

# **Accessibility at the Vancouver Writers Fest**

**by**  
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## **Abstract**

Accessibility is a crucial consideration for literary festivals, as it allows a greater community of people to participate and engage at these events, particularly people with visible and invisible disabilities. In 2022, the Vancouver Writers Festival formed an Accessibility Roundtable (ART) of paid consultants and stakeholders with varied lived experiences with disabilities to provide expertise and recommendations for increasing accessibility at the 2022 Festival.

This report details Writers Fest's process of forming the ART, the ART's recommendations, and the methods for implementing these recommendations at the 2022 Festival (October 17-23). It also outlines short-term and long-term action items to implement in the future. In doing so, this report aims to emphasize the necessity of engaging with disabled stakeholders in improving accessibility at literary festivals and to illustrate how accessibility is a long-term investment in continuous, collaborative work.

**Keywords:** accessibility; inclusivity; literary festivals; disability studies; Vancouver Writers Fest

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ART	The Vancouver Writers Festival's Accessibility Roundtable
ASL	American Sign Language
Festival	When capitalized, refers to Writers Fest's flagship Festival in October.
GITD	Granville Island Theatre District
Writers Fest	Abbreviation of the Vancouver Writers Festival. Refers to the organization rather than the flagship Festival (see above).



# Chapter 1. Introduction

Over the past 35 years, the Vancouver Writers Festival has brought communities of readers together, providing a space for them to connect with their favourite authors, challenge their worldviews, and dream of new worlds altogether. Increasing accessibility is essential for literary events like Writers Fest that aim to serve their communities, as it allows more people to participate and feel comfortable while doing so. In recent years, Writers Fest has begun developing accessibility standards to reduce barriers for disabled patrons. In 2022, Writers Fest founded its Accessibility Roundtable (ART), a stipended committee of stakeholders with various lived experiences with disabilities, to provide firsthand experience and recommendations on how to increase accessibility at the Festival. My report will explore the overall impact of the ART on the 2022 Festival, discussing the ART's recommendations for the 2022 Festival and beyond, the implementation process of these recommendations at the 2022 Festival, and priorities for years to follow. In doing so, I hope to emphasize the necessity of engaging with disabled stakeholders in improving accessibility at literary festivals, and to illustrate how accessibility is a long-term investment in continuous, collaborative work.

My internship with Vancouver Writers Festival started the first week of September 2022, as part of my studies in the Master of Publishing program at Simon Fraser University. I approached Writers Fest about completing my internship with them, and we developed a Mitacs-funded project driven by our mutual interest in addressing accessibility at the Festival. My primary objective throughout my internship was to implement the Accessibility Roundtable's recommendations for the 2022 flagship Festival, through individual work and coordination with other staff, and informed by current praxis in Disability Justice and Critical Disability Studies. Keeping in mind that accessibility is not a one-and-done mindset nor a checklist to complete as quickly as possible, there were three main limitations to my work during my internship: time to plan and execute accessibility improvements, my need to familiarize myself with Writers Fest operations and venues, and available labour. I also want to note my positionality as a neurodivergent person living with chronic illness: while I have experienced various forms of ableism firsthand, the invisibility of my conditions also protects me from discrimination that visibly disabled patrons experience, and my perspective is thus limited in this way.

Accessibility extends across all departments of an organization; although I acted as the primary internal point person for accessibility development, I collaborated with several Writers Fest staff members to implement accessibility recommendations. In addition to regularly consulting my workplace supervisor, Executive Director Kaile Shilling, I also worked closely with the volunteer operations team, particularly in developing accessibility training for volunteers, as well as the festival operations team, in responding to and checking in on access needs during events.

## **1.1. Report Scope and Format**

My report will cover the planning and implementation of accessibility recommendations at the 2022 Vancouver Writers Festival, which took place from October 17 to 23. While accessibility should be and is currently being improved for Writers Fest's other events, I have kept the scope of this report to the flagship Festival, as the Accessibility Roundtable was hired and provided expertise for this festival specifically.

Chapter One of this report covers the foundation and development of the festival, as well as the evolution of its accessibility practices over the years. Chapter Two provides the critical framework for my placement through a brief overview of crucial work in Disability Justice and Disability Studies, and discusses current accessibility practices at literary and cultural events in Vancouver and Ontario. Chapter Three details planning and consulting the ART for the 2022 Writers Festival, as well as the successes and challenges of implementing the ART's recommendations. Finally, Chapter Four focuses on recommendations for accessibility at future Writers Festival events, incorporating the ART's feedback, my own observations as an accessibility point person, and audience feedback from the 2022 Festival, as well as highlighting specific priorities for 2023.

## **1.2. The Vancouver Writers Festival**

Vancouver Writers Festival was founded in 1988 by Artistic Director Alma Lee. Originally from Scotland, Lee was one of the founding members of the Writers Union of Canada

and, upon moving to Vancouver, saw a “need for an organization that would celebrate literary arts in this city,” as current Artistic Director Leslie Hurtig explains.<sup>1</sup> Lee began Writers Fest as a three- to four-day festival, and it has since grown to a week-long event every October with more than 20,000 attendees, becoming Writers Fest’s flagship Festival among its growing year-round events.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2018, the Festival has included a guest curator, an author who helps develop a selection of events, usually connected through a particular theme.<sup>3</sup> For example, 2022’s guest curator was Giller Prize winner Omar El Akkad, who moderated six events focusing on “home, identity, and storytelling.”<sup>4</sup> Guest curators are invited by Hurtig and have included Ivan Coyote, Lawrence Hill, Cherie Dimaline, and Tanya Talaga.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to its flagship Festival in October, Writers Fest runs *Incite*, a bi-weekly free reading series from January to June in partnership with Vancouver Public Library; *Whisky and Words*, an annual whisky-tasting fundraiser; and *Books and Brunch*, a spring/summer series of author conversations hosted at the Dockside Restaurant in the Granville Island Hotel. Throughout the year, Writers Fest also produces the *Books & Ideas Podcast* as well as *Writers in the Classroom*, a program of free, interactive author visits to classrooms in Greater Vancouver.<sup>6,7</sup> Writers Fest is led by Artistic Director Leslie Hurtig and Executive Director Kaile Shilling, and operates with a year-round team of eight staff members; additional Festival-time staff for marketing, production, festival operations, box office, volunteer operations, and food services; and, of course, the crucial efforts of over 200 volunteers.<sup>8,9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isabella Wang, “Vancouver Writers Fest: Meet Artistic Director Leslie Hurtig,” *Room Magazine*, October 19, 2021, <https://roommagazine.com/vancouver-writers-fest-meet-artistic-director-leslie-hurtig/>.

<sup>2</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, “About,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://writersfest.bc.ca/about>.

<sup>3</sup> Marsha Lederman, “Vancouver Writers Fest moves online with Coyote as guest curator,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/vancouver-writers-fest-moves-online-with-coyote/docview/2451724851/se-2>.

<sup>4</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2022 Program Guide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2022), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lederman, “Vancouver Writers Fest moves online.”

<sup>6</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, “About.”

<sup>7</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, “Youth,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://writersfest.bc.ca/youth>.

<sup>8</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, “About.”

<sup>9</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2021 Annual Report* (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2022), 7.

