

# Bolstering Accessibility in Movie Theater Venues in Rochester Metropolitan Area

Presented by Sean Furman - Master of Science in Professional Studies – December 5, 2023

## PROBLEM:

Full access to movie theaters in the metropolitan of Rochester, a city with the largest Deaf and Hard of Hearing (in this poster, we will refer to them as deaf except for the lesson learned section) per capita in the United States with almost 4% of the Rochester's region population, the options continue to be extremely limited for the deaf communities. Even with auxiliary aids of closed captioning devices, open captioning showing, and other services provided, it remains to be problematic and challenge delivering equity access and opportunity for deaf people.

## PURPOSE OF CAPSTONE PROJECT:

Collect sufficient data through survey, interview for analysis, and research movie theaters venues' accessibility policies and practices. The intent is to identify common trends, barriers, challenges, and opportunities to determine potential strategies and recommendations for movie theaters to consider improving accessibility for deaf viewers.

## CAPSTONE PROJECT PROCESS:

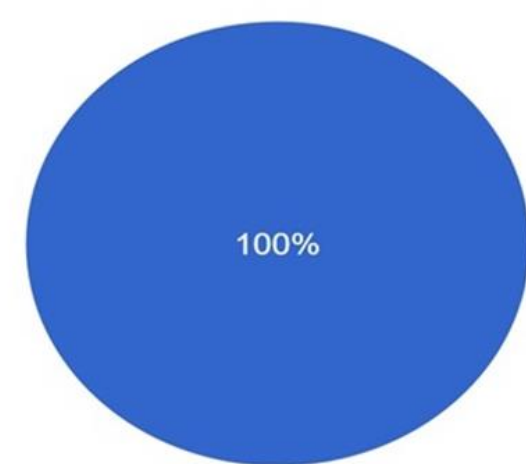
- Develop and deploy survey to Deaf & Hard of Hearing individuals
- Interview movie theaters
- Research into Rochester movie theaters website & other cities/states
- Assess all information collected for further analysis
- Identify common trends including barriers/challenges & generate recommendations
- Share recommendations as guidelines to movie theaters

## Auxiliary Devices Used in Movie Theaters:

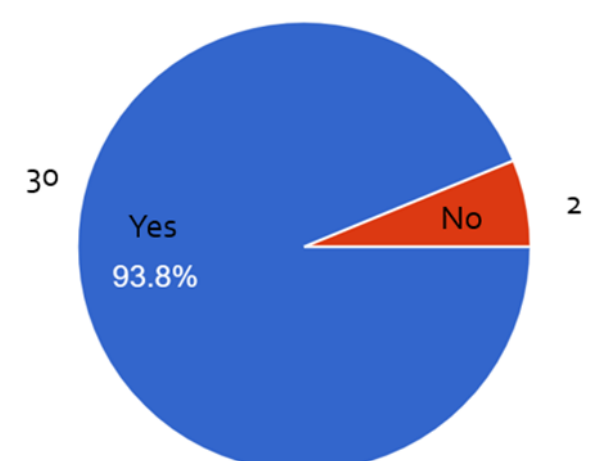


Per survey result: 88% Deaf & Hard of Hearing respondents indicated that they use assistive devices (caption or listening devices) when going to the movie theater.

In the past, did you have issues with captioning / listening devices?  
28 responses



With limited options of open caption (OC) movies and showtimes, would that be a reason why you do not go to the movie theaters more frequently?



