

# **Cultivating Festival Accessibility: Impact Report**

PRESENTED BY

**Access Reframed: Empowering Action**

In partnership with

**Reeling LGBTQ+ International Film Festival**

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## Executive Summary

**Access Reframed: Empowering Action (AR:EA)** is a collaborative initiative in partnership with Reeling 2022: The 40th Chicago LGBTQ+ International Film Festival and presented by Full Spectrum Features, All Senses Go, Backbones, and LaGrish, that aims to increase the number of film festivals in the Chicago area that offer accessible programming for all audiences, with or without disabilities.



ID: A square promotional graphic for the Access Reframed: Empowering Action Reeling 2022 program with a thin rainbow design around all sides and logo of the presenting orgs: Full Spectrum Features, Backbones, All Senses Go, La Grish & sponsor Chicago DCASE.

## **Our 2022 Pilot Program**

In Fall of 2022, the AR:EA initiative piloted a regrating program to build capacity at a regional film festival through training, written resources, festival-specific consultation, and direct cash assistance.

## **The Purpose of this Report**

This report consolidates our key learnings from Year One of the Access Reframed: Empowering Action regrating program. By sharing both the successes and failures of our attempt to cultivate greater accessibility at a regional festival, we hope to encourage collective action amongst festival organizers, funders, and filmmakers towards the expansion of access to film programming both in Chicago and across the country.

## **The Challenge**

Too many independent film festivals in America ignore the existence of disabled cinephiles and filmmakers. Across the country, screenings and networking events are being programmed in venues that are not wheelchair accessible; movies are being screened without captions for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences; filmmakers neglect to create audio description tracks for audiences who are blind or low vision; and festivals fail to design their online presence with even minimal web content accessibility standards. Limited budgets and bandwidths are often cited as reasons for why festival films are screened without accessibility. Yet this discriminatory practice results in the exclusion of an untold number of movie lovers, filmmakers and human beings, and must be replaced by inclusive practices that extend access to all film audiences and filmmakers, regardless of ability. Though the intentions of programmers and filmmakers may be good, often they find lack of resources, information and support to effectively execute access in their programs and communities.

## **Key Takeaways**

### **1. Collaboration is Key**

Film festivals that want to expand the accessibility of their programming should identify one or more local groups to collaborate with. Reach out directly to disability communities, organizations, and providers in your area, and identify potential sponsors for an accessibility initiative. Funding accessibility should be viewed not as a burden, but as an opportunity to form new partnerships, reach new audiences, and join new causes.

## **2. Adopt an ‘Access First’ Mindset**

An “Access First” mindset prioritizes inclusion from the mission statement and the earliest days of festival planning, and ensures that: budgets take accessibility into account; that only accessible venues are considered and chosen for events; that filmmakers are encouraged (and ideally required) to deliver their films with captions and description tracks; that information about accessibility is announced at the same time that full festival program is announced; and that volunteers and staff are trained to assist disabled audience members with any of their access needs at the event itself. “Access First” is in contrast to “Access as Afterthought” – rather than being viewed as an optional add-on at the last minute, access should be baked into a festival’s strategy, operations, and customer service.

## **3. Share Resources**

To build festival staff’s awareness and understanding of accessible film programming, accessibility consultants or partners should ideally be transparent about the allocation of resources, as well as about the processes involved with hiring access providers and vendors. We recommend that the following tangible resources be provided for partner festivals at the start of any new collaboration: an accessibility planning timeline; a budget for accessibility costs; a list of local access providers; ideas for direct outreach to local disability communities; technical instruction for creating and/or quality checking captions or audio description files; and more. These resources will help organizations to both launch new accessibility initiatives, and to sustain any learned practices and procedures into the future.

## **4. Redefine Success**

We encourage festivals to think beyond attendance numbers when measuring the success of an accessibility initiative. Festivals should hold the realistic expectation that it can take several years for positive word to spread amongst local disability communities; for trust to develop in a festival’s ability to deliver a high quality access; and for a sense of safety and belonging to be nurtured. Rest assured that over time, an audience for accessible programming will grow as your festival demonstrates consistency and quality. In the meantime, focus on internal growth at your organization by using the early years of your initiative to better understand the operations involved in accessibility services; to gain concrete and practical experiences with the technical and logistical aspects of accessible film deliverables; to overcome any fears, anxieties, or hesitations about providing access; and to adopt a proactive attitude of readiness in your organization for creating a welcoming space.

## **5. Commit to Access**

Accessibility is a continual and growing commitment, and we hope to use this Year One experience to iterate on a capacity-building strategy for film festivals of any size to sustain their accessibility initiatives indefinitely into the future.

We call upon anyone in the independent film community who has influence, decision-making power, or raw passion to join this effort. Commit to access at your organization by endeavoring to:

- create incentives or requirements for filmmakers to produce captions and descriptions for their films;
- secure funding, sponsorships, and partnerships to program accessible events at accessible venues;
- devise internal processes and systems for ensuring consistent and quality access;
- strengthen institutional memory and resources so that knowledge is not lost in the face of staffing and volunteer turnover;
- build consensus on best practice standards for accessibility at film festivals.

This public report is an early effort by Access Reframed to make the world of independent film a more welcoming and inclusive space. In the narrative that follows, we aim to be transparent about both our achievements and our failures, in the hope that other organizations can learn from, build upon, and improve our efforts. We urge you to feel empowered to take action.

# Overview of Access Reframed: Empowering Action

## Background

Access Reframed: Empowering Action (AR:EA) is a collaborative initiative of Full Spectrum Features, All Senses Go, Backbones, and LaGrish, that aims to increase the number of film festivals in the Chicago area that offer accessible programming for audiences with or without disabilities.

In Fall of 2022, the AR:EA initiative piloted a regranting program in order to build capacity at a small film festival through training, written resources, festival-specific consultation, and direct cash assistance.

## Pilot Film Festival

Our pioneer partner in this endeavor was [Reeling: The Chicago LGBTQ+ International Film Festival](#), one of the oldest festivals dedicated to LGBT film in the world. Since 1981, Reeling has been celebrating identities and communities too often misrepresented or ignored in mainstream film and television. On the eve of their 40th anniversary, and in the spirit of their mission, Reeling hoped to expand access to their programming to include audiences with disabilities.

## Initiative Collaborators\*

[Full Spectrum Features](#) is a Chicago-based nonprofit organization committed to driving equity in the independent film industry by producing, exhibiting, and supporting the work of women, BIPOC, disabled and LGBTQ+ filmmakers and audiences. We aim to educate the public about important social and cultural issues, utilizing the power of cinema to foster understanding in our communities.

[All Senses Go](#) is committed to ensuring that disabled, blind, d/Deaf, and Neurodiverse audiences and filmmakers are considered, prioritized, and seen as both crucial and vital for inclusion in audio-visual culture.

[BACKBONES](#) exists to help people with spinal cord injury or disease (SCI/D) and their families connect with their communities. We do that by creating events and experiences that promote awareness and engage people of all abilities

[LaGrish](#) is on a mission to break down societal barriers and reframe cultural messaging about disability+ other intersectionalities. That is why LaGrish consults with organizations in Hollywood as well as production companies, film festivals and academic institutions like Northwestern University and Harvard University, to advance culture and the disability justice movement from inside the entertainment industry.

\* See [Appendix 1](#) for full biographies of the authors of this report.

