

Following revised accommodation policy, deaf and hard-of-hearing residents still feel like ‘an afterthought’

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Lua Presidio

“They need to take accommodations more seriously. If someone requests an accommodation, they should make sure that happens. And people who are disabled, they shouldn't have to wait and have to ask for those accommodations that they already asked [for] before.”

By [Alex Nguyen](#)

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Oscar Yu was asleep in his Orchard Commons dorm room when he jerked awake to flashing lights.

Usually, it would have come from the strobe lights of a door signaller, an alternative door alarm for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. But Yu, a first-year science student, knew that couldn't be right — UBC never provided him with a door signaller despite his requests for accommodation.

Instead, in the early hours of April 10, three RCMP officers were surrounding his bed with flashlights, trying to communicate something that he couldn't understand.

"I woke up and I screamed so loud," Yu said.

Half-asleep and disoriented, he tried to reach out to his cochlear implant — a small device that provides support for his deafness — that was charging nearby. But the RCMP officers stopped him.

"I guess they thought I was reaching for a gun or a weapon or something, and they just blocked me and they just kept yelling. I don't know if they were yelling because I can't hear, but I feel like they were yelling or they just kept talking," he said.

"I just kept screaming because I didn't know why there were people in my room, and it was really, really scary."

Eventually, Yu calmed down enough to say that he was deaf. Constable Adrienne Cheung, one of the three officers present, said in a statement to *The Ubysey* that the RCMP was not aware of this before entering his room.

With the new information, the RCMP officers then tried to ask Yu questions — "Do you know why we're here?" and "Are you having suicidal thoughts?" stood out in his memory — via notepad. Eventually, the officers allowed Yu to get his cochlear implant and some belongings before driving him to the hospital.

After a few hours, Yu received a free taxi ride back and returned to his room at around 7 a.m. But he said the incident stuck with him and he couldn't go back to sleep that day. Or the next few days.

"Honestly, it was the most traumatizing thing [that] has ever happened," he said.

"When I was trying to sleep after that happened, it just seemed like I was in a room and just falling into a hole ... I just wanted to go sleep because I was so tired, but I couldn't sleep for a few days because of that experience."



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What Yu didn't learn until later that day, following a Reddit post that garnered significant attention and a meeting with Residence Life, was that the incident escalated from a well-meaning intervention.

Prior to the RCMP arrival, Yu had expressed suicidal thoughts in a Facebook group chat. According to what Residence Life told him during the meeting, this raised concerns that got to a residence advisor (RA). Some RAs then tried to reach him by knocking on his door, but Yu said he didn't notice because he had already taken out his cochlear implants to charge them. Growing concerned, they eventually called 911.

"Our key priorities are the safety and security of students and that student residents with disabilities have the accommodations they need," said UBC Student Housing and Hospitality Services (SHHS) Managing Director Andrew Parr in a statement to *The Ubyyssey*.

"We also discussed the details of the incident with him and identified areas where there were misperceptions around the course of events, and how residence staff are required to respond to the needs of students who indicate a potential desire to self-harm. Residence staff followed all established protocols during this incident and that included contacting RCMP to conduct a welfare check."

While Yu called the decision “understandable,” he expressed frustration about how the RCMP involvement could have been avoided if he had been given a door signaller. Despite having requested the accommodation immediately after getting accepted into UBC, he said the door signaller was not installed when he arrived on campus. Yu added that he followed up with SHHS about his need but to no success.

“There was no door signaller ... and I still don’t have that door signaller to know if someone’s at my door,” he told *The Ubysey* on April 15.

Parr confirmed that UBC’s Centre for Accessibility had received Yu’s request for a visual doorbell in spring 2018, but it went unfilled because a “filing error” by SHHS.

“My staff have assured the student he will have the systems he needs should he choose to reside in residence this fall, which we hope he chooses to do,” he wrote.

In response, Yu said he “definitely [doesn’t] want to live on campus next year,” but not solely because of this likely extreme incident.

For him and other residents who are deaf or hard of hearing, there are less thought-about roadblocks that can make navigating student housing challenging despite UBC improving how it accommodates students with disabilities. And in many ways, some challenges may not be easily fixed by the kind of top-down policy update the university recently approved.

Sounding the alarm

Among the roadblocks discussed by deaf or hard-of-hearing residents, dysfunctional visual fire alarms are a major issue due to the frequency of fire alarms ringing at UBC — despite most of them being false.

