>> Delbert Whetter: Greetings everyone! My name is Delbert Whetter. My appearance is I am a white male wearing a blue shirt with a black jacket and glasses. My hair is a mix of black and gray. I am the executive producer of a documentary called "Being Michelle." This has been a very impactful documentary film which depicts the life of a deaf autistic woman who has been incarcerated and experienced many misjustices in the criminal justice system. Our panel today will be discussing these issues. And if you would like to see the ASL interpreter you would go ahead and pin that person which would spotlight them for the duration of today's panel. We also are offering live captioning, and if you would like to access that you'll press -- press the CC button on the bottom of your Zoom tab. You could also access the captioning via the web. During our Q&A portion of today's panel, please enter your questions in the Q&A section of Zoom. This is being live streamed through Facebook, and you can view it through our Facebook page. We will also have a recording available to you with captioning and ASL interpreting available next week. Today's panel brings together deaf leaders, advocates, and individuals who have experienced human rights abuses within the criminal justice system. So welcome today everybody, as we discuss what deaf people and disabled people have faced in our criminal justice system. This documentary film, "Being Michelle," is the impetus and the starting off point for today's webinar. I'd like to introduce our first panelist, Damara Goff Paris, who is an assistant -- assistant associate professor and an RSA grant director at Emporia State University. She is the PhD-level program director in the deaf studies and deaf education program. She has taught numerous college courses for over 15 years. And Dr. Paris also has worked for many private non-profit corporate and government agencies, which includes responsibilities for counseling and managing said organizations. She currently works for a non-profit mental health program for the deaf that advocates for deaf individuals as they work their way through a prison court or criminal justice system. Dr. Paris has been an expert witness on trials, and is an editor and author of a recent book published by Gallaudet University called "Deaf People in the Criminal Justice System." She is also a long time advocate for deaf people, especially deaf women, as well as deaf Native Americans. I'd like to ask Damara to please pop on screen for us now.

>> Damara Paris: Thank you!

>> Delbert Whetter: So I'd like to ask you what is your reaction to seeing the film "Being Michelle," and when you watched it, Damara, what was your reaction?

>> Damara Paris: [interpreter having technical difficulties] It really exposed all the different issues that an individual goes through growing up in the system, going all the way through school, the isolation of being imprisoned, and the movie itself was very impactful, and it's a very necessary movie.

>> Delbert Whetter: Thank you for that response. Yes, let's move on to our next panelist, Sonya Mangham. There she is. Welcome Sonya. Sonya is a deaf individual from Chicago, Illinois. Sonya is a community college graduate where she studied office technology, and also graduated from Empire Beauty School, where she received a certificate and a degree. She has a husband, and is the mother of four CODA children. She does have personal experience with the court and prison system, and she is here today to share her individual experiences. Sonya, could you briefly describe your reaction to watching "Being Michelle?"

>> Sonya Mangham: Yes, hi, my name is Sonya, here's my sign name, and I'm very happy to have been sent the link of "Being Michelle" to be able to watch the film. It was, ugh, it was so impactful. I -- it resonated with me. I left the movie feeling broken-hearted. I have too experienced being in the system, and have PTSD from the experiences of that while I was living in Florida. It was extremely extremely tough. Unfortunately, the laws in Florida do not help for deaf people who are involved with the prison system. There's no communication, no interpreters that are provided, and so they, you know, feel like deaf people are not mentally capable in some ways. And so watching "Being Michelle" just really showed once again that the communication assistance that we deserve, we don't receive. And so hopefully for the future, this will allow things to change. I believe that there should be a CDI – a certified deaf interpreter – placed with those people, for example, with Michelle, to be able to explain -- express herself so she can know that she's, you know, safe. She's not going to jail for no reason. I would love to see Michelle's life improve and see what happens for her future. If -- you know, and having a CDI would have been such a great impact on her.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, Sonya, thank you for that. I'd now like to introduce our next panelist, Sandra Hatibovic, Sonya, please leave your video on with us. Sandra, I'm now going to introduce you. Sandra works at the Cleveland Hearing Speech Center, which is referred to as CHSC. She provides advocacy services and works with the deaf pathway program, where she works with deaf survivors. And they partner with the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center. She has her B.A. degree in Education and -- [interpreter makes mistake] -- Health and Human Services from Kent State University. Sandra advocates in the Ohio area, working with domestic violence survivors, and their domestic violence network. She has specialty training in domestic violence, and works with the Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services in Seattle, Washington. Sandra, please share with our audience today your reactions to the film "Being Michelle."

