

Jon Husted

Ohio Secretary of State



Disability

Resource Guide



ADA Coordinator's Office

Local: (614) 387-6039

Toll Free: (877) SOS-OHIO (877-767-6446)

TTY Local: (614) 728-3295

TTY Toll Free: (877) TTY-OHIO (877-889-6446)

www.OhioSecretaryofState.gov

This guide is a resource for election officials and precinct election officials to better understand and to provide guidance on how to assist voters with disabilities with courtesy and respect.

Access to Polling Locations on Election Day

Precinct election officials must ensure that the polling location is as accessible as possible on the day of the election. Here are some simple solutions to improve access for voters with disabilities visiting your location on Election Day.

1. Travel the route from the accessible parking space(s), through the accessible entrance, and all the way inside the polling location to make sure there are no physical barriers for people with disabilities.
2. Verify that adequate accessible parking or temporary accessible equipment has been provided to setup adequate accessible parking for voters arriving at the polling location.
3. Ensure adequate directional signs are provided. Signs are great for all voters to provide direction to the voting entrance and also to direct voters with disabilities to the nearest accessible entrance to the polling place.
4. If there is an alternate/separate entrance being used specifically for accessibility, ensure that it is unlocked.
5. Weather permitting, keep doors open. It is a great way to increase access in and out of the voting location.
6. Ensure that both exterior and interior routes are clear and free of any barriers to allow for all voters to easily navigate to and from the voting area.
7. Provide directional signage inside the polling location, directing voters to the voting room or space. This provides clear direction for people and limits any unnecessary walking or standing for voters with mobility impairments.
8. Place chairs, trash cans, or cones underneath objects that protrude more than 4 inches from the wall into the exterior and interior route of travel, as well as throughout the voting area, to make them cane-detectable. This will allow voters who are blind to safely navigate to and from the polling location.
9. Provide a voting room or space that is set up to allow voters proper access to all functions of the voting process. Allow room for voters to maneuver throughout, setting up chairs for sitting if needed, and create accessible tables, taping cords down to prevent tripping. Ensure adequate maneuvering space at voting machines.
10. Set up voting machine(s) to be used by people with a disability in an accessible and private location within the room being used for voting.



If you find that accessibility is lacking or needs improvement, you should contact the board of elections and be alert that voters with disabilities may need additional assistance in accessing the polling location.



Accessible Voting Machines

In 2002, U.S. Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). Each polling location is required to have at least one voting machine that is accessible to individuals with disabilities, including people who are blind or visually impaired. The voting system should provide the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for other voters. These machines include such features as:

- Audio ballots,
- Braille and tactile lettering,
- Zoom screen/large print text,
- Screen color contrast,
- Screen height or tilt adjustments,
- Sip/puff navigation, and
- Touch screen or push button navigation.

Keys to Ensuring Access to Voting Equipment

- Ensure that the accessible voting equipment is set up and ready for use.
- All voting equipment, including machines, scanners and electronic poll books, should be set up in a manner that is accessible for everyone.
- Precinct election officials should practice beforehand to become familiar with features of the accessible voting equipment.
- Precinct election officials should understand how accessible features work and be able to demonstrate those features.
- Precinct election officials should be able to answer questions about accessibility features and troubleshoot any issues that arise.



These accessible machines are required by law, but more importantly, the features offered allow people with disabilities to vote independently. Ensuring proper setup and having knowledgeable precinct election officials is the key to allowing all voters, including people with disabilities, equal access to voting with privacy and independence.

Instead of telling precinct election officials that voting machines are available to voters with disabilities, inform precinct election officials that voting machines are available to all voters who wish to use the features on the machines. Explain that many voters both with and without disabilities can benefit from large print, audio, high contrast, and screen height/tilt.

