

**Presidential Commission on Election Administration
Public Hearing
Thursday, August 8, 2013**

John Schmitt, President, Five Cedars Group, Inc.

What are the most important principles America stands for? What is it that makes us proud to be Americans? Isn't it our Freedom and Equality?

Good afternoon distinguished members of the PCEA Committee.

My name is John Schmitt. Six years ago, my company, Five Cedars Group, developed the Alternate Format Ballot for Oregon's voters with disabilities. I'm very proud that we've helped provide an easy and secure means for our state's voters who would otherwise have difficulty voting.

As Americans we're proud to live in a democracy in which we're free to vote. But is the slogan "one person, one vote" a reality for everyone? Can the most vulnerable of our citizens really vote without being subjected to unrealistic physical demands? Imagine that you're 35 and have developed severe macular degeneration. Or 75 and the painful arthritis in your hips put you in a wheelchair. Now imagine, how will you get to your polling place.

In 1968, while on a business trip, my father was in a car accident that left him a quadriplegic for 27 years. My siblings and I know first-hand the difficulties families have in transporting a wheelchair bound person to a specific location on a particular day. For us abled bodied to assume we've served the needs of the disabled because there's one "accessible" voting machine at a polling place is to not understand the sometimes heroic efforts it takes to get them there. And, it doesn't have to be that way.

My dad did have use of his arms and using two sticks Velcro to his palms got quite proficient at pecking out interesting letters on his trusty IBM Selectric typewriter. That was over twenty years ago. Today, my neighbor Dave, who is also a quad, takes pictures of his kids with his smart phone and posts them on Facebook. Times have changed. People with disabilities are using PC's and mobile devices in their everyday lives. *We can and should leverage their existing abilities and strengths to make it easier for them to vote.*

At the EAC's Accessible Voting Conference in April an attendee commented that "going to the polls to vote like everyone else gives voters with disabilities a sense of dignity and self-worth." That may be true for some. But, is that everyone's reality?

Last November, after waiting several hours to vote, a blind California woman, Lisamaria Martinez, was asked to walk to a second polling place because the accessible machine at her polling place didn't work. How much dignity and respect do you think she felt? Enough that she and four other plaintiffs are suing Alameda County.

Having the “right to vote” should not mean you have the right to stand in line for hours or be told you can’t vote at this polling place. Imagine how you’d feel if this happened to you.

Commissioners, I came to Denver today to ask your help to put “better reality” in our nation’s elections for voters just like Ms. Martinez.

The 1986 Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) as well as the Defense Department’s Federal Voting Assistance Program’s (FVAP) MOVE and EASE programs successfully made it easier for military and other overseas voters to vote. We’ve given our soldiers extra time to receive a ballot, mark their choices, and mail, email, or fax their voting intentions to their local election offices. This act and these programs have made the “right to vote” a reality. But, only for UOCAVA defined voters.

Since these programs work, let’s extend the rules for participation. I’m asking that you strongly recommend the rules of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) be expanded and it’s benefits be made available to anyone who needs additional assistance in exercising their right.

Commissioners, no one doubts that Poll workers work very hard and *really* do want to help everyone vote. But if the equipment provided is difficult to program and set up, if election staff budgets are being cut, and with a limited number of voting days, poll workers are fighting a losing battle.

In Oregon, we email HTML ballots and mail large format ballots (18pt font) to voters who request them. Interestingly, last November the age range of our large format ballot voters was 29 to 103. Some of them could have been veterans previously covered by UOCAVA. We can make voting privately, independently and securely a reality.

Your recommendation could empower millions of people with disabilities to vote on the digital devices they already have and use on a daily basis. Expanding the UOCAVA rules to cover voters with disabilities will help make elections Free, Fair and Accessible for everyone.

Thank you for your time and service!

Sincerely,

John Schmitt
President
Five Cedars Group, Inc.
john.schmitt@fivecedarsgroup.com