Response to:

Request for Information
Docket / FR Number: 210608–0123 / 2021–12619
Promoting Access to Voting
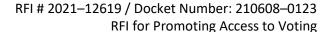

Response from:

Due: July 16, 2021

July 16, 2021

National Institute of Standards and Technology
Voting Accessibility Evaluation Team
100 Bureau Drive
Gaithersburg, MD 20899
Via e-Mail: pva-eo@list.nist.gov

Subject: RFI # 2021–12619 / Docket Number: 210608–0123
**   Promoting Access to Voting**

NIST Voting Accessibility Evaluation Team,

Please see the following pages for our reply from VASTEC, Inc. (VASTEC) to RFI # 2021–12619 for Industry comments on Promoting Access to Voting.

VASTEC is a small business that brings established and experienced best practices and processes to provide Section 508 and W3C WCAG Document Accessibility Remediation Services. We believe that our proven capabilities, demonstrated by past performance delivering high levels of customer satisfaction, and our industry knowledge in 508 document remediation, allow us to provide meaningful comments to your request for information regarding Promoting Access to Voting for People with Disabilities and would merit VASTEC selection to receive any formal requests for proposals in this area. VASTEC has more than 13 years of experience successfully providing Section 508 verification and remediation services to Federal Government agencies and supporting their mission to achieve the strict standards for accessibility compliance.

VASTEC appreciates the opportunity to present our ideas and we look forward to the opportunity to develop a strategic relationship and business partnership with the National Institute of Standards and Technology. If you have any questions concerning our submission, please feel free to contact me by telephone at (813) 222-3227 or via email at jeff.ogden@vastec.com.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ogden

Jeff Ogden, Proposal Manager

1. Company Overview and Introduction

VASTEC is a small business whose mission is to provide quality products and services utilizing its experienced and skilled personnel, ensuring accurate and timely delivery to clients, while maintaining a secure environment where client-sensitive data is protected at the highest level. VASTEC has deep domain knowledge and expertise in Section 508 and W3C WCAG Accessibility Remediation Services; as well as, records digitization, data transformation, and records management services with extensive Federal, State, and Local Government, and Commercial Industry experience. For over a decade, we have continuously supported 508 Remediation projects with a portfolio of the services that includes accessibility assessments, document remediation, testing, and consulting services to assure ADA compliance for all in-scope work.

The VASTEC executive and operational teams have deep domain knowledge, expertise, and experience managing 508 Remediation projects. Our highly-qualified operational teams employ established best practices and procedures to ensure timely start-up and delivery of all contracted services. For over a decade, we have continuously supported our clients with quality products and services utilizing our experienced and skilled personnel, ensuring accurate and timely delivery to clients, while maintaining a secure environment where client-sensitive data is protected at the highest level.

2. VASTEC Feedback to Specific Questions from the RFI

Per the Request for Information published in the Federal Register, Volume 86, # 114, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), is seeking information from voting technology vendors, election officials, persons with disabilities, disability advocacy groups, assistive technology vendors and professionals, non-partisan voting promotion groups, and other key stakeholders for the purpose of gathering information to foster greater voter access for people with disabilities. VASTEC is a small company with significant knowledge and experience in Section 508 and W3C WCAG Document Accessibility Remediation Services and is providing feedback to the questions published with the RFI from the perspective of document remediation for persons with visual impairments since that is our area of expertise.

2.1. Question #1

Describe concerns regarding accessing the right to vote privately and independently for people with disabilities.

For people who are blind or have limited vision, the ability to vote in secret is still mostly problematic whether voting in person at polling locations or in-home using paper mail-in ballots. Most visually-impaired persons must still rely on help from another person to cast their ballots; meaning that, they must make their candidate selection known to that other individual.

2.2. Question #2

Describe effective strategies, techniques, and technologies for addressing the barriers faced by voters with disabilities throughout the voting process.

For people with visual impairments, the use of assistive technologies and accessibility-compliant digital documents; such as, PDF files, allow for more effective dissemination of information on voter registration procedures and on the candidates running for office, their parties, and their platforms and positions.

