

## A Casework Success Story: Miguel Sernas

Written by Mike Honda

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Many people come to my office to ask for assistance with federal agencies. From veterans to seniors and students to business owners, my office is ready to provide information and, where possible, contact a federal agency on your behalf. This week alone, my office helped a veteran receive a decision about his benefits and referred a homeowner to a federal regulator, just to name a few. I also recently congratulated a new citizen, who went through our complex immigration system.

Miguel Sernas was born in a rural, undeveloped area of Mexico, with a hearing impairment. His family was never educated in formal sign language, and Miguel did not live in an area with a school for the deaf. Instead, he and his family "signaled" things to each other, and learned to communicate in their own way.

Years later, his father and sister became U.S. citizens while Mr. Sernas had been residing with them as a permanent resident. He had applied for citizenship so he could live in the United States without having to continuously renew his paperwork, but as with anyone seeking U.S. citizenship, Mr. Sernas was required to interview.

Unfortunately, Mr. Sernas could not interview using a sign language interpreter because he never learned any of the traditional sign languages, and the only people who can understand him are members of his family or those who grew up with him. Current immigration policy states that family or friends cannot serve as interpreters for the purpose of a citizenship interview with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Further complicating the situation, CIS would have to adapt a small portion of the U.S.

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citizenship test to accommodate Mr. Sernas' particular form of sign language. As with all federal agencies, CIS must adapt its materials for anyone with disabilities.

Mr. Sernas' sister asked my office to contact CIS to find out what options were available. After working with CIS, my office was able to convince immigration officials to adapt the U.S. citizenship interview to a picture-based format, so that Mr. Sernas could fulfill his dream of becoming a citizen, as featured in two news articles:

San Jose Mercury News

[http://www.mercurynews.com/san-jose-neighborhoods/ci\\_15351839](http://www.mercurynews.com/san-jose-neighborhoods/ci_15351839)

Santa Cruz Sentinel

[http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/nationalbreaking/ci\\_15351839](http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/nationalbreaking/ci_15351839)