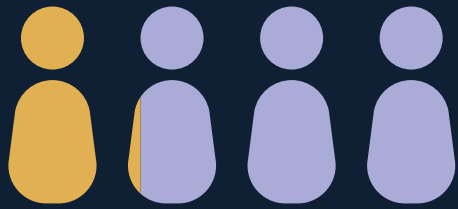


ENGAGING VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES

Disability is part of being human. At some point, almost everyone will experience temporary, short-term, or permanent disability.



**ROUGHLY 1 IN 4 ADULTS (27%)
IN THE UNITED STATES HAS
SOME TYPE OF DISABILITY**

source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

A disability includes any condition that significantly impacts a person's life activities. This can include matters of mobility, cognition, hearing, and/or vision. Any of these can impact the ability to vote in unique ways.

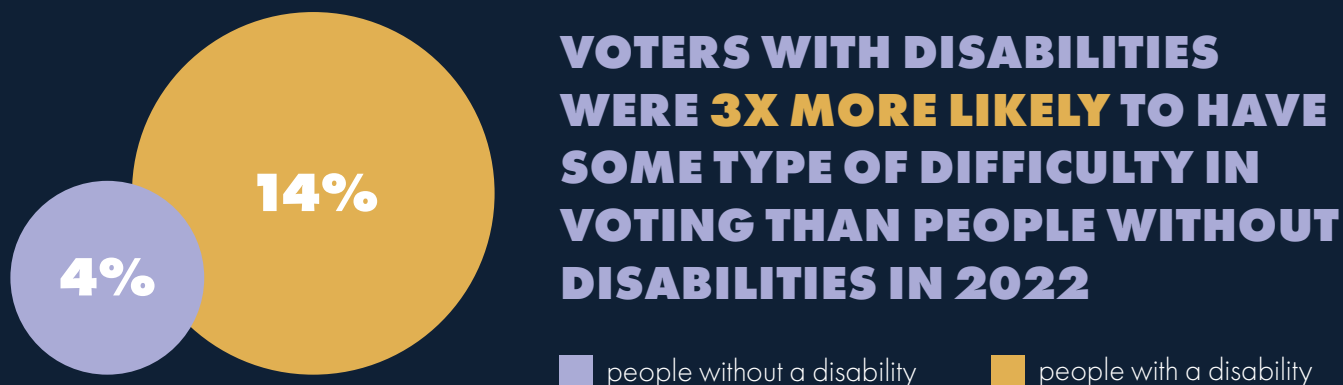
If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who have the same demographic characteristics, there would be about 1.75 million more voters.

AN ESTIMATED **17.7 MILLION AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES** VOTED IN 2020



source: Rutgers University

The landmark Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 required states to make voting more accessible. Since then, other laws such as the Help Americans Vote Act of 2002 have continued these efforts. Despite this, people with disabilities continue to face barriers to voting.



source: Rutgers University

Nonprofits have an important opportunity to improve voter registration, information, and turnout among people with a range of disabilities. Staff at trusted nonprofit organizations can ensure people with disabilities have the resources needed to fully exercise the right to vote. We asked several organizations that serve people with disabilities about barriers to voting, how their organization addresses these, and how all nonprofits can be allies in these efforts.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO VOTING

We spoke with three organizations that serve people with disabilities: The Disability Network; empower: abilities; and the Center for Independent Living¹ of South Central Pennsylvania. The insights and suggestions in this report may not apply to every community, nor will they address all of the differences that exist for various disability communities. However, for organizations looking to engage voters with disabilities, these strategies can serve as a starting point.

Using Multiple Formats in Different Mediums

Improvements made as a result of laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act provided benefits for all people. Curb cuts designed to accommodate people in wheelchairs also benefited people pushing strollers, for instance. Building on this idea, “universal design” is the gold standard. This means designing spaces, products, and communications to include all people.

For nonprofits, this means ensuring the physical and digital space in which voter registration is done is accessible to all. This may mean multiple formats in various visual, auditory, and tactile mediums. For visual information and forms, you may want to provide both paper printouts and digital devices so screen readers can be utilized. Hosting a webinar on voting information? Be sure to turn on captioning. Posting an image to social media? Be sure to use the “alt tag” features. Free online tools also exist to help simplify language or check for color contrast to ensure readability.

