Communicating Accessible Voting

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Introduction

Accessible voting for people within the American with Disabilities Association (ADA) has been around longer than what most people know about. Our voting machines have been designed to be ADA friendly for years. This is something we have learned is not communicated effectively. There is no efficient place to go to find where all these resources are listed, or that they are even available unless you come to the polling location or contact us or another coalition who knows we have such resources available. Everyone has the right to vote, and we do not want to put more of a burden on someone wanting to vote because our accessible voting features are not all listed in one convenient place.

Project Goals

Our goal is to design either a page on our website or a poster/flyer that would conveniently list all the accessible features of voting in one place. Using information gathered from multiple resources, we will be able to effectively communicate to our voters the methods available to that will enable them to vote safely, securely, and as independently as possible. Our hope by providing this information in one place is to educate voters on ADA accessible features and increase voter turnout for the ADA community. Working for the Election Board, we want to encourage people to vote and being able to design this webpage will hopefully make voting seem less daunting to those who need to know or want to know about these features. We also hope that by sharing more about ADA features, people will share it with those who do need to know about these features, and it will get everyone involved. This will also be more convenient for people to look at before coming to vote so they can prepare rather than having to call our office and let

someone try to describe it over the phone or feel rushed and confused when coming in to vote. We want voting to be a positive experience for all!

Methods

When determining what the best practices are for reaching out to the ADA community and learning about how to make our site and office ADA friendly, we were able to learn from a few different speakers regarding the matter. First, we heard from Tash Crespo, an attorney with the Indiana Disability Right (IDR) in our CEATS class. Secondly, we heard from Marcy Hintzman from the Great Lakes ADA Center with the Department of Disability and Human Development. Between these two speakers, we learned about best practices when trying to interact with the ADA and determining the gray and black of what rules need to be followed when dealing with those who have a disability.

Tash discussed that some tactics work better than others when trying to reach out to the ADA community. The color contrast should be high between text and background colors. On a web page, available information should type out for those with visual impairments to be able to do the "text-to-speech" option, since that feature cannot read imbedded documents such as PDFs. Likewise, adding in image description on a picture so it can be relayed by the "text-to-speech" translator. This year we are redesigning our website and taking these ADA friendly options into consideration while designing the layout.

Marcy Hintzman provided an ADA training course for our county, providing information on how we can be ADA compliant, and what we legally must do for those who are part of the ADA community. Title I covers employment while Title II, which is what Marcy covered, deals with the public. According to Title II laws, a place of business is required to make

accommodations for the ADA community upon their request to meet specific need. We learned about equality vs equity when discussing how to make reasonable modifications to our policies, practices, and procedures. Equality is when everyone gets the same thing, while equity is when everyone gets what they need. Equality would be someone without a visual impairment and someone with a visual impairment getting the same book to read. Equity would be the person without the visual impairment getting the book to read, while the person with the impairment gets a magnifying glass or a book written in braille to read. She had also asked us who people contact regarding accessibility questions. This got us thinking that people voting in person could ask a judge or inspector working the polls about accessible features. For voters calling to ask about voting locations and accessibility there, we can refer to our PollChief system that tracks our polling location buildings and find where the accessible entrances are. We also provide ramps to the polling locations that are not already wheelchair accessible.

After hearing Tash from the IDR during CEATS, we reached out to their agency to obtain some more information regarding the ADA community. We asked them questions such as what they thought the most effective when they are reaching out to members within the community was, and if they had any suggestions on how to break down the barrier between us and those who need these extra tools and devices to try and make it easier to communicate. They had suggested that based off the type of information we wanted, we would benefit from reaching out directly to organizations who actively include these voters rather than the legal standpoint that the IDR would provide. They had suggested organizations such as the American Foundation for the Blind, the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation, or Paralyzed Veterans of America.

After receiving this information, we reached out to the American Foundation for the Blind. The foundation was able to contact some of their members who voted. They had claimed

these members asked for assistance while at the voting booth or brought someone to help them. They had also stated they were not aware of our Voter with Print Disability (VPD) option, which is an electronic ballot that is sent and reads the ballot using the voter's assistive technology. We asked them if they also knew we had technology such as the Double Talk machine, which plugs into our voting panels to read the ballot. They had either not heard of that option or had heard about it but were not entirely sure what this device was. This just goes to prove our point that while accessible voting features are available, they are not well known. This is why we want to create a space where all these features can be listed. After talking with our website designers for the county, we will be implementing a drop-down menu labeled voters and within there will be a tab for ADA voters. Our new website is expected to be up and running by the summertime of 2025. Our county web designers know that it is important for us to implement this ADA section into our new website and have been more than accommodating in helping us make our vision for this project a reality.

CEATS Principles and Tools

There were two CEATS principles used to tie our project into this Cohort. We discussed how election security and integrity, and media relations are two important principles that are relatable when discussing accessible voting. Letting ADA voters know that they have different options to assist them when voting allows them to do so both privately and independently. This means they do not have to question the integrity of their vote, as they might do if someone was assisting them, and they know it was recorded safely and securely. Everyone has the right to vote, and we want those in the ADA community to know they have options available that are beneficial to casting their vote privately.

The second tool that relates the most is social media relations. We have worked with the Northeast Indiana Disability Advocacy Coalition (NIDAC) in the past, collaborating with them on our accessibility features and asking for ideas on how to present these ideas to the ADA community. Since we are currently in the process of updating our website, we will be using their suggestions when designing a page with all the listed accessibility features in one place. We hope to make it more convenient for those who need to know their options to find all the different ways to vote.

Conclusion

As citizens of the United States, if people meet the federal requirements, we have a right to vote. Whether or not someone needs more help than others, we want everyone to vote. While voting, we also want to make the experience as easy as we can. Our hope with this project is to continue working on our website some more this year and get that accessibility page up and running. We also have hopes to implement what we have learned from talking with the American Foundation for the Blind into training for our Election workers, so they are better equipped to help people who come in and need special accommodations made. It would be beneficial if our workers knew more about the features of our voting panel and how they operate to give people that sense of freedom and security to cast their vote on their own. As we continue to work on this project into 2025, we are hopeful that what we have learned will be helpful to our voters and we are excited to see our work be implemented.

References

American Foundation for the Blind

Marcy Hintzman-Great Lakes ADA Center; Department of Disability and Human Development.

Northeast Indiana Disability Advocacy Coalition

Tash Crespo- Indiana Disability Rights (IDR); staff attorney.

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