## Goals

Access Reframed: Empowering Action strives to increase the number of film festivals in the Chicago area that offer accessible programming for audiences with disabilities. To achieve that goal, we take a threefold strategy in working with partner film festivals:

1. Expose the partner festival to the full range of *what an accessible film event looks like*, including but not limited to:
  - an *accessible website* that includes alt text, a plain text program, and clear and prominent language about available services and how to request them;
  - the creation of a *welcoming space*, and a sense of belonging and safety that includes a masking and vaccination requirement;
  - an *accessible DCP* or digital screening file that includes either closed or open (visible to everyone) captions, and ideally an audio description track;
  - the presence of *access liaisons* at the check-in table and in the cinema, available to answer questions and to share large print and braille programs, as well as protective masks;
  - a clear *request process* for checking out captioning devices, assistive listening systems, and audio description headsets to patrons with access needs;
  - *accessible services* at live post screening panels and Q&As, including American sign language interpretation and live CART transcription.
2. Assist the partner festival in clarifying *which access provisions are in alignment with their mission* and therefore important to pursue and prioritize moving forward into their future.

3. Encourage the partner festival to *iterate and improve*, in a continued commitment to try to offer accessible programming again next year.

Ultimately, we intend to develop a replicable model for increased accessibility funding, placing foundations and funders at the center of a generative process to encourage collective action amongst festivals, venues, and filmmakers.

## **Process**

Our process in working with a pilot festival includes four project stages.

1. Initial assessment of current accessibility practices and understandings at the festival.
2. Recurring consultations with relevant staff to develop a Year One access strategy.
3. Execution of accessible programming with on-site support at key screenings.
4. Evaluation and the creation of a case study report and resources for the partner festival.

# The Experience of Reeling Staff

## Addressing Initial Fears

When AR:EA team members first approached Reeling LGBTQ+ Film Festival in early 2022 about our regranting opportunity, festival staff were intrigued but expressed some hesitations.

We spoke with Brenda Webb, executive director of Chicago Filmmakers (the organization that screens Reeling festival films) and program manager Jacqueline (Jackie) Robbins.

Some of the hesitations they expressed included the following:

- **“How much time commitment will there be from us?”** Brenda and Jackie expressed legitimate concerns about their own bandwidth as the only two full time staff members responsible for running the festival.
- **“We’ve not been good about advertising the wheelchair accessibility of our Chicago Filmmakers location.”** Brenda was transparent in admitting her fears that by advertising accessibility, she could expose the organization to criticism – or worse, lawsuits – for not going far enough to include people with disabilities.
- **“We’ve looked into funding for accessibility, and were shocked – there’s nothing!”** Jackie had apparently researched a hearing loop for the Chicago Filmmakers theater, but found the cost to be prohibitive. When considering the purpose of AR:EA funds, both Brenda and Jackie wondered whether the money would be better spent purchasing hardware; and they wondered why the government hadn’t created a fund for this type of investment in accessibility.
- **“We sometimes receive video files from filmmakers with five different closed captioning files. Which one is it?”** When dealing with inconsistent film accessibility deliverables, Jackie was often frustrated and confused. She felt that more education was needed amongst the filmmakers, who “don’t know anything about their digital file at all.” But ultimately, she admitted that she didn’t understand the files either. So there was a real knowledge gap to contend with.

Despite these hesitations, Reeling staff did ultimately decide to commit to a Year One partnership with Access Reframed: Empowering Action (AR:EA). We encouraged them by emphasizing that they can tell the world about their accessible facility without fear of legal ramifications; that they can learn the technology and best practices for mounting

accessible film screenings; and that by expanding their audience to people with disabilities, they will ultimately be serving and including more communities.

## **Arriving at a Year One Strategy for Accessible Programming**

Over the course of several rounds of deliberation, AR:EA guided Reeling through the selection and creation of four (4) film screenings that would be programmed with increased access.\*

For these four programs, the AR:EA team agreed to provide the following services:

- Consultation on the creation of an accessibility statement by Reeling
- A physical access audit of all festival venues under consideration
- Creation of an access request and accessible seating policy
- Drafting of a COVID policy for masking and vaccination
- Recommendations for language and policy around requesting captioned and described exhibition deliverables from filmmakers
- Authoring of open caption versions of short film programs when applicable
- Coordination of ASL interpretation and live captioning for post-screening talkbacks

Below are descriptions of the four programs that were selected for increased access.

VULVEETA — Friday, Sept 23 at 9 PM, *Landmark's Century Centre Cinema*

This film has closed captions and audio description. Additionally, ASL and CART will be provided for the introduction + post-screening discussion; subject to filmmaker attendance.

TWO EYES — Thursday, Sept 29 at 7 PM, *Landmark's Century Centre Cinema*

This film has closed captions and live audio description. Additionally, ASL and CART will be provided for the introduction + post-screening discussion; subject to filmmaker attendance.

THE SHAPE OF A LIFE — Sunday, October 2 at 2 PM, *Chicago Filmmakers*

This program has open captions and live audio description. Additionally, ASL and CART will be provided for the introduction + post-screening discussion; subject to filmmaker attendance.

DYKE DELICIOUS REUNION: I SEE YOU (Closing Night!) —Sunday, October 2 at 6 PM, *Chicago Filmmakers*

This program has open captions and live audio description. Additionally, ASL and CART will be provided for the introduction + post-screening discussion; subject to filmmaker attendance.

## **A Desire for Greater Input and Transparency**

At the conclusion of the 2022 Reeling Film Festival, Executive Director Brenda Webb expressed gratitude to the Access Reframed team for partnering on this project, and felt that her organization had learned a lot. However, during a one-month follow-up debrief with AR:EA partners, she suggested that the partnership would need to change in two key ways in order for Reeling to feel comfortable moving forward into a Year 2 relationship with Access Reframed.

### **1. Greater Input in Determining the Goals and Strategy for Festival Accessibility**

“In the future, we think the program could be strengthened by the partnering organization having **more input at the outset in determining the goal(s) of the project**, the deliverables, implementation strategies, and how the financial resources are allocated so that the relationship is more like a collaborative endeavor.”

Ultimately, Reeling questioned “whether pouring all of the resources into just 4 accessible shows was enough.” They urged us to consider being **open to different approaches** next year, whether we partner with them or another organization.

Specifically, they suggested the following:

“Rather than focusing multiple accessibility resources into a few pre-determined screenings, have a more comprehensive strategy to increase overall accessibility by spreading out the resources. For example, systematically working toward ensuring as many films were captioned as possible, including virtually. In regards to live events, having an effective system in place to respond to the needs of people who need services for the specific programs they want to attend, rather

than pre-determining what few shows are accessible to them, maybe using tactics such as having interpreters on retainer (if that is feasible) activated with advance notice. Or even providing CART for one show and ASL for another rather than both options for the same show (or just CART for both). We feel (should we have to make the choice with limited resources) that it is **a higher priority to make as many films accessible as possible** rather than allocating most of the resources into the live Q&A part of the festival and, as a result, being able to only have a few accessible 'events'."

While the Access Reframed team values this feedback, we do not necessarily agree with the above suggestion to prioritize *breadth* of access rather than *depth*. We do, however, acknowledge that we took a top-down approach rather than considering or soliciting ideas from Reeling for alternative access strategies. Moving forward, we intend to commit to a more truly collaborative and joint endeavor, by taking good faith steps to ensure that our partner's goals and our own come into greater alignment early on in the process.

