



Submitted via *regulations.gov*

July 16, 2021

National Institute of Standards and Technology
Department of Commerce
100 Bureau Drive
Gaithersburg, MD 20899
Re: 2021-0003

These comments are submitted on behalf of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), a national cross-disability organization advocating for the full civil rights of the over 61 million Americans with disabilities. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide specific input on the barriers facing disabled voters and further input on solutions to improve voting accessibility. Despite celebrating the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act this July, voter turnout of people with disabilities persists at lower rates than voters without disabilities, and 1 in 9 voters experienced obstacles in the 2020 elections.¹ As the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) seeks to uncover voting barriers and opportunities to improve voting access, we want to highlight key considerations before we proceed to answer the Request for Information:

- 1) The disability community is diverse, and so are our voting access needs. COVID-19 revealed countless gaps in voting accessibility that, while not new to voters with disabilities, highlighted the need for ensuring voters have not just one, but multiple accessible voting options.²
- 2) Disabled voters of color face compounding barriers at the polls, from Black disabled voters encountering lines that are twice as long to Native American communities with the highest percentages of people with disabilities having limited access to both in-person and remote voting options.³
- 3) In addition to accessibility barriers in the voting process, guardianship and incarceration disenfranchise people with disabilities before they can even begin the voting process. In many states, guardianship and incarceration strip the right



to vote away from disabled people who are over-represented in both institutions due to structural ableism.⁴

Access barriers exist throughout the entire voting process, and our comments, while far from exhaustive, address some of the 20 questions included in NIST's Request for Information. At the end of our comments, you will find an addendum with first-hand stories from voters with disabilities sharing what does and does not work for them in the voting process. Our comments address accessibility gaps in voter education and information, in-person voting, remote voting, and voting from congregate settings. We also address the disenfranchisement of disabled voters before the voting process even begins. Throughout our comments, you will find excerpts from the stories included in the addendum, demonstrating the accessibility or inaccessibility parts of the voting process for disabled voters across the country.

AAPD also supports public comments made by other disability rights organizations and coalitions, including but not limited to the National Council on Independent Living, the National Disability Rights Network, Self Advocates Becoming Empowered, REV UP Georgia, The Arc Minnesota, and more.

Voter Education and Information

Web Accessibility & Ease of Access

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the importance of the internet in providing access to information about voting, from what's on the ballot to polling place locations and hours. Unfortunately for people with disabilities, state websites containing crucial election information vary in accessibility. Even crucial parts of the voting process, such as online voter registration portals fail accessibility tests miserably, with only one state portal meeting accessibility standards in a 2015 review by the American Civil Liberties Union.⁵ When it comes to voter information, state websites vary in accessibility and in how easy or difficult it is for voters with disabilities to access information specifically important to voters with disabilities. The lack of accessible websites means that voters who use screen readers to access digital information may not be able to get the information they need to know how and when they can vote. As recently as last year, mail in ballot applications were inaccessible in 43 states.⁶ For other voters with intellectual or developmental disabilities, election information often provided in lengthy documents, spread across endless tabs and webpages, or written in complicated language present cognitive accessibility barriers.



Disability-Inclusive Voting Information

Not only do state, county, and community-based organizations' elections websites fail to provide general accessibility, but many election websites lack key information important to voters with disabilities. Information on curbside voting, receiving assistance when voting, the availability of alternative and accessible ballot formats, and even identification (ID) requirements are sometimes unavailable or buried in linked PDFs that are frequently inaccessible. Additionally, information about the impact of guardianship on voting rights is rarely mentioned on election websites, if at all, even though many disabled voters with guardians have the right to participate in elections. Ensuring voters with disabilities can access their right to vote starts with having information important to voters with disabilities readily available on election websites and materials.

Multiple and Accessible Formats for Voter Information

Beyond ensuring the content and websites are accessible, election materials must be available to voters with disabilities in multiple accessible formats and languages, as a lack of accessible voting materials excludes voters with disabilities from the democratic process. Voters with disabilities need accessible material in American Sign Language, plain language, large print, Braille, and other formats in their native language. The disability community is as diverse as the electorate at large and supplying materials in multiple languages must include supplying accessible formats in those languages as well. Accessible formats of voter information would benefit voters who are deaf or hard of hearing, voters with some vision disabilities, voters with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and beyond. In addition to creating guidance around accessible formats for elections information, the federal government must also enforce and support local elections officials in providing elections information, not just ballots, in multiple languages, that reflect the linguistic and demographic diversity in a particular precinct.

Access to Broadband Internet

Access to quality broadband internet is key to ensuring voters, particularly those who experience greater digital divides, can get the information and resources they need to cast their ballots. Only 60% of people with disabilities have access to the internet at home, compared to 79% of people without disabilities.⁷ Both the lack of access to broadband internet and inaccessible websites and apps lead to a digital divide between people with and without disabilities. Disabled and voters of color face particularly high barriers to broadband access,⁸ and the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB), as well as efforts to expand the reach of broadband internet, will help improve access to digital



voting information and resources. Ensuring that voters are educated on how they can access the EBB directly supports the goal of ensuring access to the vote. As the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) takes steps to create more precise and accurate broadband maps, NIST can work with the FCC to better understand where broadband access is particularly impacting voting accessibility.