## Issues encountered with captioning / listening devices

- 100% - Captioning device malfunctioned (i.e. did not work, died, missed captions, captions did not match the dialogues)
- 75% - Captioning devices would not stay set in position
- 71% - Captioning glasses are uncomfortable to wear
- 68% - Difficult reading captions while watching the movie
- 4% - Listening devices did not work / difficult to hear the dialogues
- 0% - No issues with captioning / listening devices

## Open Caption (OC) showtimes & frequency:

### The following theaters offer OC showtimes



Usually Sunday & Wednesday. More showtimes if movie is popular. Most OC showtimes are matinees or late night. Wednesday usually evening showtimes



Saturday matinee showtime (once a week)

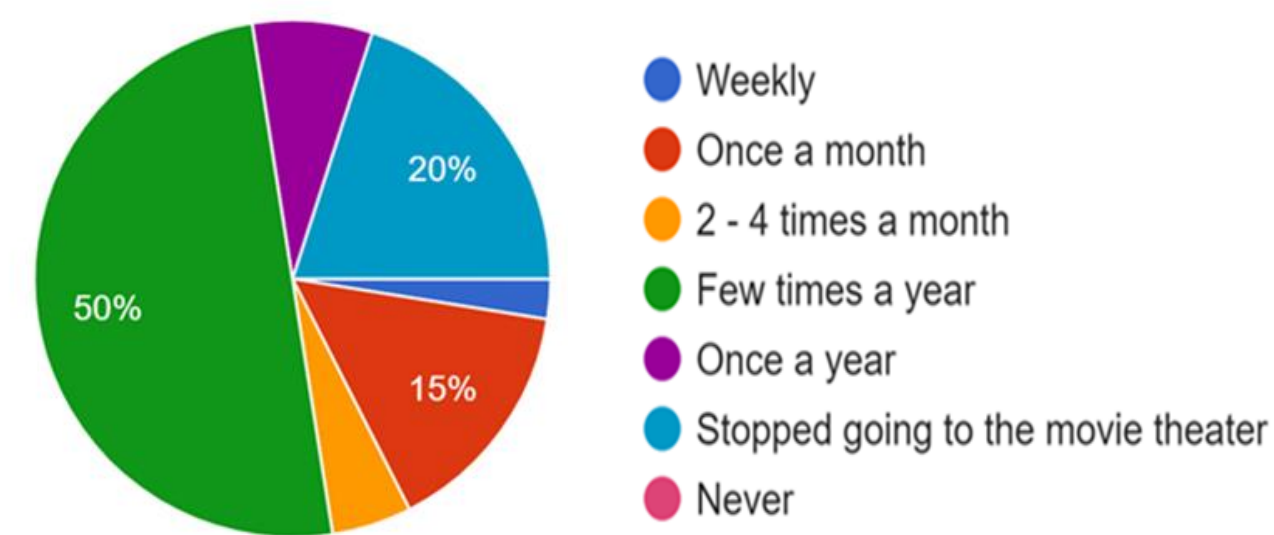


Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> matinee showtimes & Thursday evening showtimes for all movies playing

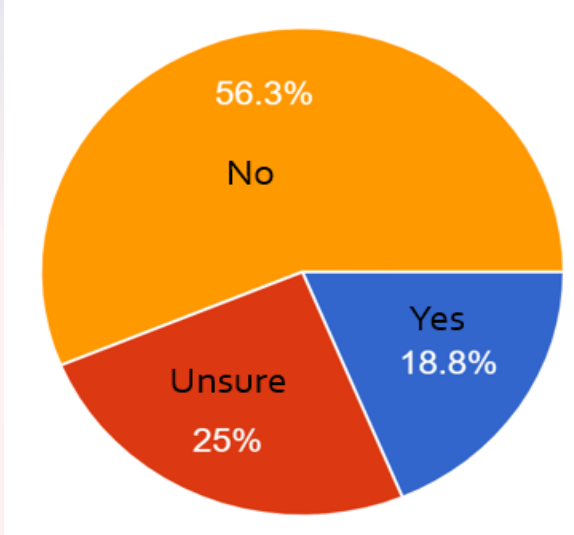
The following theaters **DO NOT** currently have OC showtimes:



How often do you go to the movie theater?  
40 responses



Do you think open captions (OC) on screen bother other viewers in the theater?  
32 responses



## Results from the survey and interviews indicated the following:

- 100% - Deaf viewers have experienced issues with captioning or listening devices.
- 97% - Deaf viewers would pick watching a movie with open captions than using assistive devices.
- 94% - Deaf viewers would go to the movie more often if open caption showtimes was available more frequently.
- 78% - Indicated challenging in finding open caption showtimes information for movies in Rochester movie theaters.
- Higher percentage selected evening (5pm – 8pm) and weekend matinee / afternoon as times they would like to see open caption showtimes to be available.