Providing Assistance to Voters with Disabilities

A voter with a disability who needs assistance participating in the voting process has two options:

1. The voter may bring a person of his/her choice to assist the voter in the voting process, other than the voter's employer, an agent of the voter's employer, or an officer or agent of the voter's union, if any, or any candidate whose name appears on the ballot.
2. The voter may decide to receive assistance from two precinct election officials, each from a different political party. (Ohio Revised Code §3505.24)



A well-managed polling place can be the most important factor contributing to the quality of the voter's experience. Effective and clear communication is the lifeline of a successful relationship, even if the relationship is as brief, as it is when voting. Regardless of the voter's ability, clear communication can make the difference in whether the voter's experience is seamless, and whether that person is able to vote privately and independently. Here are a few tips for effectively communicating with all voters, including voters with disabilities:

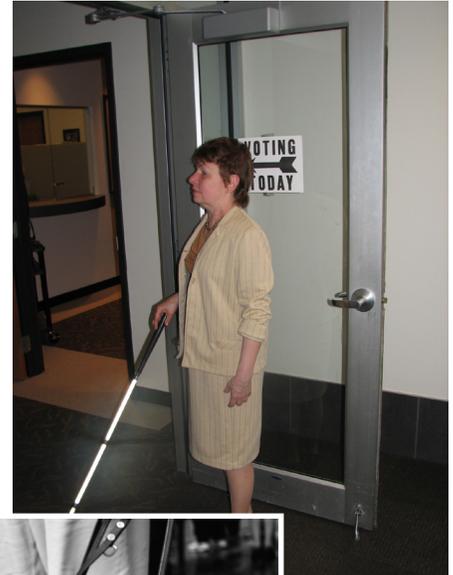
- The way a precinct election official conducts himself or herself at the polling location sets the tone for the voting location and serves as an example for voters. Treating voters and other elections officials with courtesy and respect is the foundation for a smooth process. If you have patience, the voter will have patience with you, should problems arise.
- A voter with a disability should be viewed no differently than any other voter. Communicating clearly, patiently, and on pace with any voter's needs will make the voting experience smooth and your job as a precinct election official easier.
- Let the voter tell you what is best for the voter. Once the voter enters the polling location, never panic and assume the type of assistance required. Communicate; ask first "Would you like some assistance?" If the offer is accepted, allow the voter to indicate what he or she would like. Often you will find that voters are able to maneuver through the entire voting process unassisted.
- If any assistance is provided, keep it between you and the voter. Allow his or her voting process to be private, as with any other voter. There is no reason to speak loudly or overreact if a voter asks for a type of accommodation. For example, if the voter request a chair, do not yell, "Jane Bring a chair, she needs a chair!" Instead, simply bring a chair or ask a colleague discreetly to do so.
- Perhaps the voter cannot read for whatever reason and requests help at the voting booth. Precinct elections officials may offer the audio ballot option, or softly read the ballot, quietly reaffirming how or for whom the voter has voted.
- Assisting a voter with a disability should not be viewed as an "additional" task for a precinct election official, it's good old-fashioned common courtesy.

Accommodating people with disabilities is mostly a matter of clear communication and common sense, but not all disabilities are the same. The disability will sometimes dictate the proper assistance needed to make that particular voter's experience a positive experience.

Interacting With Voters Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

People who are blind often know how to orient themselves and get around, but a place new to them, such as a polling place, may create some uncertainty. They may travel unassisted, sometimes using a cane or a guide dog. A person may have a visual impairment that is not obvious, such as difficulty adjusting from outside to inside lighting. As with any disability, be prepared to offer assistance if you suspect any potential difficulties.

- As soon as you come into contact with the voter, identify yourself and state that you are a precinct election official. Let the voter know when you leave or walk away.
- When giving directions to navigate the voting location, be as specific as possible and indicate obstacles in the path of travel, or offer your elbow and guide the voter. Don't be uncomfortable using words like "look" or "see."
- If you are asked to guide a voter who is blind or visually impaired, ask which arm he or she prefers and allow the voter to grasp your arm above the elbow, don't grab the voter, this will allow the voter to walk a half step behind you.
- After asking, it is appropriate to guide a voter's finger to the signature line on the electronic poll book or signature book to show the voter where to sign.
- It is neither helpful nor courteous to raise the volume of your voice when addressing a person who is visually impaired, even if you are trying to be helpful.
- Speak directly to the voter, not to a companion that maybe assisting the voter.
- Service animals are not pets. Do not distract or pet them.



