

Ten Suggested Practices to Improve Accessible Voting

As part of activities supported by the Election Assistance Commission Paraquad, a partner with the Research Alliance for Accessible Voting, collected informal research and information from voters and Election Administrators prior to and following the 2012 election cycle. Using interviews, focus groups, evaluations, and Election Day pilots, Paraquad identified ten suggested practices that could lead to a more successful accessible voting experience for administrators and voters. The suggestions are outlined in the following pages.

- Work with community members with disabilities and disability advocacy groups year round.
- Troubleshoot accessibility issues well before the Election.
- Integrate information on accessibility, accommodations, and disability as much as possible into regular training materials.
- Consider basing poll worker training on teaching workers how to use job aids instead of information memorization.
- Utilize well-designed and accessible signage at the polling place.
- Hire people with disabilities as poll workers and election staff.
- Train poll workers on how to use commonly used accessible features of voting machines, in addition to training on voting equipment set-up.
- Create and utilize networking and problem solving opportunities with other administrators and disability advocacy groups.
- Keep yourself and your staff up to date on ADA and HAVA Guidelines.
- Evaluate yourself, your staff, and poll workers!

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Ten Suggested Practices to Improve Accessible Voting Experiences

Work with community members with disabilities and disability advocacy groups year round: Studies show that people with disabilities vote at lower levels, register to vote at lower levels, and expect difficulties at their polling place at higher levels than those who do not have a disability. Building relationships with groups that touch this population and working to ensure that any barriers are identified and addressed could go a long way in closing this gap. Many organizations exist that are ideal for helping with such things. Start first with your local or state Center for Independent Living (CIL) or Protection and Advocacy organization. These organizations are full of experts with disabilities with firsthand experience regarding accessibility issues. They can offer invaluable knowledge and advice on how to improve elections for everyone.

Find your local CIL: <http://www.ilru.org/html/publications/directory/index.html>

Find your state Protection and Advocacy agency: <http://www.ndrn.org/en/ndrn-member-agencies.html>

Helpful activities would include: taking advocates to assess and troubleshoot solutions for inaccessible polling places; performing voting equipment demonstrations and practice sessions to familiarize people with voting technology; holding focus groups with people with disabilities to identify accessibility issues and concerns and brainstorm possible solutions; including representatives from disability organizations on any planning councils or boards; and inviting disability organizations to participate in and help plan community education fairs.

Troubleshoot accessibility issues well before the Election: Administrators likely already know which polling places are going to have physical barriers for people with disabilities and limited mobility. At the very least, make a commitment to assess polling places that received accessibility complaints during the previous election. Bringing disability advocates with you can be very beneficial. Advocates will be able to quickly identify where the problem areas are and come with easy solutions already in mind which people who do not have a disability may be unfamiliar with. Also, for very problematic polling places that cannot be fixed, this will at least allow you to inform voters ahead of time that the polling place is not ADA accessible and voters should consider voting at an accessible central polling location.

Areas that should be considered in a polling place assessment include availability of accessible parking, pathway from parking to entry, pathway from entry to voting location, doorway into voting room, pathway around the voting room (check-in to ballot box), possible room layouts, table heights and voting machine placement, thresholds on doorways, and any steps or inclines.

Integrate information on accessibility, accommodations, and disability as much as possible into regular training materials: By setting voters with disabilities apart from voters without disabilities, you might set poll workers up for potentially challenging situations. Some poll workers may feel extra pressure to carry out “special tasks” for voters with disabilities and fear consequences of making a mistake. Some poll workers might even take it upon themselves to make sure a voter qualifies to be in this “special group” of voters who can have an accommodation. This leads to challenging situations as not all disabilities are visible and it is not the poll workers job to assess whether voters qualify as being a person with a disability who qualifies for an accommodation. Approaching access and accommodation as part of interaction with all voters who might need support and not special “disability exceptions” could prevent that segregation of thought from happening and lead to more inclusive and successful voting experiences for poll workers and voters.