>> Sandra Hatibovic: I felt that wow, this is not fair. This is not right for Michelle to go through what she went through. I felt that she was targeted. She tried to stand up and advocate for herself, but I'm glad this was filmed. I'm glad that we were going to be able to share this with the community at large.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, me as well. Panelists, please leave your cameras on. I'd like to introduce our next panelist, Mr. John Yeh. John came to America from Taiwan at the age of 15. In 1979, he and his brothers set up a software engineering company, and he served as its CEO for 17 years. In 2005, he was the president and founder of Viable incorporated, who developed different visual communication access to technology. In 2009, he was charged with mail fraud and served seven and a half years at a Federal prison in Pennsylvania. John has been deeply involved in our community, and has served on the board of Gallaudet, the National Captioning Institute, and the National Council on Disability, as well as the National Deaf Business Institute. John, can you please share with our audience your reaction to the film?

>> John Yeh: Yes, good morning everyone. You know, when I came here to the United States, I never dreamed that I would end up in the criminal justice system. I -- you know, I came here to work hard and to live that American dream. And you know, it was difficult learning English and learning the language, but I went through and did what it was that I needed to do. I founded a business and I gained a lot of experience. As was mentioned, I was arrested for mail fraud and I got a real clear view of the criminal justice world as I was put into prison. You know, I went through a real change in quality of life, of course, right? The quality of communication was not something that was effective at all in prison, and they did not allow me to have interpreters. I was not allowed direct communication with anyone. I felt completely and thoroughly isolated. I was there for seven and a half years, and it was a really horrific experience. I'm still on probation. I, you know, had no idea that other deaf individuals were having a similar experience. I wasn't allowed to have communication with other people while I was there. So when I looked at the film, you know, I was really overcome with emotion. There are so so many things that I feel like I could say about this film. I thought that this is a really good start, and I feel like we need to have further discussions about this, and hope that we do such in the future, so that we can make the criminal justice system a better and more equitable system for deaf individuals.

>> Delbert Whetter: I agree John, this film is a great starting point for our conversation today, and most definitely, we need more dialogue about this here in the United States. So next question to our panelists is could you give us a little bit of background in your relation to this area or your interest in the topics covered in this film?

>> Damara Paris: All right, I'm gonna go back for a second. I didn't realize I didn't have an interpreter. So I was in charge of a mental health program for those who are deaf and hard of hearing, and I worked a lot with individuals who had coexisting disorders, who had mental health issues, who had drug and alcohol abuse disorders. I was able to get a grant to assist with this overall process. And so we were providing counseling. We were going into the system and working with those who had been arrested, who had been incarcerated, who were -- who were going through court processes. And so we were -- we were working on case management. And just over and over again I saw this issue around accessibility, where people were not bringing in appropriate interpreters or there were no interpreters at all provided. So I was engaged in a lot of advocacy in terms of access. And then the the voca individuals, they were going through the system as well. They didn't have any access to their lawyers. And then just advocates in general. So we saw that there was a great need to just get engaged and do something to change things. Last summer we worked on publishing a book, and it was a collection of different articles. We worked with different authors, some who were lawyers, some interpreters, some advocates, some who were involved in the mental health field and profession. You know, we looked at working within the school system as well. And we published -- we published this work because we saw that there just was a real dearth of information out there. There's not enough articles, there's not enough information and training around these issues. So the purpose of the book was really to aim at educating people around the criminal justice system. And the hope is that we can have a class or a training for officers and lawyers and advocates so that they have an increased awareness and understanding of the issues that deaf and hard of hearing and deafblind people are facing within the criminal justice system. It's just a start, certainly this work is just beginning, and we need a lot more following.

>> Delbert Whetter: Certainly, thank you so much for that. Sandra, I'd like to ask you in terms of your work and your experience, when you saw this film, how did it strike you or impact you in terms of connections to what you do as a professional?

