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Promoting Access To Voting

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General Comment

I want to first thank you so much for addressing this very critical question. Barriers to those with disabilities are disproportionately great compared to the barriers of others, and I so appreciate the opportunity to address them. My background in working with those with disabilities includes those with chronic as well as so-called "temporary" disabilities via family members, and working closely with a physically disabled student in order to develop accessible interfaces for education. My "day job" is an Academic Technology Accessibility Specialist, so I try to keep current on the accessibility of technology in common use. However, I write to you as a private citizen. Please feel free to contact me at sharon.austin.2012@gmail.com if you should have any questions.

1. Access to voter registration -- this is an incredibly major problem. First, because of the "nature" of notifications as to where and when one may vote, those with disabilities who are dependent upon others for transportation may have been sent a notice, but not seen it because a notice will go into a spam folder. Because of privacy issues, guardians and care-givers who normally provide transportation will be unaware of the need to take this person with disabilities to the polling station. Also, in my case, when my mother became ill, her episodes of poor health came suddenly, and I had very little time to plan for transportation. It is paramount that after-hours voting be allowed; at the time I was working a job with no benefits and could not take time off without losing pay. Were my mother alive, the only way I would have been able to take her to the polling place would have been after hours. This produced additional challenges. Because of her poor health, she needed frequent access to restrooms. Most polling places forced all to stay in line, or lose their place. Those in poor health are not capable of standing in line for extended periods of time.
In the case of my brother, who had some cognitive challenges, our family was constantly trying to make sure he was not being taken advantage of. I am not sure what the answer to this is, but I believe that some sort regulation or law that does not allow anything but official ballots to have some sort of official

identifying mark or seal, so that those with cognitive challenges -- and/or caregivers -- can understand that anything that is asking for personally identifiable information is something required by an official government agency. PLEASE do not ask for Social Security numbers to be entered on the outside of the mail, even for partial Social Security Numbers. If you really, really have to use Social Security Numbers, even partial ones, consider an "inner sleeve" that asks for a partial Social Security number, rather than one that is on the outside for all the world to see. Even partial Social Security Numbers create extreme vulnerabilities.

Another major barrier I discovered through my friend with disabilities was to access was polling places is extremely restricted by the availability of certified transportation that can carry heavy wheelchairs. Extended time to vote is critical -- both in terms of the total number of days to do so, and, for how many hours of the day the poll is open, simply because those with disabilities often rely on others to transport them to the polls, and they need many days' lead time to coordinate.

2. Voting technology: Please ensure that there is an ability to access content through voice alone for those that do not have use of their hands, and that any passwords or other uniquely identifiable information is actually able to be entered into the system with the voice system. We found out when we were working with a student with disabilities that certain kinds of numbers were not accepted by the voice system. Also, please ensure that the screen is able to enlarge the text for those with low vision. Also, be aware, that some text may be too light to be read by those with low vision, so have a machine that is either capable of allowing the user to adjust the brightness or darkness of the text and/or background, and/or have multiple machines. I highly recommend that at least one of the machines have JAWS screen reader on it.

My apologies, I am rapidly running out of space. I will include an attached file that fully incorporates the above, as well as, comments on the following:

3. Voting by mail
4. polling locations
5. Poll worker training

Again, thank you so much for doing this, and don't hesitate to reach out if there are further questions.
With great appreciation,
Sharon Austin

Attachments

Barriers to Voting