



American Sign Language (ASL) Video Project

A successful low-cost innovative way, that is easy to replicate, to provide trusted election information to the deaf community by using American Sign Language (ASL) videos. Videos may be viewed at <https://sos.tn.gov/2022-amendments>.

Background

The Tennessee Secretary of State's Office partnered with Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT), a non-profit organization focused on the rights of Tennesseans with disabilities, to address concerns that existed among the deaf community regarding four proposed constitutional amendments appearing on the November 2022 ballot. The deaf community is estimated to be 300,000 in Tennessee. English and ASL are unrelated languages. ASL is the native, natural language of the deaf community. The concern was with more intricate legal language, like that contained within constitutional amendments, there is an increased possibility of confusion for those who read English but sign ASL. This is due to occasional discrepancies in the way those in the deaf community interpret written English in comparison to those who speak and hear English as well. While the Secretary of State publishes the text of proposed constitutional amendments on its website along with summaries crafted by the Tennessee Attorney General's office intended to assist voters in understanding the process and subject matter, the problem of potential deaf voters not being able to take full advantage of this election information was identified. In addition to providing this service, the Secretary of State's office immediately saw an opportunity to meet a separate goal of providing non-biased election information from a trusted source.

Developing the Plan

Leading up to the November 2022 election, several meetings took place with election staff and stakeholders of the deaf community. The project was the first of its kind in Tennessee and to our knowledge in any state, so a model plan had to be developed.

A plan emerged to film a set of five videos featuring an ASL interpreter signing first the introductory language posted on the Secretary of State's webpage explaining the process for voting on and passing proposed constitutional amendments, and then one video for each proposed constitutional amendment. The videos for each amendment included the same information provided in English to those who visited the Secretary of State's webpage for the proposed amendments: the Attorney General's summary of the amendment, full text of the amendment, as well as the text of the question which would appear on the ballot. DRT was able to bring in an additional non-profit partner to the program, Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Bridges), which has provided services for the deaf community in Tennessee for nearly 100 years. Because of the partnerships established, Tennessee taxpayers did not incur any costs with this project as existing staff resources were utilized. For other states and localities interested in implementing a similar program, identifying organizations and individuals in their own community to partner with should be easy.

Numerous concerns were addressed upfront about the delicate nature of properly creating these videos so that the interpreter could not have even the most remote possibility of being seen as influencing the voters in either a positive or negative way towards these amendments. This meant relying on experts within these organizations serving the deaf community and working with them to carefully craft these videos. Confidence in the ability to achieve this was enhanced by setting up a review team. One of the reviewers for the project holds a Specialist Certificate: Legal (SC:L) and regularly interprets in settings such as depositions and other court proceedings. Additionally, stringent review processes were put in place such as having the interpreter review the language included in these amendments and summaries with staff attorneys of the Division of Elections and communication personnel before filming. Both DRT and Bridges also asked staff who are deaf to view the videos and give their opinion on if they were able to detect any bias or any appearance of influencing the decisions of voters in any way. The review process was effective and there were no reports of feeling influenced by the interpreter either from deaf staff members who viewed the video after filing, or from the public at large. This process ensured faith that the voting public had access to a non-biased trusted source of the information.

Execution

The finalized videos were uploaded to the Secretary of State’s website prior to the start of early voting, allowing time for those wishing to vote during Tennessee’s early voting period or on Election Day to take advantage of the information provided in the videos. These five videos combined were viewed more than 24,400 times, moving them into position as some of the most viewed videos ever posted by the Secretary of State’s office. Because of the excellent final product and innovative way of reaching the desired community other organizations assisted in promoting the videos. The Tennessee Association of the Deaf, Hearing Loss Association of America, the Tennessee Council on Deaf, Deaf-Blind and Hard of Hearing, as well as numerous other local and state-wide organizations working to serve and meet the needs of the deaf community helped distribute the links to these videos amongst their own networks of individuals. By having these links direct individuals straight to the Secretary of State’s website where these videos were hosted, voters were able to be confident that they were relying on Tennessee’s trusted source for election information.

Goals Achieved

The videos were a low-cost, resoundingly successful way to provide trusted information to those who are deaf. By implementing this project, the Tennessee Secretary of State’s Office was able to provide essential information to drastically decrease the likelihood that deaf voters would be un-informed about components of the constitutional amendments featured on the November 2022 ballot. The President and CEO of Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Nancy Denning-Martin had this to say about the project, “To have equal access to the proposals prior to the election by seeing them in their native language was a much-needed first experience that respected the citizenship and voice of our Deaf community which led to unprecedented engagement and participation.”