>> Sandra Hatibovic: Yes, okay. Well I was involved with the domestic violence program -- survivors program for many years, and I also collaborate with other agencies sponsored by the substance abuse and domestic violence programs. I made an attempt to work with them to find out what are the struggles that are going on in the deaf community currently. Clearly the court system and policing are the majority of the concerns that people are experiencing, barriers to communication there. Police officers unfortunately in our home area of Cleveland -- in the Cleveland, Ohio area. Sometimes they do, you know, seem willing fortunately to work with us, so we are able to then provide training for those officers who are local to the Cleveland area, those who want to, you know, go to the police academy, who aspire to become officers. We have a video ready to show them how they are able to work as police officers with the deaf individuals. The video is just very bare bones. We don't have the depth of information that we would like to provide them, but it's just basic information. They've only allowed us an hour to do that. I wish that we were able to provide an all-day workshop of some sort regarding deaf culture and really get into detail and explain about people who are deaf, people who are deaf and disabled. But the video does provide a minimal understanding. And so hopefully we're going to be able to convince them -- the academy -- to provide us more time to offer expanded training, so that they know how to work with individuals who have -- who are deaf, deaf plus, people who have communication barriers. So that's my goal is to provide improvement in the training that we're already offering in terms of how to provide help for the deaf individual, the person they're interviewing. And I really wanted to emphasize advocacy within the deaf community itself, that being super important to educate deaf individuals so that they can understand what their rights are when they're dealing with the police. What they can do, what they can't do -- we need to be able to provide that training to them. Because so often deaf individuals do not have the language at home, and so they are not aware of what their rights are. And once they encounter someone who is a deaf advocate or a deaf peer and they're explaining about the law, this is what you can do as a citizen, this is what you can't do, deaf people have been unaware. And so they are finally being able to understand things, for example, the miranda laws or perhaps what they're being charged with and why. There's just such a lack of information. Even having a CDI -- certified deaf interpreter -- or a non-certified deaf interpreter there on site to clarify what's going on. Why are you here? This is what the officer is saying. This is what you're going through at this point. To provide that information is so so very important. And so I would love to continue to work on that, to improve that, and provide more training, other than just the basic hour of deaf 101. I would like to provide something that's a little bit more in-depth.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, most definitely. Thank you Sandra, and clearly the committee is very eager to work with individuals who come from deaf backgrounds, but often those in power are not. So I wanted to now bring this point of a certified deaf interpreter up, since several of you have mentioned that. Would you be willing to expound on how a CDI would be beneficial in this process. Sonya, would you like to address that question?

>> Sonya Mangham: A CDI is key to helping a deaf individual who has not had a full formal education or who has more language difficulties. It does not help just to have someone who knows sign language, because it can be a very frustrating situation. For example, Michelle, she had to depend on members of her family to communicate with her and explain what the Cleveland officers were saying. And so you should not have to be forced to deal with a member of the family as a interpreter, because of boundary issues. And deaf people are able to function independently, and we should not have to have family involved. But there is policy that has to be provided. Each state requires interpretation to be provided, and unfortunately Michelle, she needed to be independent, she wanted to be independent, she wanted to maintain her autonomy, and was unable to do so because the boundaries that were crossed in the police and dealing with her family. So a certified deaf interpreter would help in terms of communication, and that would work here in the Cleveland area, as well as everywhere else. And so that's something that we're working on and we're looking forward to that, and hopefully we can get other states to be involved with that as well. And as John was saying based on his experience, I agree with what he said, a CDI would have been impactful in his situation as well to provide communication. He says there was no communication for him in jail. And so moving to America from a foreign country and struggling with the issues of lack of communication.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, I totally agree. In fact, many people don't realize that 90 percent of deaf people are born to hearing parents or hearing families, which means most of those families do not learn sign language. Deaf people then suffer language delays, and there are many compounding issues involved. So a deaf interpreter is critical to helping the deaf person be aware of what's going on in the situation, and clearly they must have comprehension. And communication and comprehension are critical in these settings and we know that a CDI could assist in being sure the deaf person is aware of the proceedings.

>> Sonya Mangham: And then the other thing about not having family members used in the role of an interpreter -- that's wrong. There should be boundaries there and those boundaries were not respected.

>> Delbert Whetter: Right, to foster independence of the deaf person. Now in terms of criminal justice system reform, there's a lot of issues that come into play, and many things that need to be improved. What recommendations, John, could you make in terms of improvements to the criminal justice system and how it interacts with deaf people?

>> John Yeh: Yeah, as I think about what the panelists have just shared in terms of training and education and whatnot, you know I am 100 percent support of that. I was there for seven and a half years, you know, I was in prison in Maryland and then was in New Jersey and then was in Pennsylvania. And in all of those settings, you know, I had issues. I asked for interpreters and I would not receive them. I asked for different devices and was not provided them. I was asked, you know, I asked for a video phone -- again, seven and a half years, I was in a situation where I did not have access to effective communication. So I really want to see some of those things changed. It's important, you know, that -- we understand what's going on. You know, a lot of times we train police and we train officers and whatnot, but they're not actually doing what it is that they need to do. Many of these people I met knew the ADA, they knew the laws, they knew the regulations, but they were not willing to follow them. And it's just -- it's just a really unfortunate state of affairs.

>> Delbert Whetter: Right. Many of your complaints were not attended to, were not addressed, and even rightfully -- I mean, not rightfully, but straight out ignored. We also have to consider deaf people who are in rural jails or in the criminal justice system where there are no interpreters nearby.