## **2. Greater Transparency Regarding Access Reframed's Budget and Process**

"...[T]he lack of **transparency** about how financial resources were used left us in the dark about what the actual costs were of the project (e.g. the costs for service providers) so that we know what the sustainability of accessible practices would cost us without your support."

Reeling is absolutely correct that our Access Reframed team could have been much more transparent with Reeling about the allocation of our resources, and our own processes for hiring providers and vendors to arrange access services for Reeling's programs. As Reeling put it, "most access tasks/ needs were carried out by Access Reframed team members without much [Reeling] involvement."

The simplest explanation for this oversight is that our own team was so consumed with the actual logistics of coordinating festival access that we neglected to communicate and educate our partner on all the various steps we were taking. Next time, we very much intend to allocate more of our capacity to clear, regular, and transparent communication with our partner so as to help build their own awareness and capacity for access.

For instance, Reeling requested, and we have now provided, the following **tangible resources** for partner festivals at the start of any new collaboration: an accessibility planning [timeline](#); a [budget](#) for accessibility costs; a list of [local access providers](#); ideas for direct [outreach](#) to local disability communities; [technical instruction](#) for creating

and/or quality checking captions or audio description files; and more. These resources will help organizations to both launch new accessibility initiatives, and to sustain any learned practices and procedures into the future.

Lastly, Reeling expressed a desire to better understand, in advance, how success would be measured by Access Reframed. In future partnerships, we intend to clearly communicate the intended goals of the project, work with our partner to develop various planning stages that align with the festival's own goals, and then what we will both be looking for as evidence of success.

## Measuring Success: Beyond Attendance

In their first year of offering accessible programming, film festivals should expect low (or even non-existent) utilization of new accommodations such as audio description, closed captioning, braille programs and sign language interpretation. Don't get discouraged if it seems that no one is using the services. Like any new initiative, it can take several years for positive word to spread amongst local disability communities; for trust to develop in a festival's ability to deliver a high quality access; and for a sense of safety and belonging to be nurtured.

For this reason, we encourage festivals to think beyond attendance numbers when measuring the success of an accessibility initiative. As an example, we list below the additional benefits that should be counted as real 'wins' for Reeling LGBTQ Film Festival in their first year of Access Reframed collaboration:

### Internal Growth

- Centering accessibility as a priority enabled Reeling staff to consider **a more holistic approach** to festival programming, marketing, and operations to better serve their audience and to create a welcoming space. "It's not about making physical space accessible, but making the marketing and films themselves accessible as well," explained one staff member.
- They also realized "how deeply accessibility needs to be built into everything we do," and shifted their approach from reactive to a more **proactive attitude of readiness**. They concluded that "accessibility planning needs to start even before the festival planning does."
- Core staff at Reeling gained a **better understanding of the various types of accessibility services** by seeing them in action and in person. "I know what to expect now," one staff member explained. Knowing what was "actually involved" will help the next time she begins to plan and build capacity for future accessible programs.
- Staff also gained concrete and practical experiences with the **technical and logistical aspects** of accessible film deliverables, such as downloading, uploading, verifying, and testing captions and description tracks on DCPs. They have also now 'nailed down' what specific questions to ask filmmakers in their

submission forms to gather information about which films have already been captioned and described.

- All of these practical experiences have an invaluable side effect on core festival staff by helping them to **address any fears and anxieties about providing access**. Reeling's executive director, for instance, felt reassured by how easily and unobtrusively live CART captions could be offered during filmmaker Q&A's. "I was worried it would be a disruptive portion of the event, but it was very workable."

## Audience Impact

- The **personal impact** of accessible film programming cannot be underestimated, even if only one person utilizes a service for a single screening during the entire festival run. In the case of Reeling 2022, this 'one person' was the mother of Programming Manager Jackie Robbins. Prior to Reeling's partnership with AR:EA, Jackie had never organized something that her mother could participate in. Jackie's mom is Deaf, and the captions and ASL interpretation at one of our accessible programs allowed her to finally join and feel fully included. "That wasn't possible before," Jackie confided emotionally to our team, as she wiped away tears.
- By **modeling accessibility**, screenings can impact and raise awareness amongst non-disabled audiences and any filmmakers in attendance. Filmmakers at the closing night celebration, which was open captioned, gave special shout outs to Access Reframed and commended the decision to screen with captions for everyone and anyone who needed it. One film professional in the audience commented, "why doesn't everyone do this?"
- Several Reeling **volunteers expressed interest** in the accessibility initiative. Two were taking ASL classes, and enjoyed seeing how an interpreter handled the Q&A. Other volunteers appreciated and utilized the Large Print programs that were made available at the check-in table. When measuring impact, volunteers should also be factored in as potential users or accommodations. Volunteers are often older, and therefore more likely to benefit from a more accessible festival themselves.
- Certain resources that a festival can provide may **benefit people who didn't even realize they had an access need**. For instance, 70% of the Large Print

programs at the check-in table were taken and utilized by patrons. Open Captioned screenings are often appreciated by audience members who don't consider themselves to be hard of hearing, but who appreciate the added clarity that captions lend to the dialogue.

- **CART transcripts** of the filmmaker Q&A can be made available to festival organizers and used to easily and quickly gather “pull quotes” to be used in future marketing efforts.
- **Accessibility providers can become allies and advocates** for the festival. The ASL Interpreter at one screening raved about the film being shown, and insisted that “the Deaf community needs to see this.” In future years she could help to spread the word amongst her Deaf clients and on her own social media.
- The presence of an accessibility initiative is simply good for the festival's **visibility**. Our posts to various social media channels resulted in a considerable number of likes and reposts, raising awareness about the festival's dedication to accessibility and perhaps encouraging other festivals to consider accessible offerings as well.

# Internal Lessons Learned: How to Better Support Future Partners

## Identifying an Ideal Partner Festival

For a regranting effort like Access Reframed: Empowering Action to make the most impact, the partner festival should demonstrate a previous or current interest in accessibility, and be ready to commit to accessible programming even without AR:EA support. Both buy-in and an existing capacity should already be present in order to ensure the success of new access initiatives. A festival should ideally be capable of investing financially in access, so that even without regranting funds, they could take steps and dedicate resources to accessible programming.

We recommend asking candidate festivals the following questions:

- What does access mean to you and your team?
- In what ways do you view your core values as aligning with accessibility?
- What types of access do you feel are most important to you and your audience?
- What steps are you already taking to increase accessibility?
- What do you feel you are doing well?
- Where do you feel you are struggling?
- Is there anything you're not doing that you feel you should be?
- What are you hoping to fund in the near future when it comes to accessible programming?
- What kind of buy-in for an accessibility initiative do you have from your ED and board?
- What kinds of funding currently exists for festival access, beyond this year's grant?

There are also a few questions that we recommend to get a sense of the candidate festival's organizational structure:

- How many events and screenings are programmed as part of the festival?
- How many year-round staff do you have and what are their roles?
- Tell us about your year-round festival staff, and who might have the interest and capacity to oversee a new accessibility initiative?
- How many seasonal employees do you have and what are their roles and timeline for staffing and employing those roles?
- How many volunteers are part of your festival team, and how are they trained?
- What venues do you partner with for the festival? What is your knowledge of their physical accessibility?

- How are festival events announced, promoted, etc. (including flyers, postcards, websites, social media, FB event pages, newspapers, etc.)?

