

# PUBLIC SUBMISSION

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RFI: Promoting Access to Voting

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Promoting Access To Voting

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## Submitter Information

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## General Comment

Dear Promoting Access To Voting Committee Members:

I am writing to provide suggestions to increase access to voting for people with disabilities, in specific, voters living with cognitive impairment. I will also attach 1 of several peer reviewed published research papers on enfranchising voters and focus specifically on voters living with traumatic brain injury (TBI) as this is an area our research and scholarship has focused on via National Institutes of Health supported grant funding.

Within the TBI population, voting is more difficult than other activities such as personal hygiene, looking after one's health, dressing/laundry, housework, managing a family budget, shopping (e.g., groceries and home goods), interpersonal relationships (with family, friends, or acquaintances), and leisure activity. Research has indicated that there are state laws that could bar those with TBI from voting, explicit in Constitutional language, statute, or precedence from court decisions (Hurme & Appelbaum, 2007). Certainly, some individuals with TBI may be under guardianship, which disqualifies them from voting in about four states (Link et al., 2012) but because physical behaviors may resemble a person who is intoxicated (slurred speech, poor balance, etc.), individuals with TBI may expect or experience more problems at the polls than people without disabilities (Schur & Kruse, 2000, 2009). Furthermore, those with TBI tend to lose their employment and relocate more often than the general population because of financial hardship (Penna et al., 2010). Political behavior scholars have found that mobility is a key barrier to registering to vote (e.g., Squire et al., 1987) resulting in a lower likelihood of voting for those with lower mobility. Given that many may have impaired working memory and information-processing skills (McAllister et al., 2001; McDowell, Whyte, & D'Esposito, 1997), "stating one's name and address," which is required identification as of this writing in North Carolina, is a challenge. Some individuals with TBI are unable to drive after their injury (Rapport, Bryer, & Hanks, 2008), and as a result photo

identification, in the form of a driver's license or age of majority card, is not nearly as easy to obtain as may be true for the general population.

Specific recommendation (in brief) are:

1. To promote voter participation for people with disabilities by intentionally adding mobile polling stations at hospitals. Hospitals ought to partner with local election boards to add mobile polling at medical centers, hospitals, rehabilitation facilities and other health care facilities where many people with disabilities or health conditions spend their time.

2. Election officials ought to receive manualized training on assisting citizens with disabilities at the polls. We are not aware of any data on the effect of election official training on participation of voters with TBI/cognitive limitations. Greater provision of basic training to increase knowledge about mental incapacity or TBI among election officials could potentially facilitate participation of voters with cognitive limitations.

3. More research and grant funding are needed to advance knowledge about specific barriers to participation to enfranchise specific populations. There is a paucity of research on voting of persons who need assistance at the polls, many of whom have TBI, but some who are simply old, or cognitively impaired, and how to solicit whether someone needs assistance and how to provide that assistance. Similarly, research on political participation or voting among people with neurologic conditions has yet to examine why disenfranchisement might be self-imposed. Perhaps self-imposed disenfranchisement is due to factors including low self-efficacy or lack of motivation, or simply because people with disabilities are less likely to go and vote if they expect problems at the polls (Schur & Kruse, 2009), or perhaps self-imposed disenfranchisement is the brain's way of conserving energy for daily activities that matter for survival (work, sleep, eating) at the expense of voting (Verba et al., 1995). Future research is needed to study/analyze those with TBI to understand why people with TBI do not vote and why voting matters. Research could lead to new insights into obstacles to voting participation faced by citizens with mental incapacity or TBI so that these citizens are able to vote in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation as for other voters and provides specific recommendations to the United States Election Assistance Commission to facilitate participation of voters with cognitive limitations (Lampel, 2011).

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## Attachments

Hirsch 2019 WMHP