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Deaf-Led, Says the Footer: Tive and the Ownership Claim Nobody Can Check

Heather Grizzle · November 5, 2026

Tive calls itself Deaf-led and Deaf community-owned. The public record names no Deaf leader and no owner. NCG asked Tive to show it.

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Picking a video relay provider is not like picking a phone plan. The interpreter on the other end of a VRS call is in the room for the pharmacy refill, the call to the school about your kid, the bank dispute, the doctor's office that still will not text. A Deaf caller chooses a default provider once and then lives inside that choice for years. So we choose on trust, and one of the strongest trust signals in our community is a simple one: who runs this, and are they us?

Tive knows that. The footer on every page of tivetechnology.com reads "A Deaf-Led Connection Company by Tive, LLC." The About page closes on "Deaf community-owned. Built for what's next." The Google Play listing says the app was built by Deaf developers, and the VRS sign-up page at tiveapp.com describes it as built by Deaf people. Four places, four versions of the same promise.

What none of those four places does is name a single person. I went looking for the people behind the promise. This is what the public record holds, what it does not, and what NCG has asked Tive to put on the table. I use a different VRS provider myself. That is a disclosure, not an argument, and nothing below depends on it.

EN BREF

- Tive, LLC calls itself Deaf-led and Deaf community-owned in four public places, and names no one in any of them.
- The state record lists one manager, Leif Martinoff, introduced as CEO in 2022 and 2024. The only co-founder named anywhere is Liz Orona, COO, in a 2022 accelerator video. A September 2026 profile names a different CEO, John Clesen, with no start date.
- No source located describes any named Tive leader as Deaf. Tive's owners were disclosed to the FCC and never published.
- That makes the Deaf-led claim asserted, not evidenced. It does not make it false. The fastest way to settle it is for Tive to publish what it already gave the FCC.

What Tive is, and who pays for it

Tive is a human relay and interpreting company. Its app bundles Video Relay Service for phone calls in ASL, Video Remote Interpreting for appointments and front desks, a Zoom integration, messaging, a social feed and a community hub. Businesses and hospitals get an admin dashboard, QR code onboarding and geofenced access, and the healthcare tier advertises CAQH billing support and what the site calls HIPAA-aligned workflows. There is no AI signing anywhere in the product, which is why NCG recorded Tive as outside the scope of the SLAT Index this morning rather than scoring it [1].

The FCC granted Tive conditional VRS certification in October 2023. Service began in 2024, and the Commission granted full certification on June 17, 2026, for a five-year term [2]. That certification is what lets Tive bill the Interstate TRS Fund, the pool every phone and internet customer pays into, for every minute of VRS it handles.

WHAT A VRS MINUTE IS WORTH, 2026-27 PROPOSED RATES

$8.61
per minute for small providers handling 1 million or fewer minutes a month

$6.96
per minute, Tier I, a larger provider's first 1 million monthly minutes

$4.35
per minute, Tier II, minutes above 1 million

$1.83 billion
proposed total TRS Fund requirement for the 2026-27 fund year

Source: TRS Fund Administrator filing, FCC DA 26-516, May 22, 2026

Those figures come from the Fund administrator's May 2026 proposal [3]. We could not find Tive's monthly minute volume in any public record, so we are not saying which band it falls in. The point is simpler. VRS is a public program paid for by the public, and a provider's identity claims are marketing aimed at the people choosing