For example, instead of telling poll workers that voting machines are available to voters with accessibility needs, inform poll workers that voting machines are available to all voters who wish to use the features on the machine. Explain that voters can benefit from large print, audio, high contrast, and screen tilt which could meet the different needs of a variety of voters, including voters with disabilities. Also, when training voters on how to set up the polling place, integrate accessibility information within your regular set-up instructions. If you are discussing the flow of the room, mention that walkways and aisles should be wide enough for all voters, including those using wheelchairs or assistive devices, and clear of unnecessary debris. Accessibility and accommodations should be seen as a part of all processes, not add-ons or after thoughts.

For help integrating these materials, contact your local or statewide Center for Independent Living or other disability advocacy organization.

Consider basing your training on teaching workers how to use job aids instead of information memorization:

Giving workers job aids (visual aids, checklists, picture guides, route maps) can do a great deal to increase poll worker information retention and ensure a successful election. Using job aids has been found to be a best practice in training adults. This is especially useful for accessibility and accommodation related information and use of the accessible voting equipment. Access and accommodations are not topics that the average poll worker thinks about in their everyday life so this information could be especially difficult to grasp or remember. Further, training on accessibility features on voting machines includes technical information that many elderly poll workers find intimidating. Job aids might prove to be a more successful training approach in these aspects than a traditional lecture and PowerPoint style presentation weeks before the election.

Also, by training poll workers on how to use the job aids at their polling place you will be preparing them to use the tools they need to address many questions that come up on Election Day. Training on how to use a job aid and familiarizing poll workers with job aids will also allow you to fit a growing amount of Election Day information into a smaller amount of time while ensuring that poll workers have access to all of the pertinent information they need in order to run a successful polling place.

For examples of job aids and Election Day Picture Guides containing disability and accessibility specific information, contact Paraquad, Inc. by phone at (314)289-4200 or email at contactus@paraquad.org or the Tennessee Disability Coalition by phone at (615)383-9442 or email at coalition@tndisability.org. Both organizations researched, developed, and piloted job aids during the 2012 Election cycle which were well received by Election Administrators.

Utilize well-designed and accessible signage at the polling place: Well-designed signage would improve the voting experience for some voters with disabilities. People with disabilities are used to asking for assistance when needed and voicing their need for specific accommodations. However, you cannot ask for something if you do not know it is available. It is nearly impossible to reach every single voter with a disability before the election to inform them of available accommodations; however, well designed signage and equipment placement can take care of this need on Election Day. Use signage not only to direct voters to doorways and accessible pathways, but also to educate and inform them on all of their voting options, tell them what accommodations are available, and encourage them to ask for assistance when needed.

Make sure signs are not overwhelming and cluttered. Signs should be easy to see and read, with large print and pictures. Include information on accessible voting options, available accommodations, accessibility features on voting machines, tools available to assist voters (magnifiers, rulers, pencil grips, etc.), and even just signs to

encourage voters to ask for help if needed. Also, if your state allows curbside voting as an accommodation, a sign should be placed outside informing voters of this option.

Hire people with disabilities as poll workers and elections staff: Having a person with firsthand experience with disability on the team will bring a valuable voice to the group. People with disabilities are familiar with accommodations and accessibility and will think about such things throughout the entirety of the planning process. It will also reinforce the idea that the disability population is not part of the 'other' or a special group, but part of an inclusive community.

When recruiting poll workers, be sure to work with your local Center for Independent Living (CIL) or other disability specific organizations to find poll workers. Many CILs have volunteer and employment programs full of people with disabilities who would make excellent poll workers. Centers for Independent Living can also help you effectively think through and plan for accommodations for poll workers with disabilities. To find your local Center for Independent Living, visit: <http://www.ilru.org/html/publications/directory/index.html>

Train poll workers on how to use commonly used accessibility features of voting machines, in addition to training on voting equipment set-up: In order to properly prepare poll workers to interact with voters who wish to use accessible voting equipment, poll workers need to understand how to actually *use* the equipment, accessibility features and all. Poll workers may be called upon to help voters with accessibility needs use the machine. If the worker is unfamiliar with the machine, they could make the voter feel insecure with the voting process. They also will not be able to properly educate voters on all of their accessibility options.

