I want to begin by thanking your president for reaching out and make sure that I had a spot to speak with you and also, especially Justin Reagan, who's been a longtime client and friend for the invitation to speak today.

So I'm really excited to tell you about what we're doing here at Visualized Access. We've only been up and running since last August. And I also wanted to share with you, if it sounds like I'm reading this this from a script, it's probably because I am, I just want to make sure that I'm able to pack all this in and the amount of time that I have for you.

So my name is Shawn Welker and I've been a visual interpreter for over six years. Um, I lived in Michigan. But last year at this time, I was coordinating a specialized health program of Be My Eyes with the blindness nonprofit that I was working for called the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired . Sometimes you'll hear them as MABVI. So the other thing, too, though, is Justin mentioned is I actually got my start in in visual interpreting back in 2018 with Ira, where I spent a little over a year, and I eventually became a trainer. During the four years that I spent at MABVI, I trained over 200 people to not just be volunteer visual interpreters, but to be aware of and to incorporate accessibility best practices. And I am personally dedicated to making physical and digital spaces more inclusive for everyone.

Unfortunately, the organization that I was working for last year lost funding for my program and position, which led me to launch VisualEyes Access, where we provide quality, affordable visual interpreting for real time , as well as a synchronous tasks. You don't always need to be considered connected for us to work on a task for you. We can also provide web and digital accessibility consulting, sensitivity training, or workshops, volunteer guide training recruitment, and coordination for events , voiceover, and descriptive audio, and much, much more.

So let's talk about the visual interpreter service. So the core service that we offer is called the Visual Interpreter Pro or VIP. And we connect using the WhatsApp platform, which is secure, relatively easy to use, and especially great for folks who are now using the Ray-Band Meta Glasses. It allows folks to connect and be hands free.

Now, I am the main visual interpreter, but we do now have a handful of others who will assist from time to time. We're actually getting ready to staff a pilot project for a city, a major U.S. City. And so we're ramping up and are getting some folks some scenarios to work with. All of the interpreters that I use are background checked. They receive initial training and they have a regular ongoing coaching sessions with myself . And one of the very first questions that I always ask on all of my applications, all of my applicants, is, who makes decisions for blind people? And we all know that there is only one correct answer there, and that is blind people, make decisions for blind people.

This is something that is absolutely core to the philosophy of what I do, how I conduct business. Yes, it's a business, but it's a business that has a purpose, right? I know that I know that B my eyes is very similar in that. And they say, hey, we use volunteers, but we're a for profit. We call ourselves a for profit with a purpose. And I like to consider myself to be very similar, yet provide a little bit more depth as far as making sure that folks are background checked and trained, making sure that we are incorporating accessibility and best profits.

So we, in our roles as visual interpreters, are merely a resource to providing access to information in a way that's meaningful and significant to our users, our users are being blind or so that they can better understand their environment and this could be physical or digital so that they can make good decisions for themselves. Now, that four-part little phrase there is something that every single one of my visual interpreters, I absolutely drill that into them. This is something that they need to keep in mind for every task that they work on with folks.

We don't make decisions for blind people. Blind people make decisions. We're a resource. We provide access to information. We must do it in a way that's meaningful and significant for those folks. You can't just say, oh, I see what you dropped this over there. That doesn't make sense. We need to do it in a way so that folks can understand their environment. It could be a website. It could be a restaurant. It could be an intersection crossing. Because what do they need to do? They need to be able to make good decisions for themselves. We're just there along for the ride.

So whether you're reading mail, navigating a physical or a digital space, dealing with an inaccessible document or website or app , or just needs something described to you, the VIP service we offer, it's flexible, it's personalized, and it costs just $1 per minute or less. There are definitely ways, and Justin can share his personal experience if he chooses, about ways that will work with individuals to make sure that it's an affordable service for y'all. We do offer two payment methods. You can either pay as you go, which just means that you're invoiced immediately after we complete a task. I use Stripe, which is the payment processor, very accessible, in the hundred or so invoices I've sent out, I've only had one complaint and that person later apologized and said, it wasn't Stripe, it was me. The other option that we have are the standard subscription plans that are billed monthly, quarterly, or annually, and the highlights of our subscription plans is that unused minutes do roll over .

This is something that never made sense to me when I was with Ira. I've continued to hear people complain about it as far as it just feeling as though it's unnecessary. It shouldn't be a gamble for how many minutes you purchase for a particular time or a mad dash to burn through them just to feel as though you got your money's worth .

So with our subscriptions, if you find at some point that you've got more minutes than you need, quarterly subscribers are allowed to skip one billing cycle per year. So out of those four billing cycles, if you get to a point, you're like, hey, I've stacked all these minutes. I just haven't used them. You can go ahead and skip a billing cycle . Monthly subscribers are allowed to skip two cycles every year. This is something that's actually relatively new. You're actually the first group that I've shared this with. It can be a little bit confusing, so I'm absolutely open to folks. Just give me a call, talking it through, making sure you understand. I don't want anybody in any way, it, shape, or form , to feel as though they just don't understand how the billing works. I'm not here to trick people.

We do also offer a 30 minute trial for $20 so that you can kick the tires and check us out. But because we're so close to the convention , just say that you met us at the convention and we'll knock 50% off so that will make it a 30 minute trial for just $10. And again, those minutes are not going to expire. So let's talk a little bit about the other things that we do.