¹ Centers for independent living (CILs) were created as part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in order to:

promote a philosophy of independent living including a philosophy of consumer control, peer support, self-help, self-determination, equal access, and individual and system advocacy, in order to maximize the leadership, empowerment, independence, and productivity of individuals with disabilities, and the integration and full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the mainstream of American society.

The philosophy of Independent Living is based on the belief that People with Disabilities should be able to live with dignity, make their own choices, and participate fully in society. The right to vote, and to do so independently, is a key component of CILs’ work to support self-determination for People with Disabilities.

For tactile engagement, provide writing implements as well as tablets for those with limited mobility or difficulty with legible handwriting. QR codes can also be an interactive way to engage people, but always include the link in case a device can't scan the QR code. There are also checklists for ensuring your space is accessible.

Take advantage of the many free tools and resources developed and fine-tuned over the years. And there are organizations in every state that can serve as a further resource and guide.

The goal is to ensure information can be accessed and understood by any person, regardless of one's particular physical or intellectual ability. This communicates in a physical way that everyone's voice and experience are valued—that all are seen, heard, and valued.

"Accessible and easily understandable voter information is crucial for individuals with disabilities to fully engage in the voting process. Complex or overwhelming resources can create unnecessary barriers. We break down information into smaller, manageable pieces and try to provide accessible ways of sharing information."

— **Shelby Butler, empower: abilities**



"Universal Design really looks at how this works for everyone. It could be in the design of materials. It could be in spaces. It could be in systems....It isn't the requirement, but if we can start with universal design, we're already building a system for everyone and we're probably gonna land in a really good spot that serves everyone well."

— **Katie Curnow, The Disability Network**

Visualizing and Walking Through the Steps to Vote

Voting can be a uniquely challenging process for anyone. As trusted organizations, nonprofits can provide welcoming spaces where voters feel comfortable reaching out for help.

One way to work with people with disabilities is in preparing to vote, from making sure voter information is clear and understandable to addressing potential concerns: How will the voter get to the polling place? If driving, will there be accessible parking? Will the pathways to the entrance be accessible and clearly marked? How will the doors open?

For first-time voters or if a polling place has changed, visiting the site together in advance can help to get a feel for the location and identify any areas of concern. Addressing physical barriers in order to make people feel more confident on Election Day is great.

Any issues can be shared with the local county election office, which can be an ally in making sure accessibility requirements for polling places are met. Frame it as, “We want to help make sure everyone can vote.”

Beyond the physical location, working through a sample ballot can be helpful. For many, anything familiar or comforting can be helpful. Try reaching out to the local election office to do a demonstration to give voters experience with the actual voting machine that will be used.

By better understanding the full range of possible disabilities and appropriate accommodations, nonprofit staff can help address some of the barriers to voter registration and education, while maintaining dignity and independence for people with disabilities.

“Sometimes we don’t know what we don’t know. Just being aware and curious and willing to move through our biases or perceptions and see what we can learn more about goes a long way. One big thing we’re working on is just perception of disability overall.

When in doubt, check with the person with a disability. They are the expert on their experience and their body. A lot of times we wanna make assumptions or have something that’s really broad and big, but really think about the individual in front of you in these cases. We don’t have to be experts on everyone’s lived experience, but just being open to it is good.”

— Katie Curnow, The Disability Network

Helping to Access and Navigate Existing Resources

Another way nonprofits can help address voting barriers faced by people with disabilities is by connecting people to local resources and information. Presenting clear and understandable information like key dates, voting locations, transportation options, etc. is essential. Providing reminders of key dates can further make voting more accessible.

Nonprofits can also help lift up the experience of people with disabilities is by engaging elected officials. Working with people to navigate how to request accommodations and how to voice concern about public spaces or resources that are not accessible can be very empowering.

“We want to raise awareness among individuals with disabilities about the connection between public programs they rely on and the decisions made by public officials. Creating opportunities to meet elected officials in comfortable spaces like our office or in a person’s home is a great way to bridge that gap. We also work to stay connected through coalitions where we partner with other local and statewide groups. By working collectively, we can advocate for policies that ensure accessibility and inclusivity in the voting process.”