Voter ID Requirements

Strict voter ID requirements create substantial barriers to voters with disabilities, voters of color, and disabled voters of color. In 2006, 18% of Americans 65 and older did not have an up to date form of ID, and rates of people of color with a photo ID in the U.S. are significantly lower than White Americans.⁹ Overall, people with disabilities are less likely to have a photo ID required by many states.¹⁰ According to researchers at Rutgers University, 7.5% of people with disabilities lacked a state photo ID, more than the 4.8% of people without disabilities who lacked this ID.¹¹ In 2020, about 36 states required an ID when casting a ballot, which excluded many voters from the ballot box.¹²

In-Person Voting

Accessible Voting Machines

For many voters with disabilities casting their ballot in person, accessible voting machines provide the only way for a fully independent and private vote, a right of all voters due to the Help America Vote Act.¹³ Unfortunately accessible voting machines, such as ballot-marking devices varies by polling site, with many voters with disabilities encountering polling locations with untrained poll workers who do not know how to set up and operate the accessible voting machine. With the current standard of one accessible voting machine per polling location, polling locations with broken or out of order accessible voting machines disenfranchise many disabled voters, leaving them without a way to cast their ballot.¹⁴ In order to address this barrier, poll workers must receive proper training on setting up and using accessible voting machines and election officials must receive guidance to ensure polling locations have more than one accessible voting machine at polling places, and enough to serve the population.

Enforcement of Accessibility Standards at Polling Locations

The Government Accountability Office's study of 178 polling locations in 2017 revealed that only 17% of nearly 200 polling locations reviewed met accessibility standards, while 83% had at least one potential accessibility barrier either outside or inside the polling location or both.¹⁵ Polling locations have abysmal accessibility rates, despite the



multiple laws guaranteeing all voters equal access to the ballot, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Help America Vote Act, and more. Three ways the federal government can take action to fix the inaccessibility of polling sites include increasing oversight of the accessibility of polling locations, improving and simplifying guidance on accessibility guidelines, and providing guidance to ensure election officials do not remove inaccessible polling places without a ready accessible replacement. In the past, election officials with malicious intent have used accessibility guidelines in the Americans with Disabilities Act to close polling locations,¹⁶ a heinous strategy used often to disenfranchise voters of color.¹⁷

Story Spotlight: “Recently, my local polling place changed to a much more accessible location, where there is a ramp to enter the polling site, as well as a lowered table with a scanning machine. These enhancements allow persons with disabilities easier access. I had planned on voting in person in the 2020 election but, due to Covid, I opted to avail myself of a mail-in ballot. I plan to return to voting in person for future elections.” | *K.W., New York*

Story Spotlight: “When I voted at my school, there were benches along the area of the line. I have a disability that makes standing for long periods of time difficult and dangerous (I'm likely to faint), but I can technically walk so insurance wouldn't cover a wheelchair and I can't afford one on my own. The benches allowed me to sit down while waiting to vote. I wasn't at risk of fainting and I wasn't in pain. At another district, where the voting area was unfamiliar, I waited outside for about an hour before even entering the building. There wasn't anywhere to sit...if I had not brought that lawn chair I would have fainted before ever reaching the building.” | *D. D., Texas*

Alternative Voting Options

Alternative options to casting a ballot at a polling place provide key ways to fill gaps in access to voting. Options like early voting, mobile voting, ballot drop boxes, drive-thru voting, and curbside voting provided safe and accessible voting options to many voters with and without disabilities. During the COVID pandemic, many of these options were expanded so that voters could exercise their constitutional right while protecting themselves from a deadly virus. These changes resulted in an unprecedented level of voter turnout. Even when the pandemic subsides, these voting options remain critical to expanding voting access to people with limited access to transportation, voters unable to enter inaccessible polling places, or disabled voters with increased risk from



communicable diseases and more. Options like curbside voting do not replace the need for accessible polling locations but are important tools for maintaining voting access until modifications are made or a new polling place is chosen.

Story Spotlight: “In 2016 I went to the drive-up disabled voting ballot area that was available nearby my house. It indicated a place to park and said someone would be out to take my ballot. I waited. I waited and waited. No one came. I looked around and no one was around. I called the number and no one answered. I was there over an hour and a half with no one in sight. I can't walk very far so there wasn't anything I could do so I drove up to where some people were in line and someone was nice enough to get someone to run inside for me. Finally someone came out and said that they really weren't set up to do the disabled outside area that they had said was available on the website. They fixed it after that though. They stopped offering it and now I have to drive really far to do it.” | *D.W., California*

Story Spotlight: “Last year, because of the pandemic and having an autoimmune disorder, I chose to submit my ballot by mail in. I did not feel comfortable going [into] the polls in person to vote. I submitted an online request for my ballot which went smoothly. When I received my ballot, I turned in my completed ballot to a local dropbox. I had an easy time dropping off my ballot in this way because the slot for the dropbox was low enough for me to reach me from my wheelchair and I had accessible transportation. Last year during the pandemic, I assisted a friend who is blind to complete her ballot because she was not able to use her screen reading software on the computer to complete her ballot. Her family lives far away and could not help her nor did she feel comfortable asking family to help. Additionally, access to an in person reader was not as available during the height of the pandemic. The computer voting technology was not compatible with her assistive technology. She mailed off her completed ballot.” | *T.G., Maryland*

