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General Comment

ADAP provides legal services to Alabamians with disabilities to protect, promote and expand their rights. ADAP is part of the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN). Our voting work includes education, individual case advocacy, monitoring, and collaboration with other organizations with similar election protection interests. These include trainings on rights of voters with disabilities, participation in disability coalition efforts, monitoring polling sites to identify barriers to accessibility, and collaborating with organizations in legislative advocacy efforts.

Our electoral system is complex and extremely localized. Though voting laws in the US have changed over time and advanced access for all voters, we still have a long way to go to ensure all Americans have equal access to the vote.

Voters with disabilities are still denied equal access to the ballot box. Related laws such as the VAEHA and ADA protect rights of people with disabilities and access to the vote. Yet, jurisdictions, election officials and policy makers make decisions every election, knowingly or not, that prevent equal access to voting.

Barriers to voters with disabilities include exclusion from legislative processes, negative perceptions of voters with disabilities, and a lack of education about voting processes and accommodations. Outreach should address physical inaccessibility as well as other barriers like a lack of education about electoral processes and accommodations.

Despite barriers that exist, people with disabilities will not be scared away from the ballot box. As we strive for equal access, disability advocates applaud systems and practices that enable voters with disabilities to mark, verify, and cast their vote privately and independently.

ADAP advocates to ensure a private and independent vote through election protection efforts and general education. We troubleshoot during election hours, hold a voter hotline during General Elections, and collaborate in election protection by training volunteers, providing an overview of disability voting rights, and encouraging individuals with disabilities to complete our poll site monitoring survey. Our survey

addresses physical accessibility and privacy and independence, e.g., functionality and placement of AutoMARK machines. Ensuring voters with disabilities are aware of accommodations to ensure privacy and independence is integral in our outreach education.

Moving forward, we must address barriers voters with disabilities encounter while voting. To promote access, jurisdictions, election officials and policy makers must include people with disabilities in the planning process, combining election officials' expertise in administering elections with disability advocates' expertise in providing access.

Include voters with disabilities in the legislative process. Legislation that will disproportionately affect voters with disabilities should not only be consulted by legislators without disabilities.

Make disability sensitivity training mandatory for policymakers.

Highlight the diversity of life experience of individuals with disabilities and how their experiences impact the voting process. Go beyond physical inaccessibility to address what prevents individuals from voting.

Prioritize disability rights so policies and systems enable voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently. Include people with disabilities in decision-making processes.

Promote campaigns to educate voters with disabilities about their right to a private and independent vote and what options are available.

Train election officials and poll workers to ensure they advocate for and protect the rights of voters with disabilities.

Increase the number of accessible voting systems/equipment at polling places.

Increase accessibility of vote by mail systems, including allowing all voters to vote by mail and offering electronic remote balloting.

Increase options for voters including online, automatic, and/or same day voter registration, early voting, curbside voting, and ballot drop boxes.

Establish an Office of Accessibility within the Election Assistance Commission to oversee state efforts to expand voter accessibility and serve as a resource for advocates and voters.

Create a national resource center on accessible voting to conduct disability training for election officials and poll workers to create fully accessible voting systems.

ADAP applauds NIST for requesting information from the public on how to promote access to voting for people with disabilities. Addressing barriers faced by voters with disabilities is overdue. All related recommendations should include the voices of people with disabilities.

Practical solutions to many barriers facing voters with disabilities exist, but we must prioritize voters with disabilities. NIST's recommendations can protect the rights of people with disabilities but recommendations must address access and include voters with disabilities.