

What is ....

# ACCESSIBILITY

## and How Can You Advocate to Get It?



by **Eva Basch**

Accessibility for a person with hearing loss means understanding what is being said, when it is being said:

- with family, friends, acquaintances and strangers
  - in person or at a distance
  - in a public place or a private home
  - while at a religious service, lecture, school
  - at a medical appointment, court, bank
  - at a restaurant, book club, gym, shopping
- Here, there, everywhere!**

If someone with good hearing can hear it, the person with hearing loss has the right to hear it too. Communication is a foundation of our lives and a basic human right. Here is a step-by-step walkthrough for how to gain accessibility in your personal life, including personal testimonials from CHIP members.

### Step 1: Define what accessibility means for you.

For someone with a mobility impairment, accessibility may mean a wheelchair, a walker, an elevator or a ramp.

For a person with visual loss, it may mean braille, a magnifier or a seeing-eye dog.

If you have a hearing loss, accessibility may mean some or all of the following:

- a well-fitted and adjusted hearing aid
- assistive listening device(s) (ALDs) to help you hear better
- alerting devices.
- a hearing ear dog
- good lighting
- a quiet environment
- optimum seating at a lecture or meeting
- captioning/subtitles for television & movies
- a sign language or oral interpreter
- a public place that is looped and/or has a good sound system
- people speaking into a microphone
- real-time captioning at a public event
- surtitles at the theatre
- Skype or Facetime
- visual cues
- communication partners who speak clearly, and are willing to make accommodations for your specific needs.

### Step 2: Educate yourself about your specific hearing and listening needs.

This may involve:

- **staying informed** about issues related to hearing loss (blogs, websites, magazines)

- **joining organizations** that support individuals with hearing loss, such as CHIP
- **taking classes** (Speechreading, Signed English, ASL) where you can learn more about the many accessibility options available to you
- **attending workshops** and conferences (such as those offered by CHIP)
- **communicating** with hearing health professionals and other people with hearing loss (CHIP members, peer mentors, instructors)

*“I read in a handout from speechreading class that I could ask the acoustician to activate the telecoil on my hearing aid. For the first time in many years I was able to hear on the telephone without straining, by just flicking on the T-switch.”*

### Step 3: Be willing to disclose your hearing loss.

Telling people about your hearing loss may be hard at first. You may feel self-conscious, or embarrassed, or you may not want to bother people, or appear needy. It is often especially difficult to approach this subject with family and close friends. However, many people with hearing loss have confided in me that it gets easier every time they do it.

Willingness to disclose means:

- **admitting to yourself** that you have a hearing loss
- **knowing** that people won't understand your accessibility needs unless you tell them
- **being prepared to tell them** what they can do to make it easier for you to understand

*“I used to be embarrassed to let people know about my hearing”*



**“I leave an outgoing message on my answering machine that says, ‘Please speak slowly and clearly. I have a hearing loss.’ My message is slow and clear and gives the model of how I would like the callers to speak.”**

*problems. I have a deaf neighbour and I remember being shocked about how she wears her hair in a ponytail, and displays her hearing aids for everyone to see. At my speechreading class, I learned why it’s important to let people know that I’m hard of hearing.”*

#### **Step 4: Advocate for yourself (self-advocacy).**

Once you have identified what accessibility means to you and you are ready to disclose your hearing loss to others, you can progress to advocating for yourself.

Self-advocacy means making specific request(s) for accessibility, by:

- **informing** others that you have a hearing loss
- **explaining** what they can do to make it easier for you to hear and understand
- **repeating your requests**, since change takes time and people often forget
- **asking politely**, since that is the best way to get results

*“I was scheduled to go to the theatre, and my friend purchased tickets in row G. I called the theatre, and explained my hearing loss, and was given second row tickets! It made all the difference in the world. I enjoyed the play.”*

*“I visited a restaurant the afternoon before I was planning on going out, and explained my noise concerns to the manager. We chose a table together in a quiet location. When we arrived for dinner, we were shown to that table and*

*the manager lowered the volume of the music without me asking him to do so! The moral of this story? When people know how they can be of help to you in coping with your hearing impairment, it is not unusual for them to be willing to help. But it’s up to you to let them know how they can help.”*

*“I teach in a postsecondary institution, and used to be frustrated when I couldn’t hear my students’ comments and questions. Now I tell them, ‘Sit near the front, or wait until the break to speak to me, or submit your questions in writing.’ ”*

#### **Step 5: Advocate for others**

Once you have begun advocating for yourself, you may want to use that confidence and experience to advocate for others.

This may involve:

- **volunteering** for an organization that supports your cause
- **speaking up** when you notice that a venue is not accessible
- **encouraging people you know** to become members of an organization that supports people with hearing loss
- **informing other people with hearing losses** what they can do to gain accessibility
- **reminding hearing health professionals** about their obligations towards their patients and clients
- **writing** articles, blogs and letters to the Editor
- **lobbying** your MNA, MP or mayor to improve accessibility legislation (*see also article on pg.12*)

**“At the airport I told the airline agent that I had a hearing loss. I was relieved when she came over and pre-boarded me. It reduced the stress of missing the boarding call.”**

- **posting** articles regarding accessibility on social media

*“At a concert, the speaker didn’t want to talk into the mic. I said I couldn’t hear her, and then she did use the mic. After the concert, a few other people came up to me and said, ‘Thank you for speaking out. That helped me!’ ”*

**“I met a lady at the hearing aid centre. I asked her how she was managing. She said she found it hard. I asked, ‘Do you know CHIP?’ ‘No.’ I said, ‘I’m a member, and I’m taking speechreading, and CHIP offers a lot of programs.’ She said, ‘I don’t want programs, I just want to hear and understand better.’ So I gave her a CHIP membership form.”**

One of the most important things I have learned from CHIP members in my speechreading classes is that when they become informed and speak up for themselves, they feel less isolated, more self-confident, and more empowered.

Advocacy works. I know, because I have seen the results. I encourage you to try it. You will be amazed at how much you and others will benefit!

**For more information and article links, please go to our website at [www.hearhear.org](http://www.hearhear.org)**

**Eva Basch** is a retired educational oral interpreter, and has been teaching speechreading at CHIP for over 15 years. She and her husband are the parents of two adults with profound hearing losses. Eva advocated for them and taught them to advocate for themselves as they got older. She was coordinator of Interpret-Access, and continues to push for accessibility for all people with hearing loss. Eva will be participating in the Canadian Government Accessibility Legislation Consultations.