Remote Voting

Vote-by-Mail and Drop Boxes

Vote-by-mail is critical to expanding voting access to both voters with and without disabilities, who turned to vote-by-mail in droves in 2020.¹⁸ Drop boxes further



expanded access to voting, providing extended methods and times that voters could deliver their ballots and allowing many voters a chance to return their ballot on-time, particularly when the United States Postal Service experienced severe delays.¹⁹ Unfortunately, a lack of standards around the size, height, and mechanics of ballot boxes meant that many people with disabilities, especially those of short stature, wheelchair users, and others with mobility disabilities, could not easily or independently use drop boxes.²⁰ Guidance on the placement and number of drop boxes is crucial to ensuring that communities have adequate access to accessible drop boxes.

Despite the ways that vote-by-mail can expand voting access, several rules around voting by mail can create barriers for voters with disabilities. For example, signature verification requirements in states that match signatures on ballots to previous signatures provided by the voter create massive barriers for voters with print disabilities, print disabilities, learning disabilities, physical and dexterity disabilities, blindness, or low vision. Facilitating the provision of stamped ballots with paid postage to voters would further reduce barriers to the vote for disabled and nondisabled voters.

Story Spotlight: “I am a hemiplegic due to stroke. I no longer drive and I am unable to write legibly or type with my right hand (I am right handed). For the 2020 general election I requested a mail in ballot with assistance from my able bodied wife since I am unable to complete the request form or the ballot. We both voted with mail in ballots and dropped them off at the county election office drive up drop off box due to news about the postal service. I do appreciate Ohio for making absentee voting available but if they restrict mail in ballot further I would have difficulties voting. I do want to point out that I have to scribble to sign my name but every time I sign my name it looks different. If they compare signatures they might decline my ballot. I believe they should have a different way to authenticate a voter rather than signature.” | *M.M., Ohio*

Story Spotlight: I have a developmental and mobility disability that affects my ability to walk, stand, and balance. During the November 2020 election, because I was at high risk for COVID, I decided that returning my ballot was the best way to stay safe from the virus and to ensure my vote was counted. I located the nearest ballot drop box to my apartment and made a plan to vote. My partner and I went to drop off our ballots together, and when we arrived, the accessible path to the drop box was completely cut off by construction. I could not cast my ballot independently, and my partner had to drop off my ballot for me. Had I gone to



vote by myself, I would have had to spend additional time, money, and effort to coordinate accessible transportation and potentially expose myself to additional risk of COVID-19. The city could have identified areas where construction permits had been issued and cross referenced it with placement sites for ballot drop boxes to ensure paths to drop boxes remained accessible.” | *M.T., District of Columbia*

Remote Accessible Ballots

Paper vote-by-mail ballots are inherently inaccessible to voters with print disabilities, stripping many voters of their rights to an independent and private ballot, guaranteed to voters through the Help American Vote Act.²¹ Investing in improving and advancing voting technology to ensure a secure and accessible voting option for voters with disabilities both in-person and remotely will ensure that voters with print disabilities have equal access to the vote. This equal access is required by law, which many states’ election officials are discovering through lawsuits. In a recent lawsuit in North Carolina, a Judge ruled that election officials must provide a remote accessible voting option, as well as accessible sample ballots.²² Both remote and in-person voting options must be equally accessible to disabled voters. Accessibility gaps in remote voting disenfranchises voters with disabilities, many of whom face transportation barriers, in accessible polling locations, accessible voting machines that are not set up or broken, and other environmental barriers that voting at home enables them to avoid.

Accessibility and security are both key priorities for voters with disabilities. Over half of states offer the electronic delivery of accessible remote ballots, and some of those states also allow electronic return which ensures a fully accessible, independent, and private ballot. Despite the successful and safe use of remote accessible ballots for small numbers of people with disabilities in many states, some computer scientists fear the cybersecurity threats that electronic ballots introduce. When objectively considering the comparative security of paper ballots and electronic ballots, it is critical to remember that security threats for both paper and electronic ballots exist. Investing in, securing, testing voting systems is critical to any method considered for voting. We are focused on expanding free and fair elections for all voters, including voters with disabilities, and part of that ensures that they have access to secure and private ballots they can cast themselves and that they can trust to reflect their choices.