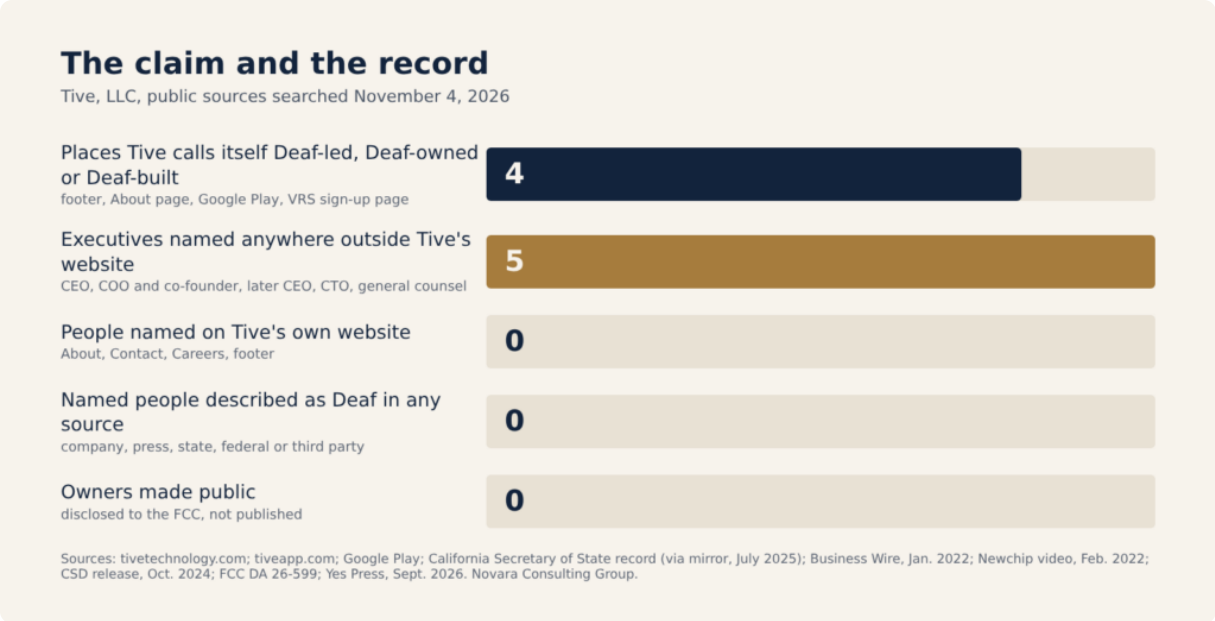
which provider gets those minutes. "Deaf-owned" in this market is not decoration. For a lot of Deaf callers, it is part of the reason they pick one provider over another.

What the public record shows about who runs Tive

Tive, LLC is a California limited liability company, filed December 21, 2020, active and in good standing, with telecommunications as its stated business and a principal address at 137 North Larchmont Boulevard in Los Angeles. The only manager on that record is Leif Martinoff [4]. We read the record through a third-party mirror dated July 2025, and the primary filing at the Secretary of State is the next thing to pull.

Martinoff is the earliest and most consistent name. In February 2022, the startup accelerator Newchip posted an 82-second testimonial video in which Martinoff introduces himself as Tive's CEO, alongside Liz Orona, captioned on screen as COO and Co-Founder. The video description says Tive had raised $500,000 [7]. That is the only place in the record where anyone at Tive is called a founder, and it is the only funding figure we found. A January 2022 Business Wire release quotes "Tive CEO Leif Martinoff" announcing a memorandum of understanding with the Children's Medical Care Foundation, under which the foundation would support Tive as exclusive provider of sign language interpretation for the pediatric specialists and Deaf patients it serves [5]. In October 2024, Communication Service for the Deaf announced that Tive's customer service would run on CSD's ASL Now direct video platform, again quoting Martinoff as CEO [6]. That release describes a vendor partnership. It states no investment and no ownership stake, so CSD's name on it does not answer the ownership question either way.

Then the story forks. A September 2026 profile names John Clesen, a Chicago-area operations executive formerly of Stericycle and RepScrubs, as Tive's chief executive, and describes the company as headquartered in Austin [8]. It gives no start date and mentions neither Martinoff nor Orona. Elsewhere, a business data aggregator lists Scott Coombs as chief technology officer [9], and the FCC's provider list names Gregory Caffas as general counsel [10].



The claim and the record. Public sources searched November 4, 2026.

Not one of those sources describes Martinoff, Orona, Clesen, Coombs or Caffas as Deaf. That is not evidence that none of them is. Press releases routinely leave it out, and plenty of Deaf executives do not lead with it. But it means the public cannot connect the Deaf-led claim to any person who leads.

The ownership side is thinner still. When the FCC granted full certification, the order recorded that Tive had disclosed its ten-percent equity holders, its voting power holders, and its executives, officers and board members [2]. The Commission did not publish the names. So the one document that would settle "Deaf community-owned" exists, sits in a federal file, and has not been shown to the community the claim is made to.

Even the address will not hold still

A small thing, but it compounds the big one. Where Tive says it lives depends on which document you read.

Where Tive's address of record points

Source	Location given
California Secretary of State record	Los Angeles (137 N. Larchmont Blvd.)
FCC VRS provider list	Los Angeles (137 N. Larchmont Blvd.)
Google Play developer listing	Los Angeles (137 N. Larchmont Blvd.)
Tive privacy policy	Austin (2211 S. IH-35)
Tive terms and conditions	Austin (2211 S. IH-35)
Tive careers page	Austin (interpreter role)
Yes Press profile	Austin headquarters

Source: Sources cited in this article, accessed November 4, 2026

Companies move, and a California LLC can operate from Texas. What a buyer cannot tell from the outside is which one is current, and whether a Texas registration exists. We did not check Texas records for this piece, and say so.