Overall, theaters do NOT maintain data or track deaf attendees.



## Challenges that deaf individuals experienced at movie theaters:

### A) With closed captioning or listening devices

- Early arrival to get device and set it up
- Hard on the eyes especially for individuals with visual impairments
- Glasses device challenging for those who already wear glasses
- Most devices are clunky and awkward
- Device dies during the movie when not properly charged
- Weak signal causes the device not to function properly
- Dropped/missed dialogue on the device
- Eye-split between caption devices and subtitles on screen
- Unable to use captioning device when chair is reclined
- Devices are not well maintained / post-pandemic concerns
- Lack of training (staff), do not know where they are located, or / and how to use it
- Distraction for others in theater; assumption it is a recording device
- Limited number of devices; insufficient for large number of deaf attendees

### B) With open captioning (OC) Movies

- Limited theaters provide OC showtimes
- Limited options of movies shown in OC
- Limited showtimes (often matinee or late night)
- Rarely preview/opening night showtimes are OC
- OC showtimes only during 1st week run
- Ticket sales for OC showtimes not available ahead of time
- Some theaters have requirements of 10 people/10 days in advance for OC showtime
- Challenges of finding information

## BENEFITS OF OPEN CAPTION AT MOVIE THEATERS:

- Opportunities to develop language skills
- Fill in missed information
- Cost saving in the long run
- No need to worry about tech issues with devices & no maintenance required
- Appeal to more people = increase attendance & ticket sales
- Enhance movie experience & accessibility for EVERYONE

“Captioning questions have danced around the elephant in the room: Why not simply bring back "old school" versions of on-screen text?”

“For too long, deaf and hard of hearing customers have been relegated to second-class status and excluded from true access at theaters”

- Netflix reported that 80% of their users utilize caption while watching TV & movies
- YouTube reported recently that 92% of people use captioning on their devices

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Theaters need to figure how to communicate OC showing to the community as that is the key to increasing attendance to these showtimes. Failure to do that will only lead to assumption that Deaf community are not interested when it is often simply the fact that the information is not communicated or made accessible to the Deaf community to be aware of these OC showtimes.

Consider flexibility of allowing OC request within an hour from the time showtime of the movie starts. Hearing audiences have become accustomed to subtitles therefore the myth that OC is distracting is full of BS. It's 2023 and seriously theaters need to get with it!

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- Increase number of devices with proper maintenance / training protocols
- Add more OC showtimes including peak times
- Allow for same day request for OC showing
- Remove in advance request of 10 days / 10 people requirements
- Normalize OC showing in movie theaters
- Include disclaimer that OC may be shown during the movie
- Partner with various deaf organizations in Rochester
- Consider Accessibility Coordinator position
- Ensure website to have a dedicated page related to accessibility information
  - Ease the ability to find OC showtimes if offered
  - Incorporate accessibility information as part of FAQ
  - Utilize social media platforms for this purpose
- Strive for inclusion accessibility in theater

## LESSON LEARNED:

- Recruit more hard of hearing participants for the survey
- Consider strategies for recruiting 18 – 25 age group participants for the survey
- Provide incentives to increase participation for the survey
- In person presentation may be more ideal compared to virtual presentation
- Consider providing the survey for hearing viewers to collect their insights on open caption in theater
- More analysis in generational interest with movie theater

## WHAT'S NEXT:

- Draft letter for movie theaters with recommendation / guideline for consideration
- Stay connected with movie theaters and build positive relationship
- Share findings with the deaf communities

## SHOUT OUT TO:

Wendy Dannels – Mentor for Capstone Project  
Peter Boyd  
Family & friends for cheering me on!