Additionally, analyzing the structure of ballot documents and modifying the read order of the text provides a friendlier navigation experience for the non-sighted individual giving them the opportunity, depending on available technologies, to complete a ballot without any assistance. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) included provisions to mandate that each polling location have at least one voting system accessible to visually-impaired persons; so that, they have the ability to vote in the same manner as a fully-sighted individual. The intent is to allow the same levels of privacy and independence while voting that other voters experience.

Enabling technologies for sight-impaired votes are not standardized across the nation and include such approaches as paper ballots printed in Braille, computer touch screen devices, button labels in Braille, audio voting capabilities, and others.

2.3. Question #3

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter in getting useful information about the voting process.

Knowing where to find information on the voting process can be a challenge for all people, with or without disabilities. Web searches can be helpful and are becoming more accessible to vision impaired voters and prospective voters. Direct mailings from government agencies, individual candidates, political parties, or non-government organizations are often not designed for the vision impaired; including, updated voter ID cards and notification of changes of polling places. Through our accessibility service offerings, we provide a means of allowing voters and people with disabilities access to the content within such informational mailings, website notifications, and other forms of communication.

2.4. Question #4

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter with ballots, and in getting useful information about the items on the ballot.

Barriers that visually-impaired persons may encounter with, and in getting information about, the items on the ballot include:

- The lack of proactive communications to the visually-impaired community about where to get information about the items on the ballot.
- Sample ballots that have not been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.
- Well-structured PDF documents concerning information about the items on the ballot that have not been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.
- Searching for and accessing information without assistance from other persons.

2.5. Question #5

Provide recommendations for improving voter access for people with disabilities.

Potential improvements for voting accessibility for the vision impaired may include:

- Well-structured PDF documents concerning voter registration and voting information that have been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.

- Well-structured electronic ballots that have been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.
- Proactive and Section 508 compliant communication to vision-impaired voters on where to find electronic information on the voting process, the candidates and their positions, and sample ballots.
- Improved technologies for voting machines specifically designed for the vision-impaired voters.
- Standardization of technologies for voting machines specifically designed for the vision-impaired voters.
- Universal availability of voting machines specifically designed for the vision-impaired voters.

2.6. Question #6

Identify what has had the most impact enabling people with disabilities to vote privately and independently.

Delivering an accessible, Section 508 compliant ballot, as part of the voting process, enables voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently without having to become familiar with a specific system, application, or piece of equipment. Such voters with disabilities are already familiar with assistive technology software such as JAWS and other screen reader technology. This allows voters with disabilities same and similar access to their ballot and the same experience as a non-visually impaired voter / voter without a disability.

2.7. Question #7

Identify gaps that remain in making voting accessible to people with disabilities.

The requirements of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) included provisions to mandate that each polling location have at least one voting system accessible to visually-impaired persons; however, poll workers can be poorly trained on these technologies making the process more difficult. A single assistive technology voting machine per polling location can restrict access due to waiting for the machine to be available. Even though these technologies are designed to allow for visually-impaired voters to vote without assistance, actual experience has shown that voters often require some kind of assistance to complete the voting process. Particularly troublesome can be changing a candidate selection prior to finalizing the ballot. Additionally, security concerns with current accessibility-enabling voting machines are discouraging wide-spread acceptance and adoption. Through our accessibility service offerings, we provide a means of allowing voters and people with disabilities accessible ballots and mitigate such gap.

2.8. Question #8

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter with completing online forms for the voting process.

Online forms that have not been designed for the visually-impaired can be difficult or impossible to complete without assistance from others. Also, the lack of proactive communication to the visually-impaired community about the availability of online forms, their purpose, and requirements about who needs to complete the forms and when they are due can create barriers. Through our accessibility service offerings, we provide a means of allowing voters and people with disabilities accessible ballots and provide a solution that removes such barriers.

2.9. Question #9

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter in getting useful information about their eligibility to vote.

Barriers to getting useful information about their eligibility to vote for visually-impaired people include:

- The lack of proactive Section 508 compliant communications to the visually-impaired community about their eligibility to vote and about the registration process.
- Well-structured PDF documents concerning voter registration requirements and voting information that have not been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.
- Searching for and accessing information without assistance from other persons.

2.10. Question #10

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter with registering to vote.

Barriers to registering to vote for visually-impaired people include:

- The lack of proactive Section 508 compliant communications to the visually impaired community about the registration process.
- Well-structured PDF documents concerning voter registration and voting information that have not been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.
- Completing the registration process without assistance from other persons.

