

FYI Inspiring Change

The Hard Reality for People with Disabilities




Abby Stonehouse has been Hear Québec's Program Coordinator since 2018. She is a graduate of Concordia University, with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. She lives with moderate hearing loss. As such, the work she does for Hear Québec is very near and dear to her heart. She is also a stand-up comedian, who made her OFFJFL debut at the Just for Laughs 2018 festival. In May 2019, she co-produced and performed Montreal's first fully accessible comedy show: Comedy for a Cause: Accessibility for All.

It is hard to think of a time when I did not have a disability. However, I was fortunate to live for 22 years of life without one. I have to admit that I was extremely naive about the lifestyle and challenges associated with disabilities. It was a big reality check when I was temporarily in a wheelchair: not being able to leave my house with ease, not having access to certain establishments, and having to think five steps ahead as to whether an activity was even feasible presented new challenges. I was extremely lucky to have a support network and the ability to focus on healing and adjusting to a new way of life. Many (millions) are not so lucky. I went through the same journey when I was told that I had moderate hearing loss at the age of 25.

The reality is that many are not confronted with a disability—either directly or indirectly—in their daily activities. This makes it easy to ignore the challenges that disabled persons face day-in and day-out. For disabled persons, everyday activities that many of us take for granted—like going to school, working, or simply going to a café for a latte—are rarely easy. I can remember, for example, approaching a Tim Hortons in my wheelchair and being devastated that the establishment had installed planters between the wheelchair ramp and the entrance. Perhaps “devastated” is an understatement—I was livid since this made it impossible for me to enter.

Now think of that on a larger scale. Imagine someone who is eager to learn and hone their skills in the workforce; if they have severe hearing loss the job search narrows. Even after applying to jobs that they are suitable for, they find out that many employers cannot add the additional technology required for them to fully participate in the workplace. This narrows their possibilities even further and they are now left working a job with insufficient hours and inadequate pay. This is, in many respects, an idealized scenario. The reality is that many cannot find a job at all. *In Canada, 80% of working-age adults without disabilities have jobs, whereas only 59% with disabilities do. The wage gap is also significant among those with disabilities; It has been estimated that the median annual income for someone with disabilities is \$19,200, compared to \$39,000 for a working age adult.*



***“Alone we can do so little;
together we can do so much.”***
– Helen Keller

In addition to this, living with a disability often comes with burdensome expenses. Everything from equipment and technology to medication presents extra costs for disabled persons to bear. Hundreds—and sometimes thousands—of dollars are not covered by Medicare or other insurance. On June 1st, Prime Minister Trudeau announced a one time tax-free payment of \$600 for all those who are signed up for the disability tax credit (due to COVID-19). Despite the obvious need, this only occurred after months of Canadians affected by disabilities lobbying for help. Although this is a step forward, this fund excludes more than half of the Canadians living with disabilities. According to Statistics Canada, there are 6.2 million people in Canada who have disabilities; and of those, only 1.2 million are registered for the disability tax credit. Therefore, this COVID financial aid excludes 5 million Canadians living with disabilities. How could such a glaring inequality go unnoticed?

A large part of society is neither sensitized to any of this information nor aware of the basic needs of those affected by disabilities. As a result, when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, lifesaving information was being shared without any accessibility measures attached for those with hearing loss. Moreover, live press conferences were not captioned and did not have sign language interpreters. This changed with time, but it's disheartening that people with disabilities had to fight to be thought of and included. And yet, we are seeing this neglect once more with



the lack of acknowledgment about the impact that cloth masks makes on the hearing loss/Deaf community. As someone who reads lips to compensate for their hearing loss, I am faced with confusion and anxiety every time I am in public space. How much longer will we, (disabled persons), have to raise awareness of the most basic needs of those with disabilities?

The time is ripe for change. In May 2019, the Accessible Canada Act for a barrier free Canada passed at the senate. This act will allow Accessibility Standards Canada to develop and revise the standard for accessibility in federal private sector organizations and Government of Canada departments and agencies. Closer to home, a Montreal committee for universal accessibility has set a goal to make 36 metro stations wheelchair accessible by 2022. Even though these changes will take time, it is a huge win for those with disabilities.

I can see the possibilities for an even bigger change right at our fingertips. The change starts when we educate ourselves—and others—about the needs and rights of those with disabilities. In our collective effort to make lasting change, it is important to remember that we, (those with disabilities), are not fighting alone.



I saw this positive impact first-hand not long ago when one of our volunteers, John Ferguson, generously donated 150 clear face shields during National AccessAbility Week. This donation was significant in launching our Safe and Clear Campaign to raise accessibility awareness money for clear face masks and shields.

All 150 shields were distributed within 48 hours! John's generosity and the popularity of the shields prompted us to continue our campaign to purchase more clear face masks and shields. In June we raised \$1783 allowing us to distribute more than 300 items during July! We have received such positive feedback from people finally being able to communicate with their friends and families, who were finally able to use a mask that did not hamper their hearing device. The immense support for the community affected by hearing loss was overwhelming.



"We are so grateful for the face shields! Our son is hard-of-hearing and we don't realize how much he actually looks at our mouths and reads our lips while talking to him. Cloth face masks muffle our words and make it difficult to hear. Not only will the face shields provide protection, but they will allow for better sound transmission and he can still read our lips! Thank you!!!"

- Clear Face Mask Recipient, Rina Hampartsoumian

The support our Safe and Clear Campaign has received throughout this difficult time has been extremely heartening and, if anything, has signaled the overlooked accessibility needs of our community. By the first week of August we were able to raise over \$3000 for the purchase of face masks and shields, and received over 500 orders in just two days! Our members were not the only ones in need

of the masks. We received requests from teachers, school boards, senior/community service centers, childcare centers, churches, clinics, other non-profits, and even airlines! We've spoken about our campaign with CBC, CJAD, and the Suburban. The intense demand for the masks clearly demonstrates the great need throughout the city. In an effort to bring further awareness, we've reached out to Valérie Plante, Mayor of Montréal; François Legault, Premier of Québec; and Dr. Horacio Arruda, Québec's Director of National Public Health. We have sent them their very own clear masks and face shields with the hope they will choose to serve as an inspiration for us all and lead by example by wearing the masks. No contribution is too small in this case; simply doing a small act of kindness such as wearing a clear mask, donating a few dollars, or sharing a Facebook post with accessibility information can make a huge difference. Together, we all have the potential to make a huge impact.