Asserted is not the same as false

I want to be careful here, because this is the part people will screenshot. NCG is not saying Tive is not Deaf-owned. We are saying the claim has not been shown, and that the gap between the claim and the record is wide enough that a Deaf consumer, a hospital or an employer has no way to check it.

There are honest ways for the claim to be true and still invisible. Deaf investors can hold equity without being officers. A Deaf product and engineering team can shape a company that a hearing operator runs. "Deaf-led" can mean decision authority, or it can mean a founding story, or it can mean a staffing mix, and those are three different things. The Fifth Parameter spent two issues on this problem, the Deaf halo effect and the difference between representation and governance, and the lesson holds outside AI: a community's name on a product is a claim about power, and claims about power are checkable.

The standard we apply is the one we apply to every vendor. If a company says something that changes how people choose, it should be able to show it. Sign language AI vendors are asked to evidence accuracy claims. A relay provider that sells on Deaf ownership can evidence Deaf ownership, and the evidence already exists in Tive's FCC file.

The paperwork underneath the promise

Reading for names meant reading everything Tive publishes, and the legal pages have problems of their own. None of this is a SLAT finding, since Tive is not a SLAT subject. It is what an institution buying VRI should know before signing.

The privacy policy reads like a generated template that was never finished. Several processing entries end with "This processing constitutes:" and then nothing. Two sections are duplicated. The text tells the reader to look for a modification date at the bottom of the page, and there is none. It describes cookies, identifiers, contact details and profile pictures, but says nothing about video, call content, the confidentiality of interpreted calls, or health information, for a company with a healthcare sign-up page. It says the app records microphone audio and, a few lines later, that the recording feature is not used. It labels several processors, Twilio among them, as a sale or share of data under California law, while a separate clause promises mobile numbers are never shared or sold [11].

The terms carry a "Latest update" of January 2, 2024, name no governing state, set no minimum age while the App Store rates the app 13+, contain no 911 or emergency provision for a service marketed into medical settings, and incorporate a "Free Pediatrician Practice Plan Terms" document that is not published anywhere we could find [12]. "HIPAA-aligned" is a description, not a compliance commitment, and we located no business associate agreement.

> **WHY THIS MATTERS FOR BUYERS**
>
> A hospital that signs up for Tive's VRI is putting interpreted patient conversations through a vendor whose published privacy policy does not mention interpreted conversations at all. Ask for the BAA and the data handling terms in writing before the first call.



What NCG has asked Tive

NCG has put the following questions to Tive in writing. Any answer Tive sends will be published here in full, unedited, with the date it arrived.

1. Who owns Tive, LLC, and what share is held by Deaf individuals or Deaf-led organizations?
2. Who are Tive's current officers and board members, and which of them are Deaf?
3. What does "Deaf-led" mean at Tive in practice: who holds final decision authority over product, interpreting standards and pricing?
4. Who founded Tive? Are Leif Martinoff and Liz Orona still with the company, and is John Clesen its chief executive? If leadership changed, when?
5. Is Tive headquartered in Los Angeles or Austin, and is it registered to do business in Texas?
6. Will Tive publish the ownership and management disclosure it filed with the FCC for certification?
7. Does Tive record or retain the video or content of VRS or VRI calls, and what protects the confidentiality of interpreted calls?
8. Does Tive sign business associate agreements with healthcare customers, and how does the app handle a 911 call?

What to ask before you buy

For hospitals, clinics, employers and agencies choosing a relay or interpreting vendor on the strength of a Deaf-led claim, the check takes one email.

☐ Ask the vendor to name its owners with ten percent or more, and which are Deaf.

☐ Ask who holds final decision authority, by name and title.

☐ Ask for the ownership disclosure filed with the FCC, if the vendor is a certified VRS provider.

☐ Get the business associate agreement and the call data terms before the first patient call.

☐ Confirm the address of record and the state whose law governs the contract.

☐ Ask how the service handles an emergency call, in writing.

Deaf ownership carries weight in this market because it tells a caller whose interests sit at the top of the company. That is the reason it should be shown, not just said. Tive can close this gap in an afternoon by publishing what the FCC already has. Until it does, the footer is a claim, and NCG will report it as one.

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> **TIPS**
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> Know something about a sign language AI system that the public should know? Send it to tips@novaracg.com. Every tip is read by me and kept confidential. If you work in the UK, writing to us is not by itself a protected disclosure under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, so before you share employer information, check your options with Protect (protect-advice.org.uk), the free whistleblowing advice line.

Comment citer

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