Writers Fest operates as a non-profit and a registered charitable organization. Its funding model relies on government funding, community support (including sponsorships and individual donations), and ticket revenue. These three main funding streams typically bring in equal revenue; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic Writers Fest has received additional government funding (in 2021, it made up 59% of total revenue due to COVID recovery funds and lower revenue from in-person events).<sup>10</sup> It also uses a membership model priced at \$40 a year. Members receive early access to the Program Guide and ticket sales, a mailed print copy of the Program Guide and a digital copy of the Summer Reading List, and a 10% discount to the Festival itself. Members are also eligible to vote at the Festival's Annual General Meeting.<sup>11</sup> Writers Fest is governed by a Board of Directors, led by Chair Alexia Jones. At ten members, the Board's mission is to "provide a powerful forum for the public to exchange views with writers and creators on a wide range of issues: social, ethical, and political as well as literary and cultural."<sup>12</sup>

In 2021, Writers Fest sold 24,955 individual tickets over 55 events. 43% of Festival survey respondents were 55 or older, and 39% earned over \$80,000 a year.<sup>13</sup> This data supports efforts to make the Festival more accessible to both low-income and disabled patrons (according to the federal government's most recent Disability Report in 2011, 23% of Canadians aged 55-65 and 43% of Canadians aged 65 and older have a disability).<sup>14</sup>

### **1.3. Granville Island**

Writers Fest's offices and events take place on Granville Island, a prominent Vancouver tourist destination and public space managed by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). In 2022, Festival events ran across four venues on the Island: Waterfront Theatre, Performance Works, and the NEST (managed by Granville Island

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<sup>10</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2021 Annual Report*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "Support Us," accessed April 5, 2023, <https://writersfest.bc.ca/support-us>.

<sup>12</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2021 Annual Report*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2021 Annual Report*, 1, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Government of Canada, "2011 Federal Disability Report," accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/disability/arc/federal-report2011.html>.

Theatre District), and Revue Stage (managed by Red Gate Arts Society). The area that is colonially known as Granville Island was once a large sand bar in False Creek used by the Coast Salish peoples for fishing and hunting, and became a permanent Squamish settlement, Seḥákw, in the 1820s.<sup>15</sup> As colonial industry expanded, the British Columbian government put “mounting pressure [on] the residents of Seḥákw to vacate their land.”<sup>16</sup> In 1913, the government forced the Squamish residents of Seḥákw to surrender their lands and displaced them to other Squamish reserves.<sup>17</sup> On this land, the government then used “material dredged from False Creek” to create a man-made island, which would become the industrial and commercial site known as Granville Island.<sup>18</sup> In 2003, the Federal Court of Canada returned a “misshapen portion” of land to the Squamish Nation: only 10.48 of the original 80 acres of reserve land.<sup>19</sup> It is crucial for arts organizations to understand the colonial history of the land on which they are making accessibility efforts, as colonialism and ableism both seek to regulate and eradicate “non-normative” bodies, historically through state-sanctioned policies.

Granville Island is accessible by car and by multiple bus routes, although the closest bus stops are off-island. The Aquabus and False Creek ferry also stop at Granville Island.<sup>20</sup> The Island is located within the Vancouver neighbourhood of False Creek. In 2016, the median age of False Creek residents was 54.6, the median household income was \$78,176, and only 17% of residents identified as a visible minority.<sup>21</sup> These demographics are important to consider when acknowledging accessibility, as a predominantly upper-middle-class, white neighbourhood may feel inaccessible to racialized and/or lower-income patrons despite accessibility efforts on-site.

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<sup>15</sup> Granville Island, “About Us,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://granvilleisland.com/about-us>.

<sup>16</sup> Seḥákw, “History of the Seḥákw Lands,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://senakw.com/history>.

<sup>17</sup> Seḥákw, “History of the Seḥákw Lands.”

<sup>18</sup> Granville Island, “History & Architecture,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://granvilleisland.com/history-and-architecture>.

<sup>19</sup> Seḥákw, “History of the Seḥákw Lands.”

<sup>20</sup> <https://granvilleisland.com/directions-and-parking>

<sup>21</sup> City of Vancouver, “About False Creek South,” February 2021, <https://syc.vancouver.ca/projects/false-creek-south/fact-sheet.pdf>.

## 1.4. Past Accessibility Efforts at the Festival

Accessibility is an ever-adapting and ongoing process, and the evolution of Writers Fest's accessibility practices over the past five years reflects its mission to continuously improve. In 2017, the Festival Program Guide <sup>22</sup> included the following accessibility resources: courtesy seating "available for audience members with mobility challenges, physical disabilities or chronic pain," ASL interpretation upon request, free or reduced ticket pricing for "social service or community organizations," school subsidies, and gender-neutral washrooms.<sup>23</sup> It also stated that all Festival venues were accessible for mobility devices, though did not specify in what ways. In 2018 and 2019, the Festival offered free events for the entire Saturday of the Festival, including a free shuttle bus to the Island in 2019.<sup>24, 25</sup>

In 2020, accessibility took on a new angle as the Festival went fully digital during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the pandemic's financial impact on its patrons, Writers Fest offered a pay-what-you-can model for all events as well as an all-access digital pass for \$100. They also provided live captions for 20 of its 40 events.<sup>26</sup>

The 2021 Festival operated in a hybrid model to follow current COVID-19 public health and safety protocol; events were a combination of digital and in-person, and all in-person attendees had to be masked and fully vaccinated. Digital events remained pay-what-you-can or \$100 for a digital pass. This year, Writers Fest also pre-booked ASL interpretation for six events, rather than making it upon request only.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The 2017-2021 Program Guides discussed here were available in print or PDF, but were not published in more accessible formats such as plain text or audio.

<sup>23</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2017 Program Guide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2017), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2018 Program Guide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2018), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2019 Program Guide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2019), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2020 Program Guide*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2020), 4, 11-48.

<sup>27</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, *2021 Program Guide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Writers Fest, 2021), 6, 13-80.

## Chapter 2. Accessibility: Current Frameworks and Practices

### 2.1. Disability Justice and Critical Disability Studies

Contemporary, anti-oppressive ideas about accessibility, particularly with regard to disability, have been shaped by the Disability Justice movement over the past twenty years. The Disability Justice movement began in San Francisco in 2005 through conversations between Patty Berne and Mia Mingus, two queer disabled women of colour, and continued to grow through the additional work of Stacey Milbern, Leroy Moore, Eli Clare, and Sebastian Margaret, as well as Sins Invalid, a performing arts collective of disabled queer people of colour co-founded by Berne and Moore.<sup>28, 29</sup> It was formed in reaction to the disability rights movement, which was led by people with “historically white centered experiences,” and was “single-issue identity-based.”<sup>30</sup> Disability Justice, in contrast, argues that ableism is inherently interconnected with other systems of oppression like white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism and that resistance should be led by those most impacted by these intersecting systems.<sup>31</sup> Disability Justice emphasizes that:

“All bodies are unique and essential.  
All bodies have strengths and needs that must be met.  
We are powerful, not despite the complexities of our bodies,  
but because of them.  
All bodies are confined by ability, race, gender, sexuality, class,  
nation state, religion, and more, and we cannot separate them.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Berkeley: Sins Invalid, 2019), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Shayda Kafai, *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021): 31.