That is the big, big, major thing, the visual interpreting service, but we also do web and digital accessibility consulting, especially for small businesses, not profits, who want to do the right thing, but just aren't even aware that they're doing things incorrectly. I'm not talking about going after Amazon and Google and, you know, all these, you know, big businesses . They have their own accessibility teams. And in most cases, they're already working on it, or they know well enough of what they should be doing. I'm talking about the nonprofits who oftentimes, you know, you've got a director who has never heard of accessibility. I'm talking about the mom and pops who they didn't build their own site. You know, they hired somebody else to build their site. They don't know anything about a screen reader. And the way we do this as a kinder and gentler and more affordable approach.

And this comes from a project that I worked on while I was at MABVI called Access desk. Because we found that if you approach businesses and organizations with a really heavy hand and you talk about compliance and you talk about AD8 and you throw around Section 508. A lot of times all that does is it gets their guard up, and they start to complain about, oh, there's those mean, disabled people who are coming here to sue us. And don't get me wrong. I've been in in accessibility long enough to know there is a time for pitchforks and torches and torn feather , but I think with a lot of these smaller organizations, just having an open arm, walking them through the process, letting them understand how many potential customers they're missing, how many potential thunders they're missing, how many folks that might be missing the ability to utilize their services and programs simply because they've inadvertently placed these accessibility barriers in front of them through their web and digital content. I find that mor often than not, if you have a softer gentler approach, a more affordable approach, they're absolutely willing to look at it because they know that this is something that they want to do. They just don't know how to do it. And if you become heavy-handed, oftentimes, it's just you get a real negative reaction and they're just not going to be open to it no matter what you do later on.

And ultimately, our goal here is not just about compliance. Compliance, in my opinion, is one of the last things that we should really be talking about. What we should be talking about is we should be talking about inclusion. We should talk about the folks that are potentially being left on the sidelines, not intentionally, but because of the way their web and digital content is being presented. So ultimately, what we want to do is not just make those fixes, but ultimately bake accessibility into everything that they do from the very beginning, not just the website, not just digital content. Also, you know, just how they treat folks in general .

So our accessibility reviews that we do, we don't do full audits. We just do reviews because they're a lot less expensive and a little bit easier to handle, right? It includes real user testing. I personally test using JAWS, NVDA. We'll use Voice Over on iOS. So we'll test over different devices, different platforms, we'll make clear affordable recommendations for making their websites and digital content more inclusive and in a more encouraging and affordable way. And also, you know, be there along the way for them to kind of provide that coaching for them.

So let's jump back, though, to the visual interpreter service, because one of the ways that I wanted, one of the things I wanted to be very intentional about when I created the service is I wanted it to be two things. I wanted to be very good quality, but I also wanted it to be affordable. And so one of the things that we're doing to try and make it affordable for folks , we have this thing called the Provisions Shop and there we sell supplies for guide dogs. Well, this is what we say. We say supplies, toys, treats, and supplies for guide dogs and good dogs of all kinds. So it doesn't have to be a guide dog, but if you've got a bad dog, you're going to have to go shop elsewhere. It's only for guide dogs and good dogs . So every purchase that's made in our provision shop, you'll receive 10% back in the form of the visual interpreter minute. So if you go in and you buy a bag of treat and a chew toy and maybe, you know, some dog boots, and all of a sudden, you've spent $100 on your dog because your dog needs it. That's the necessity . You're going to get 10 minutes back for yourself in visual interpreter minutes. And this might not seem like much, but if you think about it, if you have friends and family, folks that you know and that have dogs that would like to purchase supplies from our provision shop , they can allocate their minutes to you, and you could ultimately end up with a potentially unlimited supply of free visual interpreter minutes.

So you're getting the supplies for your dogs. You're getting some free minutes and supporting what I think is a pretty cool business. So speaking of supporting a pretty cool business, we are going this year, even though we're not quite a year old. We got our business license last August 1st. We are, though, going to exhibit at both the ACB and NFB conventions . So if anybody is going to be in New Orleans, hopefully I'll see you down there. But both of those are incredibly expensive, especially for a brand new startup business that's not even breaking even just yet. So we are actually running a fundraiser through City Pop. That's going to be going through the end of the month to help us defray those costs. I know of at least one person in this Zoom room here that's already participated. I'm not going to tell you who, but you might be able to figure it out. So I will send your president the link to our fundraiser page. And if any of you want it, you could either request it from her or if you'd like, you can reach out to me and I can send you the link . And hopefully, you know, you can help us out by purchasing some tasty snacks.

And the last thing here is I just wanted to share out my contact information and make sure you all know how to get in touch with me. We do have a website that's available online. Visual eyes, that's e-y-e-s, visualeyesaccess.com. There's a contact form there, or if you want, you can email me directly. Just put my name at the beginning of that. That's Shawn S-H-A-W-N at visualeyesaccess.com. And if you prefer to call text or WhatsApp, you can just use that personal number because it didn't make any sense for me to have a separate business line. I may regret that at some point, though. So the number there is going to be 517-630-1420.

So we're excited about what we're doing here. We're excited to be in involved in the blindness community and in the space. I've been here for a long time. Great! Some of you are some familiar names . And so I hope you check us out. And if you are in New Orleans, please swing by the booth and say hello. If there's any time available, I'm happy to answer any questions y'all might have.