>> John Yeh: Right, and they're definitely -- you know, I had to fight to really get interpreters in. Oftentimes I would have VRI -- video relay interpreters -- who would be piped in, but they oftentimes didn't understand me. And so I fought for seven years through the court system with the support of the National Association of the Deaf before I was finally able to get a video phone. And then once it was installed, I was out a month later. I mean, you know, to go through those years without interpretation or without communication, you know, I was not able to effectively communicate with my daughter who has down syndrome. It just -- it was an undue burden, and really unacceptable. So you know, this is a travesty. A lot of times people are trained, they are listening, but then once inside, they are not supporting the things that they have been trained to do, and they have to be forced. So training only gets us so far. There has to be some type of teeth or enforcement of those laws and policies.

>> Delbert Whetter: You know, you make a good point here, John, that now with technology and the multiple access points, there really is no excuse for improper training or inadequate training. So now I'd like to ask the panelists about statistics regarding deaf people who are incarcerated at various levels in the criminal justice system. What do the numbers tell us about deaf people?

>> Damara Paris: I think that's a huge question you've just asked, and I think it's really hard to get accurate statistics about deaf and hard of hearing and blind individuals in general. But specifically within this system, I think one of the problems that we have is that each state, and frankly each county, and then the federal system on its own -- they all have disparate information. They're not documenting things, you know, there are a lack of rules around information sharing. So there's no real consistency across the board. And then another issue that we deal with is the documentation itself. Oftentimes things are documented but in an unclear manner. So there -- you know, there have been a few studies -- not very many, but a few studies that address the number of deaf and hard of hearing -- or people who have vision loss in prison. And you know, you'll see surveys done on a national level with -- vision loss. And the numbers are all over the place. In terms of those who have been identified with these losses, we're just not able to accurately capture that information. You know, we may have some individuals who are deemed deaf, but they're -- they don't use sign language. So who are the surveys actually being sent to? And then what's happening after people who have been incarcerated are released? Where are we getting that information from? Especially if your first language is not in English -- or it's not English, and you're receiving a survey in English, how are you able to respond to that accurately? So you know, when we talk about RespectAbility, they say that there's 153,000 deaf and hard of hearing people within the criminal justice system at the various levels, from local to federal. And I would assume that some of that is a guess, some of that is not completely accurate. When we look at the Department of Justice, about six years ago they said there was 6.5 percent of people who were incarcerated had hearing loss in our various levels of the system. So that gives us a rough idea of people who I believe that use sign language. But I believe that most people who use sign language and are deaf are the most vulnerable within these systems, because they're the most cut off from communication.

>> Delbert Whetter: Well, in terms of disability programs in general, we see there are more of those offered. But like you mentioned, do people actually adhere to what they've been trained to do? Are the programs providing what they were set out to do? Are there any specialized programs specifically for deaf people? Absolutely not. And what you said, Damara, regarding documentation, the numbers just aren't divided in ways that are helpful to us. Now, maybe like in the "Being Michelle" documentary, we saw her situation, the fact is these surveys or questionnaires are designed by hearing people and for hearing people. There's got to be another way to determine what these statistics really look like. And we have to consider the fact that many individuals who are incarcerated are also experiencing PTSD and other compounding factors. So in terms of issues that we see in the criminal justice system, multi-layered, and when we look at law enforcement and your individual experience in dealing with people from law enforcement, directly with the police or in the court system, what did you notice that was problematic or what barriers have you experienced, Sonya?

>> Sonya Mangham: So I grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and the first time it impacted me was dealing with DCFS. Deaf children don't know what's going on when the Department of Children and Family Services comes into the picture. And it wasn't until I attended college that I understood what that was about, what the law looked like, and understanding that deaf people have civil rights, people with disabilities have civil rights. So I looked at the 504, and so I understood, finally, what was going on as far as, like, police and court and social workers at a basic level. And so I was trying to figure out for myself what do I do as I'm approached by these situations? And so, like, do I request an interpreter? Am I allowed to? And so in Chicago we have, you know, specific companies that provide the interpreters, but unfortunately, they don't provide the training for how to deal with these situations. It wasn't until I moved here to Cleveland that I encountered that. But it wasn't easy even then. So during my encounters with the police I would say, hey I'm deaf. They may or may not believe me. And so on our -- we have a card that we can pull out to prove -- it's a certified card that says you know what, you're deaf and etcetera, and if you don't cooperate with me, you know, please call this number, we can get the situation resolved. And so they're able to collaborate with us and solve issues that come up as we deal with the police. And it actually works. But everyone does not have the same knowledge as I have. Every individual has their own level of knowledge and awareness of what to do, and that depends on where you grew up, who has taught you, if you've had interpreters, your deaf community. If you're late deafened and you don't know sign language that's a whole other set of problems. And so we need people teaching classes here in Cleveland and across the country to show that deaf people, you do have rights. There is a way that you can go about dealing with police situations. Unfortunately many states don't offer that. We have a better situation here, and deaf people are able to learn and study on their own independently to figure those things out. But oftentimes it's not, you know, easy to understand and people don't have the same opportunities as I have had. So for example, when you're encountering police, don't get aggressive, say, you know what, I'm deaf. And depending on the training that they've had or not dealing with the section 504 and the rights that are included there, perhaps they'll know something about it and be able to provide interpreters. Other than that, you're fighting for access. You're fighting to get the equipment that could provide you access. And so officers need to know that if you don't follow the civil rights that deaf people have, if you violate our rights, you can be fired, you can be punished because of that. They need to follow the policies that have been established.