<sup>30</sup> Patty Berne and Sins Invalid, “10 Principles of Disability Justice,” *Sins Invalid*, 2015, <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice>.

<sup>31</sup> Berne and Sins Invalid, “10 Principles of Disability Justice.”

<sup>32</sup> Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone*, 19.

Disability Justice, as well as the overlapping scholarly field of Critical Disability Studies, are also critical of the medical model of disability, which focuses on rehabilitation, cure, and institutionalization. Instead, these activists and scholars argue that disability is a “product of social relations” wherein “disabled” is given meaning through its opposition to “able-bodied” or “able-minded,” rather than being a “problematic characteristic inherent in particular bodies and minds.”<sup>33</sup> In her work *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer rejects the medical model of disability and instead proposes the political/relational model, which reframes disability as an issue that “no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being.”<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that disabled people should not seek medical treatment if they so choose, or wish for less pain, for example – but focusing solely on individual cure presents the eradication of disability as the only acceptable goal, ignores the ways that disability is socially constructed, and prevents disabled people from organizing against the systems that oppress them.

When we reconsider disability through its relation to social norms, political ideologies, and built environments, we can understand that being disabled is a “cultural identity” and “source of knowledge” in its own right.<sup>35</sup> Accessibility should arise from these knowledges and identities rather than from the goal of “universally” accessible design, which ignores individual access needs and imagines a mythical future without disabled people. As Critical Disability theorist Aimi Hamraie writes, “the design of ‘habitable worlds’ must involve treating disability itself as a valuable way of being in the world, one that societies must work to accept and preserve rather than cure or rehabilitate.”<sup>36</sup>

In her book *Restricted Access*, Elizabeth Ellcessor reminds us that it is also important to think critically about access rather than unquestioningly accept it as a “public good”: it should be understood as a “relational, unstable phenomenon that both grants benefits and interpellates individuals into larger social systems that may be empowering,

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<sup>33</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Aimi Hamraie, “Designing collective access: A feminist disability theory of universal design,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2013): 288.



exploitative, or both.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, accessibility practices do not absolve an organization from recreating social hierarchies and/or benefiting from larger systems of oppression. As disabled poet, educator, and activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

I’ve been asked to do disability and access trainings by well-meaning organizations that want the checklists, the ten things they can do to make things accessible. I know that if they do those things, without changing their internal worlds that see disabled people as sad and stupid, or refuse to see those of us already in their lives, they can have all the ASL and ramps in the world, and we won’t come where we’re not loved, needed, and understood as leaders, not just people they must begrudgingly provide services for.<sup>38</sup>

Accessibility guidelines and accessible event planning that arise from the above frameworks therefore incorporate the specific knowledge of disabled attendees, while addressing barriers for intersecting experiences and aiming to reduce them. They look to those most affected by these barriers for leadership, and they understand that accessibility is a continuous process that requires failure, and re-evaluating goals, and confronting oppressive ideologies about disability instead of checking boxes.

## **2.2. What Are Other Festivals Doing for Accessibility?**

Toronto Festival of Authors (TIFA)’s website links to the accessibility page for Harbourfront Centre, its primary venue. This page includes information on parking, wheelchair access, how to request assistive listening devices, and how to book complimentary tickets for support persons. Staff and volunteers who work with the public at Harbourfront must complete Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)

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<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Ellcessor, *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 76.

training.<sup>39</sup> TIFA’s website also has information on accessibility for three theatres at Harbourfront.<sup>40</sup>

The Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD), based in Brampton, states on its website that it “only uses spaces that are wheelchair accessible with ramp or ground level entrances, gender-neutral washrooms, dedicated accessibility parking spaces, and e-button access on all doors.” It provides information on parking and interior accessibility for each of its venues, which are held to a scent-free policy. Caregivers and support workers can attend events for free. Additionally, all events at its virtual festival in 2021 were closed-captioned.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, FOLD also works with an Accessibility Advisory Committee, “a group of disabled readers and writers who consult with [them] on how to make [their] events as accessible as possible.”<sup>42</sup>

WORD Vancouver offers courtesy seating for “anyone with mobility challenges, physical disabilities or chronic pain.” Its events are free and all live streamed events are closed captioned. All venues are also scent-free.<sup>43</sup>

The Cultch, which runs out of multiple venues in Vancouver, offers ASL- interpreted performances and relaxed performances for select shows,<sup>44</sup> captioning for digital events, assistive listening devices at all venues, and live audio described performances in partnership with VocalEye, a local non-profit that works to make theatre and visual art more accessible for blind and partially-sighted attendees. It encourages a scent-free

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<sup>39</sup> Harbourfront Centre, “Accessibility,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://harbourfrontcentre.com/accessibility/>.

<sup>40</sup> Toronto International Festival of Authors, “Accessibility,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://festivalofauthors.ca/accessibility/>.

<sup>41</sup> The FOLD, “Accessibility,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://thefoldcanada.org/accessibility/>.

<sup>42</sup> Amanda Leduc, “What the Literary World Gets Wrong About Accessibility,” Literary Hub, March 12, 2020, <https://lithub.com/what-the-literary-world-gets-wrong-about-accessibility/>.

<sup>43</sup> Word Vancouver, “Diversity Statement,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.wordvancouver.ca/diversity-statement>.

<sup>44</sup> Relaxed performances are designed for audience members who may feel more comfortable in a more casual and/or low-sensory environment, including but not limited to those on the autism spectrum, with sensory sensitivities, and with learning disabilities. Typically, audience members can move around, talk, and make noise throughout the performance, and lighting and sound may be modified to meet sensory needs. The Cultch, “Accessibility,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://thecultch.com/accessibility/>.

environment at all venues. Its box office provides complimentary tickets to “support persons accompanying patrons who require assistance to attend a performance,” and can reserve wheelchair seats and “big and tall” seats for patrons in advance. The Cultch Connects program also provides tickets to a variety of community organizations and social groups for which attendance might be a barrier. The Cultch’s accessibility web page includes information on accessible seating as well as venue accessibility, such as exterior/interior accessibility, transit accessibility, and parking.<sup>45</sup>

PuSh festival holds performances throughout Vancouver, including many at the same Granville Island venues as Writers Fest. In 2022, PuSh’s accessibility coordinator was Anika Vervecken, who is also a member of Writers Fest’s Accessibility Roundtable. PuSh provides ASL interpretation and closed captioning at select events or upon request; low-vision friendly programming, including live audio descriptions and sighted guides in partnership with VocalEye; and written introductions for performances without the above. The festival also runs relaxed performances and provides visual stories for its venues, which can be particularly helpful for patrons on the autism spectrum. Companions of patrons with disabilities can attend for free, and the festival can provide a support person if a patron does not have one. Additionally, the festival’s website provides detailed accessibility audits for each venue. The festival provides accessibility awareness training to its volunteers, which is facilitated by paid consultants with lived experience with disabilities.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The Cultch, “Accessibility.”

<sup>46</sup> PuSh, “Accessible PuSh,” accessed April 5, 2023, <https://pushfestival.ca/festival-events/accessible-push/>.

