



ADA Live! Episode 33: Voting Access - What Poll Workers Need to Know

Event Date: June 1, 2016

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VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Good afternoon and welcome to WADA - ADA LIVE! On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to the 33rd episode of ADA Live! Voting Access

My name is Donna DeStefano and I am the Assistant Director of the Tennessee Disability Coalition. The Coalition is the Tennessee State affiliate for the Southeast ADA Center.

Our guest today is Melanie Bull, Public Policy Director and also my colleague at the Tennessee Disability Coalition. Melanie leads the Coalition's efforts on all of our state legislative work and was a part of the Research Alliance on Accessible Voting - a grant funded by the Election Assistance Commission. Today we are talking about Access to Voting and what poll workers need to know. Welcome Melanie to our show.

MELANIE JANE BULL: Happy to be here

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Glad to have you here today. Here's my first question for you - Why is voting so important for people with disabilities?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Well, fortunately in a democracy we get to elect our leaders. And that is from president all the way down to our local city councils and school boards. And the way that people show their priorities for policies that affect people

with disabilities is by voting. As a group of people that care about similar things like access to good healthcare, employment options, reliable sources of transportation, and physical access, when you show up to vote, you make those priorities known. Unfortunately, people with disabilities tend to vote less than people without disabilities. And in some states, that statistic is as high as 15% according to a study done by Rutgers University.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: So does the research suggest why that gap can be so high?

MELANIE JANE BULL: It does. And there are a multitude of reasons. The biggest one is that there is a perceived fear that the polling place will be inaccessible, and that's both in physical access and that the ballot will be inaccessible. It can also be difficult for some people with disabilities to get to their polling place on Election Day. Or during the early voting period if their state has one. What we do know according to that study done by Rutgers is that the perceived fear of voting is much higher than the actual negative experience when voting. People with disabilities are overwhelmingly able to privately and independently cast their ballot.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: That's very interesting information. Can you talk briefly about the federal laws that affect voting?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Yeah, there are two big ones that I want to mention. Just very briefly. And one of course, the largest civil rights law that affects people with disabilities is the Americans with Disabilities Act. And it's extremely wide ranging in scope. But it offers many protection to people with disabilities against discrimination and then in 2002, the Help America Vote Act was passed. And it encourages that all polling places be accessible, and ensures that polling locations have at least one accessible voting machine. And then states also have their own ability to enact their own laws around voting.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Can you tell us about some of those state laws and how they affect how people with disabilities vote?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Absolutely. And I'm going to go through a list of several that I think are really important that a lot of states have.

The first that I want to talk about is a photo ID law. Many states in the last five to ten years have passed a photo voter ID law. And they vary, but typically you must present a state-issued photo ID when you show up to vote. Many people think that having a photo ID is just kind of a given, but what we do know is that many people with disabilities don't have a photo ID, especially if they don't drive. And in some places, it can be really difficult to actually get a photo ID.

Another thing that I want to mention are states have very different laws on technology or the way you cast your ballot. And they typically fall into two categories. You either vote by paper ballot or you vote by machine. For example in Tennessee, in almost every county in Tennessee, you voting a voting machine. And then some other states almost every place in that other state you are issued a paper ballot, unless you ask to use the accessible voting machine. And often people with disabilities, especially if you are vision impaired or have a mobility impairment, you need to use a machine to vote. Voting machines are often equipped with assistive technology like an audio ballot or a sip and puff so people are still able to vote independently. Sometimes however states that use mostly a paper ballot, sometimes the voting machines are not already set up for a person to use. Or even though a poll worker is very properly trained, they haven't used it enough to be familiar with all the technology on the machine.

Another law that some states have is curbside voting. If you have a disability, you can wait in your car, and you will call into the polling place and they will either bring a machine or a ballot out to you. And this is helpful for a lot of reasons. One, you can avoid the line if you have trouble standing or can't stand. And sometimes if your polling place isn't fully accessible, having that curbside voting option is really helpful.

A lot of states also have laws around early voting. 37 states have early voting laws. And some start as early as 46 days before an election. And in most states they typically end just a few days before Election Day. So for example, if you have a transportation need that you need to schedule, a lot of people take advantage of this early voting period because it gives you a larger window to be able to schedule that transportation that you need.