>> Delbert Whetter: Thank you for that, Sonya.

>> Sonya Mangham: You're welcome.

>> Delbert Whetter: Right, training without knowledge means people will react differently if they haven't been thoroughly trained. And I'm glad that you've had some experiences where police officers have been understanding. But many of us experience where they are not open-minded or perceive you as a threat, and deaf people are worried about their safety in all interactions because they don't know what knowledge base or training the police officer has. Sonya, did you want to add something?

>> Sonya Mangham: Yeah, you're right and I just wanted to add that hopefully we'll have an addition to the law in the future.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, most definitely, we need to see modifications to the law. John Yeh, I wanted to ask you, in terms of the film, we've seen quite an interesting reaction from hearing audiences, in them imagining being a deaf person incarcerated and not being able to hear. Now, a deaf person not being able to hear and being in prison is not necessarily what is frightening or traumatizing. It's the fact that they are unable to communicate with others around them. And it also would be highly dependent on that individual deaf person's experience growing up with or without communication. So imagine being a youngster with a family who did not sign, not being able to understand the world around you, then being incarcerated, and yet again not being able to communicate. So John, can you share your personal experience. What was what was that like and what are your thoughts on this?

>> John Yeh: Yeah you know, that lack of communication is a horrible horrific experience, and you're absolutely right to describe it that way. You know, as a deaf individual, you know, when there were announcements that would come out over the speakers, you know, somebody's name would be called, my name would be called and yet I wasn't aware of that. And you know, if your name was called a certain amount of times and you did not respond then you lost your appointment, even if it was for the doctor. And if I would go up and, you know, let them know that I was not able to hear my name, then you know, they -- they neglected that as well. There was just no accounting for the fact that I was deaf. You know, you would sleep alone in your cell and the officer would come in and yell through the little -- the little slot there to make sure that you were all right. They would do a check, and you know, if they needed -- to check on me and they really wanted to check on me, they would open it up and then you know shove the bed or kick the bed which would startle me, right? So this is what happened on a daily basis. And I asked them -- I asked them to please pay attention to me and my limitations. The officers knew that I was deaf and yet they would get right in my face and speak to me. I would ask if they would write and they did not want to write, they refused. So there was just, you know, denial of rights over and over and over again. And again I have to stress: they knew what they needed to do and they chose not to. And they chose to take it out onto me. It left me really feeling demoralized, right? And I know that I'm not alone in that. I know that there are deaf and hard of hearing people in the criminal justice system and they are experiencing the same things that I experienced. I look forward to a day where we have a law that will ensure that practices and attitudes can be adjusted and changed where people are able to have their rights honored regardless of where they fall within the criminal justice system. It's something that really needs to change.

>> Delbert Whetter: So John, this story is incredible, and audience today, please know that all deaf people have very similar experiences. You may think that this is an isolated or one-off experience that Mr. Yeh had or that Sonya had. That is not the case. This is a widespread problem. I'd like to address our next question: why is it that there is such difficulty in accessing communication and our rights in the prison system? What could be done to address this issue? Sandra?