## Chapter 3. Planning and Implementing Accessibility Practices at Writers Fest 2022

### 3.1. Formation of the Accessibility Roundtable

The idea for the ART came about through discussions among the Writers Fest team: they knew they wanted to prioritize increasing accessibility, but wanted to ensure they had “the resources to look at it more intentionally,” as Executive Director Kaile Shilling recounts.<sup>47</sup> Shilling had previously done participatory research and community engagement in the United States, and, knowing the importance of engaging and compensating those most impacted, developed a rough outline and goals for the roundtable and applied for grant funding. The team wanted to encourage free-flowing discussion through the roundtable format, providing a loose structure rather than a strict agenda while still having a facilitator to ensure that everyone’s voice is being shared. Shilling explains, “In my experience, [this model is] often most effective for enabling people to share things into the circle when trust is still being built.”<sup>48</sup>

The Accessibility Roundtable (ART) met five times over six months (June-November) in 2022. Recruitment began with the Writers Fest team connecting with people they knew from the arts community, then asking for more recommendations at the first meeting. 2022 members were Amy Amantea, Heather McCain, Ladan Sahraei, and Anika Vervecken. Amantea is an artist and actor as well as a member of and community outreach coordinator for VocalEye, a non-profit organization that works to increase accessibility in the performing and visual arts for blind and partially-sighted attendees.<sup>49</sup> McCain is Executive Director of Live Educate Transform Society (formerly Creating Accessible Neighbourhoods), a non-profit they founded in 2005. McCain is proudest to be called a Crip Doula, a Disability Justice term for someone who helps disabled people

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<sup>47</sup> Kaile Shilling, email message to author, April 21, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Shilling, email message.

<sup>49</sup> Alexandre Jay, “The Show Must Go On,” *Pacific Rim Magazine*, 3, no. 7 (2020), <https://sites.langara.ca/prm/2020/community/the-show-must-go-on/>.

navigate our complex systems, provides resources, support, and builds community.<sup>50</sup> Sahraei is an Iranian-Canadian award-winning Deaf filmmaker. She is involved with Kickstart Disability, Greater Vancouver Association of the Deaf (GVAD), Vancouver Community College, Pride In Art Society and Queer Arts Festival.<sup>51</sup> Vervecken is a queer, neurodiverse single mom and caregiver for a Deaf man with a developmental disability. She is a leader in accessibility for performing arts, using her background in theatre, music, translation as well as her lived experience to hone her skills and vision as an access activator.<sup>52</sup> Each ART member received a \$1,500 honorarium and invitations to attend 1-3 Writers Fest events.

Writers Fest's initial priorities in forming and consulting the ART were as follows:

- Institutionalize accessibility for Deaf/hard of hearing attendees
- Make events more accessible to blind/low-vision attendees
- Make events more accessible for people with invisible disabilities
- Increase awareness of language when asking patrons about access needs
- Make VWF materials and website accessible
- Assess accessibility of each venue

Writers Fest's initial outcomes in working with the ART included:

- Share results with staff, board, and supporters
- Include appropriate recommendations in volunteer training
- Make results available on website and share with other performing arts organizations who use Granville Island venues

## **3.2. ART Recommendations for 2022**

My project came about as a result of the ART's creation, as Writers Fest needed an internal point person to support the ART and help plan and implement their recommendations for the 2022 Festival. My internship did not start until after the third

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<sup>50</sup> Heather McCain, email message to author, May 4, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Kickstart Disability, "Staff and Board," accessed April 14, 2023, [www.kickstartdisability.ca/about-us/staff-and-board/](http://www.kickstartdisability.ca/about-us/staff-and-board/).

<sup>52</sup> Anika Vervecken, email message to author, May 8, 2023.

meeting, so I was filled in with meeting minutes and transcripts. I attended the fourth meeting before the Festival, primarily to listen and take notes; I also facilitated the fifth meeting after the Festival and asked members debriefing questions. As mentioned above, each meeting followed a circle-sharing style discussion based around general agenda items. Meetings were primarily discussions of possible accessibility improvements based on ART members' experiences as consultants/advocates, and then discussions of how these improvements might be accomplished within a festival-specific context. The first meeting's agenda was based on Writers Fest's initial priorities for accessibility at the 2022 Festival, and subsequent meetings were planned according to the discussions that unfolded.

For box office operations and ticketing, the ART recommended ensuring that box office staff and volunteers are prepared to take video relay service calls, and to reserve a block of seats for groups from the disability community attending together. Importantly, they also emphasized that ticket purchasing over the phone should be free of charge, and that support persons accompanying disabled patrons should also receive free admission (this was already the case at Writers Fest, but is not always a guarantee at all festivals). The ART also requested that the option to reserve accessible seats in advance should be made more visible on the website and in the program guide.

For seating at events, the ART emphasized ensuring a clear sightline between Deaf guests and ASL interpreters at each venue, as well as providing flexible seating needs for a variety of mobility aids, including wheelchairs, walkers, scooters, canes, etc. Furthermore, ART members recommended training front-of-house volunteers to open the house early for patrons with pre-booked seating or access needs.

The roundtable members also provided several guidelines for improving the program guide's accessibility. They recommended creating a plain text version of the program guide in a Word document, which allows for text customizability and compatibility with screen readers, as well as creating an audio version of the program guide, with key information summarized before each event description. In all formats, ASL-supported events should be listed in one place for easy reference, and accessibility information should be prioritized at the front of the guide – doing so counters the notion of disabled people being “afterthoughts,” and emphasizes accessibility's importance. The ART also

encouraged including photos of people with visible disabilities in the program guide to provide further visibility and representation of disabled folks.

Making events more accessible also requires an ongoing commitment to outreach to underserved communities. The ART recommended paying consultants to spread the word about the Festival and providing them with tickets to distribute (arranging for transit to the events would be ideal). When performing outreach, Writers Fest should offer reduced ticket rates, and develop a process for welcoming group visits, which can include providing a greeter for the group and arranging for early access to seating. Outreach can also take the form of ongoing interactions with individuals and communities on social media.

ART members also provided recommendations on how to make venue accessibility information more public facing. They suggested creating accessibility one-sheets for each venue, with main points about various forms of accessibility; an important aspect of access is being transparent about what is and is not accessible, as it allows individuals to best assess if they can enter a space and/or attend an event. Providing audio introductions for venues and individual events would also provide more accessible information to blind and low-vision patrons specifically. ART member Anika Vervecken had created visual stories for the Waterfront, Performance Works, NEST venues on Granville Island for PuSh Festival, and suggested adapting them for Writers Fest as well. Visual stories are guides to a particular location with images explaining how to navigate them, for people to prepare for their visit.<sup>53</sup> They can be a particularly useful tool for people on the autism spectrum. Additionally, the ART recommended sending an accessibility rider to authors – like a hospitality rider, it would allow authors to make access requests for their venue or greenroom in advance.

Importantly, the ART recommended developing accessibility training for Writers Fest volunteers this year. They suggested running multiple sessions of this training to avoid information overload, and if the training is optional, offering volunteers who complete it the first pick of shifts.

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<sup>53</sup> PuSh, “Accessible PuSh.”

