

My name is Shyla Patera. I am an Independent Living Specialist who is employed by and represents North Central Independent Living Services, Inc. in Black Eagle, Montana. NCILS serves north central Montanans with disabilities. Accessible voting is a fundamental right for all Americans including those with disabilities. NCILS applauds NIST for submitting this Draft of Promoting Access to Voting: Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Private and Independent Voting for People With Disabilities.

The draft submitted is very thorough and offers detailed strategies for increasing and addressing the barriers towards private and independent voting for all. NCILS understands that this draft explores various ways current technologies assist in our voting process. Secretaries of State, clerks and recorders, poll watchers, as well as elected officials must ensure that accessibility can be achieved to the maximum extent possible. We, at NCILS, encourage you at NIST and other interested parties to examine how voting technology and reasonable accommodations can be implemented to ensure accessible, private and independent votes are cast and counted in rural and frontier America. Oftentimes, rural Americans do not have easy access to accessible polling places in county seats or on tribal reservations and Sovereign lands. NCILS also acknowledges that access to technology eliminates some barriers to voting, but may limit other opportunities to cast accessible votes as screenreading and other technologies used by voters may change. Other voters may not be as technology aware or be able to afford certain technologies. Counties and states may have to upgrade encryption and voter technologies as standards change.

NCILS appreciates the need for accessible languages as well as effective communication methods during the campaign and election processes. Plain language should be the standard for all campaign materials, ballot initiative language, as well as official election materials authorized by Secretaries of State and staff. NCILS hopes that NIST will engage with all federal agencies and states to ensure that best accessible practices for each voting method are highlighted and followed in state, local, and federal election processes and policies. As a voter and Montanan with a disability as well as a policy advocate, I would hope that NIST, along with other federal agencies such as the US Access Board and the National Council on Disability, would examine states voting rights laws and voting systems to promote maximized disabilities accessibility and best accessibility practices throughout our voting process. NIST could offer states peer training and such opportunities. NCILS appreciates and supports documents / materials outlined in the draft report and on your website regarding advancement of disabilities accessible voting throughout our nation. Thank you for the opportunity to submit these vital comments on behalf of North Central Independent Living Services, Inc.