

FIRST PERSON: HOW TO HELP ELECTION WORKERS PROVIDE EQUAL ACCESS TO OUR DISABLED CITIZENS

A partnership between a disability rights group and the secretary of state's office aims to ensure polling places can meet the needs of all Iowans



by Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate

Spearheaded by U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa, the Americans with Disabilities Act became the law of the land just over 32 years ago.

It made a dramatic impact on providing access to public accommodations for millions of Americans. For state and local election officials, the ADA requires us to ensure every polling place is accessible for voters. However, there is much more we can do beyond meeting the minimum requirements of the ADA.

I want every voter to have a positive experience at the polls. The key to meeting that goal: provide poll workers with the necessary tools in a format that is easy to follow.

When I returned to the Iowa Secretary of State's Office in January 2015, 20 years after my first tenure on the job began, one of my top priorities was helping veterans and Iowans with disabilities vote. That initiative turned into a multi-pronged, multi-year effort geared toward voter and poll worker education and community outreach, as well as providing the necessary resources at every polling place.

The initiative was recognized with a U.S. Elections Assistance Commission Clearie Award in 2018. But our work was far from finished.

Ahead of the 2020 elections, my office unveiled a new tool to ensure accessibility at every polling place in Iowa.

The "Voting Accessibility Quick Check" booklet is something every precinct election official in the country should have on Election Day.

We partnered with Disability Rights Iowa to produce "The Voting Accessibility Quick Check" booklet. It's a tool for precinct election officials to use to ensure polling places meet ADA requirements, as well as to quickly recognize and fix any accessibility issues that may arise on Election Day.

A polling place that was chosen in August could look very different on a snowy November day in Iowa.

Our "Quick Check" booklet focuses on the three main components of the polling place: the outside, the entrance and the inside.

It reminds poll workers of things like the necessity for every parking lot to have one accessible space for every 25 spaces, the need for signs from the main entrance to the accessible entrance, and the importance of having all paths of travel be at least 36 inches wide.

It's not enough to be accessible at 7 a.m. when voting begins.

Polling places are busy on Election Day. Due to a high volume of people coming in and out of the building, the initial setup could inadvertently change. Tables and chairs might move. Signs could shift. Walkways that were accessible when the polls opened might have obstacles accidentally placed in the path.

That's why the "Quick Check" guide is such a useful tool. It's a handy, easy-to-follow booklet that any poll worker can utilize to check for accessibility and adjust when needed.

The booklet includes information about accessible voting equipment, spacing and signage, and it can be used as a measuring tool. Panels in the easy-fold booklet provide the necessary measurements and accessibility requirements for every aspect of the polling place.

'QUICK CHECK,' BIG DIFFERENCE

The "ADA Checklist for Polling Places" (produced by the U.S. Department of Justice) is a 25-page document that provides technical assistance for polling place accessibility.

A few years ago, my office provided tablets to all 99 counties with this checklist installed as an app. This allowed auditors to identify and set up polling places ahead of elections.

Our "Quick Check" booklet is a fantastic supplement to the ADA checklist to use on Election Day. Just six pages long, with graphics and a measuring tool, it is an easy-to-manage instrument that poll workers and

county auditors have found useful to double-check ADA accessibility at the polls before they open on Election Day morning.

Most important, we are ensuring that Iowans with disabilities have equal access to voting.

"It has been an honor to partner with the Secretary of State's Office in preparing the quick-check voting guide," Catherine Johnson, executive director of Disability Rights Iowa, says.

"It has been an exciting experience for our agency to participate in [its] growth and development."

We must continue to find unique and innovative ways to help all eligible citizens cast their ballots.

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission's report on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections showed significant progress in making voting easier for people with disabilities. Among people with disabilities who voted in person, 18 percent reported difficulties. This is down from 30 percent in 2012.

Despite improvements, there is still much more work to be done. "The Voting Accessibility Quick Check" booklet is something every precinct election official in the country should have on Election Day. It's a tool that helps make elections more accessible for eligible voters by allowing precinct election officials to review accessibility throughout the day and to quickly remedy any concerns that arise.

That, in turn, makes their jobs easier. Those are two goals every state election commissioner should strive to achieve.

Paul Pate returned to the Iowa Secretary of State's Office in 2015, 20 years after his first stint in the position. He also has served as a state senator and as Cedar Rapids mayor. Secretary of State Pate is a 2015 graduate of The Council of State Governments' Henry Toll Fellowship program.

SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

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NUMBERS ON VOTING AMONG U.S. CITIZENS WITH A DISABILITY

17.7 MILLION	# OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WHO REPORTED VOTING IN THE NOVEMBER 2020 ELECTIONS — ABOUT 11 PERCENT OF ALL VOTERS
+5.9	THE PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE IN TURNOUT IN DISABLED VOTERS BETWEEN 2016 AND 2020 (55.9% IN 2016 VS. 61.8% IN 2020)
18%	% OF VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES REPORTING SOME TYPE OF DIFFICULTY VOTING IN PERSON IN 2020 (THAT IS DOWN FROM 30% IN 2016)
74%	% OF VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES IN 2020 WHO CAST BALLOTS BY MAIL OR EARLY IN PERSON



Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission

TURNOUT RATES IN MIDWEST AMONG DISABLED AND NON-DISABLED VOTERS, 2020 (ESTIMATES)

State	Disability	No disability	Disability gap*
Illinois	64.3%	68.9%	-4.6
Indiana	59.3%	61.2%	-2.0
Iowa	67.4%	70.9%	-3.5
Kansas	58.7%	66.8%	-8.1
Michigan	60.1%	68.0%	-7.9
Minnesota	76.3%	78.0%	-1.8
Nebraska	62.8%	65.5%	-2.7
North Dakota	73.1%	66.4%	+6.8
Ohio	62.5%	71.4%	-8.9
South Dakota	54.4%	59.2%	-4.8
Wisconsin	63.6%	75.0%	-11.4
United States	61.8%	67.5%	-5.7

*The sample size was low in many states, which increases the margin of error and decreases the likelihood of finding a disability gap that exceeds the margin of error. In the Midwest, the disability gap in 2020 was large enough to be outside the margin of error in Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission

