



# Ontario Association of the Deaf

*Working together to ensure a better future for Deaf Ontarians.*



August 10, 2011

Honourable Leona Dombrowsky.  
Ministry of Education  
22<sup>nd</sup> Floor Mowat Block  
900 Bay Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
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## An Open Letter to all Deaf Communities and ministries and the agencies.

Dear Honourable Leona Dombrowsky:

On behalf of the Ontario Association of the Deaf (OAD), I am writing this letter with sad news regarding the organization VOICE's letter posted on their website August 5<sup>th</sup> 2011. The people of the Deaf Community have emailed OAD. They are upset, and are concerned that VOICE'S letter and position constitutes abuse and harassment. VOICE's letter mailed to you encourages people to write letters to their local MPP's. The Deaf Community is frustrated with VOICE'S position which they see as akin to destroying Deaf culture and oppression of Deaf people.

Today I feel very discouraged that I must write a letter of complaint against any agency or organization that is not proud of a true language like American Sign Language (ASL).

We are not surprised of the necessity for action time and again however. I will try to give a **concise** explanation.

For the record, I am profoundly Deaf and over 50 years of age. I have always loved American Sign Language (ASL) as my own true first language, and I am glad that I know English as my second language. Without ASL, I would not feel as accomplished in expressing myself as eloquently as I do. I did learn how to speak, however I am not comfortable using my voice to speak with people. I have no reason, nor am I ashamed to tell people that I am Deaf.

I believe we both are aware that countless people around the world love to learn different languages for a variety of reasons. They can be inspired to learn in order to communicate, listen to music, or news from other countries. Many people want to learn more than one language for their career. This has been the case for hundreds of years. They will still always enjoy life also with their true native language(s).

This is not the case for Deaf infants, youths, adults, and seniors. They are continually frustrated like I am today. OAD is the oldest Deaf consumer organization in Canada. We will celebrate 125 years this fall! Although the very first president of OAD was not around to tell me to advocate for the people, I certainly understand what he meant and why it is necessary. We always must fight for our true language, but we wonder do we really need to keep fighting for the next 125 years?

OAD has not spoken out against VOICE for quite some time. Right now, I must name VOICE in this letter. It is time for me to step up, and do what is necessary in the best interests of the Deaf Community. There is no "hidden political agenda." The people from VOICE have no idea what Deaf citizens feel like. My question is, why do they force deaf children to learn to listen and speak

without any sign language? Why do they not encourage learning ASL also? Could it be because they cannot be bothered to learn to sign themselves? Is it too hard to learn? Do they not recognize ASL as a culturally distinct and recognized official language? Do they hate the Deaf communities? I know that VOICE seeks funding for their organization, the same as our organization does. VOICE stated *"We have concerns about the supports and services available to students with hearing loss in the Province of Ontario. Families are becoming increasingly anxious as they experience escalating cut-backs to the direct support for their children. There are numerous boards in the province that have significantly cut the hours of intervention by trained teachers of the deaf."* OAD is not concerned with VOICE's funding issues. VOICE tries to help Deaf children, but unfortunately their priority appears to be themselves

VOICE is not willing to be responsible for adults who are not succeeding from their services. Most Deaf adults have no career and exist on welfare. We can't ignore their situation and feelings. We know that VOICE has no evidence to substantiate their beliefs. They have been less than truthful to everyone for many years because they have to be, or they can lose their jobs.

I know that parents have their rights for their children. Many parents however, have no idea of what is best for their children, and rely on organizations for guidance. They are not always given all the communication options however, which would include learning ASL. VOICE's letter states "VOICE is the only organization that exclusively supports children who are deaf and learning spoken language". Why have they taken it upon themselves to determine that spoken language is the preferred/superior method of communication? VOICE does not promote the use of ASL; in fact they ignore ASL as they mistakenly believe it is not the best option for children."

Research has shown that acquisition of a strong foundation in a language during pre-school years is a requirement for future literacy development in English. ASL like any language and in particular first languages is a valuable building block for thinking, problem-solving, and assisting to form relationships with others. ***It is time to stop working counterproductively and time to work together!*** We want to see Deaf children encouraged and happy to learn ASL as their first or second language(s)

We are volunteers doing all we can in the best interests of all Deaf infants, youths, adults, and seniors. OAD always works to ensure that deaf people can have a good life and good career. VOICE staff, sadly do not!

Lastly, I would like to suggest that you discuss with VOICE that they need to work ***with*** Deaf people whose true native language is ASL, or the Ministry will no longer continue funding VOICE. They must remember that Ontario has a non-discrimination policy. All of us need to respect that policy.

OAD is more than willing to work with your team and VOICE. It is important for Deaf students to see the Ministry of Education support their own language- ASL, and support and provide students with the educational foundation needed to pursue their best education.

Sincerely,



Dean Walker  
Executive Director

CC OAD President  
VOICE Steve Duke, Chair