## Clarifying Grant Expectations

Before committing to a partnership, the candidate festival and the regranteeing team should co-create a working agreement that lays out the following: commitments and responsibilities of each party; a timeline for implementation broken into 4 stages (festival accessibility audit, pre-festival prep, festival access coordination, and post-festival evaluation). Monthly progress check-ins and clear channels of communication should be also established.

Below is the working agreement for our partnership with Reeling LGBTQ+ Film Festival.

### **Access Reframed: Empowering Action (AR:EA) Working Agreement with Partner Festival**

#### **PHASE I: Accessibility Assessment & Planning: March–May 2022**

*Series of meetings with festival staff/stakeholders to determine best accessibility practices and implementation plan (ie., how to integrate accessibility planning into the larger festival planning timeline).*

- Monthly progress meetings in March & April (2 hrs each): debrief to understand how festival logistics and stakeholders (audience, staff, board, volunteers, etc.) may impact big picture and realistic goals for festival accessibility; intro to basic accessibility strategies for festival mission.
- Results (May): Finalize collaborative accessibility plan (2 hrs).
  - Pre-Festival Prep
  - Festival
  - Post Festival Commitment

#### **PHASE II: Pre-Festival Prep: June–August 2022**

*Start implementation as determined in Phase I discussions with the festival.*

- Monthly progress checks in June & July (2 hrs each): orientation and training with staff on accessibility best practices, introduction to potential vendors and providers; as-needed consultation & troubleshooting from AR:EA team regarding accessibility implementation and evaluation.
- Results (August): Finalize vendors for specific accessible screenings; develop checklist to ensure accessibility features are promoted clearly and reach target audiences; determine level of support needed during Phase III.

**PHASE III:** Festival Implementation: September–end of festival 2022

*Accessibility implementation and evaluation as determined by Phase I & II.*

- AR:EA team assists festival staff in training seasonal staff & volunteers.
- AR:EA hires and coordinates with evaluation team.
- AR:EA team on call for accessibility logistics and support.

**PHASE IV:** Post-Festival Commitment: October 2022–beyond

*Review of evaluation and next steps.*

- Debrief with AR:EA staff about what went well and next steps for festival accessibility moving forward.
- Collaborate on a final public report that includes accessibility implementation challenges, successes, etc from festival perspective + AR:EA team perspective.
- Collaborate with AR:EA on at least one public presentation.

Our own expectations as a regranting body included that the partner festival would be able to confirm full support for the initiative from leadership (ED, Board, festival director) and staff. We also wanted the partner festival to make a public commitment on their website and via press release to a new accessibility initiative, and to participate in the public sharing of our findings at the conclusion of the Year One regranting phase. Finally, we hoped to secure the festival's good faith intentions to continue working to increase and extend accessible programming beyond the grant period.

The full text of the public commitment to accessibility that Reeling made as part of the regranting agreement can be found below:

**ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT**

Reeling celebrates identities and communities too often misrepresented or ignored in mainstream film and television, and that includes those with disabilities.

In 2022, Reeling partnered with Access Reframed, a team consisting of members of the disability and film community in Chicago, as part of their Empowering Action initiative. Our goal is to increase access to Reeling's programs and events.

Reeling's accessibility initiatives include staged implementation of closed/open captioning and audio description at select screenings online and in-person, clear

orientation to the accessibility of our venues, and an extension of support to filmmakers with disabilities.

If you would like to learn more about accessibility at Reeling please visit our Accessibility page or contact us at [reelingcustomerservice@gmail.com](mailto:reelingcustomerservice@gmail.com).

## **Coordinating with the Partner Festival**

We found that shared Google Documents were essential in planning for access with the partner festival. Reeling shared three key documents with our team that proved invaluable to our accessibility planning:

1. A festival planning timeline, to help our team determine necessary next steps and deadlines for accessibility planning deliverables.
2. A document sharing up-to-date info about programming choices and film details to help us determine which films and programs seemed most suited to accessible programming.
3. A spreadsheet tracking confirmed film deliverables, including caption files and audio description tracks, as well as planned attendance by filmmakers, to aid our team in determining which media would be arriving with built-in access and which programs would likely include post-screening talkbacks.

## **Choosing What to Fund**

Regranting funds covered a range of expenses, including:

- Consulting by our team during all stages of festival planning, including marketing, web design, communication with filmmakers, and volunteer recruitment.
- Accessibility audit of the festival website.
- Venue accessibility audit.
- Language reviews of all accessibility-related copy in public communications.
- Quality checks of captions and description tracks.
- Revision of caption files that did not meet quality captioning standards.
- Authoring of DCPs to include captioning files and/or audio description tracks.
- Purchase of braille and large print programs.
- Creation of a plain text version of the program.
- Scripting and filming of a volunteer training video.

- Coordination and hiring of providers such as ASL interpreters and live CART transcribers.
- On-site support during the festival itself.

Although our team is open to reconsidering the following exclusions, regranting funds in this first pilot year did *not* include:

- Accommodations and travel for filmmakers with disabilities.
- Hardware or equipment like an assistive listening system or closed caption devices.

## **Auditing Venue Accessibility**

A fundamental requirement for an accessible screening is that it take place in a cinema that is ADA compliant. For a festival, this means more than simply taking a venue's word at face value. Reveca Torres, an AR:EA team member, has experienced countless times when a venue's website and even customer service personnel assure her that the building is accessible, only to discover on arrival that there is a step into the building and no ramp.

Ideally, a festival should contract with someone who uses a wheelchair and is knowledgeable about the Americans with Disabilities Act and the physical requirements for ADA compliance, to visit each venue in consideration and assess its true accessibility. Avoid the word 'audit' when visiting a venue, as that can scare people. Take a less formal approach, along the lines of "we're considering this venue and want to check a few things about the accessibility for audiences with different disabilities.

Below is a basic checklist that Reveca used in her own venue accessibility visits:

### **Venue Checklist**

#### Physical Access

- Route
- Step-Free Access (Entrances, Box Office, Concessions, Networking areas, etc)
- Automatic/ Push-Button Door
- Ramps
- Lifts
- Elevator

- Buttons height
  - Size
  - Braille or audio cues
- Stage Access
  - Ramp/lift
  - Podium
- Bathroom - ADA Stalls
- Bathroom - Sink Height
- Seating
  - How many wheelchair spaces? Can seats be removed/reconfigured?
  - Companion seats
  - Incline (seating area)
- Gathering spaces?
  - Open layout
  - Bar/table height
  - Food/drink accessibility
- Sensory break spaces

#### Transportation and Wayfinding

- Bus and train proximity
- Parking - How many disabled parking spots?
- Parking - Street Parking
- Clear Signage

#### Tech

- DCP Projector
- Microphones (stand, lavalier)
- Wi-fi
- Captioning Devices
- Assistive Listening / Audio Description Devices
- Designated spaces for ASL and CART
  - Outlet available

#### Covid Precautions

- Distancing
- Mask and vaccine policies

#### Other Considerations

- Trained staff, knowledge about access at venue

- Service animals

Note that key information resulting from these venue checks can and should be made available on the festival's website. Detail exactly what types of access are available at each venue, as well as any potential access barriers, so that attendees with disabilities can make informed decisions based on accurate information.

## Choosing Accessible Programs

Choosing accessible programs proved to be more complicated and problematic than we had anticipated. Our AR:EA team entered into the pilot program with a fairly firm sense that this regranting initiative should support 4 accessible programs: 1) the opening film and launch party; 2) the closing night film and celebration; 3) two 'flagship' programs.