>> Sandra Hatibovic: The struggles exist because there's not enough education. People don't understand that we have the Americans with Disabilities Act that is provided for us. Especially in rural areas, people do not understand -- they are unaware of this law. If we continue to educate people, that could provide a better understanding of the law and knowledge of the law. The second reason would be finances. People don't have enough money to pay interpreters, organizations don't have the finances for that. In larger communities there is more knowledge of what to do, they know how to provide interpreters, but can it can still be a challenge in lesser area -- areas that are rural -- less population. In the Cleveland area especially, in other states as well I imagine, there are interpreters who will come to the court to interpret, but they do have to provide two interpreters. And so oftentimes they'll forget to provide the table interpreter who sits with the attorney. They have to have someone do that, and more often than not, they just provide the one interpreter who stands at the front of the courtroom. We need several interpreters to be in that courtroom, because how are we going to be able to communicate between the lawyer and the deaf individual? There is conversation happening at that table that the client needs to be aware of. During mediation, etcetera, there are separate rooms that they are taken to to discuss, and we need to have the interpreter in there early to figure out -- to be a part of what's going on with this -- with the situation before they go into the courtroom, as well as the visitors. They need to have someone separate -- in a separate room with the interpreter. So there's multiple interpreters that are required basically for this. In prison systems, sometimes they will have -- especially here in Cleveland which I've seen and, you know, kind of been appalled at -- they have, like, the visiting center. There's, like, a slight box where there's glass where they're able to see each other across the room -- the visitor as well as the prisoner. So deaf people have to sit back from this small box, the size of a mailbox lid, to sign and interpret and communicate with whoever's across the way, the visitor. But how are you able to see their face, their body language, their expression, the entirety of their language, if you're only exposed to them in a small slot? So the visuals are not appropriate. And there's, you know, no finances to provide for the -- the improvement of that system, of creating a window that's bigger for people to be able to see each other. One person can make a difference, but it's very slow going.

>> Delbert Whetter: Thank you for that, Sandra. In the film "Being Michelle," a lot of issues were illuminated in the prison system. It shows that there are different programs to help prisoners prepare for when they are released. There's educational programming, there is addiction recovery programs, group therapy, counseling services -- so hearing inmates regularly take advantage of these programs and put them on their -- note them on their record to show their intentions of perhaps an early release, and the fact that they are preparing themselves for the time that they are to enter the world. Now imagine: these programs do not provide sign language interpreters, therefore deaf people cannot participate in any of these programs that might help them for early release, that might help their record or profile seem more attractive to a court. So deaf people are penalized, more so than hearing people, for their crimes. They are not able to access any of these jail funded programs, and perhaps this even protracts their time in jail or in prison, because they cannot access these programs that they should be able to. Does anyone have any thoughts or comments to this? John or Sonya?

>> John Yeh: Yeah, I would just mention that all of those things are true. You know, you have the opportunity to go to classes and to training opportunities, and that will decrease your prison time. And I really wanted to take advantage of all of those opportunities. I needed an interpreter to participate in those classes and in those trainings, and yet I was never able to procure one, no matter how many times I asked. And nothing, again, was never provided. You know, there were some courses, you know, that would get into a variety of different interests like investing or taxes. And I asked for interpreters and, you know, sometimes they would cancel the classes because there was no interpreters, and then that would make all of the other inmates mad at me, because, again, they canceled it, they said because there was no interpreter. So I remember them telling me at times, you know, an interpreter would be there for the course. And I would show up, and the teacher would move on without the interpreter. There would never be one who was there. I would ask if there was one who was coming, I was assured that there was one, an hour would go by, you know -- I was being lied to. I was being -- I was being deceived. It was just really a terrible experience. And again, they knew that they needed to provide those interpreters but they chose not to. They would not practice what it was that they knew they needed to do.

>> Delbert Whetter: Well clearly this is not an example of equal justice.

>> Sonya Mangham: John, let me tell you something. Even though they ignored you and neglected you, you have a right to sue them. You can go to court and win against them, against those officers, against the prison system. You can sue them. They did not have the right to ignore you. They have to follow the law as well, that's not fair.

>> John Yeh: Yes I did that, and still was ignored, still -- even after doing such.

>> Sonya Mangham: It didn't work?

>> John Yeh: You know -- I went through the grievance process, I went through a variety of levels, and -- escalated that grievance all the way to the warden, and was -- neglected even there. And then I was in Pennsylvania at one point, and -- even took it to the national level -- the federal level, and still was ignored. They did not care.

>> Sonya Mangham: So it didn't work?

>> John Yeh: So I attempted to go through their process, and it was finally, when I got a hold of the National Association of the Deaf, that they were willing to work with me through a five-year process to be able to obtain a video phone and interpreters. But it took over five years of chasing them down and still it wasn't resolved. It was after seven years that they finally gave me what it was that I needed, and then again, as I mentioned earlier, I was released a month later.

>> Delbert Whetter: Right. Sometimes when the law doesn't work, the law needs to be changed, and we have to fight through political arenas to make these changes to really protect ourselves as citizens as we should be in the system.

>> John Yeh: And you know, I think that's what's interesting, you know -- they're not all on the same board. There are some states that are not providing and yet other states that do. And again I was in Pennsylvania, right? So there are some who have policies that are in place and they're working. Again, I think it's about the practices. I think that there needs to be some type of monitoring group that ensures that they are enforcing those policies and practices.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes. Dr. Paris, I wanted to talk to you about your book, which I believe is going to have a major impact in moving forward. I understand that you and your co-authors -- they're developing some educational materials. I'm curious as to what those supplementary materials will look like?

