

Public Comments on Draft of Promoting Access to Voting: Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Private and Independent Voting

Disability Rights Texas appreciates the opportunity to comment on the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)'s Draft Report on *Promoting Access to Voting: Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Private and Independent Voting*, as set forth by Executive Order (EO) 14019, Promoting Access to Voting.

Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) is the federally designated legal protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities in Texas. Our mandate is to ensure people with disabilities understand and exercise their rights under the law, ensuring their full and equal participation in society. As part of this mandate, we work to address issues involving people with disabilities and voting.

One area of priority for DRTx is to assist people with disabilities to fully participate in all aspects of the voting process by enforcing federal and state voting and anti-discrimination laws and policies. DRTx staff routinely educates individuals with disabilities and groups that advocate on their behalf about the rights of voters with disabilities including, registering to vote, ways to vote and accommodations available. DRTx also operates a voting hotline to assist voters with disability related difficulties and DRTx attorneys seek to protect these rights through the courts when necessary. Additionally, DRTx regularly provides technical assistance and feedback to state and county policymakers and pollworkers about the potential impact of proposed policies on voters with disabilities.

Overall, DRTx believes this draft report is a good start in addressing access to the vote for people with disabilities. However, it is problematic that the draft available for public comment is incomplete. At the very least, all definitions, appendices, and the executive summary should have been made available for public comment, in addition to what has been released. In reviewing the draft report, DRTx strongly supports the public comment submitted by the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), providing a line-by-line analysis with recommended edits. We take this opportunity to discuss broad recommendations for the draft report.

Election Security Has No Place In The Report

Reconsider frequent references in the report to election security concerns, as they fall outside the scope of this report as set forth by EO 14019. NIST must shift the emphasis on elections security to election accessibility for people with all types of disabilities. Elections security concerns should not be the focus of the report, and cannot take priority over elections. NIST should focus on recommending known secure solutions that address access barriers, including the availability of electronic ballot delivery for voters that need it to ensure they can exercise their fundamental right to vote. Accessibility must be of equal importance as cybersecurity. Cybersecurity cannot come first and accessibility be delivered only after security requirements are met.

For example:

The report should propose a commitment to equalizing federal investment in voting accessibility that is currently invested in voting security through staffing all levels within the EAC, NIST and CISA. Developing accessible and secure methods for future voting is critical. Future research should explore how to continue to securely integrate next generation technology into the voting process. Electronic ballot return is necessary to overcome many barriers faced by voters with disabilities when voting remotely. It is vital that research improves security to the maximum extent possible for electronic ballot returns while maintaining accessibility.

Personal Assistive Technology Is Not A Solution

The frequent references to assistive technology (AT) should acknowledge the difference between personal AT belonging to individual voters and the accessible technologies required to be provided by election administrators to ensure elections are accessible.

Recommendations including AT must acknowledge that voters should not be held responsible for providing their own AT, as not every voter may have the resources and some common forms of AT are barred from use in many polling places. For instance, optical character recognition software often recommended for ballot verification is typically loaded on smartphones, which often cannot be used in polling places or to photograph a completed ballot.

Refrain From Using The Term “Remote Accessible Vote by Mail”

Remote Accessible Vote by Mail (RAVBM) typically describes something that would accurately be called Remote Accessible Ballot Marking. When a paper ballot must be printed by the voter and returned by mail, it cannot be accessible remote voting. Including an unqualified “accessible” in the term RAVBM is inaccurate. It is unacceptable for this report to mislead election officials, voting jurisdictions, and other policy makers that only providing remote digital ballot marking is delivering fully accessible remote voting. Courts have consistently agreed that prohibiting voters with disabilities from using electronic ballot return is denying equal access to private and independent voting. Additionally, when voters covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) can return ballots electronically, prohibiting voters with disabilities from doing so has been ruled discriminatory. If there is a reason to describe a process of digital blank ballot delivery with inaccessible return of a printed ballot (by mail or otherwise), then that process must have a more accurate name that does not suggest it is a fully accessible option.