We believe strongly that festivals should do everything possible to make opening and closing night programs as accessible as possible. These are prestige events around which much hype and press are built, and as such they have high audience interest. Inclusion thus becomes all the more important for these programs.

Unfortunately, we were not able to make the opening night film accessible, owing primarily to factors outside our team's control: the film was in French and had dialogue-only English subtitles, which lacked crucial non-speech sound captions for Deaf and hard of hearing audiences; there would be no talent attending in person and thus no post-screening talkback necessitating live access; and the film file itself was encrypted and required a [KDM](#) for playback, so Reeling was unable to access the digital file prior to the screening.

What to do when a festival's choice for an opening night film makes access impractical or impossible? It may simply take time for a festival to understand the importance of access and inclusion for prestigious events, and to realize that the existence of captions and audio description for a piece of media can and should factor into programming choices for opening and closing night. Our ideal scenario, from the point of view of disability justice, is that a film that lacks captions and description should simply not be programmed for opening night.

An additional friction that resulted from our accessible program choices involved the question of depth vs breath. Our AR:EA team leads with the conviction that access should be deep rather than shallow, and that in order to create a safe and inclusive space for audiences with disabilities, it's simply not enough to offer one accommodation but not others. For instance, if captioning is available for a feature film, but no ASL

interpretation or live captioning is provided for the filmmaker Q&A following the film, then can that event be considered truly accessible to a deaf audience member?

Our point of view results in an allocation of resources and budget towards making a few programs as accessible as possible, from start to finish, for as wide an audience as possible.

In our Year One wrap meeting and debrief with Reeling, however, executive director Brenda Webb made a different case for breadth over depth:

“Rather than focusing multiple accessibility resources into a few pre-determined screenings, have a more comprehensive strategy to increase overall accessibility by spreading out the resources.”

A valid criticism of our approach by the Reeling team was that, by choosing a small subset of accessible programs, we were in effect eliminating choice – we were choosing FOR a disabled audience. The solution seems simple: make ALL screenings accessible, and then disabled audiences will have the same choices as everyone else. This of course runs into logistical and financial limitations. Festivals often have upwards of 50 screenings. It's simply not possible to provide captions, ASL, and live CART transcription for all of them. So, faced with the question of how to best allocate limited resources, Reeling wanted our team to be more open to different approaches, such as using regrants to caption all of the films rather than pouring the money into live captioning and ASL interpretation for a much smaller sub-set of programs.

Regardless of which strategy is correct, we should in hindsight have spent more time in discussion and consensus with Reeling in the early stages of our partnership. We had two different conceptions of what should be prioritized, and took a top-down approach by telling them we would be implementing our strategy – rather than collaborating on a strategy that both parties could get fully behind. To quote Brenda Webb, potential solutions could have included:

“[H]aving an effective system in place to respond to the needs of people who need services for the specific programs they want to attend, rather than pre-determining what few shows are accessible to them, maybe using tactics such as having interpreters on retainer (if that is feasible) activated with advance notice. Or even providing CART for one show and ASL for another rather than both options for the same show (or just CART for both).”

Other ideas include having “access days” or an “access weekend” where accessible programs are brought together into a mini-festival where inclusion is prioritized.

## **Gathering Accessible Assets**

In order to screen a film with accessible assets such as captions or description, a festival’s organizers are entirely dependent upon the filmmakers. If a filmmaker doesn’t deliver their film with captions or description, a film festival can’t program an accessible screening of that film. This begs the question: how can festivals encourage filmmakers to deliver their films with these crucial assets?

Solutions have included the following:

- Some festivals that center disability, such as ReelAbilities and Superfest, are able to dedicate funding specifically to caption and describe films that are lacking these assets. However, most grassroots festivals cannot afford to pay for these assets themselves. While affordable captioning may be in reach of some festival budgets, more expensive audio description tracks are almost certainly not.
- Other festivals that prioritize accessibility, like the Queer Women of Color Film Festival (run by the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project - QWOCMAP), mandate that all films screen with Open Captions that are visible to everyone, and they make this information known during the submission process. Furthermore, they have trained their staff on the process of creating quality Audio Description, and they describe all films they exhibit. Their film festival runs shorter days and has fewer selections to prioritize the ability to create access. This may not be possible for every festival.
- Some top-tier festivals such as Sundance and SFFILM have begun to make captions a required asset for filmmakers to provide. Yet this requirement can feel like an extreme step for smaller festivals to take, especially those that screen independent, low budget films.
- Most festivals simply adopt a ‘wait and see’ approach, whereby they review the delivered collateral and then announce which films will include captions or descriptions. Often, the public learns of this information long after the full festival schedule has been announced, and potential audiences with disabilities have already concluded that no screenings are accessible.

The approach that AR:EA took with Reeling LGBTQ+ Film Festival was to make captioning and audio description a requested (but not required) deliverable, and to notify filmmakers of this request during the submission process. Specifically, when acceptance letters were delivered to filmmakers, language was added around Accessibility Recommendations. For instance, paragraph 4 of Reeling's acceptance letter in 2022 reads as follows:

As part of our organization's mission to celebrate diverse identities, Reeling is working to become more inclusive of people with disabilities. We encourage filmmakers to submit additional assets with your film. **Accessibility Recommendations** for films, trailers, photos, and posters are found on the linked "Technical Specifications and Deliverables" document.

The "Technical Specifications and Deliverables" document then listed recommendations such as the following:

*For Exhibition Copies:*

**ACCESSIBILITY RECOMMENDATIONS:** The recommendations below are included with the goal of increasing access for people with sensory disabilities to our online and in-person programming at Reeling's 2022 Festival. We are committed to improving and offering accessible experiences at our festival and advocating for accessibility within our industry in Chicago and at large. We welcome your participation in this effort.

**Accessibility Recommendation:** We encourage you to include **closed captions** with your film's deliverables, whether short or feature-length, to accommodate viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing. If closed captions are available, please indicate your intention to deliver either a caption sidecar file or a captioned DCP by emailing Patrick Friel at [reelingprogramming@chicagofilmmakers.org](mailto:reelingprogramming@chicagofilmmakers.org) by the publicity deadline of **[insert date here]**. Reeling will then follow up with technical specification for caption delivery. Note that captions should adhere to the following guidelines.

- The synchronization matches the complete film
- Captions include film atmospherics. E.g. sound effects and music.
- Line length does not exceed 32 characters.
- Does not exceed 4 lines per caption.

- Preference for mixed-sentence case - not all caps.
- Does not exceed 450 words per minute.
- Minimum duration of a caption should be no less than 13 frames.
- Maximum duration of a caption should not exceed 11 seconds.
- Captions should duplicate any subtitle text that is burned into the film.
- Should be Pop-On. Roll Up captions are not acceptable.

**Accessibility Recommendation:** Reeling plans to make a select number of films accessible with audio description for audiences who are blind or have low vision. For your film to be eligible for live audio description, if selected, you will need to provide an **electronic version of your script or transcript**, to be referenced by our live audio describer (the person who describes the film in real-time to blind and low vision audience members wearing specialized headsets). Please indicate your interest in this option and your ability to deliver such a script by emailing Patrick Friel at [reelingprogramming@chicagofilmakers.org](mailto:reelingprogramming@chicagofilmakers.org) by the publicity deadline of **[insert date here]**. Reeling will then follow up with more details. Note that the electronic version should be editable to enable our audio describer to type inline notes and description. Scripts are for internal purposes only, and will never be shared with anyone outside of this audio description specialist.