Talynn English, another first-year student and Orchard Commons resident who is deaf, remembered when she slept through a fire alarm.

“I remember the time — it was a 5 a.m. on a Thursday,” she said.

“That’s extremely specific, but I only remember that because I woke up at 7 a.m. and I had like a zillion texts from my RA and my floor mates and they’re like, ‘There is a fire alarm, please answer!’”

According to English, while her room did have a visual fire alarm as requested, it was “very strangely placed.” Since the alarm was located right above the door and the bed was around a corner from the door, the strobe light could not fully reach the bed to alert her.

It’s just the little things that like nobody thinks to consider because people with disabilities are always an afterthought.

— Talynn English

Yu had a similar issue with the visual alarm placement in his room.

“It was frustrating not being able to have a fire alarm in the washroom, so I would have to like keep my door open to see if there’s a visual fire alarm while I’m taking a shower, especially since I have cochlear implants and I can’t get them wet,” he said.

“So I have to keep my door open to make sure that there’s no fire going on.”

Yu added that a number of times, the visual fire alarms did not work at all. Or, there might not be enough of them to even be noticed.

“In Vanier, I don’t remember there being any lights. It was just ancient bell alarms,” Brandyn Marx, a fifth-year anthropology student who is hard of hearing, recalled from his first year living in Place Vanier.

“[They] don’t really work well for someone that can’t hear [them].”

Closing the gap

Despite these problems, UBC is actually more equipped to provide accommodations for deaf or hard of hearing residents than it was in the past.

According to Centre for Accessibility Director Janet Mee, there are two categories for housing accommodations: priority access and priority placement. Priority access means that even if the students with disabilities don’t win the lottery to live in UBC’s residences, they would still be assigned housing before others. Priority placement means that the students can request housing units with specific features, such as a visual fire alarm or a door signaller.

Mee added that the Centre is also the central hub for fulfilling accommodation needs.

“We don’t ask individual units on campus to have the expertise to make those decisions,” she said, “and we don’t want students to have to disclose or get documentation in multiple places.”

But the big document that governs this whole process is [Policy 73](#), which until recently was criticized as being severely outdated.

In a move long pushed for by student advocacy groups like the AMS, the UBC Board of Governors and Senates finally reviewed the policy after almost two decades and approved a series of alterations between December 2018 and January 2019. According to Mee, they

included changes to the policy's definition of disability, its scope and procedures to make the policy more transparent and aligned with the case law that comes out of the BC Human Rights Tribunal.

"Ultimately, the entire policy has resulted in a student disability policy that is modernized and more transparent for students and faculty," then-AMS VP Academic and University Affairs Max Holmes told *The Ubyyssey* in December 2018.

But, based on Yu and English's experiences, it's clear that some residents are still falling through this closing gap.

Mee emphasized that with the recent policy updates, getting units on campus like SHHS familiarized with the revisions is going to be "an ongoing process," which has just begun in March.

"We're in a pretty intensive phase of education around the policy and all of the procedures that kind of relate to accommodating students with disabilities," she said.

"That's a very high priority for us to continue over the next year."

Mee also said the Centre for Accessibility is working with SHHS to look at how UBC can standardize the language for existing accommodations and create a bank of commonly-needed equipment to install them more quickly.

When I was trying to sleep after that happened, it just seemed like I was in a room and just falling into a hole.

— Oscar Yu

According to her, this project came up after the Centre for Accessibility consolidated all the accommodation for housing to one advisor — a "closer eye" that allowed the centre to see "where the gaps really are." She hopes this will help limit errors like the ones Yu had in the future.

"Anytime there is an incident ... we always take a look at our procedures and our policy, and we sit down — in this case with Housing — to talk about how we can ensure that we address that issue," said Mee.

"Certainly, we believe that some of the pieces around the project will help to address some of those things."

Missing out

At the same time, there are also roadblocks that might not be easily fixed through a top-down policy change.

While Marx didn't experience a lot of difficulties while living in student housing, he often avoided going to residence events because their low lighting would disrupt his ability to read lips and communicate.

"The other thing is for a lot of residence-sponsored events, the lighting in Vanier generally sucks," Marx said.