Define The Legal Rights Of Voters With Disabilities

While the report demonstrates how access barriers in the electoral process fail to respect the dignity of Americans with disabilities, NIST must also stress that barriers to a private and independent vote, equal access, and integrated settings are also violations of the federal laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities. The final report should provide a fundamental framework for understanding the basic civil rights of voters with disabilities to equal access to voting privately and independently. The report currently provides a cursory overview of applicable statutes and does not provide any information about the myriad of court decisions, binding settlement agreements, and the like that provide a robust understanding of what those laws mean and how they directly impact legal rights for voting accessibility. This legal underpinning, including relevant litigation decisions, is critical for inclusion in the final report. In fact, this legal framework is of greater importance to the report than lengthy descriptions of ballot marking devices (BMDs) or the Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VVSG) 2.0.

Define Voting As Marking, Verifying, and Casting

The voting process should be carefully defined throughout the report to acknowledge that voting is done in three parts - marking, verifying, and casting of the ballot. Voting systems cannot be considered accessible, and people with disabilities will not be able to vote privately and independently, unless all three steps are made accessible. No voting systems should be recommended in this report that do not provide a person with a disability the ability to accessibly mark, verify, and cast a ballot.

Make Concrete, Actionable Recommendations

The report should strive to make bold, concrete recommendations designed to have a direct impact on accessibility. Most of the current recommendations are process in nature, such as forming work groups, supporting development of technical assistance materials, conducting research, etc. While these recommendations are good, they do not propose actions that will directly increase accessibility. Most would take extended time to yield results and results would be limited in scope. Voters with disabilities are done waiting for actions that improve accessibility. Decades of undelivered promises of accessibility require bold systemic change recommendations. Examples of recommendations included in NDRN's detailed comments are establishing and funding a National Voting Access Research Center to tackle the issue of accessible paper verification and paper handling mechanisms for BMDs and directing the US Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and Access Board to issue guidelines to prevent segregated voting where all voters hand-mark paper ballots and only a few people with disabilities use the "segregated" BMD.

Engage The Disability Community As Primary Stakeholders

The EO directed this report to identify access barriers and recommend solutions to those barriers. The disability community is the stakeholder group that will directly gain or lose access as a result of report recommendations. Input from disability and accessibility experts/advocates must be considered with due diligence and rejected only when justification can be provided. The final report must guard against overinfluence of input from stakeholders whose interest and expertise are not disability and accessibility. Far greater resources/expertise is devoted to cybersecurity than accessibility in all aspects of election work. NIST must commit to collaborating with disability and accessibility experts to craft a final report that is not rejected out-of-hand by those it is designed to help.

Refrain From Overstating The Impact of Current Technologies and the VVSG 2.0

Finally, the report also must not overstate the effectiveness of current voting technologies, like BMDs, in providing access to a private and independent vote and the effectiveness of VVSG 2.0 to ensure development of accessible voting technologies. Paper based voting systems are not fully accessible. VVSG 2.0 does not ensure a private and independent ballot for all voters in a fully integrated experience that respects the dignity of the voter and the secrecy of the ballot. NDRN and many other disability rights organizations have cautioned that no voting system currently in widespread use is fully accessible to all voters and submitted public comments opposing adoption of VVSG 2.0, as it falls far short of its intended purpose to establish guidelines to ensure accessible voting systems. While NIST played a role in the development of VVSG 2.0, using this report to promote NIST's work is inappropriate. Any discussion of VVSG 2.0 needs to be carefully vetted as terms like "will ensure" are inaccurate and misleading. The following limitations of the VVSG need to be clarified:

- The VVSG only applies to in-person voting systems, remote voting systems are not covered. Any statements about VVSG need to carefully separate in-person voting from all other voting.

- VVSG only provides standards for required access features that the in-person voting system must be able to deliver. Even when a system is able to deliver required access features, that does not mean it will be configured or deployed to actually do so. Many current “accessible” voting systems are configured and/or deployed in ways that negate available access features, and VVSG 2.0 does nothing to change that.
- VVSG 2.0 as a whole, because of significantly increased security requirements, will ensure increased reliance on paper based voting (and expanded use of hand-marked paper ballots) which will have a negative impact on accessibility.

Summary

DRTx understands that the barriers facing voters with disabilities are many, complex, and present in every aspect of the electoral process with which voters interact. Drafting a report that captures all of these barriers and proposes solutions to them is an immense undertaking. While this draft report is a promising start to capturing all of these barriers and proposing recommendations to mitigate them, edits are warranted to strengthen the report.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important draft report. If you have any questions please contact Jeff Miller, (512) 407-2762 or jmiller@drtx.org.

Sincerely,

Mary Faithfull
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Disability Rights Texas