Do not hesitate to reach out if there are questions about these technical requirements, accessibility recommendations, or the process for uploading your film.

*For Photos and Posters:*

**Accessibility Recommendation:** We encourage you to provide a one-sentence image description for inclusion on Reeling's website and social media, geared towards blind and low vision followers.

*For Trailers:*

**Accessibility Recommendation:** If your film includes closed captions, we encourage you to caption your trailer as well. Please include the SRT file for deaf and hard of hearing viewers who wish to watch your trailer.

Crucially, film teams were asked in advance by Reeling about their *intent* to provide captions and / or description with their exhibition copies. This enabled the programming team to plan and announce accessible screenings much earlier than the typical 'wait and see' festival approach. In fact, Reeling announced their accessible programs for 2022 simultaneously with their full film schedule announcement.

This process requires filmmakers / film teams to understand what access materials they have and to deliver them properly. We encountered quite a few films that did not indicate access materials like Closed Captions or Audio Description, only to find out that they did have these materials once they delivered the film file and we opened them up. This puts the burden on the festival to have staff on hand to ingest and understand what access materials look like on a DCP or ProRes file and how to access them. Many festivals have a print traffic team to do this work, but smaller festivals (like Reeling) do not have additional projection staff to review incoming materials.

Film teams were also asked whether they planned to attend the festival in person, and were given the opportunity to request an accessibility services to ensure their own full participation:

Does anyone planning to attend the festival in-person have any access needs, such as wheelchair access, American Sign Language Interpretation, etc.? If so, please indicate what access services would enable full participation, and we will reach out for further discussion.

## **Creating and Funding Assets In-House**

In order for a screening to be truly accessible from start to finish, any festival branding shown on screen before or after an accessible film should also be made accessible. Several accessibility assets will therefore need to be funded or created in-house by the film festival, including open captions for festival promos and trailers, as well as sponsor reels.

The same branding should be made accessible when shared on the festival website or on social media. For instance, the festival trailer was included with closed captions on the Reeling LGBTQ+ Festival website. Additionally, when listing film details online, care should be taken whenever possible to embed or link to closed captioned versions of any third-party film trailers.

In some cases, a festival may want or need to invest in the creation of burnt-in open captions of films that supplied a closed caption SRT file. For example, Reeling planned two accessible short film collections that were to be collected onto a single BluRay disc. Rather than figuring out how to toggle on several different SRT files on the same disc, they opted to burn in the captions instead, and screen the shorts programs with open captions. Similarly, if a theater is not equipped with closed caption devices, an open caption copy of the film may need to be created from a closed caption sidecar file, at the expense of the festival.

## **Conducting Tech Checks**

We cannot overstate the importance of scheduling ample time in advance of an accessible program to confirm that captions and description tracks on DCPs are indeed working and accurate. Festival staff should work directly with theater employees to conduct these tech checks, and should also familiarize themselves with how to operate and troubleshoot a venue's closed caption devices and audio description headsets. Ideally, a festival should also have access to a staff member or vendor with expertise in DCP creation in order to troubleshoot and fix any technical issues.

As mentioned above, many festivals have dedicated print traffic teams to ingest and review all screened films. Many smaller festivals, like Reeling, do not have the staff to do this. When a print trafficker / in-house projection staff is not able to be hired, it is imperative that someone on the festival staff learn the basics of how to identify and tech check access materials on DCPs, BluRay's and ProRes files as well as any access devices being used.

## **Ensuring Festival Website Accessibility**

One of the first things that a festival should do when beginning a new access initiative is to have their current festival website audited for accessibility. Ideally, the audit should be conducted while audiences can still browse the schedule and register to attend screenings, so that the full functionality of the website can be tested. If a full WCAG 2.1 compliance audit cannot be conducted, then we recommend reaching out to a local accessibility advocate who uses screen reader technology to conduct an informal audit.

AR:EA, for instance, worked with a local blind musician Tommy Carroll to navigate the Reeling LGBTQ+ Festival website using JAWS screen reader software. We asked Tommy to peruse the festival schedule, register for several events, and then report to us on any barriers he encountered. The crucial issues that prevented Tommy from finding

the information needed to register for the events that he wanted to attend were then addressed by Reeling's web team. Again, full WCAG 2.1 compliance was not the goal; rather, we simply wanted to ensure that someone who uses assistive technology can complete the tasks that are vital to participation in the film festival.

In addition to a formal or informal audit, a festival's web team should be well acquainted with guidelines and best practices on Alt Text. To ensure that blind visitors have access to information about film stills and other visuals that could be helpful when evaluating interest in a specific film or program, Image descriptions should be added to as many non-decorative photos and images as possible. Festivals should be aware that using third party integrations may mean that they have less control over attributes such as Alt Text. We caution against using any third-party integration that does not provide a way to add Alt Text to images.

Beyond the above, festivals should consider using plain and clear language (rather than overly verbose or flourished language), simple grid schedules and high contrast graphics. Additionally, there should be alternative pathways available to purchasing tickets (e.g. phone, email).

## **Tracking and Responding to Accommodation Requests**

Audiences with disabilities want to feel confident that, if they purchase a ticket to a screening that is marketed as accessible, they will actually be able to attend and enjoy the program. This is best communicated by tracking access requests during the registration process, and communicating clearly with registrants once access requests have been made.

In 2022, AR:EA was not able to successfully implement an accommodation request process with Reeling LGBTQ+ Festival, which was using a ticketing platform that did not easily enable tracking of access requests. We believe this may have been a major factor contributing to such low attendance by people with disabilities.

In future collaborations with film festivals, we intend to strongly encourage the addition of an "Access Needs" question during registration, whereby users can check a box next to any accommodation they plan to make use of when attending the event. Those who have indicated such requests should then be sent a confirmation email by the festival, specifying which accommodation was received, providing helpful information about how to access that accommodation at the venue, and sharing contact information for any further access-related questions.

Access related questions should ideally be directed to a dedicated accessibility email such as [access@xyzfestival.com](mailto:access@xyzfestival.com) (rather than a general customer service email). This email should be set up with an auto-reply that confirms receipt of a message and that indicates the typical or expected turn-around time for festival response to that query. For instance:

Thank you for your email regarding festival accessibility. This email is being checked daily. We hope to provide you a response to your query within 2-3 business days. Thank you for your patience.

Whenever possible, there should be a dedicated Accessibility page on the festival's website that includes a listing of all films with access accommodations (e.g. closed captioning, open captioning, ASL interpretations, live captioning, audio description, etc.), accessibility information on the venue itself (e.g. where the ramps and automatic doors are located, whether or not there are accessible bathrooms, etc.) and how to get to the venue with accessibility information (e.g. accessible parking, public transportation - including accessible stations, etc.). The accessibility page should also include how to contact the festival to make accommodations requests (include multiple pathways of access like phone and email). Access information should also be repeated in the schedule of events, on the individual film pages, print materials, etc. Don't hide this information!

The above recommendations are things we would recommend for any festival to implement; although in our stage one implementation with Reeling, we were not able to coordinate a dedicated accessibility email and autoreply, to the detriment of our prospective disabled audiences.

## **Publicizing Access**

Festivals should prominently and proudly announce accessible screenings on their website and in their newsletter and other marketing communications. We are shocked at how often accessible festival programs are hidden, hard to find, or simply not advertised! Accessible screenings must also be promoted early, often and within the right networks.