Story Spotlight: “For the first primary in May of 2020 I had to have sighted assistance to complete the paper ballot which I was able to request myself



online. That was not private nor accessible. For The General Election, I was able to use Electronic Ballot Delivery because the state of Pennsylvania contracted for the Democracy Live system to do that for and with me. I used my computer to make my ballot choices and printed the ballot after reviewing on screen...There were difficulties with this system. It was new so much of the county voting office didn't know what I was talking about when I asked questions about the system...Many of the blind and low vision folks that I know don't have printers so couldn't use this system because they couldn't send their ballot to be printed somewhere with a printer after they completed it using screen reading software. Others had already made arrangements for sighted assistance to complete a standard paper ballot because that was the only choice that they saw. I followed a similar procedure for this year's primary, but the instructions said that I had to fill in my address on the declaration side of the outer envelope so I needed sighted assistance to do that before it was mailed.” | *C.H., Pennsylvania*

Voting from Congregate Settings

Long-Term Care Facilities

Approximately 8.4 million people live in long-term care facilities in the United States.²³ People with disabilities make up about 1 in 4 Americans overall but 1 in 2 Americans in congregate setting institutions, including long-term care facilities.²⁴ While comprehensive data does not exist on voter turnout among people living in congregate settings, we know of many barriers that make voting from congregate settings more difficult. Even before the pandemic, people living in congregate settings often faced limited mobility, a lack of access to information, and inadequate voting support from staff. Older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color are also more likely to lack the required ID to vote.²⁵ Many states lack processes for assisting voters in congregate settings, with only about half of states having established, but typically optional processes for election officials to facilitate voter registration and voting in nursing homes and long-term care facilities.²⁶ Lack of access to technology, information, printers, and more can add to the voting barriers that residents of long-term care facilities face. In order to improve voting access in long-term care facilities, encourage and provide clear guidance on mobile voting in congregate settings, research the barriers and voter turnout from these settings, and emphasize universal access to vote-by-mail and accessible remote voting.



Other Congregate Care Facilities

Voting barriers may vary by congregate setting, from jails and prisons to hospitals. While the brevity of the response period for these comments restricted our ability to research this issue fully, we highly recommend further investigation into the nuances of barriers that individuals in other congregate settings, particularly those involved in the criminal justice system, face in the voting process.

Disenfranchisement of Disabled Voters

Guardianship

While the public conversation has shone a spotlight on Britney Spears' conservatorship, guardianship is a common, though under-researched, arrangement placed on people with disabilities that restricts their autonomy, from their decisions about what they eat, to whether or not they can vote. In some states, any person placed under guardianship loses their right to vote, while in other states judges determine whether or not the individual is allowed to continue to vote.²⁷ In many states, retaining the right to vote depends on a judge deciding that a person communicates the desire to vote, an arbitrary guideline not placed on any other voters. We recommend additional research into guardianship and its impacts on the voting rights of people with disabilities, and ultimately the presence of guardianship or disability should never be reasons for disenfranchisement.²⁸

Incarceration

Laws around voting rights, incarceration, and felony convictions vary by state, and nationwide over 5.2 million people have lost their right to vote due to a felony conviction.²⁹ In federal prisons, the disability rate is more than double that of the general population.³⁰ Throughout the criminal justice system, people with disabilities, particularly Black disabled people and disabled people of color, face higher rates of police violence and incarceration.³¹ People with disabilities face employment discrimination, higher rates of poverty, a lack of access to healthcare and other supports, a higher chance of experiencing homelessness, and other factors that contribute to the higher numbers of people with disabilities in prisons and jails.³² Without community based mental health support, prisons and jails become massive psychiatric facilities. The interconnected structures that funnel people with disabilities into the criminal justice system also lead to the mass disenfranchisement of disabled voters. Creating a federal standard to restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated



individuals, as is proposed in the For the People Act, will make progress towards reducing the disenfranchisement of voters. Automatically registering voters when eligible and providing formerly incarcerated individuals with information on their right to vote are further needed to combat the disenfranchisement of criminal justice system-involved individuals.³³

Conclusion

Even before people with disabilities begin the process to vote, disenfranchisement laws and the inaccessibility of voting information put up barriers that keep disabled voters and potential voters from participating in democracy. As the first-hand experiences of disabled voters shared in these comments demonstrate, the barriers are present throughout the voting process. And still tens of millions of disabled voters surpass each barrier to vote and have their say in our democracy. In these comments, we communicate not mere desires but necessities for full and equal voting access for voters with disabilities. Additionally, as pointed out earlier, our comments are not comprehensive and cover only a portion of access barriers and the changes needed to improve voting access. We support the comments submitted by our allies in the disability community and encourage further work by NIST and other federal agencies to examine and improve the experience of disabled voters. For additional insights on the real-life impacts of access barriers on disabled voters across the country, read the addendum below with nearly two dozen stories from voters in our community. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide input and stories from disabled voters to NIST, and we eagerly await the results of the public comments process. Our democracy only works for all when each person has the equal opportunity to participate.

These comments are co-signed by the following organizations:

Alliance Center for Independence
American Association on Health and Disability
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
Center for Accessible Living
Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY
Citizens Coalition for Equal Access
Count US INdiana
Blue Ridge Independent Living Center



Disability Rights and Resources, Birmingham, Alabama
Easterseals New Jersey
Farmington Human Relations Commission
Indiana Statewide Independent Living Council
Michigan Rehabilitation Association
Muscular Dystrophy Association
PinkOracle.com
RespectAbility
REV UP Georgia
REV UP NJ
REV UP Virginia
League of Women Voters of the United States
The Arc Minnesota
The Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL)
TheCPGroup
The Lurie Institute for Disability Policy
#UpgradeMedicaid, part of Iowa Disability League
VOCAL-NY
WeCAHR



Addendum - First-Hand Stories from Disabled Voters

AAPD collected the following stories from disabled voters in our network who agreed to share their stories in our public comments. The first-hand stories shared below may not represent the positions of AAPD or of other people with disabilities. These stories each represent the diverse real-life personal experiences and perspectives of voters with disabilities engaging with the democratic process.