Several states also have laws around voter registration. 31 states have an online voter registration law. And six either have pending legislation or currently implementing an online voter registration system.

And as long as these voter registration systems are accessible, this can greatly increase the ability for all people to register to vote. And that in turn should increase the amount of people that actually vote. States also required different amounts of time to be registered to vote in order to vote in that upcoming election.

So some states will have a 30-day period, you have to be registered thirty days before the next election for you to be able to vote. And 16 states actually have a same-day voter registration, which means that you can show up to your polling place, register to vote, and then turn around and vote in that election.

Then another thing that greatly affects the way that people with disabilities vote are absentee ballots. And again, the state laws differ on those absentee ballots. 20 states require an excuse so you have to show some kind of documentation that shows that you need to be able to vote absentee. And then 27 states allow for no-excuse absentee voting, which means you can vote absentee for any reason in any election. And then several states will offer a permanent absentee ballot that you can also register for.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Wow! That's a lot of information. Where should people start in their state to find more information about voting?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Well, I would say that you should start at your state's Secretary of State office . And you can find their information online or in a phone book. And then often advocacy groups in your state will have really good local election information. For example, the Tennessee Disability Coalition along with Disability Rights Tennessee and the Tennessee Secretary of State released a voting video last summer that gives state-specific information for voters with disabilities. And we'll talk later in the show about additional resources, but I think those are very good place to start order to find good state-specific information.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Thank you Melanie. ADA Live! listening audience, if you have a question about access to voting, you can submit it at any time at our online forum at ADAlive.org. And now a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Tennessee Disability Coalition provides information, training, and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government, and individuals at local, state, and regional levels. Tennessee Disability Coalition is located in Nashville, Tennessee and serves as the Tennessee state affiliate of the Southeast ADA Center, a member of the ADA National Network. For answers to your ADA questions, contact the ADA National Network at 1-800-949-4232 (voice/tty).

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Welcome back to the second part of our ADA Live! program. We're talking with Melanie Bull, public policy director at the Tennessee Disability Coalition about access to voting. Melanie, we've been discussing what voters need to know about voting. What are the key things poll workers need to know about voters with disabilities to ensure that they're able to vote privately and independently?

MELANIE JANE BULL: The most important thing poll workers can do are work with people with disabilities before an election, know how to set up accessible polling places, learn about assistive technology and know a little bit about the basics of disability etiquette.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Tell us a little bit more about what poll workers can do to work with people with disabilities before an election?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Absolutely. Local election administrators need to be out there talking to people with disabilities prior to an election. Since we know based on that Rutgers study that there's a perceived fear amongst voters with disabilities that they're going to have a bad experience voting, the election administrators can work with different advocacy groups to help eliminate that fear. Take voting machines to different groups and let them practice voting beforehand. Voting machine manufacturers are making some really cool new voting machines with really intuitive technology. But most states are still using older voting machines with technology that voters may only use once every four years. So it takes some getting used to. You kind of forget how to use it in that four-year period of time.

Also, like I said, there are many laws that surround elections. But there are some really creative ways within the law that you can work with people to make sure that they feel comfortable with voting. Some groups like Paraquad, which is a Center for Independent Living in Missouri do picture guides, which show step-by-step instructions on how to vote. And like I mentioned earlier, some states have a voting video like Tennessee, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania to name a few. And then one of the smartest things I've seen in a polling place, they actually had a handheld whiteboard so they could write really simple instructions in order to be able to communicate with voters with hearing impairments. That's a really smart, simple solution that the polling place knew about because they had heard that suggestion from a group of voters in their area. So advocacy groups and election officials can work together to ensure that every voter has a great experience.

And then also election administrators can hire voters with disabilities to be poll workers on election day. Usually a person with a disability is going to be able to best describe what another voter with a disability needs.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Thank you Melanie. What do poll workers need to do to set up an accessible polling place?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Well accessible polling locations will have accessible parking that's wide enough to fit a van with a lift. There need to be clear routes to the polling place. There needs to be signage that clearly indicates the route to the accessible entrance. And then the route to the sign-in table and the voting machine need to be barrier free.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Tell us about the accessible technology for voting.

