

WORKING AS A COMMUNICATION ACCESS ASSESSOR

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In 2011, Scope launched the Communication Access Symbol (see Figure 1). This symbol is awarded to businesses, services and organisations that demonstrate communication access standards. These standards are required for creating communication accessible environments for people with communication disabilities. It extends the current concept of universal access to include features of interpersonal communication and aspects of the environment that convey information, so that products and services are accessible to everyone in their communities.

Since 1969, with the launch of the International Symbol for Access (ISA) by Rehabilitation International, there has been a strong focus on access to the built and physical environment. The ISA has become one of the twenty most recognised symbols internationally¹. 42 years after the launch of the International Symbol for Access, Scope launched the Communication Access Symbol. This focuses attention on creating communication access in our communities and society. It places the focus on features of social and interpersonal environment required for the inclusion of people with communication difficulties.

“Communication access occurs when people are respectful and responsive to individuals with communication difficulties and when strategies and resources are available to support successful communication”². This definition focuses on communication as a shared experience and on the role that communication partners have in supporting effective communication. It focuses on staff attitudes, availability of communication tools and staff skills in using these tools.

A core value of Scope’s communication access initiative is the central involvement and leadership of people with communication disabilities at all stages of the process. People with communication disabilities are employed as Communication Access Assessors, and participate in all aspects of a business, service or organisation becoming accredited with the symbol.

Cathy works casually as a Communication Access Assessor at Scope’s Communication and Inclusion Resource Centre (CIRC). Cathy’s main project has been working with Victoria Police. The pilot

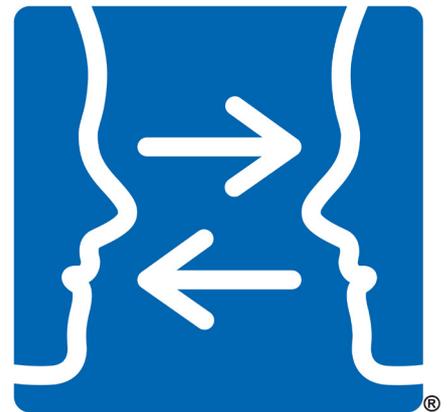


Figure 1: The Australian Communication Access Symbol.

project has been funded by a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) National Readiness grant, and aims to ensure one 24-hour police station has:

- Uniform police officers who have received training to understand people with communication disabilities,
- Customised communication tools to assist police and people with communication disabilities communicate effectively, and
- A watch-house that has signage that is easy to read.

For Cathy, the project so far has been *“really interesting. I like helping police. The police are very friendly and their job is to look out for people and to help people as best way they can. They need extra help to support people with disabilities, and I like doing that. I want to keep doing my job because I feel happy with what I’m doing, and it’s a good thing.”*

All Communication Access Assessors participate in three days of training, to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to undertake all aspects of the job. *“Training was full on! Busy, busy, busy! I’ve never been so busy in my life! But it was hard, and I was nervous because I didn’t know how well I was going to be, and I if could do it or not. But, I liked it in the end and I like to keep myself busy. It was fun, I enjoyed it.”*

Cathy has worked closely with the police, and her team of Communication Access Assessors, who each bring something different and valuable to the project, because of their lived experience of communication disability.

Cathy works with colleagues who have:

- Aphasia,
- Cerebral palsy, and
- Intellectual disability.

The role of a Communication Access Assessor is varied. As a part of their role, each Assessor conducts:

- Role-plays,
- Focus groups,
- Communication Access training, and
- Communication Access Assessments.

The aim of the role-plays is to simulate ‘real-life’ situations between police officers and community members with communication disabilities. Cathy recalls *“I acted as someone stealing cigarettes from the 7/11 shop without any money. I had to pretend to sneak my hand into the cash register and try and pretend to take some money out when no one was looking. At the start, I was really nervous. Especially when you see them in uniforms! Because that’s not a thing you see every day. And they are nice, but sometimes they look like they have a serious expression on their face and that can be scary. But I love role-playing because I love acting out someone that I’m not.”*

¹ Rehabilitation International. (n.d.). RI’s Mission. Retrieved from: <http://www.riglobal.org/about/#history>

² Solarsh, B., West, D., Johnson, H., Rezzani, N. (2013). Communication Access. Retrieved from: <http://www.scopevic.org.au/service/communication-access/>

Cathy's role-play

I had to learn this role-play off by heart, and remember to:

- Ask the police officer to slow down.
- Ask the police officer what will happen next.
- Make a mistake.
- Write down what they said to me.
- Ask how to talk to them again if I have more questions.

Role play



You are a **suspect**.

This means someone police think did a crime.

Your story



You were at a 7/11 shop.



You went to the counter.

You asked for cigarettes.



He turned around to get the cigarettes.



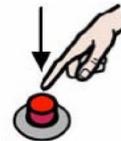
You tried to take money from the cash register.



A customer saw you.

The customer yelled.

Hey. What are you doing?



The staff saw what you did.

The staff pushed the emergency button.



The doors locked.



The police came to the shop.

Many of the police performed well during the role-plays, however, the effectiveness of communication sometimes wavered, especially when difficult police concepts needed to be discussed. *“It was really enjoyable, but also a bit hard talking to the police, because they want to know exactly what I was doing and some of the questions were a bit hard. They asked questions like if you need ‘a second or third person’ [an Independent Third Person], and the ‘[anything] you say or do so thing’ [i.e. being cautioned]*

and I'd never heard of that before. There was a bit of a time where they talked a bit fast and I had to say slow down, because I felt a bit rushed, but they were nice. Looking into their eyes looked a bit scary, they didn't seem quite relaxed at first."

The role-plays provided valuable information about what needs to occur in order to make the police station communication accessible. For Cathy, *"it is really important that whatever happens, they will always believe what you're saying and they'll help you out, no matter what situation it is. The police need to learn how to talk to people using easier words, and also give people Easy English documents. It would have been a bit more better if they had a smile on their face... but it'd also be hard for police to not be serious because they're talking to people who are in their bad books."*

For other Communication Access Assessors who don't use speech, priorities include the development of custom communication tools, to support people with little or no speech to communicate effectively with uniform police officers.

In addition to the role-plays, Communication Access Assessors facilitated a number of focus groups. Representatives from the Office of the Public Advocate's Independent Third Persons (ITP) program, Disability Justice Advocacy, Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA), Disability Discrimination Legal Service (DDLs), Communication Rights Australia, Victorian Legal Aid, Victorian Courts and Tribunals, Office of the Public Prosecutions (OPP) and a number of other specialist Victoria Police teams were in attendance at the focus groups. *"The focus groups were fun, but also nerve-wracking. Because, I've never done something like that before. But now that I've joined Scope, it's not that overwhelming as I thought it would be. I enjoyed it, and I like helping people out, especially the police."*

Police will undergo Communication Access training, and then participate in a number of Communication Access Assessments, where the team of Communication Access Assessors will go undercover to test police. The assessments will really make sure that police can communicate effectively with all community members.

For Cathy, it is important that Victoria Police becomes accredited with the Communication Access Symbol because *"then people with disabilities will hopefully have someone they can connect to, and talk to, if they have problems. They won't feel abandoned or feel like they can't talk to anyone because if we keep helping the police, at least they'll know how to help everyone, and that'll be a good thing."*



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