"You wouldn't think that that would be a huge deal for someone who is hard of hearing, but when I'm in crowded environments where I have to read lips, I can't do almost anything. Like the dances that they had at the venue for first years, I made a point not to go because I know it's going to be dark. I don't really like going to dances anyway — but even if I do go, I'm not going to understand what any of my friends say so I'm just gonna avoid that."

English similarly described the difficulties of attending events that are heavy in public speaking or have a major sound component. According to her, it is sometimes challenging to ask for support in casual settings like these because of the near invisibility of her deafness. Like Yu, English wears cochlear implants but they usually blend in with her shoulder-length hair.

But she added that she doesn't want to feel tokenized by that identity.

"I think it's harder to get people to take me seriously when I say like, 'Oh, I can't hear you,'" she said.

"People just kind of just assume like, 'Oh, it's fine,' and then I drop the 'deaf bomb' on them and they're like, 'Whoa!' I feel sometimes when I tell people that I'm deaf, I almost feel like I'm tokenizing it as, 'Oh, I'm deaf and that's all that I am.'"

Finding community

On a larger scale, this near invisibility could mean it's more difficult for students who are deaf or hard of hearing to find their community.

According to Mee, around 2 to 3 per cent of the Centre's approximate 3,500 clients are deaf or hard of hearing, a range from 70 to 105 on a campus with over 60,000 people. But this is likely to be an underestimate, as Mee herself admitted.

"We only know about the people who require some form of accommodations," she said.

"But there is a much more significant group of individuals on campus who could be considered deaf or hard of hearing that we wouldn't necessarily know about."

In fact, both Marx and English pointed out how the number of deaf or hard-of-hearing students they know could be counted on one hand.

“I have reached out to so many people, but it's actually a small community,” English said.

“I'm actually kind of shocked by how small it is. I do know a couple people that know sign languages and I do know a couple of people that have hearing loss, but it's kind of a sprawl.”

At the same time, UBC Signs — a student-run club created in 2015 to “promote awareness for sign languages and the local and distant Deaf communities” — has been decommissioned as an AMS club. According to club President Joshua Green, it has not had an event since late 2017 and is unlikely to continue in the future.

“Now that UBC is officially providing a means to learn [American Sign Language], I feel that UBC Signs might no longer need to host classes,” Green wrote to *The Ubysey*. “If the club were to continue I think it should be focused around providing an environment for students in LING 447H to practice signing together.”



Lua Presidio

Without a central group, the interests of residents who are deaf or hard of hearing often don't make it into the agenda of student advocacy groups.

According to Residence Hall Association (RHA) President Harresh Thayakaanathan, the RHA was not aware of Yu's incident until *The Ubysey's* comment request on May 6. Similarly, he acknowledged that "accessibility has not been a recent advocacy topic for the RHA," but said that the association is committed to supporting residents.

"The largest barrier that we face when responding to advocacy issues such as this is that they are not brought to our attention in the first place," Thayakaanathan wrote to *The Ubysey*. "We encourage all residents to continue to come forward with their experiences, as there is nothing we value more than their input as we work towards an effective solution, together."

Getting a fuller understanding of the community is also part of Marx's work to support the AMS Equity Caucus, which was restructured in May with further plans for consultation in the upcoming school year. While there are still many moving parts, he looks forward to diversifying the idea of accessibility on campus.

"[This means] increasing visibility and expanding the whole idea about 'What does it mean to have a disability?' and 'What does it mean to have access?' because a ramp isn't going to fix a problem for a deaf person," he said.

In the meantime, other deaf or hard-of-hearing residents are continuing to advocate for their needs in whatever capacity they can, wherever they are.

"I want people to know that UBC Housing has some work to do," said Yu about his decision to go public about his experience following the Reddit post, which was published under a username.

"They need to take accommodations more seriously. If someone requests an accommodation, they should make sure that happens. And people who are disabled, they shouldn't have to wait and have to ask for those accommodations that they already asked [for] before."

Meanwhile, English is focusing on making residence events more accessible with her new role as the Orchard Commons Residence Association president. While starting out small, she hopes this consideration will carve out more advocacy space for residents who are deaf or hard of hearing.

"Even just events like coffee house[s] and movie nights, [it can] just be ensuring that captioning is available and that everyone is able to attend," she said.

"It's just the little things that like nobody thinks to consider because people with disabilities are always an afterthought."