>> Damara Paris: Well, with "Being Michelle," you know, we've looked at this need to expand our materials to really support the audience's understanding of what's actually taking place, and to really guide them through all of these issues, from education -- the education to prison pipeline, the interpreter issues, the legal issues. We're realizing that we need to help those instructors in colleges and universities guide those watchers through this. You know, and this isn't limited to higher education. We need these types of audiences who are here today with us. So we're working on expanding a lot of that information and those resources so that audiences have a better understanding as to what's needed, and what's required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. So in a few more months, we believe we'll be able to release some of those resources. But to go back to some of those things that a few of the panelists mentioned earlier, I'd just like to to capitalize on. You know, Sonya talked about police training. You know, there are some statistics out there from the Ruderman Family Foundation. And they talk about how one third of people who have interactions with law enforcement are killed. And so these people with disabilities are having negative impac -- are being murdered by the police because of the communication breakdowns, and for a variety of other reasons. So this training is more than critical. We -- you know, we can also talk about rural areas. They have to build their infrastructure and their resources ahead of time. They have to work with our deaf communities, which means our deaf communities need to become more active in these area -- in these areas, and participate and engage in advocacy. We need to see more of that within our system. The unfortunate thing is that we see this taking place in the criminal justice system in Louisiana right now. They're training hearing prisoners to become interpreters for those who are incarcerated. And this is such a high risk behavior and activity. You know, we're creating a system where they're becoming more vulnerable, because they're not able to understand these individuals -- these hearing inmates have not learned officially how to become interpreters, they don't know that they are creating further misunderstandings, and then you know, they get involved in some of the vindictive behaviors that -- some of the inmates getting get engaged in. So it just creates a situation where deaf individuals are increasingly vulnerable. We need to engage in advocacy with both deaf and hearing individuals.

>> Delbert Whetter: Sandra?

>> Sandra Hatibovic: And I just wanted to make a brief comment. ASL is the fourth most popularly used language in the United States, but where are the resources for these deaf individuals using ASL, as far as counseling, drug addiction -- all different types of counseling. It's the fourth most popular language in the United States but the resources are bare minimum.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes. Unfortunately, we're moving to the close of our program. Let's move to our question and answer section. Panelists, feel free to answer any questions as they appear. Somebody says I have a friend in prison who is serving a 25 year to life service and this person is not receiving what it is that they need. They've asked for ADA accommodations in terms of a specialist. They need access. They've been told they are not allowed to use a particular VRS provider, but they have to use one that the prison system has provided. So our audience member wants to ask what about denial of these rights? Their friend in prison also asked for a particular interpreter, but were not given that. So this audience member has asked what is it that we can do to help this deaf inmate get their desired services and technologies provided to them? Do we have any suggestions for this question in the Q&A chat? I know it's a tough question.

>> John Yeh: You know I'll -- I'll weigh in on that. As you know, we've had amazing advances in technology. You know, there's questions about interpreters and qualifications of interpreters and accessibility to interpreters, and I get that. There are questions about who is able to come. You know, there are -- you know, plenty of women who don't want to come into the prison scenario -- or the prison setting, just because the prisoners may treat them in a particular way. I think we need to take a look at VRI technology. We can use VRI technology anywhere, and still, though, regardless of what you explain to them, they seem to be unwilling to do that. So if you cannot find an in-person interpreter, then we -- we need to look at video relay interpreting. You know, some interpreters must have a very clean background. They -- can't have a criminal record. We had one interpreter who had to go through and take a variety of courses, and after three to six months, they were were allowed to go in and provide that interpretation. So some of the the hurdles that they're asked to go through is difficult. But I think VRI can be supportive. Many of the officers seem unwilling to understand, or don't understand. It's very very frustrating. You know, there's so much that has been developed outside in the real world, and then it's not being allowed to exist within the prison system to support deaf individuals. So I'm just here to tell everyone that I've seen it for myself, those services are not being provided in appropriate ways.

>> Delbert Whetter: Wow. Self-advocacy is definitely a skill deaf people must have, and we need organizations to partner with us and recognizing the value of these deaf service organizations to partner with. And often inmates or those incarcerated are denied where the organization could pursue this further and try to enforce it. So it seems deaf people must become their own advocates, and we need these organizations to really help enforce what is expected. Sonya?