— **Shelby Butler, empower: abilities**

“We provide voter information cards, messaging, and training with key information like transportation, dates, and voting rights. And because we have longstanding relationships and are seen as a trustworthy source, we were able to work with the Secretary of State’s office to help address misinformation about voting dates spread in our area.”

— **Katie Curnow, The Disability Network**



MEET: CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING OF SOUTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

The Center for Independent Living of South Central Pennsylvania (CILSCPA) serves People with Disabilities in seven counties in South Central Pennsylvania to create Independent Living Plans, enabling and equipping people to define and achieve their goals. Through advocacy and collective action, CILSCPA strives to remove physical and attitudinal barriers that prevent People with Disabilities from exercising their rights, achieving personal independence, and participating fully in the life of the community.

Marty Dombrowski, Assistant Director, answered a few questions.

What are some ways you've worked with people with disabilities in your community to overcome barriers that make it difficult to vote?

The first step in our electoral process is registering to vote. This vital first step is often overlooked and is difficult for some to navigate. CILSCPA has shared information with Consumers about why we have to be registered and how this process works. The process is ongoing and is a discussion that we have with folks during intake. If someone needs assistance to register, staff is available to help.

We have also worked with People with Disabilities to overcome many barriers when it comes to voting, but one of the biggest challenges for folks is access to transportation to get to the polls. Public transportation is always a big issue. Of the seven rural counties we serve, only three have public buses, and this transportation is only available within a very limited area. While there is adequate medical transportation for people with disabilities, getting to the polls can be more complicated.

For many Voters with Disabilities, vote-by-mail has been the safest and most accessible way to vote, but it is very important for all voters to understand each County's regulations and rules when it comes to voting. CILSCPA had a team of volunteers call to connect with individuals and families to be sure people knew the unique dates and deadlines so that their vote would count. This call also doubled as a wellness check for our Consumers who lived most remotely. With permission, we contacted individuals and discussed the importance of the mail-in ballot and getting the envelope postmarked by the proper date.

Another way we connected was to help people to find the correct polling place in the event that they wanted to vote in person. What really helped people was when staff would call and ask, "Do you need help finding your polling place?", "Do you have any questions?" People really liked the one-to-one engagement and the chance to get questions answered by people they trusted.



MEET: THE DISABILITY NETWORK

The Disability Network is a Center for Independent Living (CIL) serving individuals in the Flint & Genesee County area or Michigan. The organization's mission is to revolutionize communities to be inclusive and accepting, where all people thrive in the quality of life they create.

Katie Curnow, Advocacy and Associate Director, answered a few questions.

What are some voting issues for people with disabilities you've been seeing?

There continue to be election site issues. These might be questions about any unfamiliar space, like, "How will I get there?" "Will there be accessible parking?" "Will accessible pathways to the entrance be clear and marked?" and "Will the doors open the way I need them to?"

After that, there's the matter of whether the necessary equipment will be turned on and working properly, and whether there are people onsite who understand the equipment and how to troubleshoot it. We find that proper planning and training on the front end is so important. Too often, people don't think it's a priority given the number of people who use ballot-marking devices and other accessibility options. But really the priority is in the right to vote. So how many people use the machine is not the question to answer. Instead, the question should be, "Are we prepared for everyone to vote how they need to vote?" If it can be framed that way, that's going to result in a better experience for everyone.

Additionally, some of the changes that have happened in voting by mail have been really beneficial. So we've been trying to protect these additional accessible options, whether it's voting by mail or voting in person.

Why is engaging voters with disabilities important and beneficial to the wider community?

People with disabilities often are underrepresented in community spaces and processes. The Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990, and we still have a lot of work to do in making sure that people with disabilities are represented, brought to the metaphoric table. As Americans, it's important that people with disabilities engage in civic duties, with voting being the most critical one.

And, it's not even just people with disabilities—we're talking about a universal approach. Accessible spaces benefit everyone. So when we're thinking about where we're going to vote, that would include people with disabilities utilizing the space, but also people with baby carriages and others navigating spaces differently.

What advantages do you have that political campaigns or other groups might not?