“Doing my part has never been more important to me [than] in these times but my vision loss is aggressively making it more difficult. I do not have someone that can help me read the information on the ballots, having a read out from a computer or even a MP3 player with stop, play, rewind would be a big help. Something resembling language learning software. Where only 3 buttons are needed to operate. Thank you.” | *S.G., California*

“My most recent voting experiences have been accessible. Since I moved to DC for school, I've been able to successfully vote absentee by mail in my home state of PA. In particular, I'm a huge fan of the email notifications from the county when they send out the ballot, receive it after I send it back, and when they process and officially count it in the system. The only negative thing I've experienced is the anxiety associated with filling out the ballot correctly so that my vote can be counted, as well as some problems with how long it takes to receive the absentee ballot in DC. Although I've remedied that by staying on top of submitting my application as early as possible, executive functioning is difficult for me and I fear that I will not remember to submit the application on time or have some other issue in the future.” | *A.F., Pennsylvania*

“I am a hemiplegic due to stroke. I no longer drive and I am unable to write legibly or type with my right hand (I am right handed). For the 2020 general election I requested a mail in ballot with assistance from my able bodied wife since I am unable to complete the request form or the ballot. We both voted with mail in ballots and dropped them off at the county election office drive up drop off box due to news about the postal service. I do appreciate Ohio for making absentee voting available but if they restrict mail in ballot further I would have



difficulties voting. I do want to point out that I have to scribble to sign my name but every time I sign my name it looks different. If they compare signatures they might decline my ballot. I believe they should have a different way to authenticate a voter rather than signature.” | *M.M., Ohio*

“In 2016 I went to the drive-up disabled voting ballot area that was available nearby my house. It indicated a place to park and said someone would be out to take my ballot. I waited. I waited and waited. No one came. I looked around and no one was around. I called the number and no one answered. I was there over an hour and a half with no one in sight. I can't walk very far so there wasn't anything I could do so I drove up to where some people were in line and someone was nice enough to get someone to run inside for me. Finally someone came out and said that they really weren't set up to do the disabled outside area that they had said was available on the website. They fixed it after that though. They stopped offering it and now I have to drive really far to do it.” | *D.W., California*

“A totally accessible voting experience for me. When my jurisdiction used its paperless voting system, my polling place always knew what to do to give me as a totally blind individual the assistance needed to start the equipment in speech mode. They did designate one device for those of us who needed to use speech, but all voters used the same equipment. I have not yet used the paper equipped ballot marking device available in my jurisdiction because for the past three elections, that is, two primaries and the presidential election between them, I have been hesitant to travel to public places with unknown people because of Covid. I don't know how private my ballot will be when I finally use that equipment because the ballot does not resemble the ballot that people use who are completing ballots with a pen and ink. The system will also not have a way for me to actually read the printed ballot in case the equipment malfunctions and chooses to print something that I didn't pick on the ballot. I can review the ballot before printing, but don't actually know what is going to go into the scanner.

Now, for the Absentee or vote by mail ballot experience. For the first primary in May of 2020 I had to have sighted assistance to complete the paper ballot which I



was able to request myself online. That was not private nor accessible. For The General Election, I was able to use Electronic Ballot Delivery because the state of Pennsylvania contracted for the Democracy Live system to do that for and with me. I used my computer to make my ballot choices and printed the ballot after reviewing on screen. I used scanning software on my iPhone to determine that my printed ballot reflected my choices. I then used visual assistance from AIRA with the help of my iPhone camera to help me find the signature spot on the outer envelope. I couldn't get an answer from the county as to whether my ballot would be void if I didn't date it, so I used the same source to help me find the box for the date. I don't have a date stamp at home to use to accomplish that task. The date was probably not particularly legible. There were difficulties with this system. It was new so much of the county voting office didn't know what I was talking about when I asked questions about the system. It was not well publicized by either the state or the county so when I first requested my paper ballot I didn't know how to ask for electronic delivery. Only after a state legislator's office found the proper link on the department of state website could I request the electronic ballot delivery. The system, however, wanted to track the bar code of the envelope for the first paper ballot that I had requested, and I couldn't follow that the county got my electronic ballot which had special envelopes sent by the department of State to the county to be forwarded to me for returning my home printed ballot. They sent both a secrecy envelope and the outer envelope which were of two different sizes and textures. The only way that I could tell that the county got what appeared to be my ballot was that I was told that two such ballots had come in from my voting district. I never knew if my ballot had been rejected for outer envelope violations. Also, how private is a ballot that has to be submitted in special envelopes unlike those that other voters use? It also didn't look at all like the paper ballot that standard voters got. I never knew if they would have to have a county employee recopy my ballot onto a standard ballot to be scanned or if the county had to have special scanners set up to handle the few ballots like this that it got. After the Presidential election I was told that the state only processed fifty such requests for electronic ballot delivery. Many of the blind and low vision folks that I know don't have printers so couldn't use this system because they couldn't send their ballot to be printed somewhere with a printer after they completed it using screen reading software. Others had already made arrangements for sighted assistance to complete a standard paper ballot because that was the only choice that they saw. I followed a similar procedure