>> Sonya Mangham: My ex-husband had quite a bit of experience with the prison system in Illinois, just like you John. The frustrations and the struggles that you went through trying to find interpreters, the abuse, the neglect that you experienced, everything that you went through. The boundaries being crossed, the lack of communication, my ex-husband experienced all of that. It is truly heartbreaking. And so he was able to sue and received a settlement. And there were some people who lost their jobs behind that. And so it's just, like, too bad. And so what you need to do is find a good attorney who's willing to work with you, a good attorney who will listen, who you can share with, and who will advocate and fight for you. Because they can be beat, the system can be beat, and it can help you rebuild, John, specifically. So it's happened to a friend of mine as well, and so I'm just letting you know what, we're human. Deaf, hearing, we are the same. And so if they treat hearing people better than us in the system, that's not allowed. And so we need to be treated equally and be provided the same resources and same communication. And so I'm happy that you've been able to share with us, John, my friends have kind of experienced the same thing. They've walked in your shoes as well. And so it's amazing to see you here.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes. One more question, panelists, I see here in the Q&A regarding the miranda rights. This happens to everyone after they've been arrested, right, where they are read their rights. And we know there's a lot of legalese and complicated legal English terminology in these miranda rights. So panelists: how do you think these could be altered or improved in order for deaf people in the system to have greater access? This can fall to any of our panelists. Damara, does anyone have any thoughts? Sandra?

>> Sandra Hatibovic: I can do it simply. It's very very difficult to try to change the Miranda laws. So what I'm hoping they'll do to consider in the future is doing an addendum for people with limited language abilities, that they would provide more simplistic language, more humble language for people who don't understand English well, and/or provide sign language -- a sign language translation of that. And so that there would be some type of addendum -- instead of changing the miranda laws, add an addendum to expand upon them for clarification's sake. So hopefully that'll be something that happens for us in the future. It's a challenging process for sure.

>> Delbert Whetter: We have one more question in the Q&A here which addresses Sonya and John. What was your social life like while incarcerated, or while dealing with law enforcement? Did you interact with other prisoners, and how did you navigate communicating in the setting that you were in?

>> John Yeh: You know, in terms of the social life, I think that a lot of it depends on your location. It was horrible in New Jersey. In Federal prison, you know, there were a lot of white-collar criminals, so there was, you know, there was a different type or caliber of people. There was a level of sophistication. Many of those incarcerated individuals were willing to write back and forth with me using written English, so that's how communication happened there. Some of them actually wanted to learn some vocabulary of sign language. There were some who certainly looked down on me because I was deaf, you know, and there's always, you know, this -- influx of new people and then this outflux of people. I would imagine, you know, I met over a thousand different individuals between those -- who, you know, were transferring in and those who were transferring out. But you know, I had friendly relations with most of those -- those individuals, however, I'm not allowed to communicate with any of them for five years afterwards. That's part of their -- policy and so I respect that -- that rule. In terms of the social life, yes, in some ways it's effective, and in some ways, you know, it's non-existent. I think a lot of it depends on the individuals, but again, your communication is limited and it was limited to just writing back and forth.

>> Delbert Whetter: Well in the documentary "Being Michelle," we see she must be very brave, and navigates very difficult situations, as have you both today, and thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us. Many individuals feel that that's more private or it is a previous part of their life and they don't want to re-experience it through sharing it, which is definitely understandable. But I want to thank you so much for sharing your stories and allowing us to bear witness to it, because without that information, it's hard for us to push for change. So thank you so much for your participation, and we want to gather and collect more of these stories and individual accounts to build up the data bank that we have to push for change. John?

>> John Yeh: Yeah, if I can just take a quick moment to share, you know, my wife watched the movie with me, and we talked about the experience. And my wife asked if, you know, the story was true to life. And I explained to her that, yes, there's a lot of abuse and bullying and whatnot that goes on, and that I saw it and witnessed it for myself. So you know, it's not like, you know, this -- Hollywood tends to exaggerate things, but what I can tell you is that what I saw with -- the movie, the experience was true to life. It was very accurate, and there was a lot that was unspoken as well. And I hope that when people see it they are taken aback, they are understanding more and more that deaf people are suffering. And so I think, you know, as has been stated, there's a lot that needs to be done, and there's a lot of the stories that have not been shared. You know, we've heard some things but the rest of the stories need to be told.

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, thank you so much. Well, an hour goes by very quickly, does it not, with all of our wonderful discussion today. I want to thank our panelists: Damara, Sandra, Sonya, and John. I want to thank you, our interpreters and our live captioner for joining us today. This panel will be available on our website and you'll be able to watch it at a future date. Also, please catch "Being Michelle," which is available for viewing at several locations and will be at the Cleveland International Film Festival, which is an incredible film festival, and we were honored to be invited to show the film there. Thank you everyone and have a fantastic day.