MELANIE JANE BULL: Well, there's a lot out there. A few examples are magnifying devices, which will assist voters with low vision to be able to see their ballot more clearly. Also communication boards. And that serves those with communication or speech impairments so you can speak to each other through that communication board. Seating, which isn't really technology, but those simple solutions. If someone has trouble standing in a line, having extra seating for them to be able to sit while in line or while they complete their ballot is a good idea. There are audio ballots for those who are blind. And a sip and puff, which is used by voters typically who are in a motorized wheelchair.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: You've done all these things, worked with people before the election, ensured that the polling place is accessible and you have the necessary accessible technology. Now, what does a poll worker do when a person with a disability actually comes into to vote?

MELANIE JANE BULL: The most important thing that a poll worker can do is be friendly. The goal is for every person to succeed in privately and independently casting their ballot regardless of their abilities. Be kind, be patient, and relax. You're not always going to be able to tell if a voter has a disability so it's really important that you, that all poll workers are asking every voter if they need assistance. And then the poll worker and the voter can work together to ensure that they have a good experience at the polling place.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Thank you Melanie, for that valuable information. ADA Live! listening audience, you can submit your questions about voting access or other ADA Live! programs at any time on ADAlive.org. And now a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: The Southeast ADA Center is your leader in providing information, training, and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government, and individuals at local, state, and regional levels. The Southeast ADA Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia is a member of the ADA National Network and serves eight states in the southeast region. For answers to your ADA questions, contact the ADA National network at 1 800 949 4232.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Welcome back. Melanie, during our time today we have discussed what voters need to know about voting and what key things poll workers need to know about voters with disabilities to assure that they're able to vote privately and independently. We appreciate your sharing your thoughts on these. You mentioned several resources. Where can people continue to find out more information?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Well certainly the ADA National Network is a great place to start. I would also check out the United States Election Assistance Commission and the United States Department of Justice. They both have comprehensive resources and instructions for voters with disabilities.

And then as I said earlier, your state Secretary of State's office will have really thorough state-specific resources. And then in Tennessee, and I'm sure that this is the same way across the country, several of our advocacy groups have great resources. Some have even made their own materials related to voting. Like Tennessee's protection advocacy agency, disability rights Tennessee has created a poll workers' guide to assisting voters with disabilities. And then the Tennessee Disability Coalition and the Disability Rights Tennessee along with the Secretary of State's office released our voting video last year. So check in your state amongst your state advocacy groups. I think a great place to start is your state's protection and advocacy agency, and they should have some good resources on voting.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Thank you. What would you like listeners to take away from this show?

MELANIE JANE BULL: Well, I would like to close by saying two things. One, far too many people think their vote doesn't count. And I cannot tell you enough how much it does. Just by nature of design alone, being a voter gives you power. Votes make elected officials from local school boards all the way up to president accountable for their actions. When only 55% of the voting-age population actually does vote, that just makes your vote count even more. It will continue to greatly decrease barriers for voters with disabilities and their experience at the voting place. Second, the passage of Help America Vote Act, HAVA, and other advances in technology have greatly and will continue to greatly decrease barriers voters with disabilities experience at polling places. Of course people will still experience problems but don't fear going to your polling place if you are able! Poll worker are frequently trained on new laws and technology and want everyone to have a successful experience, so they are often very helpful and willing to assist you.

DONNA DeSTEFANO: Thank you very much. I appreciate the time you have given us Melanie. At this time I would like to thank Melanie Bull, Public Policy Director of the Tennessee Disability Coalition, for joining us today at WADA ADA Live! And thank you also to our listening audience. The Southeast ADA Center is grateful for your support. Remember, you may submit questions by going to ADALive.org. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, please contact your regional ADA center at 1-800-949-4232. That's 1-800-949-4232. All calls are free and

confidential. Join us next month on Wednesday, July 6th at 1 o'clock Eastern for Episode 34. See you next month on WADA, ADA Live!.

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: (Music) Thank you for listening to ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center. Remember to join us the first Wednesday of each month for another ADA topic, and you can call 1-800-949-4232 for answers to your ADA questions.

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