

Alabama First State to Offer Automated Driver License Testing in American Sign Language for Deaf and Hearing-impaired Applicants

BIRMINGHAM — Alabama driver license applicants who are deaf and hearing-impaired now can take the state driver test in American Sign Language (ASL) using computerized testing machines, thanks to a collaborative project of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Alabama Department of Public Safety and Birmingham-based Openshaw Media Group. Alabama is the first state to offer automated driver license testing in ASL.

ADRS Commissioner Steve Shivers, DPS Director Col. Mike Coppage and OMG Vice President Jim Harmon demonstrated the new testing system Tuesday at Birmingham's driver license office. The new ASL program is now part of AutoTest, Alabama's automated testing system, which is available at 12 sites throughout the state.

"This new, accessible testing system makes it much easier for people who are deaf or hearing-impaired to more fully participate in community life," said Shivers. "We applaud Public Safety for its willingness to serve this often-overlooked population. We were happy to partner with them to make this happen."

Coppage said the project began when DPS sought to identify a better way to deliver the state driver license test to deaf and hearing-impaired applicants. "We wanted to provide deaf and hearing-impaired driver license applicants the same testing environment as that provided to applicants who have no such impairment," said Coppage.

"Rehabilitation Services generously provided funding for the project, and OMG, which developed the state's automated testing system, was eager to develop the program," he said. "Public Safety is the conduit for delivering this program, but all the credit belongs to Commissioner Shivers and to OMG for bringing it to fruition."

The Web-based AutoTest system features touchscreen test stations with randomly selected questions to ensure security. Test questions are presented on the computer screen in ASL with an accompanying color picture, video or three-dimensional animation of road signs and driving situations. Applicants can skip, replay or pause a question. Applicants can review any questions answered incorrectly at the end of the test, and the test automatically concludes when the applicant has answered enough questions either correctly or incorrectly to pass or fail.

Harmon said, "Alabama is the first state to offer ASL through automated testing, and we're proud to be a part of this project. We welcomed the challenge from DPS to create a mainstream testing environment for deaf applicants. ADRS made itself available to us throughout the entire process to advise us on various aspects of American Sign Language, while DPS steered the project. It was a true team effort."

Alabama began offering driver license testing in ASL in 1997. Coppage said the automated ASL testing replaces an unwieldy system in which deaf applicants navigated through a VHS videotape on a small television monitor. The applicant would have to rewind and fast-forward through the video to find and repeat questions, and then write the corresponding answers on an answer sheet.

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Automated Driver License Testing in ASL
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“While the old system got the job done, we knew there was a better way,” Coppage said. “Thanks to Rehabilitation Services and this partnership, Alabama now has a better way.”

Coppage said automated testing in ASL is available at all 12 AutoTest driver license sites. In addition to Birmingham, they are Dothan, Hartselle, Huntsville , Jacksonville, Mobile, Montgomery, Opelika, Selma, Sheffield, Sumiton and Tuscaloosa.

OMG installed Alabama’s AutoTest system in January 2003, to automate the driver knowledge examination for commercial driver license applicants, Class D operator license applicants and motorcycle license applicants. The federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration provided grant funding for purchase of the system.

In addition to Alabama, OMG provides automated driver license testing in Mississippi, Colorado and Bermuda.

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