Our organization is actually run by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. So we have some baked-in peer support and are already starting off with disability in mind. As a person with disabilities, I'm much closer to the work that we do—I'm approaching and thinking about the world and different spaces in different ways.

I think the closer people are to disability, the more they recognize it in themselves and their peers, in their coworkers, in their loved ones as a natural part of life. A lot of that stigma and bias is removed. With political campaigns that might be further away from disability issues, disability might not even be acknowledged, or stigma or bias might come up in language used.



MEET: EMPOWER: ABILITIES

Empower: abilities is a 501(c)3 organization founded in 1985 (formerly Southwest Center for Independent Living) by a grassroots group of citizens working to protect the civil rights of people with disabilities. Empower: abilities is located in Springfield, Missouri, and serves both urban and rural areas in eight counties across the southwest portion of the state.

Shelby Butler, Director, Independent Living Services, answered a few questions.

What are some ways you look to engage voters with disabilities?

As a Center for Independent Living (CIL), we are committed to assisting individuals living in our service area with registering to vote and engaging in the democratic process.

Assisting with voter registration and education is an important part of our efforts and our frontline staff play a crucial role in making these services accessible to those we serve. Collaborating with partners across the state and locally also helps pool resources, streamline efforts, and amplify our impact. This is especially important for maintaining momentum and continuity in our initiatives despite changes in leadership and term limits.

Rural communities often face unique challenges when it comes to accessibility and voting. Connecting with local clerks in these areas is a strategic approach, as they can provide valuable insights and support for ensuring that individuals with disabilities can exercise their right to vote from home.

What do you see as some of the barriers facing voters with disabilities, and what are some ways in which you address those?

Physical accessibility is still a major barrier as many polling places may not be fully accessible to those with mobility impairments. Communication barriers exist when individuals may face challenges in understanding the voting process due to lack of accessible information. Transportation can be a significant barrier for people who may have a difficult time reaching polling places or where there are limited resources. Stigma and discrimination can discourage individuals from registering or engaging in the process. Sometimes voting can be complex and confusing, and that may make it more difficult for those with cognitive disabilities to cast their votes. All of these barriers can lead to apathy or a desire to completely forego engaging in voting altogether.

For the past three years, we have received a grant from the REV UP Voting Campaign of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), which has allowed us to work together with different partners. This amplifies our impact and we are able to reach more people through outreach efforts. We have numerous stories demonstrating the profound significance of our work,

but one that stands out is an individual who regained his guardianship and then was able to register to vote at one of our events. Ensuring someone has the opportunity to exercise their right to vote not only empowers them to make their voice heard but also sends a powerful message about inclusion and the value of every individual's contribution to the democratic process.

We have also considered becoming a central voting place, which aligns with our organization's mission to empower individuals with disabilities and promote inclusivity. It also serves as a practical way to address barriers to voting. We are committed to fostering a more accessible and participatory democratic process.

RESOURCES

Voting Accessibility (Election Assistance Commission)

eac.gov/voting-accessibility

Promoting Access to Voting: Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Private and Independent Voting for People with Disabilities (National Institute of Standards and Technology)

nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/SpecialPublications/NIST.SP.1273.pdf

Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections: Final Report on Survey Results Submitted to the Election Assistance Commission (Program for Disability Research, School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers University)

[smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/Program Disability Research/Disability and voting accessibility 2020 election Final Report survey results.pdf](https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/Program%20Disability%20Research/Disability%20and%20voting%20accessibility%202020%20election%20Final%20Report%20survey%20results.pdf)

Presentation of 2020 survey findings

ndrn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Rutgers-Disability-Vote-Summit-Slides.pdf

Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2022 Elections: Final Report on Survey Results Submitted to the Election Assistance Commission

eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC_2023_Rutgers_Report_FINAL.pdf

Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2022 Elections: Supplemental Analysis of Census Voter Turnout Data

eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC_2023_Rutgers_Report_Supplement_FINAL.pdf

The 7 Principles of Universal Design

universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/the-7-principles/the-7-principles.html

Find your state's federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) System and Client Assistance Programs (CAP):

ndrn.org/about/ndrn-member-agencies

Find your state's federally funded Centers for Independent Living:

acl.gov/programs/centers-independent-living/list-cils-and-spils