## Summary of Recommendations

- Ensure that box office staff and volunteers are prepared to take video relay service calls and to reserve a block of seats for groups from the disability community attending together.
- Make option to reserve accessible seats in advance more visible on website and in program guide.
- Ensure a clear sightline between Deaf guests and ASL interpreters at each venue.
- Provide flexible seating needs for a variety of mobility aids.
- Train front of house volunteers to open the house early for patrons with pre-booked seating and/or access needs that require it.
- Create a plain text version of the program guide.
- List ASL-supported events in one place in the program guide.
- Put accessibility information at the front of the program guide.
- Include images of people with visible disabilities in the program guide.
- Pay consultants to spread the word and provide them with tickets to distribute.
- Offer reduced tickets and a welcoming/early access process to groups from the disability communities.
- Create accessibility one-pagers and visual stories for each venue.
- Create audio introductions for venues and events.
- Send an accessibility rider to authors.
- Develop accessibility training for Festival volunteers.



### 3.3. Implementing Recommendations

I started at Writers Fest in September 2022, as a Master of Publishing student intern and Festival Associate, with the primary role of working with the Writers Fest team to implement the ART's recommendations for the 2022 Festival. The following section details my observations and experiences of developing accessibility at the Festival, including our processes, successes, and challenges.

#### Box Office

Ticket purchases were available online via Showpass, over the telephone, and in-person at the Festival box office. Maintaining multiple options for ticket purchasing is key for accessibility at the box office. As one attendee wrote in their feedback, "I do not have [a] cell phone or [a] printer, but was accommodated nicely at the venue re ticket."<sup>54</sup> Additionally, the option to reserve courtesy seats was advertised in our program guide, on our "Accessibility" web page, and in an accessibility e-blast to newsletter subscribers.

Based on 2022's Festival attendee snapshot survey, 75.5% of respondents still did not know about accessibility resources at the Festival, including the option to reserve accessible seating, which suggests a need for greater communication of these resources in years to come.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the box office was able to easily meet access requests when they did come in. As one attendee wrote in their daily feedback, "I have a broken leg and had to attend in a wheelchair. I found the staff very accommodating and when I called to explain the situation I was given a ticket so I could bring someone to assist me. I would have had to cancel the event if they had not done this."<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, we learned to ensure that accessible seats are reserved even if there are no advance requests in order to accommodate walk-ins, particularly for seats within the sightline of ASL interpreters. At future festivals, box office staff should also practice

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<sup>54</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "2022 Feedback Survey – Saturday," accessed December 1, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "2022 Vancouver Writers Fest – Attendee Snapshot," accessed December 1, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "2022 Feedback Survey – Wednesday," accessed December 1, 2022.

checking in with teachers about students' access needs during the booking process, as we had students whose needs could have been better met with advance preparation.

## **Program Guide**

For the 2022 program guide, Marketing and Publicity Manager Ariel Hudnall created a plain text version and it was linked on the website. Hudnall noted that formatting the plain text guide was a significant time investment. We did not have the time or resources to create an audio guide this year but will aim to develop one next year.

## **Outreach**

We did not reach out to disability organizations or community groups for the 2022 Festival, largely due to a lack of time to research, plan, and execute this outreach; furthermore, we had not yet determined which staff would be responsible for taking it on. Rather than initiating rushed and ill-prepared connections with the community, we decided to make more in-depth outreach a priority in advance of the 2023 Festival. I did connect with Douglas College ASL students, offering them complimentary tickets to several of our ASL-supported events. 12 students attended in total at the following events: What Home Means, Fabulous Historical Fantasy, The Power of Story, and Poetry Bash.

## **Venue Accessibility**

To increase awareness of venue accessibility, I developed accessibility one-pagers for each venue, which provided point-form overviews of how the venues could or could not be accessible. I used PuSh Festival's accessibility audits (developed in turn from Radical Access Mapping Project's template) as guides and filled in gaps by speaking to the production team and visiting venues.<sup>57</sup> The one-pagers were sent to the ART for review and shared with authors and volunteers. They were particularly useful in establishing consistency in what to assess and communicate regarding venue access. I also created visual stories for each venue, using Vervecken's existing visual stories for PuSh as

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<sup>57</sup> Radical Access Mapping Project, "Free Audit Templates," <https://radicalaccessiblecommunities.wordpress.com/the-radical-access-mapping-project/radical-access-mapping-project-vancouver/>.

templates and customizing them for Writers Fest. We received positive interest in venue visual stories from moderators, including Shelagh Rogers and Elee Kraljii Gardiner. Finally, we introduced accessibility riders for authors, encouraging them to share their access needs.

Both the one-pagers and visual stories were shared on our website, social media, and in an e-blast on our accessibility resources. Their promotion on social media in particular allowed us to inform followers pre-Festival and emphasize our ongoing investment in accessibility measures; despite this communication, however, 75.5% of respondents in 2022's post-Festival survey still did not know about resources like one-pagers and visual stories.<sup>58</sup> As a result, communicating these resources in future years will require more time, research, and diversity in order to reach a broader audience. Overall, developing the one-pagers and visual stories highlighted the benefits of sharing resources among organizations: I used resources shared by RAMP and PuSh, and in turn created documents that can be shared to other organizations that use Granville Island venues.

Increasing venue accessibility by opening the house early when access needs require it also depends on greater communication with front of house GITD (Granville Island Theatre District) staff at relevant venues. While Writers Fest has its own operations staff and front of house volunteers, they work alongside GITD staff and front of house managers at Performance Works, Waterfront Theatre, and the NEST. At the Literary Cabaret event this year, we arranged with VocalEye's group that they could be let into the lobby and house of Performance Works before opening to increase access for them; however, front of house staff insisted that the group could not be let in to the lobby before doors opened and that they could not check their seats' accessibility before the house opened, which created confusion for the group and myself. As a result, there needs to be more effective communication between Writers Fest staff and GITD staff when arranging access to the lobby and house before standard opening times.

## **Volunteer Training**

Incorporating accessibility training into volunteer orientation was a significant addition to the Festival this year. The standard orientation for Writers Fest volunteers takes place

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<sup>58</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "Attendee Snapshot."

during one evening session the week before the Festival itself (volunteers have two sessions to choose from; both sessions are the same). The sessions largely focus on celebrating the volunteers' integral roles at the Festival as well as providing a logistical overview of these roles (for example, how to access schedules, where to check in, etc.) At the end of the sessions, volunteers break off into smaller, role-based groups led by different staff members to review their specific responsibilities during the Festival. Volunteers can also access resources for their respective roles through Writers Fest's online volunteer management software, Better Impact.

I took the lead in coordinating the addition of accessibility training to these orientation sessions, liaising between the ART and the volunteer operations team, Keely Langford and Mikaela Ashfour. We received generous advice on how to run this training in different ways from the ART; as a first run, we decided to include a 20-minute accessibility overview for all volunteers at orientation, rather than running multiple, optional training sessions. I approached Amantea about incorporating sighted guide training, but we agreed that it was too last minute. I recommend that interested volunteers attend VocalEye training throughout the year and that the Festival start planning volunteer training sessions with Amantea in spring/early summer next year.

Initially, I only asked Vervecken to facilitate because we thought her model for PuSh training could be easily applicable to Writers Fest, and I suggested a 20-minute overview. Vervecken recommended asking more ART members to emphasize multiple points of view, so I reached out to McCain and Sahraei, who both expressed interest. Sadly, I was not able to find an ASL interpreter for Sahraei in time, which excluded her from the training.

