



## **Programmatic Accessibility in the Arts**

October 25, 2024

For many years, structural access to arts facilities by people who use wheelchairs or have mobility impairments has been a well-known and generally accepted practice. Less understood is how the programs within a facility can be made accessible for people who are blind and/or deaf. Join a panel of experts for a discussion on how innovative and universal use of audio description, open captions and sign language interpretation can ensure that arts organizations can become models of accessibility.

### **Panelists**

Shalmarie Arroyo-Mercado, Past President, National Federation of the Blind-Puerto Rico

Katharine Hayward, Ph.D., Accessibility Specialist, Office of Accessibility, National Endowment for the Arts

David Rawlings, President, Sign Language Interpreters, Inc., of Puerto Rico

Joel Snyder, Ph.D., President, Audio Description Associates, LLC; Founding Director Emeritus, Audio Description Project of the American Council of the Blind

### **Overview**

This session focused on programmatic accessibility in performing arts and museums, featuring experts discussing various aspects of accessibility in arts and culture, focusing on audio description, sign language interpretation and universal design practices. The panel emphasized that accessibility in arts and culture is not merely a legal requirement but an opportunity for innovation, audience expansion and engagement, and cultural enrichment. Success requires early planning, adequate budgeting, professional implementation and consistent commitment to accessibility across all aspects of arts programming.

## **Programmatic Accessibility**

Evolution of accessibility in the arts: Traditional focus of arts access has been on structural access (facilities, physical), and less understood was the programmatic accessibility within programs for attendees and presenters (artists). Need for meaningful participation for blind, deaf and other disabled visitors.

Access should not be an afterthought: Access is a requirement under Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Access should be considered from the beginning of any project.

Audio description as an access tool: Translation of images to words, visual made verbal and oral, inserted during pauses between dialogue or critical sound elements. Benefits extend beyond blind communities (e.g., autism spectrum, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, language learners)

Best practices: Including integration from the beginning of production; professional describers as part of the creative team; availability at all performances, not just selected shows; and proper compensation for professional describers.

## **Sign Language Interpretation in Puerto Rico**

History: Professional interpreting emerged in past 25 years. Previously government-controlled through Vocational Rehabilitation Administration. The field grew in part due to the impact of ADA, changes in deaf culture due to mainstreaming.

Challenges: Shortage of qualified interpreters (down to only 60 interpreters available, when there used to be 120); impact of Hurricane Maria and COVID-19 pandemic; economic barriers for deaf community; need for professional compensation.

## **NEA Office of Accessibility Initiatives**

Both physical and programmatic accessibility is required under Section 504.

Accessibility as innovation: Access as aesthetic innovation, integration into creative process, proactive planning, disability-centered design, multisensory experiences

- Plan access features before receiving requests.
- Build accessibility into initial designs.
- Access is both requirement and opportunity.

Key barriers: Lack of clear accessibility information, including difficulty finding accommodation details, inconsistent service availability, etc.

Impact: One access feature can serve multiple needs. Build trust with diverse communities; increase audience engagement; create sustainable participation; expand potential audience by including friends and families.

## **Q&A**

The Q&A session focused on two main concerns: compensation for accessibility services and resources for organizations starting accessibility initiatives.

A dance company director from Michigan sought guidance on implementing accessibility measures, leading to suggestions about working with independent living centers, schools for the blind/deaf, and utilizing NEA resources.

The discussion concluded with practical advice about using more specific verbal instructions for dance and accessing the NEA's careers in the arts toolkit. This discussion revealed that while progress has been made in arts accessibility, much work remains. The panelists suggested that success lies not just in meeting minimum requirements, but in reimagining accessibility as an integral part of artistic creation and cultural participation.