for this year's primary, but the instructions said that I had to fill in my address on the declaration side of the outer envelope so I needed sighted assistance to do that before it was mailed. I finally got an email from the tracking system saying that my ballot was received, but that came ten days after the election so I didn't know if it had been received timely, but the paperwork was in a backlog or if the post office just didn't get it to the county until it was too late to be counted. I question whether there will be adequate training for poll workers to be sure that they know how to handle the ballot marking devices since so few people actually know to use them if they have any difficulty with visual issues or the use of a pen to mark their ballot. At least in Philadelphia the ballot marking equipment in use is to be used by all voters and not just by those who cannot handle a pen. Oddly, when I asked a former member of the EAC about why the commission never came down on the side of electronic ballot delivery or even possibly electronic ballot submission for vote by mail or absentee or no excuse absentee ballots, I was told that he didn't think that those topics were in the jurisdiction of the EAC. If those issues aren't in [their] jurisdiction, I presume that accessible electronic poll books would be completely off the table, but universal design or access from the beginning would make more people aware of capable disabled people and bring us more into the full voting community both as voters and polling place officials. That might go far to assist on the training issue for poll workers with the idea that something other than lip service would be given to that topic." | *C.H., Pennsylvania*

"I have always had accessible voter machines that read aloud the selections. I am a blind voter and I'm so grateful to have this opportunity because I am personally not OK with somebody filling out a ballot for me. I like that we have this independence and my concern is with all of the voting restrictions passing throughout the country we might lose access to accessible ballots as well." | *M.S., Colorado*

"Voting by mail was easy. I applied to the local election board, was sent the materials, filled them out, and mailed them back. That easy! When I voted in person, the polling place was accessible, the voting machine I had to lift out of its



frame and hold on my lap, but otherwise easy to use. I am a T6 paraplegic and use a wheelchair all the time.” | *D.C., Indiana*

"As a wheelchair using paraplegic, I had no personal issues getting into the in person polling place (beyond those of any typical wheelchair accessible location) and voting using the standard paper ballot. (I personally STRONGLY oppose any voting method that does NOT result in a (sighted) 'human readable' paper ballot as the official vote)

Since I am vice chair of our town's Disability Commission I checked to see if there was an 'automark' machine available. There was one machine for the two precincts in my polling location. Any voter needing it would be sent to the actual room where it was regardless of which room their precinct would normally vote in.

Approximately 3 elections ago the machine was present but not set up, and I made complaints about this to both the Town and the State. Since then the machine was present, set up, and appeared functional, though I didn't test it. (I don't have any data as to how many (if any) voters actually used it) I am told that the other polling places in our town had similar setups." | *A.T., Massachusetts*

“Since my teens, I looked forward to being able to take my place in line with the voters in my community, and I have fond memories of discharging my civic duties in just that way. But my various disabilities have not always allowed the normal to occur. But all of my memories of voting access have been positive ones. When I was in a new state and hospitalized for an extended period, I mentioned my desire to register and vote there to my doctor, and the hospital made it happen!

After discharge, I needed to get a Texas ID card. My doctor contacted the DPS. On the appointed date, my nurse took me to the DPS office. The staff moved everyone in the very busy office way to the far side of the reception area and ushered us along the other wall, into the back and into the Sargent's office. Everyone was wearing surgical masks. To avoid exposure to the usual fingerprint ink, and officer pulled an untouched fingerprint card out of a plastic ZipLoc® bag with long forceps. They placed the card on the Sargent's desk; with a gloved



hand, the Sargent then rolled my thumb on the appropriate spot. The card was returned to the bag and the officer took it away. Mission accomplished.

The only time I have been uncomfortable with the voting process was when I was visually impaired. A little row of accessible voting devices were lined up on a table along a wall. While I sat there to vote, the line of other voters was slowly moving right behind me, giving me no privacy at all, as best I could tell. I called the County Elections Department to report this, and it never happened again.

More recently, the first thing that happened really surprised me. My Texas ID card needed to be renewed. It turned out that being bed-bound at home was no problem for the DPS! A lady came to my home and took the new photo for my ID card with me sitting up in my hospital bed! Moreover—and I don't know if this was age- or disability-related—my new card was given an ""Indefinite"" expiration date. More than once, I wondered if I just dreamed this, but a glance at my card shows me sitting in my bed.

I used to have to mail a request for an absentee ballot before each election, but now disabled (and aged) voters can make a single request annually! So that reminder now pops up on my digital calendar on the first business day after New Year's Day annually.

Once, I didn't receive my absentee ballot in time so my caregivers loaded me up and took me to my polling place, less than a mile away. An election judge came out to the van, so I didn't have to get out of the vehicle to vote.

