

Local Partnership Makes Voting Accessible for ALL in El Paso County

The El Paso County Elections Department is committed to “removing all...remaining obstacles to the right to vote,” (Martin Luther King Jr., about the Voting Rights Act of 1965). To that end, the Department consistently engages stakeholders to identify opportunities for enhancing accessibility for all communities in the El Paso County region.

For the 2016 Presidential Election, the Department had the chance to establish the first “Highly Accessible Polling Place” (Stewart, 2017) in Colorado Springs through a partnership with The Independence Center. The Independence Center is a local nonprofit organization that serves individuals with disabilities, and their families, to support independent living.

The Department worked with The Independence Center to identify specific challenges to voting accessibility for those with disabilities, which include transportation to and from voting locations, and poll workers who are trained in being able to better service those with disabilities. Additionally, while all voting centers are ADA compliant, not all are as convenient for voters with accessibility challenges.

In order to address the obstacles outlined, and others, the Elections Department worked with The Independence Center to open it as a voting service and polling center for two days during the 2016 Presidential Election.

Features that make The Independence Center uniquely accessible include desks with cranks for height adjustments that anyone with a disability may use, more



Photo courtesy of The Independence Center

handicap parking spaces than required by ADA standards, flooring with accent colors

against the wall for visually disabled to move without assistance, and hallways in which 2-3 wheelchairs may move through at the same time. Other unique features include lever door knobs that are more accessible, acoustic paneling designed to reduce background noise, and stairs that have contrast striping on each step to make them more visible – among several other features. With these services, along with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters on hand throughout the day, The Independence Center offered advanced services for those in the disabled community.

All voters in El Paso County were welcome to use the facility, but the focus was to provide additional opportunities for individuals with disabilities to vote. Specifically, voters with disabilities were able to register to vote with location staff who had been trained in disability etiquette; they could also vote at the facility through paper ballots or one of the several DRE devices.

El Paso County Clerk & Recorder Chuck Broerman, along with Department Manager Liz Olson, and several other team members from the El Paso County Elections Department participated in an open house at The Independence Center in September 2016 to demonstrate the ease of voting with a DRE, and to provide additional information on registration and voting support that the Department offers. Over 40 individuals attended.

The Colorado Springs School for the Deaf and Blind brought students to the open house; they were able to practice voting on the accessible devices, and to register if needed.



Clerk & Recorder Chuck Broerman speaks with voters through an interpreter



Elections Manager Liz Olson presents on voting and registering

But the Elections Department did not limit its accessibility efforts to The Independence Center. Staff from The Independence Center presented at the election judge training for both 2016 Elections and worked with over 200 judges assigned to locations throughout the County on disability etiquette. These judges learned how to best offer assistance for a variety

of disabilities, and how to be sensitive to the different physical, emotional, and mental needs of many throughout the community.

The Communications Department worked with several media outlets to spread the word about the opportunities for voting at The Independence Center. Newspapers carried the story, along with multiple local TV networks (Attachment 1). The Department posted information about voting on social media, and The Independence Center earned media coverage, posted on social media, and created a flyer for its network to advertise the services offered (Attachment 2).

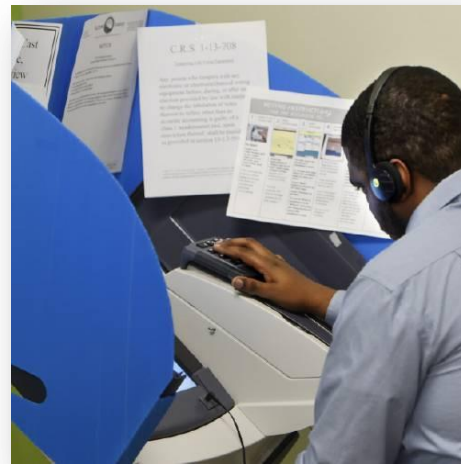
The results of the partnership were exciting. The Independence Center saw over 450 voters during the two days it was open, with 380 voters on Election Day; 188 of those Election Day voters used a DRE.

One first time voter, Daniel Ratcliff, commented, “It was well put together. It was very easy. I hadn’t even registered yet, and I was able to come into the room, register and vote in the same place. And it only took me 10 to 15 minutes, total.” Daniel further described his concerns about the voting process prior to voting at The Independence Center. “I just really felt as though an individual that was blind, or visually impaired, wouldn’t be able to vote and I didn’t want to ask somebody to come into the booth with me. I wanted to actually have it private, just like everyone else” (Burke, 2017). Daniel concluded, “It was an awesome experience to feel as though I’m doing this all on my own, independently.”

Another first time voter, 19-year-old Nathan Schwegman, signed to reporters attending the opening of the voter service and polling center, “I’m a star.” He is a student at the Colorado Springs School for the Deaf and Blind (Sun, 2017). He was one of 16 students from the School able to vote on DRE machines, with the assistance of interpreters.

The Elections Department is continuing its partnership with The Independence Center for the 2017 Coordinated Election on November 7. The organizations partnered for another open house on September 21, 2017 with over 20 in attendance.

Additionally, the Elections Department is filming a short video on how to use newly purchased accessible voting machines, with features such as the ability to enhance contrast on the screen, enlarge text, and is sip and puff compatible. The Department looks forward to utilizing The Independence Center once again as a Voter Service and Polling Center on November 6 and 7, and continuing to support the needs of all citizens in El Paso County.



Daniel Ratcliff voting at The Independence Center on November 7, 2016. Photo by Jerilee Bennett, The Gazette.

Reference:

Stewart, N. (2017, January 13). Making Voting Easier for People With Disabilities. Retrieved April 15, 2017 from <https://www.theindependencecenter.org/making-voting-easier-for-people-with-disabilities/>.