



2021.07.16 Mollie Gathro For "Regulations.GOV" Website NIST-2021-0003 Voting While Disabled Public Comment

1 message

Mollie Katie <molliekatie@gmail.com>
To: Mollie Katherine Gathro <MollieKatie@gmail.com>

Fri, Jul 16, 2021 at 8:14 PM

I love the "Massachusetts Information For Voters" guide outlining the ballot measures and what a yes or a no vote would do, while explaining why each interest group has that position. (Hopefully I will be able to figure out how to include a photo of my late cat, Miss Rita Hayworth, hanging out with the 2014 guidebook for your enjoyment!) I wished they had not stopped sending it in the mail to all Massachusetts residents each year. That's something that would be helpful no matter where you live, but especially in rural areas or where internet coverage is not good. I also wish it would be found more easily online. I also wish every candidate for office had to submit the same basic information too, explicitly saying which political party they belong to at minimum, because many people running for local office never make an official campaign website. I run a Google Search and all I get back is a Facebook page, which is a social media website I quit using because I found it so inaccessible. These should be standard requirements nationwide, actually. I also wish it were made clear to the public that there are elections held every single year, not just the every four years presidential elections or the every two years mid-term federal congressional elections. Because of different offices' rules, between federal, state, county, and local city or town levels of government, it is exceptionally rare for a year to go by when there are no elections scheduled. Your civic duty is annual, so please show up to vote accordingly every year! Codifying these kinds of basic transparency rules into law and making these kind of guides as freely publicly available and as easy-to-find online as possible would be a great improvement.

I wish we had automatic federal voter registration. When I came of age in Massachusetts, I had to opt-in at age 16 when I applied for a driver's license for my voter registration to then become "automatic" on the day of my 18th birthday.

I quit voting in person because it was too difficult. The polling place I was assigned, a local elementary school, is an accessible building in theory but nit in practice. I ended up walking the full outside length of the building from the parking lot to get to the only handicapped-accessible ramp door I could get my rollator (a walker with a built-in seat) through, only to have to walk the entire length of the building back again to get to the school gymnasium where the polling station was set up. It was physically exhausting, especially when abled people could just walk up one set of stairs from the parking lot straight into the gym. The polling place is on a public bus route, but to get to the bus stop from my home requires going up a hill that is too steep for me. I had to rely for many years on a Personal Care Aide (PCA) worker to drive me to the polling place. I have been through four different PCA's in the last five years, and all were so flaky about calling out of work with adequate notice -- less than 5 minutes before their shift was due to start is simply not enough time to find a replacement PCA worker or arrange to do necessary errands like pharmacy trips on a different day, let alone find an alternative for a one-day-only event like Election Day -- that I did not feel comfortable relying on them to ensure my voting rights.

When I was a child and accompanied my parents in line to vote every year, voting took place in proper private booths with full-height curtains you could completely close, with a drop box for collecting ballots inside the booth itself. Currently my town's voting privacy is a joke. They have set up bar-height tall tables, each with an X-shaped plastic divider on top to split the table into four sections. If, say, I went to vote with my abusive husband who threatened to harm me if I did not vote for the political party of his choosing, the old way I could have safely voted my conscience and deposited my ballot safely without him knowing. But the new way, my hypothetical abusive husband could not only look and see who I was voting for the entire time, but he would also be able to look more on the walk from these bar-height faux voting booth tables to the ballot drop box next to the checkout table. It is not secure or private in any way. Furthermore, the bar-height tables are not accessible if I need to use a wheelchair that day instead of my rollator, or I am so tired I need to use the built-in seat of my rollator during voting. I had to sit at the check-in/check-out table with the volunteer elections officials and monitors to fill out my paper ballot one year, with no charade of a plastic divider between us at all, so they could clearly see who I voted for.

Disabled people are frequently trapped in living arrangements with abusive people, be they romantic partners or extended family members. Because Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits pay so low -- in the case of SSI, the federal maximum per individual is only 75% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) -- that we cannot afford financially to leave our abusers. I know because it happened to me. I became permanently disabled in 2010. I had to drop out of college because I could not function. With no physical ability to work to pay for my own apartment once I lost on-campus student housing, my only choice was to move back home, where my violently abusive younger sister was living full-time. I was awarded Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits in 2013,

but my mother insisted I give her 90% of my backpay retroactive to my application date and 80% of my monthly benefits going forward for renting my childhood bedroom in her home. I consider this to be financially abusive on my mother's part because as a hypocritical double standard, she allowed my healthy abusive sister, then commuting to local community college and working either full- or part-time depending on the season, to live rent-free. As a result, I was unable to put away any money to save for a security deposit to rent an apartment on my own, so I was stuck in that house, hiding in my bedroom 99% of the time and being regularly physically assaulted by my abusive sister anytime I came out to use the kitchen or bathroom, until 2017 when I was finally selected after years on a waiting list for government-subsidized housing. I was lucky that my violently abusive sister and my financially abusive mother agreed with me on political party affiliation or it would be very likely I would have to add voting rights abuse to that list too. I did not qualify for Personal Care Aide (PCA) services until almost the same year I was able to finally move out, so up through the 2016 election I was still relying on family or friends to drive me to polling places to vote.

Even though my friends lived in different polling precincts within our same town, because of Massachusetts' Early Voting the past few years, we were all able to vote together at the one central city hall location, which allowed them to help me exercise my rights with minimal inconvenience. Unfortunately, the Massachusetts laws on Early Voting only say which days are required to be offered, not hours during those days. I know many people working first, second, and third shifts or 12-hour overnight shifts like my mother did as a nurse for over half my life, who would have appreciated voting hours be extended to well after 5pm, potentially with one or two days with at least one central accessible polling place open all 24 hours.

I also wish getting an absentee ballot had been easier. I had to go to my town's website, download a .PDF form, print it out, fill it out by hand, and mail it in. Because I have to do so much paperwork as a disabled person, I have no choice but to buy my own printer. Many people cannot afford to, which would have necessitated a trip to either the public library or an office supply store in order to get the printout made. Many people also conduct all their financial business entirely online, so they do not keep stamps or envelopes for mailing on hand. There was also no box I could check certifying that my disability is permanent, therefore I would like to automatically receive a mail-in ballot every year without having to ask for it. Instead, I have to repeat the above tedious process every year – which could have been faster, greener, and more efficient for the government employees (who have to decipher handwritten forms) if it had been offered as an online typed form to submit, either instead of the handwritten form or in conjunction with it as an alternative electronic option. It makes things unnecessarily difficult for voters, especially disabled people who battle with executive dysfunction issues in neurodivergent brains.

I have heard making Election Day a federal holiday, or shifting it from Tuesday to be part of a holiday three-day Election Long Weekend on a Monday or Friday proposed to increase access. But that disproportionately privileges white people with middle-class jobs. I see countless non-essential businesses open on federal holidays, and the majority of their employees are poor and/or not white. As with giving employers a tax cut for employee hours lost going to get the COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine, perhaps we could pass a law to give employers a tax cut for all employee hours lost so those employees could go vote. If it would incentivize these non-essential businesses that normally stay open anyway on federal holidays to actually let an Election Day holiday work as it is intended to.

For my particular disabilities at least, instituting universal automatic vote-by-mail at all levels of government would be the single greatest improvement in our current voting system. Unfortunately, there is no perfect universally accessible way to all disabled people to conduct the voting process. But hopefully by combining these different types of fixes together we can greatly improve our current voting system in this country.

This comment was written by Mollie Gathro. You can contact me to discuss it further by e-mailing me at "MollieKatie@Gmail.Com"!