When training on accessible voting equipment, make sure you allow poll workers to practice using the voting machine. Poll workers should know how the machines can be height adjusted, how to tilt screens, how the audio option works, how to make the print large, and how to change the contrast of the screen. When creating job aids, this information should be represented as well.

Create and utilize networking and problem solving opportunities: Most accessibility problems are not new problems. A lot of unique strategies are being developed with the help of community members and advocacy groups. Many opportunities exist for Election administrators and staff to network and engage in idea sharing and mutual problem solving which should be utilized.

The Election Center is one organization which specializes in hosting conferences and events to encourage continuing professional development and networking. To see a list of upcoming opportunities, visit their website at <https://www.electioncenter.org>. You can also reach out to local disability groups and Centers for Independent Living to set up focus groups and engage in problem solving. Be sure to ask what the major concerns are from the disability community, what technology and innovations exist to help with these issues, and what strategies other businesses have used to create an accessible, inclusive environment. To find your local Center for Independent Living, visit <http://www.ilru.org/html/publications/directory/index.html>

Keep up to date on ADA Guidelines: It is crucial for Election Administrators and staff to be familiar with and up-to-date on ADA guidelines for polling places, as well as pertinent election laws, especially the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). This information can get pretty in-depth and technical and can be difficult to remember and implement in everyday elections processes. It is very important that administrators stay up-to-date on this information and refresh themselves annually. Further, any staff who implements any process of the election should be well-trained on this information. The director is not always the person in charge of developing

processes or materials, so providing training opportunities only to people in this higher position is not enough. All staff should at least have a basic working knowledge of how to ensure they are creating an accessible experience.

Keeping up to date on this information does not have to be time consuming or expensive. There are many resources online that you can look at to educate yourself or your staff on these guidelines. Consider the following websites:

For an ADA Checklist for Polling Places: <http://www.ada.gov/votingck.htm>

For various elections related accessibility information, including accessible polling places, US laws, assistive technology, and accessible voting systems: <http://elections.itif.org/resources/> or www.accessiblevoting.org

Also, Centers for Independent Living or local disability groups can provide this service to your office.

Evaluate yourself, your staff, and your poll workers. Evaluation is key to identifying strengths and weaknesses. One cannot expect to make improvements or solve problems if evaluation is not part of your overall election plan. Evaluation should not just be an afterthought or optional but should be seen as one of the most important parts of an election administration strategy. Evaluation can be kept confidential. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Evaluation does not have to be extremely formal and paper based. Some Election Administrators use games during training to assess whether poll workers are grasping what they need to.

There are several different places to incorporate evaluation in order to improve accessibility and overall election administration:

Evaluate Poll Workers after Training: This should focus both on evaluating the trainer and methodology, and also assessing what the poll workers actually learned during the training. This will help you see if poll workers felt that you spent enough time preparing them on accessibility and accommodation issues and if your methodology was useful. It can also help you assess whether the poll workers grasped the information, understand it, and are prepared to administer accommodations and ensure access on Election Day.

Evaluate poll workers on Election Day: This is a true test of how well the training and job aids worked for poll workers. On Election Day, they will have a better grasp on what they were prepared for and what they could have used more information on. This information will be extremely valuable when developing your next election's poll worker training curriculum. Giving poll workers an outlet to process their Election Day with you can also alert you to situations and issues happening at polling places of which you were previously unaware.

Evaluate Elections Staff: Election staff is crucial in making sure all aspects of Election Day run smoothly. We need to be sure that our staff is up-to-date and knowledgeable about processes, accessibility, and accommodations and using accurate information when administering their tasks. You should use this opportunity to get feedback from staff.