of society. However, these services only work well when the technology, training, user control, organizational support, and service fit are all in place. The project findings offer practical, community-informed guidance that can support accessibility standards development and delivery of services that meet community needs.