Don't be afraid to ask how to be most helpful.

Interacting With Voters Who Have Mobility Impairments

People who use canes, walkers, or wheelchairs have different disabilities and varying abilities. Some can use their arms and hands. Some can get out of their wheelchairs and even walk for short distances.

- Make sure that chairs are available for voters with mobility disabilities and/or voters who are elderly, have a serious illness, or are pregnant and cannot stand for a long period of time.
- Do not lean or hang on a voter's wheelchair. Consider this device an extension of the voter's body.
- Place yourself at eye level when speaking with a voter in a wheelchair. Try to sit or kneel at the same level as the voter in a wheelchair.
- Voters who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so never grab a voter's arms or his or her devices.
- Always ask the voter if he or she wants assistance, wait for a response, and then provided the needed assistance as directed.

Interacting With Voters Who Are Deaf or Hearing Impaired

People who are deaf or hard of hearing have a variety of communication preferences and styles, some may use sign language, others may read lips, rely on assistive listening devices or interpreters and/or use a combination of each.

- To get the attention of a voter who is deaf, tap him or her on the shoulder or wave your hand.
- Identify who you are (i.e., show your name badge).
- Look directly at the voter when communicating.
- Speak calmly, slowly and directly to the voter. Do not shout or exaggerate. Face the voter at all times.
- In simple and brief interactions like voting, communicating in writing is acceptable.
- If not understood at first, write or rephrase, rather than repeat sentences.



Interacting with Voters Who Have Cognitive or Intellectual Impairments

People with cognitive or intellectual impairments may have a hard time using what they have learned and applying it from one setting or situation to another.

- Keep communication simple and direct; help voters understand a complex idea by breaking it down into smaller parts if needed, such as giving instructions one step at a time.
- Voters with cognitive or intellectual disabilities rely on routine in their everyday lives. Changes in environment or routine may induce anxiety or fear—be patient.
- Allow for extra time for a voter with a cognitive or intellectual disability.

Interacting With Voters Who Have Speech Impairments

A person who has had a stroke, is severely hard of hearing, uses a voice prosthesis or has a stammer or other type of speech disability may be difficult to understand.

- A voter who cannot speak may give a name and address simply by providing identification to the assisting precinct election official, who then reads the name and address out loud.
- If you do not understand something, do not pretend that you do. Ask the voter to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Follow the voter's cues to determine whether speaking, gestures, or writing is the most effective method of communication.
- When speaking, do so calmly, slowly, and directly to the voter. Do not shout. Ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Be patient.

Interacting with Voters Who have Hidden Disabilities

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may make a request or act in a way that seems strange to you that is actually disability-related. Also, people may have a respiratory or heart condition that limits their walking long distances or walking quickly.

- You may give seemingly simple verbal directions to a voter, but the person asks you to write the information down. They may have a learning disability that makes written communication easier.
- A voter with a hidden disability may request to use an audio ballot. Do not question or ask why - he or she may have dyslexia or other reading disabilities that make written information difficult to comprehend.
- An apparently healthy-looking voter may request to sit, rather than stand in line. This voter could be fatigued from the effects of cancer or have Cystic Fibrosis. Be respectful of the person's request and accommodate the voter if possible.

A Final Word

People with disabilities are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, problems and joys. While the disability is an integral part of who they are, it does not define them. Treat them as individuals. As election officials and precinct election officials, it is your duty to ensure that all voters have the opportunity to vote independently, privately and with dignity and respect. Although people with disabilities may vote using an accessible machine, need assistance casting a ballot, need help from a friend or family member, or travel using a mobility device, they have the same rights as any other voter. It is your duty to ensure voters with disabilities have the same opportunity to equally participate in the election process.

Jon Husted

Ohio Secretary of State

The seal of the Ohio Secretary of State is circular, featuring a landscape with a sun rising over hills and water. The text "THE SEAL OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE" is written around the top inner edge, and "OHIO" is at the bottom. A small star is positioned at the bottom center of the seal. A signature "Jon Husted" in red cursive is overlaid on the right side of the seal.

180 E. Broad St., 16th Floor

Columbus, Ohio 43215

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