2.11. Question #11

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter using technology for the registration or voting process, whether online, in person, or via mail.

- The lack of proactive Section 508 compliant communications to the visually impaired community about the voting process.
- Well-structured PDF documents concerning voter registration and voting information that have not been analyzed, remediated, and tested to Section 508 compliance.
- Completing the voting process without assistance from other persons. This is most problematic for online and mail voting.

2.12. Question #12

Describe the availability of accessible voting equipment.

The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) included provisions to mandate that each polling location have at least one voting system accessible to visually-impaired persons; so that, they have the ability to vote in the same manner as a fully-sighted individual; however, this requirement does not consider the ratio of vision impaired persons to the general population to ensure proper availability and timely access to these machines. It also requires familiarity with, and perhaps training to the end user voter, in order to utilize the equipment correctly.

2.13.   Question #13

Describe barriers that people with disabilities encounter with voting by mail.

Absentee voting or voting by mail typically require that voters fill out a paper ballot…something a significantly visually-impaired person usually cannot do independently. Through our accessibility service offerings, we provide a means of allowing voters and people with disabilities accessible ballots and provide a solution to people with disabilities to vote by mail and otherwise return the accessible ballot that they've received and been able to complete independently.

2.14.   Question #14

Describe security considerations relevant to existing and potential technologies used by people with disabilities in the voting process.

A number of U.S. Federal Government Agencies; including, the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI, raised security concerns about existing assistive voting technologies in a report issued prior to the 2020 election. The report warned that federal legislation, pending at the time, could compromise election integrity by allowing hackers to manipulate ballots and election results. Our accessibility service offerings do not require access to any voting systems, government networks, or specified hardware and thus avoids security concerns related to utilization of such voting equipment/systems.

2.15.   Question #15

Describe barriers that people with disabilities face at polling locations.

People with disabilities may encounter a number of barriers when voting at polling locations; including, physical and logical barriers if they are unable to access the ballot machine or ballot itself, in order to cast their vote independently and privately. We have designed our solutions with these barriers in mind, to ensure that voters with disabilities have the same opportunity and experience in casting their ballot, as a voter without a disability.

2.16.   Question #16

Describe the accessibility of polling places.

The broad range of polling places makes this question difficult to answer. Generally speaking, all polling places should be accessible based on requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act for physical barriers.

2.17.   Question #17

Identify areas where poll worker training can address barriers experienced by people with disabilities.

For vision-impaired voters, adequate training for poll workers on assistive technology voting machines is a must. Particularly troublesome can be changing a candidate selection prior to finalizing the ballot so this could be an area of focus for poll worker training.

2.18. Question #18

Identify areas where clearer or better policies can address barriers experienced by people with disabilities.

The most effective actions to designing, developing, and implementing better policies for voter accessibility for people with any disability are awareness of the situation and a sustained commitment by lawmakers and poll workers to continuous improvement on voting technologies and solutions; as well as, fostering effective communication until every voter or prospective voter can access information on the voting process, on the candidates, and on the candidates' positions on important issues. In this way, all visually-impaired voters will be able to vote with the same level of privacy without assistance from another person, and can be assured of the security and integrity of the votes that they cast.

2.19. Question #19

Describe any barriers that people with disabilities face to voting that disproportionately impact communities of color, persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

Accessibility issues transcend societal discrepancies. For all people, the equal access to technologies and logistical services can have the greatest positive impact for people who have disproportionate access compared to others due to any limiting individual factor, trait, or standing in the community.

2.20. Question #20

Of the concerns and barriers noted, identify the most serious and impactful barriers faced by voters with disabilities throughout the voting process.

For people who are blind or have limited vision, the ability to vote in secret is still mostly problematic whether voting in person at polling locations or in-home using paper mail-in ballots. Since assistive voting machines offer the highest levels of privacy and the lowest level of assistance from others, the most impactful barrier to be "knocked down" should be insuring the utmost levels of ballot integrity and security are realized for assistive voting machines. This should drive increase availability of, confidence in, and the increased adoption of these technologies by vision-impaired voters.

3. Summary

VASTEC is pleased to provide the above information and we look forward to being part of any NIST initiative to promote and improve access to voting for the visually-impaired.