I really don't understand why any US citizen who wants to vote can't easily do so. At least in Texas, even in my variety of extreme circumstances, I have always been afforded the accommodations I've needed to get legal identification and help to vote. Once or twice, my doctors may have initiated a process but I'm not sure that even that much help was necessary. I believe that education of potential voters, disabled, aged, or otherwise, is a vital key to finding their easy path to voting. The second is like it: Defining a clear path, then identifying any obstructions in the current path should give state legislators guidance to establish state laws that direct state and county/parish agencies involved in



establishing proper identification and providing voting methods to accommodate the needs of every US citizen who wants to vote.” | *J.H., Texas*

“The most accessible voting experience I had was for the presidential election in 2020 when I was able to vote by mail. I was able to review my ballot in a timely fashion, further investigate candidates and proposals in which I had more questions about in a better effort to cast an educated vote, and I was able to take as long as I needed. In prior voting experiences of waiting in long lines, I have always been dictated by time constraints and felt high anxiety to complete my ballot as fast as I could so that the next people in line could move along as well. There have been transportation issues with voting in person with the time constraints of not knowing how long the wait time will be or the cognitive processing time in actually completing the ballot.” | *J.M., Michigan*

“I used to vote in person but had issues with the machines and felt uncomfortable asking for help as a vote is private. I now vote absentee” | *J.G., Indiana*

“As an American with a physical disability, I am proud to say that I have voted in every election since I was eligible to vote. I am a graduate of the Henry Viscardi School where I now lead the Viscardi Alumni Association In 2019, I hosted a voting demonstration event where local Board of Election representatives demonstrated to our audience the different voting machines and adaptive adaptations available for people with disabilities to vote.

Recently, my local polling place changed to a much more accessible location, where there is a ramp to enter the polling site, as well as a lowered table with a scanning machine. These enhancements allow persons with disabilities easier access. I had planned on voting in person in the 2020 election but, due to Covid, I opted to avail myself of a mail-in ballot. I plan to return to voting in person for future elections.” | *K.W., New York*



“I was denied access to vote once because I’m hard of hearing. When I came back with a hearing person all of a sudden I was allowed to vote. This was at a voting location advertised as ADA compliant. The woman taking my ID at the entrance said to her coworker “she doesn’t even look deaf”. I didn’t hear what she said but my hearing friend told me she was making fun of me while I voted. I spoke to the lead voting judge and filed a complaint. It wasn’t even the first time I experienced discrimination at this location.” | *A.H., Delaware*

“The first time I voted at a building that was vacated and used temporarily for voting. It was not the best site because it was not open all the time and it had a sign (blocked) on the front of the building telling people when they were open and that we needed to come back at unusual hours. The next time I voted in the same town, it was much better. It was still during the pandemic, but it was much better organized. There is only one site in our small town to vote. It is important to make sure the voting is very clear to us all. This time it was held at one of the schools and it included good parking for me and two other people I was with that were disabled or elderly. They pulled us out of line immediately after parking and asked if they could help us. They then escorted us, and many others like us, to the polls. It was very easy and safe for all. There were many voters, but no one was annoyed or exhausted from the experience, we also had the option of voting by mail which would have been useful if I trusted the mail to get the results, and get them on time.” | *H.V., Massachusetts*

“When I voted at my school, there were benches along the area of the line. I have a disability that makes standing for long periods of time difficult and dangerous (I’m likely to faint), but I can technically walk so insurance wouldn’t cover a wheelchair and I can’t afford one on my own. The benches allowed me to sit down while waiting to vote. I wasn’t at risk of fainting and I wasn’t in pain. At another district, where the voting area was unfamiliar, I waited outside for about an hour before even entering the building. There wasn’t anywhere to sit. I brought my own lawn chair and was able to scootch it forward to the next point when the line moved forward (it was social distanced so it was 6ft every minute or so.) if I had not brought that lawn chair I would have fainted before ever reaching the building. Having seating along line areas is a great way to improve



accessibility. Even if there's only enough to sit half the time, it makes a difference.” | *D.D., Texas*

“Minnesota for the most parts is very accessible except that we don't have online Caucuses until this year due to the pandemic. I would like to see this further implemented from now because physically going to a Caucus where most of the places aren't accessible is a problem considering how long you have to be there for.” | *M.O., Minnesota*

“Last year, because of the pandemic and having an autoimmune disorder, I chose to submit my ballot by mail in. I did not feel comfortable going in to the polls in person to vote. I submitted an online request for my ballot which went smoothly. When I received my ballot, I turned in my completed ballot to a local dropbox. I had an easy time dropping off my ballot in this way because the slot for the dropbox was low enough for me to reach me from my wheelchair and I had accessible transportation.