At the start of each orientation session, Vervecken and McCain provided 30-minute accessibility overview/disability awareness training, and then sat in on usher, front of house, and box office breakout groups to answer any additional, specific questions. Vervecken and McCain were paid for their work in addition to their ART honorarium. Volunteer operations also implemented specific accessibility responsibilities for front of house volunteers and ushers, which included asking if patrons need a chair when waiting in line, asking line-ups if anyone needs courtesy seating, and announcing priority seating and advance entry to theatres.

As with any early stages of implementing new training, this year's accessibility orientation came with both successes and roadblocks to address for 2023. Vervecken and McCain's personal stories about living with disability were a positive aspect of the training, as volunteers could understand the importance of accessibility awareness and even relate these experiences to their own life or others they knew. Furthermore, gaining basic accessibility awareness made many volunteers feel more empowered to take action in meeting patron's access needs during the Festival in a supportive way. As one attendee wrote, "each volunteer I met at five events I attended was outstandingly supportive and gracious about facilitating myself and my walker's access ... I felt warmly welcomed."<sup>59</sup> After the Festival, six volunteers also signed up for Amy Amantea's sighted guide training with VocalEye, showing an increased interest in accessibility among volunteers. Heather and Anika also shared in-depth PowerPoints with volunteers afterwards so they could refer to their talking points and learn more.

The largest challenge – and area for improvement – for this year's volunteer orientation was time management. When I first started, it took time to determine who would plan and execute accessibility training between myself and volunteer operations. By the time I took it on, I had two weeks to plan everything; in the future, I think at least a month's head start would make coordinating easier, particularly for recruiting consultants and ASL interpreters for the event. Additionally, many volunteers and staff felt that the training itself was too long for one session (particularly as it went over the allotted time and rushed the rest of the schedule) and was occasionally repetitive between presenters. As a team, we also agreed that in the future, volunteers could benefit from more role-specific accessibility information, though adding this would also lengthen the training.

## **ASL**

Writers Fest held one event with ASL interpretation each day. Interpreters were provided by ASL Interpreting, Inc., with the exception of two externally-organized ASL-supported events, held in partnership with the City of Vancouver and Arsenal Pulp Press respectively. Before and during the Festival, I contacted authors for any readings and proper names they would be featuring in their talks, and then forwarded them to the ASL

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<sup>59</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "2022 Feedback Survey – Friday," accessed December 1, 2022.

team so they could prepare accordingly. I also stayed in contact with the ASL team throughout the Festival to respond to ongoing requests, including procuring a sound monitor for interpreters at one venue.

While reserving seats within ASL interpreters' sightline was easily accomplished at all Granville Island venues, where seats are first come first served, it was an oversight at our event at Vancouver Playhouse theatre, where seats are ticketed individually. We had not asked the Playhouse to block out seats within the ASL sightline, so they were available for purchase to the general public. As a result, our Deaf audience members were unable to sit in the most ideal spots for ASL. We also learned not to place the standard Writers Fest-branded signs on stage behind the ASL interpreters, as the colours can be distracting. The production team was able to quickly respond to this request by placing black sheets over the signs during ASL-interpreted events.

## **Chapter 4. Feedback and Future Planning**

### **4.1. Feedback from the ART**

After the 2022 Festival concluded, Writers Fest held a final debrief session with the ART to gather their feedback as attendees this year, and to consult them for short-term and long-term accessibility goals going forward (see Appendix A for session agenda). This subsection focuses specifically on feedback from this year's Festival. I have incorporated the ART's recommendations for the future into the subsection that follows this one.

In the debrief meeting, Ladan Sahraei mentioned that she did not know in advance that Queer Little Nightmares or City of Vancouver Book Awards had ASL interpretation. Notably, both of these events had externally-arranged ASL, which suggests a need for stronger communication from Writers Fest when ASL gets added to an event, whether internally or externally. Sahraei also noted that the reserved seating for Deaf and hard of hearing audience members was not always in the front row and/or in an adequate sightline, and emphasized that the background behind interpreters was distracting when signage was not covered up. As a result, greater attention should be made to seating for Deaf and hard-of-hearing audience members and the placement of ASL interpreters on stage.

Anika Vervecken liked the open atmosphere of the Festival's opening event – she elaborated that literary festivals often run the risk of being elitist, but she could see efforts to get away from this assumption and make the Festival more inclusive.

Heather McCain praised the volunteers at Revue stage, noting that they were excited to use their training, worked together, and didn't make it feel like an obligation to help McCain. McCain did note that there could have been more consistency in volunteers providing access support across all venues and events, such as offering chairs or stools to guests waiting in line. They also noticed quite a few people lost on the island while they were on-site, and suggested that more wayfinding tools and maps throughout the island could help.

Amy Amantea noted that the location of her VocalEye group's table for the Literary Cabaret event at Performance Works (back right-hand side when facing stage) was accessible for her and her group. She also mentioned she would have benefited from more audio information about the event, including descriptions of the speakers, which could be available online in advance. Writers Fest provided a volunteer trained in sighted guiding for Amantea at the Sunday Brunch, and the guide sat with her for the event; Amantea noted that while she did not mind, other blind/low-vision patrons may not want to be accompanied by their sighted guide for the whole event and that Writers Fest should offer both options.

## 4.2. Future Action Items

In this section, I have developed a series of action items for Writers Fest to aim for going forward, both short-term (can be started and/or piloted by the 2023 Festival) and long-term (developed over the next five years). These actions are based on the ART's recommendations from our debrief meetings, audience feedback in anonymous surveys, and my own observations during the Festival. I have also isolated specific priorities for next year in the section that follows this one. Importantly, budget, labor, and Writers Fest's level of control over venue spaces could create limitations to the feasibility and sustainability of these points.

### ASL

As mentioned above, **seating should be reserved** in the front row, within the ASL interpreters' sightline, and with enough seats to accommodate walk-ins. The stage behind interpreters should have a dark background, free of signage.

Writers Fest should aim to **include ASL interpretation for its opening event**; Sahraei also suggested **recruiting volunteers from Douglas College's Sign Language Interpretation program** to act as floaters throughout the Festival site and offer interpretation in lineups, at concession, and during house announcements. Adopting the



above practices would hopefully make Deaf attendees feel more acknowledged and welcome in all festival spaces, not just the ASL-supported events.

Writers Fest also hopes to begin **consulting the Deaf community to determine ASL programming**, to ensure that the events with ASL are aimed toward the community.

Writers Fest could connect with Sahraei to organize a small focus group and compensate this group with free tickets to ASL-supported events. This consulting would have to take place before the program guide goes to print, however, so timing is crucial.

#### **Short-term actions:**

- Reserve seating within ASL sightline at each event with enough seats to accommodate walk-ins.
- Ensure the background behind interpreters is dark.
- Start planning a focus group with Ladan Sahraei to consult with Deaf community members on ASL programming.

#### **Long-term actions:**

- Ensure that ASL programming focus group is a yearly commitment and maintain relationships with members.

