

NASS IDEAS Award Nomination

Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, Steve Simon

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American Sign Language Voter Information, Elections Area

The Office engages in a voter outreach program to inform and educate Minnesotans about their right to vote, elections facts, civic engagement, and more. Two main components, our voting factsheets and voter information hotline, are now available in American Sign Language. This resulted from a productive collaboration within state government and represents a new expansion of the accessibility of these resources.

Executive Summary

The Minnesota Secretary of State's office, in service of its mission to administer elections and voting, is always seeking to make it as easy as possible for eligible voters to cast their ballot.

The right to vote, central to the mission of our office, has always depended on accessibility. Our nation's history is littered with laws and rules that have created barriers to voting for one group or another. We've left behind the institutional suppression of literacy tests and poll taxes, but many people still find it difficult to vote. In our office, we are on a never-ending mission to learn more about how we serve our constituents and remove barriers to participation in our democracy. We have strong laws in Minnesota to enable the exercise of the right to vote – features like election day registration, early voting, and time off work to vote. Making sure that citizens know about those features is the role of voter outreach.

A key component of our efforts in voter outreach to many groups is the array of informational materials the office produces. Our series of factsheets are half-page documents with important topical information: information for new voters, or college students, instructions for registering on Election Day, and more.

These factsheets are widely used at community gatherings, schools, and wherever our office and our partners have the opportunity to engage with potential voters.

In 2016, we undertook an effort to translate these factsheets, in print and digital form, into languages other than English. English proficiency is a requirement for citizenship, so why should it be necessary to provide information in other languages, given that the right to vote is tied to that American citizenship? First, there are many people who are born here and have all rights as citizens but have grown up speaking another language. And second, no matter how fluent someone becomes in English, they may prefer to have complex or technical information in their native tongue. It's been important to Secretary Simon to continue the progress toward accessibility, so we now support voter outreach materials in ten written languages other than English. Minnesota has a long history of language accessibility in voting; since 1896 the state has been translating election information for citizens. The languages have changed, but the spirit is the same: however someone best communicates, we want to meet them with relevant and understandable information about their rights.

Another major part of our efforts in voter outreach is our voter information call center. In the weeks ahead of statewide elections, our office maintains a phone line for Minnesotans who have any sort of question about exercising their right to vote. Thousands of callers rely on our office every election season to find out where they vote, what they need to bring to the polling place, how to vote early, and more. It's an incredibly valuable resource, especially because it provides a point of personal connection. Callers are connected directly with an expert in our office who can guide them to the correct answer for their specific situation. Operators in the call center also have access to a translation line, so that a caller whose first language isn't English can receive necessary information as well.

In 2020 we began a partnership with another state office, the Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing. Through collaboration with that Office and its staff, our office has engaged in a new kind of expansion of the way we reach voters, making voter information available in American Sign Language.

The unprecedented challenges of election administration during 2020 are well known to the community of Secretaries of State. Among them was the concern of voter outreach – how to continue to engage voters during a pandemic and invite new voters into our shared democracy as well. While engaging with advocates for disability rights and elections issues the idea took hold to transfer the important information

and access afforded by our print and digital toolkit and by our voter info hotline into a format that would open it up to an entirely new community.

According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, approximately 20 percent of Minnesotans have hearing loss. Some were born deaf. Others lost some or all their hearing later as the result of illness, traumatic brain injury or medication side effect.

The Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing (MNCDHH) has been a longtime partner and adviser to our office in the areas of disability access to elections. They are a regular participant in our Disability Advisory Committee, a group composed of members of the public as well as government agencies that meets regularly to discuss elections and voting issues related to disability and form recommendations about improvements to those processes.

In collaboration with the MNCDHH, voter outreach staff from our Office began to develop a plan to reformat our voter information into American Sign Language and make it accessible to Minnesota's deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing community. That partnership has continued through today and yielded an all-new way of delivering official information about how to vote.

For the factsheets, our office worked with MNCDHH to produce 'video factsheets,' showing an ASL signer communicating the topical information, along with captioning and voiceover. These videos were produced for 2020, and then updated with 'evergreen' information – that wouldn't go out of date – for 2022 and beyond. The Secretary of State's Office provided the script and guidance for production, and the MNCDHH arranged for the ASL onscreen talent and recording.

For the information hotline, after a small-scale pilot project in 2020, we were able to fully develop the ASL call center for 2022. The ASL Hotline uses videophone technology, standard within the deaf community, so that callers may communicate back and forth with the operator in sign language. The Secretary of State's Office provided training and ongoing support to contracted ASL staff so that they were fully able to answer any type of question about elections and voting

One challenge in this arrangement was replicating the ability of our standard call center (staffed by hearing people) to 'elevate' a call – to refer to internal elections or communications staff if a caller had a more complex question or, rarely, was upset or causing difficulty. Since our Office staff do not communicate in ASL, we established a procedure by which ASL call center staff could reach our office by email with a priority status, indicated by a specific subject line, which Office staff would immediately triage and return with an appropriate answer.

These projects represented the first time that our Office had specifically established a channel for official elections information to be disseminated to ASL signers in the same way that we do for written languages. It's our Office's hope that they demonstrate a commitment to expansion of rights and to a value of accessibility that meets the needs of all kinds of constituents.

That value is not always easy to achieve. These projects added time and attention to their already-established counterparts, and we owe our partners at the MNCDHH tremendous gratitude for sharing the work and helping us learn. The collaborative core of this project can be an example for other institutions: as we strive for access, we need a partner to fill in the spaces where we lack experience and awareness. That lesson applies as we learn more about how to serve communities with disabilities, who have historically encountered barriers to participating, but also to every type of community that relies on the services that we provide.

Supplemental Materials

[News release and information](#) from MN Secretary of State

[News release and information](#) from MNCDHH



Screenshot of video factsheet



**Do you have any questions about voting?
Call our ASL Voting Hotline!
612-293-4288 (VP)**

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m mncdhh Do you want access to voting information in ASL? Call and ask your questions! Such as: where is my voting poll? Am I registered to vote? What is on the ballot?

Call the ASL Hotline at 612-293-4288 (VP)! The hotline is open, Monday-Friday, from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm. On Election Day, it will be open from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm.

This hotline is also open to voters who identify as hard of hearing, as an individual with a hearing loss, or similar, and wish to connect to one of our experts.

Please email Jessalyn at jessalyn.akerman-frank@state.mn.us for any of the following:

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OCTOBER 28

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