

Organizational Considerations When Beginning

An Audio Description Program

Why are you doing this?

1. Community members who are blind or have low vision have requested audio description services.
2. Performing and/or visual arts organizations want to increase their audience and provide increased access to their programs.
3. You or a member of your staff attended a workshop on audio description and you think it would be a good service for your organization to provide.

Now What?

1. Assemble a small group of individuals who will use the service to discuss the best place to start.
If you are beginning a new program, you may want to focus your attention toward an area where you will experience initial success and be able to build upon that success/audience. (i.e., if your community has excellent museums with high quality touring and permanent exhibits and if most of the individuals had sight at one time, they may want to focus on access to museums first.)
2. Prepare presentation for local arts organizations to introduce the techniques and advantages of audio description. Try to determine the level of support (financial and other) you can expect from these organizations.
3. Research which assistive listening equipment (used to provide audio description) is best to meet your organization and patrons' needs.
4. Prepare funding proposals to purchase necessary equipment to provide the service.
5. Hire coordinator or assign scheduling and coordination duties to current staff member/volunteer.
6. Advertise through local resources to invite interested individuals to attend introductory presentation. (i.e., newsletters of toastmaster organizations, theater groups, reading for the blind and dyslexic organizations, retired teacher associations, etc. and the local paper.)
7. Coordinate introductory session to explain audio description to interested individuals. Provide examples of description, as well as the expectations of your organization for each describer's time commitment to the program.
8. Contract with professional or highly skilled and experienced describer to provide initial training in the art and techniques of audio description to group of volunteers and staff.
9. Schedule auditions for perspective describers following the introductory session, if necessary. Remember that you will need a describer, back-up describer and equipment person for every performance, so it may be in your best interest to include every interested individual in the training workshop. Knowledge is more power to your program.
10. Conduct training, usually three days to adequately cover all the material and provide ample opportunities to potential describers to practice the techniques. Invite people who are blind to attend the training sessions to give feedback. Trainer usually describes performance for trainees on Saturday evening.

An example of a week-end training:

Friday evening: brief introduction to audio description and an overview of the training.

Generally, because the trainer must attend the performance to prepare his/her notes for the following evening's description, Friday's presentation lasts for 1 1/2 hour.

Saturday morning: convene in morning and conduct workshop with lunch break. Break at end of day with ample time for the trainees to get something to eat and to reconvene at the theater. Trainer provides description services at evening performance.

Sunday morning: convene at workshop location to discuss previous evening's description and continue description practice. Techniques for describing visual art usually covered on last day. Distribute potential schedule of described performances/art exhibits for describer assignments. Assignments cover describer, back-up describer and equipment person. It may be necessary to assign two describers to any opera event, one to prepare the pre-show notes and the other to describe during the performance.

11. Arrange appointments to discuss with individual producers the unique process of providing audio description in their facility. (i.e., where describer will transmit: in the booth, in the balcony, in the auditorium, etc., and where in the lobby the equipment person will hand out the receivers.)
12. Develop report form for equipment person to use at each event and also evaluation form to be used to gather feedback from the patrons. This evaluation can be administered in several forms: phone call, hand out at performance, informal questions at event, etc.
13. Schedule frequent describer meetings (i.e., quarterly, monthly) to discuss techniques, word choices, challenges, etc.
14. Implement an apprentice program to train future describers when you have a stable of experienced describers that can provide mentor and trainer services.

Personnel

describer: responsible to preview performance, exhibit or scheduled event; develop script; prepare pre-show notes and deliver description.

back-up describer: responsible to preview performance, exhibit or scheduled event; develop script; prepare pre-show notes; and be prepared to deliver description in the event of an emergency. The back-up also assists the equipment person at the facility when necessary.

equipment person: arrange to bring equipment to facility (if not owned by the facility); set up transmitter for describer; check out receivers to determine they are in good working order; hand out and collect receivers to and from patrons; capture names, addresses and phone numbers of patrons not on mailing list; listen to description to monitor quality of transmission; distribute feedback form or advise patron that someone may call them for their feedback; and report to staff coordinator of any problems.

This handout was prepared by VSA arts of Texas. It represents only one way of developing a successful audio description program. There are other models available across the country. For more information, contact Celia Hughes at 512-454-9912 or email celia@vsatx.org.