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Canada: Getting connected

Waterloo Chronicle

The next time Gail Brunsdon wants to contact the mayor's office, all she'll have to do is connect to the City of Waterloo's new Textnet system. It allows people who are deaf or hard of hearing to communicate in real time by sending and receiving text messages. Brunsdon, 52, has been deaf since she caught the German measles around the age of three. And she knows it's been difficult for deaf people to connect with city hall in the past. The Textnet system, which was launched last week, integrates into the phone system, allowing people who are deaf to communicate in real time with city staff, said Lori Ludwig, the city's community development program manager. It can be downloaded onto any computer; then, when people who are deaf call in from their TTY -- or text telephone -- an icon will come up on the screen. To answer, the operator will click on the icon and begin chatting live with the person. Three different TTY numbers are available: 1-866-786-3941 for city hall; 1-866-786-3942 for recreation and leisure; and 1-866-786-3943 for facility inquiries and bookings. The user will then be transferred to the person they're trying to call. So far, 16 departments have Textnet capability, including the mayor's office, property-tax department and human resources, at city hall. RIM Park, the Waterloo public library and the Adult Recreation Centre, along with Parkview Cemetery and Bechtel Park, are also on the list. It was a bit of a guessing game to decide where to put the system, so the city chose the locations that currently get the most calls, Ludwig said. "But the great thing about Textnet is it can be really flexible to change, so if within a year's time we find out no one is calling the cemetery, but we're getting lots of calls in public works and different departments, we can move the licenses over to put them where they're needed." For Brunsdon, who works as the community liaison for the Canadian Hearing Society in Kitchener, it will be easier to book community rooms thanks to this new system. "That's pretty cool that I can do that on my own and not have to ask anyone," she signed. "In the past, I'd have to call and leave a message. Now I can call the one line and they can transfer me directly to that person. "So I know it's just the start and they just have a few numbers right now. But hopefully in the future that will grow and they'll have a more extensive list." Waterloo is the first municipality in this area to launch a Textnet system, for which no provincial funding is provided, Ludwig said. The initial setup fee is just under \$2,000, and the ongoing operating costs are \$8,000 a year for all 16 locations combined. Brunsdon applauds the city's initiative, adding any technology that allows communication accessibility for deaf people is a wonderful thing. "It's going to break the barriers down," she signed. But she also recognizes that this new technology may come with some glitches. She has tried calling the city through Textnet and found she had to wait for a while before the person answered. "So I'm feeling pretty positive about it that it will be beneficial," she signed. "As with any technology, you need to be patient because those bugs are going to show up." Now that the system is in place, the city will have to educate the deaf community, most of whom have a TTY, on how Textnet can help them. "If you've never come to city hall on your own to have to deal with anything, you're not even aware of what you would use us for," Ludwig said. "So it's going to be really important that they understand that now they don't need to have a support person doing this kind of work for them, that they can connect with us directly." Brunsdon, meanwhile, hopes that down the road more businesses with deaf employees, along with area police stations and hospitals, will setup the Textnet system.

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