Use Year One of a festival accessibility initiative to begin outreach to local organizations that intersect with disability, access, and inclusion, and build on these connections with every successive festival. Capitalize on personal connections when promoting accessible offerings. For instance:

- Encourage the filmmakers of an accessible screening or program to announce on their own channels the presence of captions, description, or ASL.
- Ask accommodation providers and vendors to promote the event amongst their own clientele.
- Request that venues include accessibility information in any of their own marketing efforts.
- Create a [share guide](#) and include [marketing images](#) directly related to your accessibility initiative, and ask your own staff and team members to distribute them amongst their own networks.

One thing that stood out to us working with Reeling is how important this step is and the importance of remembering that gaining the trust of disabled audiences takes time. Because Reeling had not offered accessibility accommodations in the past, they did not have any relationship with the disability community coming into this process. We were able to leverage our networks to do outreach but this kind of outreach takes time, we are talking months, if not years. Just like any demographic, when trying to attract new audiences, you need to build trust. We highly encourage festivals doing outreach to the disability community, do the work in the lead up to the festival to begin to build that trust. Some suggestions would be:

- Hold a monthly or bi-monthly screening that includes increased access (e.g. open captions, audio description, ASL and live captioning) and partner with your local disability community to make an event out of it. An event where the community can get to know your festival, your staff, your films and build that trust.
- Hold a virtual preview night leading up to your festival where you invite the disability community to learn about your accessible programs and offer time / space for feedback and questions.

The disability community is no different than any new audience that you are trying to attract. You need to do the work to publicize your offerings, build trust and show the community they are welcome by following through on your commitments.

## **Making Arrangements with Providers**

Something that we have learned over the years and that we brought with us to Reeling, is the importance of hiring skilled access providers (who are familiar with film) and

making sure they are given what they need to succeed. We leveraged a network of access providers who we have worked with before on other film events to provide services for Reeling. Knowing that our access providers were knowledgeable and quality was key. We then were able to provide them ahead of time with the materials, films and information they needed to succeed.

When communicating with providers such as ASL interpreters, CART captioners, or live audio describers, keep in mind the following tips:

- Reserve 1 complimentary ticket and seat in the theater per provider who will be offering their services during a program. They will need a place to sit!
- Book providers for ½ hour before the start of a program, to ensure they can arrive early, get acquainted with the theater space, and figure out best placement.
- Do not use the film's runtime to determine the duration of a booking; always add an additional half-hour or so to a booking to account for preshow announcements, technical delays, and post-screening Q&A's, panels, or talk-backs.
- Note that many providers have a two-hour minimum for bookings. For this reason, consider alternative solutions for providing access to short, pre-show announcements. For instance, rather than hiring an interpreter for 5 minutes of pre-show announcements, consider pre-scripting the announcements and projecting the script visibly on the screen while the festival representative is speaking.
- Create and share a [run of show](#) with providers so that they can easily find information about parking, check-in, cinema number, etc. ASL and CART providers will also benefit from lists of filmmakers, speakers, or panelists whose names may need to be spelled during the program. Any script or dialogue that you can provide ahead of time, bullet points are fine, also help providers with spelling, etc. Include the film's runtime in the run of show as well. If providers choose to take a break during the film, knowing the runtime will help them to gauge when they need to return.
- When working with live CART transcribers, be aware that their work automatically generates a timed text file with the full transcription. For a modest additional cost, festivals can request this file from the transcriber, who can share it either as a simple Word document or as an SRT file (which can be used to add

closed captions to recordings of the event). Such requests must be specified in advance of the event.

## **Preparing Volunteers and Front-of-House Staff**

No matter how much technical and logistical preparation has gone into creating an accessible program, it will all be for naught if your disabled audience members encounter able-ism or experience negative social interactions with festival volunteers or front-of-house staff. An accessible event must also be a welcoming one, and to create a sense of welcome, volunteers and staff should have a minimum, basic training in disability awareness. This can be delivered during an in-person training, remotely via video conferencing, or by means of a pre-scripted or documentary style training video. See this hyperlinked [volunteer orientation outline](#) and this [transcript](#) of an accessibility training video created for Reeling's volunteers by the AR:EA team. When recruiting volunteers, festivals may also find it beneficial to add 'accessibility' as an option to any questions gauging a volunteer's areas of interest. Make sure to clearly define what accessibility means for the festival, as well as the kind of tasks that would be involved.

Crucial to disability awareness training is the inclusion of testimony by actual people with disabilities. Consider hiring disabled consultants to work with your key staff in developing your accessibility and customer service policies.

Consider designating at least one paid staff member or subcontractor as a dedicated **access coordinator**, who will be present at each and every accessible program. This person should be aware of:

- The accessible seating policy, including number and timing of when to release them
- The location of accessible seats (including companion seats)
- The best and most accessible pathways to designated seats and main areas
- The location of suggested seating for Deaf/Hard of Hearing patrons
- The location of accessible restrooms
- Where closed-captioning devices are stored and how to operate them
- Where listening devices and description headsets are stored and how to operate them
- How to usher or guide blind patrons to their seats
- Any COVID protocols for the festival

This person should also be tasked with checking to confirm that closed-caption, listening, and description devices are working. The access coordinator should ideally be the person who meets access patrons during check-in and distributes devices to those who have requested them. This includes helping to orient patrons to how to operate these devices. Access coordinators should also be present in the theater while the movie is beginning in order to assist patrons who are encountering technical issues. Additional devices should be easily on-hand should faulty devices need to be switched out and 'quarantined' for repair.

In the case of Reeling, the AR:EA team acted as onsite access coordinators due to a lack of staffing and Reeling's concerns about designating a volunteer for this position. In future festival years, our hope is that the festival will begin handling this component, to engage with their audiences in a deeper way and to extend their learning about the access provided at each screening.

## **Setting Up An Access Table**

Near the check-in area, we recommend that festivals set up an "access table" operated by volunteers. At least 1 volunteer should be posted at this table at all times, ready and trained to share the following resources:

- A large print informational sign listing what Access Support is available
- An easel on which to mount the Access Support sign
- Badges or stickers to identify access volunteers
- A folding table and linen
- A laminated one-sheet with tips for access volunteers
- Large Print / Braille programs
- Clear masks / surgeon masks / KN95 masks
- Notepads + Pens
- Mobile devices with AVA or comparable app
- An extra folding chair for audio describer if needed
- An extra folding chair with TV tray for CART provider

This worked well for Reeling as the festival never screened in more than one venue at the same time. The festival provided space near the check-in table and the AR:EA team staffed the table. For larger festivals with multiple venues, we recommend an access table at each venue and that it be staffed with folks knowledgeable about the access accommodations provided. When this is not possible, it is key to have the materials available at each venue and have the venue staff trained on accessibility. If access

tables at each venue is not possible, we recommend an accessibility table at the festival's main location, box office or hub that allows patrons to have one main point of contact for all access requests and information in addition to each venue having the properly trained staff and access materials.