### **Production/Operations**

One major area to continue expanding is publicly available accessibility information, both through on-site signage and online communication. For instance, the Festival's online accessibility information, including one-pagers, should expand to **include more details on accessible parking**. An "accessible" parking spot is not necessarily so for everyone, as so much depends on the vehicle and the surrounding traffic flow – if a wheelchair user exits their vehicle from the back, for example, will they be exiting into oncoming traffic? Greater detail will allow patrons to determine if they can use these accessible spots or not. Additionally, in 2022, the Festival's accessibility information was limited to the main event venues on the island; in the future, this information should expand to **include special events venues as well as the Festival bookstore**.

**Increased signage for washrooms** could also be helpful, particularly in Waterfront, where lineups can interfere with access to the washrooms. This year, Revue did not have washrooms due to renovations; while the Festival did have an accessible port-a-potty, signage in the venue with directions to the nearest washrooms would be useful for folks who would prefer to use them.

Writers Fest should consider putting **signs at the entrance to each venue with a summary of access information** for that particular venue (similar to the accessibility one-pagers on the website). Doing so would allow patrons to assess a venue's accessibility upon arrival, and could help them determine if they have to make additional access requests during their time there. Including contact information on the signs for feedback and requests would also help Writers Fest further engage with its disabled patrons and maintain accountability. Overall, introducing these signs shows that Writers Fest has invested time and money into accessibility, acknowledges disabled attendees specifically, and can help them feel more prepared for their experience at the Festival.

Because Writers Fest uses venues managed by GITD and Red Gate Arts Society, certain recommendations might have to be accomplished through collaboration with them or await their approval. For instance, adding high-visibility strips to stairs in the venues and integrating FM transmitters and receivers into venue operations could be a **shared responsibility between GITD/Red Gate and Writers Fest as well as other festivals using these venues.**

Finally, while Writers Fest did encourage mask use in its communications and provided free masks to audience members, it could demonstrate greater solidarity with disabled and immunocompromised attendees by **making masks a requirement at all events.** As one attendee wrote in their feedback, "not requiring audience members to wear masks excludes disabled people from the entire festival ... Overall, the festival did not feel welcoming to disabled people this year."<sup>60</sup> Making masks mandatory reduces the labour of disabled and immunocompromised attendees to decide if a space is safe enough for them to enter, and demonstrates greater community care through disease mitigation.

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<sup>60</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "2022 Feedback Survey – Friday."

### **Short-term actions:**

- Include more detailed information on accessible parking on the Festival website.
- Include accessibility information for special events venues and Festival bookstore on the Festival website.
- Increase signage in venues, particularly for washrooms and for point-form accessibility information.
- Make masks a requirement at all events.

### **Long-term actions:**

- Collaborate with GITD, Red Gate, and/or other festivals using Granville Island venues to invest in accessibility features across venues.

## **Box Office**

The Festival box office should continue offering in-person and phone ticket sales, and should also consider **offering reduced ticket prices for underrepresented communities** at the Festival. Furthermore, the box office could **incorporate a seating chart** for each venue so patrons who reserve accessible seating in advance can request specific seats (ex. If they need to be near an aisle, exit, front row, etc.). Finally, when booking school groups, box office could **include the option for teachers to disclose and make requests for students' access needs**. For instance, one teacher wrote in a feedback survey, "Our school body includes a student with hearing impairment. Other venues have had an FM device available that helps him hear better. Thankfully, he didn't need it for this year's event, but if it were a larger space, he might not have been able to enjoy it as much without access to a device."<sup>61</sup> Knowing access needs like this student's in advance can help Writers Fest inform school groups how they can meet these needs, or if they cannot.

### **Short-term actions:**

- Make seating charts for each venue available at ticket purchasing points.

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<sup>61</sup> Vancouver Writers Fest, "2022 Feedback Survey – Wednesday."

- Include option for teachers to make access requests for students when booking school groups.

#### **Long-term actions:**

- Develop a process for reduced-price ticketing for patrons from underrepresented communities.

## **Outreach**

Outreach should be an ongoing effort to build and maintain relationships with disabled communities over time. One way that Writers Fest can improve on outreach is to **provide tickets to community ambassadors** to share with their peers, as well as **providing tickets to disability organizations** to share with their networks. Ideally, ticket prices should be reduced and refundable, as disabled folks may not want to pay full price for an experience that may not be entirely accessible for them, or they cannot pay full price due to the significant intersection between poverty and disability.

#### **Short-term actions:**

- Provide reduced-price, refundable tickets to community ambassadors and disability organizations.

#### **Long-term actions:**

- Integrate line for outreach to community ambassadors and disability organizations into budget.
- Establish environment where members of disabled communities can attend in groups, such as reserving a block of seats and providing a greeter for the group.

## **Volunteers**

As accessibility training for volunteers was in 2022, it will understandably take a few years to develop training that runs efficiently and effectively. Starting to plan orientation earlier in 2023 would be a simple but significant improvement. Writers Fest should **contact Amy Amantea in late spring/early summer to coordinate sighted guide**

**training** for volunteers, and should **begin planning and recruiting speakers for the orientation sessions themselves at least one month in advance**. Writers Fest should also **ensure that there is an ASL interpreter at orientation** no matter what, to account for Deaf volunteers and/or presenters.

For orientation content, Writers Fest could **invite different presenters each year** to maintain a variety in perspectives shared, and could **film the accessibility training and/or provide handouts so volunteers can learn in their own time**, thus reducing the amount of time spent on training during orientation night. In-person accessibility training could take more of an **interactive approach**, with volunteers practicing scenarios specific to their roles or playing games to help them remember certain aspects of accessibility awareness. Volunteer operations could also **make certain shifts available only for people who have completed a certain amount of accessibility training** (e.g. watched all videos, taken sighted guide training) in order to incentivize this training.

Finally, Writers Fest should prioritize **recruiting volunteers from a variety of communities**, including Deaf, blind, and disabled communities, should **consult disabled volunteers in its accessibility implementation**, and should **provide more opportunities for volunteers to disclose their own access needs** and make support for them clear.

#### **Short-term actions:**

- Plan sighted guide training with Amy Amantea in late spring/early summer.
- Hire ASL interpreter for orientation sessions.
- Recruit speakers and plan orientation content in late August/early September.
- Establish contact point for volunteers to disclose their own access needs.

#### **Long-term actions:**

- Invite different presenters each year.
- Provide a combination of self-guided and interactive accessibility training.
- Incentivize accessibility training by giving volunteers who have completed training priority shifts.
- Develop practice for consulting disabled volunteers in accessibility implementation.

- Recruit volunteers with lived experiences with disabilities.

## Media and marketing

In the future, Writers Fest should continue offering a plain text program guide and should also **begin planning an audio version of the program guide**. The marketing team should also continue highlighting the Festival's accessibility options through its social media and newsletter, and **emphasize a contact point for access-related questions and suggestions**. It would also be useful to **promote the Digital Festival earlier** – while being honest that programming is TBD – to provide assurance for attendees who are unable to make it in person due to illness, lack of access, etc.

The marketing team should also work towards **including alt text for all digital media**, and ensuring that the accessibility page on the website is visible year-round. Future website development should also include a **statement of intent**, created in collaboration with the ART, as well as an overall **accessibility audit** for the website.