Last year during the pandemic, I assisted a friend who is blind to complete her ballot because she was not able to use her screen reading software on the computer to complete her ballot. Her family lives far away and could not help her nor did she feel comfortable asking family to help. Additionally, access to an in person reader was not as available during the height of the pandemic. The computer voting technology was not compatible with her assistive technology. She mailed off her completed ballot.” | *T.G., Maryland*

“One of the inaccessible moments has been the fact that the media did not talk about any additional parties other than the two major parties in the United States. In 2012 because I'm legally blind I used to watch the news and TV religiously. When it came time to vote I remembered asking the person at the Salt Lake county voters office if they could help me fill out my ballot. The person said yes, and so she started reading off the different names. Once she came to the name Jill Stein I asked her who is this person? She proceeded to tell me, oh I'm sorry I can't tell you who that is? Because I'm legally blind and he's a power



wheelchair and have limited mobility I needed someone to help me fill out my ballot and to being able to even understand what certain questions on the ballot mean are not always easy to be able to answer those questions?

Whenever I have tried to use a voting machine I've had to have the person at the voting place actually cast the vote for me as they tell me who is on the ballot but not being able to see what they're actually tapping I would not know if they actually were tapping the person I chose? Plus when I have filled out the paper ballot at home being legally blind I have had a very hard time because even if I could read the ballot using a magnifying glass or other means just the stress of trying to fill it out can be overwhelming Plus not knowing if I have filled in the correct circle or even if I have properly filled it in. At the same time I have a hard time with things like signing the ballot because my signature is not always the same and it's hard to know if my ballot is actually being counted? There are so many different variables and so many different things that make voting very inaccessible? To begin with it is very difficult when it's hard to get the information about the different candidates and the different parties to be able to make an informative decision on who you want to vote for and then not having the ability to actually fill out the ballot properly or wonder if you're filling it out properly is another one whether it's a mail-in ballot or an in-person ballot? When they don't allow all of the different parties that are out there to be part of the debates that does not help with accessibility. I was one of the people that in 2016 was trying to get Jill Stein on the ballot in Utah. I noticed that when I was asking people to sign the petition that there were people with disabilities as well that wanted to sign but they didn't have the physical ability to feel the petition out because the areas to fill out are way too small even for myself being legally blind and if someone has limited motor skills or hand-eye coordination these are other things that I noticed as well and during the pandemic because of safety it's hard for people to be able to fill out a petition if they want something done because nothing in Utah is electronic so that you could send a petition to someone over an electronic format where they would be able to fill it out? Personally it would be easier to fill out a ballot that doesn't just give you choice One or [Two] too but a ballot format that would be more accessible would be, [Ranked] Choice Voting. Unfortunately voting is not really a fun thing because one it's so hard to gather information and when you have disabilities like myself where I'm legally blind and have limited mobility being able to find information about different candidates or different situations and being able to try to understand what the different



candidates or issues are they care about versus the issues that us disabled [people] live each and every day. The point is that it is so overwhelming trying to be able to cast a vote knowing if your vote was counted correctly and just all of the other factors in trying to fill out ballots or petitions and the questionability about what real accessibility is when it comes to being able to understand what's on your ballot all of those different factors together can either make voting a happy and joyous occasion or a miserable irritating occasion? Voting should never be something that ends up only just helping a few people while [you, the person who is voting,] wonder if your vote even matters?" | *A.G., Utah*

"The last time I voted, the experience was passable. I received assistance from someone just inside the polling site in finding my correct table at which to sign in. The poll workers at the table, however, seemed unfamiliar with [the] concept of a white cane. One worker turned a tablet screen toward me expecting me to be able to see where I was supposed to sign and didn't offer any verbal instruction or to guide my hand to the line. Another poll worker responded positively when I asked to use the ballot-marking device. I was given my ballot in a privacy folder, guided to the machine, the machine given settings for speech, and I was given earphones when I asked for a set. When I was finished voting, I was guided to the tabulator and had my question about how the ballot could be inserted answered. Unfortunately, when I arrived at the polling site, I tried to enter via the accessible entrance, but the door was locked. If I had a physical disability as well as a visual one, I would have had an impossible time trying to vote. I alerted a poll worker to the locked door, and they immediately rectified the problem. However, this was in the early afternoon, and so it is possible the door was locked for most of the day." | *K.C., New York*

"2020 General Election. Mail in ballots were requested, received late. Not enough time to mail them back. I am disabled. This presented a problem because there is one drop box in the county. It is down town. The access to the drop box is difficult to park near. Requires walking a good distance. Lucas County Ohio. Fortunately, my husband was able to drive me and drop mine and his off. More drop boxes and less problems voting must be priority!" | *C.M., Ohio*



“I have a developmental and mobility disability that affects my ability to walk, stand, and balance. During the November 2020 election, because I was at high risk for COVID, I decided that returning my ballot was the best way to stay safe from the virus and to ensure my vote was counted. I located the nearest ballot drop box to my apartment and made a plan to vote. My partner and I went to drop off our ballots together, and when we arrived, the accessible path to the drop box was completely cut off by construction. I could not cast my ballot independently, and my partner had to drop off my ballot for me. Had I gone to vote by myself, I would have had to spend additional time, money, and effort to coordinate accessible transportation and potentially expose myself to additional risk of COVID-19. The city could have identified areas where construction permits had been issued and cross referenced it with placement sites for ballot drop boxes to ensure paths to drop boxes remained accessible.” | *M.T., District of Columbia*



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