## Evaluating Customer Experience

When a festival begins to attract audiences with disabilities, it's important to assess the quality of their experience and the effectiveness of a program's accessibility offerings. Because our Year One collaboration with Reeling yielded a low count of access patrons, meaningful quantitative survey results from our pilot program are not currently available. We did, however, receive valuable qualitative data that we have detailed in an earlier section of this report called [Beyond Attendance: Measuring the Successes of Accessibility](#)

One anonymous means of evaluation is the new [Film Event Accessibility Scorecard](#) developed by [Filmmakers with Disabilities](#) (FWD-Doc), the [Film Event Accessibility Working Group](#) (FEAW), [Film Festival Alliance](#) (FFA) and in association with [1IN4 Coalition](#) (1IN4). Or, more tailored surveys can be administered by the festival itself, using Google Forms, Survey Monkey, or the like. Please note that tracking access requests is vital to data collection; only when emails of access patrons are known can a follow-up audience survey can be shared to assess their experience.

## Conclusion

The Access Reframed: Empowering Action pilot program was conceived in order to build capacity at a small film festival through training, written resources, festival-specific consultation, and direct cash assistance. Through these supports, our pioneer partner, Reeling LGBTQ+ Film Festival, gained the following three essential benefits:

1. Greater awareness amongst staff and volunteers about disability and inclusion;
2. Increased familiarity with access technology, service providers, and accommodation request procedures;
3. An understanding of how extending access to audiences with disabilities is indispensable to a sense of welcome and community.

We encourage you to prioritize and secure funding for an accessibility initiative at your own film festival. Guidance around access can move your organization forward towards a more welcoming and inclusive festival, and you will gain crucial learnings by simply trying to mount accessible events for the first time – even if your audience for such accommodations hasn't been cultivated quite yet.

Please share this report with anyone in the independent film festival circuit that you believe can empower action.

Visit <https://www.fullspectrumfeatures.com/access-reframed> to learn more about this and other Access Reframed initiatives.

For questions or invitations to speak about our Year One learnings, please contact [accessibility@fullspectrumfeatures.com](mailto:accessibility@fullspectrumfeatures.com).

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## Contributors

**Cassidy Dimon** (she/her) is a filmmaker and event producer with over 15 years of experience producing film events across the US. She has produced over 200 film screenings, numerous award shows and film festivals, as well as two iterations of the esteemed Getting Real Documentary Film Conference. Cassidy is also the founder of the Film Event Accessibility Working Group (FEAW), an initiative that harnesses the collective power of event professionals to help exhibitors across the country develop and execute accessible events and is the creator of the Film Event Accessibility Scorecard launched in July 2022.

**Matt Lauterbach** is a filmmaker and accessible media artist. He founded All Senses Go in 2020 as part of an effort to build a filmmaking community that prioritizes access to captions, audio description, and accessible websites and screenings. All Senses Go clients have included Sundance Film Festival, International Documentary Association, SFFILM Festival, Full Spectrum Features, Kartemquin Films, and more. Matt also serves as Programming and Communications Coordinator with the Cultural Access Collaborative, whose mission is to empower Illinois' cultural spaces to become more accessible to visitors with disabilities. As a documentary film editor, Matt has helped to craft over a dozen documentaries, including: American Arab (2013, America ReFramed); The Trials of Muhammad Ali (2014, Independent Lens); Saving Mes Aynak (2014); There Are Jews Here (2016, America ReFramed); Unbroken Glass (2016, America ReFramed); '63 Boycott (2017, WORLD Channel); and For the Left Hand (2021). He is an Adjunct Faculty member in the School of Cinematic Arts at DePaul University in Chicago, where he recently taught one of the nation's first courses in Accessible Cinema.

**Jason Matsumoto** is a fourth-generation Japanese American producer and musician from Chicago. Jason co-produced The Orange Story, an early Full Spectrum project funded by the U.S. National Park Service that aims to provide educational content about civil liberties as told through the lens of Japanese American incarceration during WWII. Jason is the director and primary composer for Chicago-based music ensemble Ho Etsu Taiko. Jason is also a strategy consultant for Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten (Tokyo), a 150 year old traditional Japanese instrument maker who officially serves the Emperor of Japan. Prior to joining Full Spectrum's staff, Jason spent 10 years in the financial derivatives industry, retiring in 2017 as Director of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange's strategic pricing team.

**Jackie Robbins** is a versatile professional known for her exceptional leadership, organizational prowess, and commitment to driving positive social change. As the Program Director at Chicago Filmmakers, she collaborated closely with community stakeholders to design and facilitate initiatives that empowered individual artists and contributed to the growth of the local film industry. Additionally, she managed operations for the organization's two annual film festivals, creating a dynamic and enriching environment for all attendees.

Before joining Chicago Filmmakers, Jackie gained valuable experience as the Press Coordinator for the prestigious Sundance Film Festival and as a Social Media Manager for the Chicago International Film Festival. She holds a B.A. in Advertising and Public Relations from Loyola University Chicago, earned with honors in 2015.

Now, in her pursuit of a law degree at the University of Illinois Chicago Law School, Jackie seeks to bridge the creative arts and legal advocacy with the aim of supporting and protecting artists' rights, as well as fostering a more equitable entertainment industry.

**Grishma Shah, PhD** (she/hers) is a multidisciplinary artist, producer, and Entertainment Psychologist. She is the founder of LaGrish, known for intersecting disability+ stories and consulting with organizations in Hollywood as well as production companies, film festivals and academic institutions like Northwestern University and Harvard University, to advance culture, discourse and the disability justice movement. When Grishma isn't consulting on film projects or participating in panels about cultural transformation through Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Access (DEIA) initiatives, this self-taught artist is burning the midnight oil creating mixed-media artwork for upcoming LaGrish workshops and art exhibits. Grishma's art inspired by her multiple intersectionalities intertwines the human experience of disability+ components of culture, faith practices, age, sexuality, gender, skin tone, and race. Her painting style goes beyond traditional elements having dimensions of texture and asymmetry, asking audiences to reflect deeper about societal standards of beauty in life and art. A 3Arts Fellow in 2021, Grishma has had her artwork exhibited at the beautiful Chicago Harold Washington Library, Skokie Public Library, Adler University, Harper College, The Chicago Cultural Center, Navy Pier, Chicago Symphony Theatre, and DuPage Symphony Orchestra (to name a few).

**Reveca Torres** is an artist, filmmaker and disability advocate. She is a 2023 Firelight Media Doc Lab Fellow and was a Kartemquin Films Diverse Voices in Docs fellow (2017) and selected for Kartemquin + Hulu Accelerator program in 2020. In 2020 Reveca was one of four fellows for International Documentary Association's (IDA) Documentary Magazine Editorial Fellowship and was awarded the inaugural Craig Neilsen Visionary Prize for her work in art and advocacy. Reveca was a 3Arts fellow in 2018, a 3Arts awardee in 2020, and a 3Arts Next Level recipient in 2022. She is the founder and Executive Director of BACKBONES, an organization helping people with spinal cord injury and disabilities and co-director of ReelAbilities Film Festival Chicago. Reveca has curated touring photography and art exhibitions that showcase the work of people with disabilities and bring awareness to disability rights. She uses painting, illustration, photography, film, movement, and other media as a form of expression and a tool for advocacy and social justice.

**Brenda Webb** is the Executive Director of Chicago Filmmakers, where she started out as Program Director in 1978. In 1981, she founded Reeling: The Chicago LGBTQ+ International Film Festival, the second oldest festival of its kind in the world, for which she was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame as a "Friend of the Community." She was among the top 10 on a list of the 50 most influential people in the Chicago film community in Newcity's "Film 50: Chicago's Screen Gems" in 2017 and 2019. In addition to her work at Chicago Filmmakers, she has served on the boards of the National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture and the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, and was a founding board member of the Chicago chapter of Women in Film.