### Short-term actions:

- Pilot an audio version of the program guide.
- Establish and promote a contact point for access-related questions and suggestions.
- Promote Digital Festival during the flagship Festival itself.
- Start including alt-text for all digital media.

### Long-term actions:

- Develop a statement of intent for the website.
- Perform an accessibility audit of the website.

## Programming

**More disability representation** in programming is an important facet of Writers Fest's accessibility work. Including disabled authors, books about disability, and possibly even panel discussions about disability or accessibility might allow members of Vancouver's

disabled communities to feel better represented. That being said, disability is hugely diverse, and Writers Fest should avoid tokenizing disabled authors and expecting them to speak on behalf of all people with disabilities.

**Long-term actions:**

- Include greater disability representation in festival programming.

**Distribution of Labour**

For future accessibility work, **collaboration between the Accessibility Roundtable and an internal accessibility coordinator** would be most effective – it would facilitate consulting the ART for their expertise while having someone familiar with festival operations execute the ART’s recommendations and ensure consistency across the team. Ideally, the accessibility coordinator would include volunteers and/or consultants with a variety of lived experiences of disabilities in implementing accessibility recommendations, lending their perspectives and expertise.

**Long-term actions:**

- Institutionalize consistent, ongoing collaboration with the Accessibility Roundtable, particularly through the assistance of an internal accessibility coordinator, who could then liaise with volunteers and staff.

**4.3. Priorities for 2023**

The following priorities are based on debriefing discussions with the ART about their recommended short-term goals, as well as accounting for what can be accomplished in 2023 with expected time, labor, and funding. These priorities focus on sustainable and iterative planning, as they either build upon initiatives from the past year or institutionalize practices to streamline implementation in the following years.

1. Continue with Accessibility Roundtable, expanding to include more of a focus on accessibility for neurodivergence in addition to physical disabilities.

2. Ensure that there is a combination of staff and ART representatives to continue accessibility standards from last year and address areas for improvement.
3. Increase frequency and diversity of communication of accessibility resources, including signage at venues, e-blasts, program guide, website, and social media. Include access information for bookstore and special event venues, as well as contact information for accessibility-related questions and recommendations.
4. Continue developing volunteer training, including sighted guide training, accessibility awareness training, and Festival-specific scenarios; offer specific shifts to volunteers who have completed this training.
5. Consult Deaf community about ASL programming, creating a small focus group in collaboration with Ladan Sahraei before program guide goes to print.
6. Recruit Douglas College students for further ASL support.
7. Start ongoing outreach to Disability organizations/community groups and prioritize building relationships with these communities – not just at Festival time, but for events throughout the year and with ongoing connection on social media.
8. Increase communication with GITD and other partners about accessibility, including informing them of accessibility practices and resources.



## Conclusion

As Vancouver Writers Festival continues to develop its accessibility practices and resources going forward, there are a number of strengths for it to act upon as well as limitations for it to address. One major strength is its relationships with local festivals that use the same Granville Island venues, such as PuSh Festival, Fringe Festival, and Children's Festival. These relationships enable reciprocal sharing of venue-specific accessibility practices and resources between Writers Fest and other festivals, meaning that Writers Fest can learn from these other festivals while also sharing its own practices with them in return.

Writers Fest also has a significant strength in its team of dedicated and experienced volunteers. Volunteers are often the first point of contact between Writers Fest and its patrons and empowering them to implement accessibility practices can help with consistency and communication. Importantly, meeting volunteers' own access needs, consulting disabled volunteers, and providing them with specific leadership would also strengthen and diversify Writers Fest's accessibility efforts.

As a non-profit organization, Writers Fest's labour and funding for accessibility efforts are largely accomplished through grants and internships, which can mean less continuity and stability from year to year. This limitation may require more advance planning and more frequent reassessment of access goals depending on available funds and labour, but it certainly does not mean that improvements cannot be done. As Elizabeth A. Harrison and Alison G. Kopit remind us, "if it was not possible to create access on a tiny budget and with limited time, we wouldn't have the Disability Rights and Disability Justice movements."<sup>62</sup>

Finally, Writers Fest may be limited in its ability to improve venue-specific accessibility due to the fact that it does not own the venues it uses; venues on Granville Island are managed by Granville Island Theatre District (NEST, Waterfront, Performance Works) and Red Gate Arts Society (Revue). As a result, specific changes to the venues, such as

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth A. Harrison and Alison G. Kopit, "Accessibility at the Bisexual Health Summit: Reflections and Lessons for Improving Event Accessibility," *Journal of Bisexuality* 20, no. 3 (2020): 227.

new railings and high-visibility stairs, would have to be accomplished in partnership with the venue management. This limitation demonstrates the importance of transparency in communicating environmental accessibility to an audience: if a building is not as accessible as it could be (keeping in mind it may never be fully accessible to everyone all the time), then it is better for users to be informed so they can prepare and make specific access requests accordingly.

Overall, it takes time to build trust with disabled attendees in a world in which most events are inaccessible in some ways – it may take several years to gain a significant number of attendees, and it requires continuous demonstration of putting in work and money. As the festival continues improving its accessibility, it should also consider its relationship with other festivals and arts organizations: how can Writers Fest share resources with them? And how can it learn from them?

To conclude, Writers Fest's first flagship Festival working with the Accessibility Roundtable highlights the importance of consulting and seeking leadership from those most affected by barriers to access, of collaborating across Vancouver's disabled communities and cultural organizations, and of reframing accessibility as an ever-changing, long-term practice rather than a list of tasks to complete as quickly as possible. Writers Fest still has much more to learn and accomplish on its accessibility journey, but such is the very nature of accessibility: as Elizabeth Ellcessor writes, "it is not an end goal but is a process of fits and starts, accommodations and innovations, learned skills and puzzling interfaces."<sup>63</sup> This ongoing process should be exciting rather than discouraging: it means that with every lesson learned, every question asked, and every change made, the Vancouver Writers Festival can help more people connect with stories, ideas, and worlds in ways that work for them.

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<sup>63</sup> Ellcessor, *Restricted Access*, 9.

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# Appendix A: Accessibility Roundtable Debriefing Sessions Agenda

Welcome and check-in

## **FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE: General impressions**

- What events did you attend? Any highlights for you?
- Any accessibility-related experiences that stood out for you? (positive or negative!)

## **PRODUCTION AND OPERATIONS**

- How can we make the experience of attending an event more accessible? What worked this year and what can still be improved?
- Any specific recommendations for particular events or venues?

## **VOLUNTEERS**

- Timing of volunteer training: how early to plan for next year, how much time to schedule for accessibility training and when?
- Would ART members be willing to support training next year? In what capacities?
- How can we ensure that volunteers get big picture and also feel empowered in their specific roles at the Festival?

## **OUTREACH**

- How can we best engage Deaf, blind, and disabled communities to let them know events are accessible?
- How can we better inform potential attendees about our accessibility resources?

## **ACTION ITEMS AND COMMITMENTS**

- What specific actions can we commit to as we plan for next year's festival and beyond?
- What did we do well this year that we should repeat for next year?
- Knowing we have limited resources of time, money, and people, what are priorities for accessibility investments?
  - Ex: accessibility coordinator, promotion and awareness, reduced ticket prices, sighted guides, simple text program guide, visual stories