

Voter Accessibility Advisory Committee

Charleston County Board of Voter Registration and Elections



The Voter Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC) was established in March 2024 to provide valuable advice and recommendations to the BVRE on matters related to voting accessibility. The primary purpose of the VAAC was to ensure that all voters in Charleston County, regardless of disability, could fully and equally participate in elections. The committee's role involves identifying barriers to voting, proposing potential solutions, and enhancing the overall voting experience for individuals with disabilities in Charleston County.

When discussing accessibility, we often hear the same refrain: Voters with disabilities can vote absentee by mail rather than voting in person. At BVRE, we believe voters with disabilities deserve to be able to vote in their preferred method. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures that voters with disabilities are not prevented from physically accessing the polling location, we want voters with disabilities to feel welcomed in the polling location.

Committee members are part of the disability community, representing groups from a wide spectrum. We currently have representation from the following organizations:

- **AccessAbility**
AccessAbility promotes the full integration of people with disabilities into our community.
- **Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired**
- **Disability Rights SC**
- **HEART inclusive Art Community**
HEART inclusive Art Community offers mentorships in the arts for people with disabilities.
- **College of Charleston Office of Equal Opportunity Programs**
- **Pattinson's Academy**
Pattinson's Academy provides programs to support children with disabilities and their familiars.
- **City of Charleston ADA Coordinator**
- **Just Bee**
Just Bee serves people who are autistic or neurodivergent, a group of individuals not often represented in discussions around accessibility.

Accessibility Checklist

One of the first deliverables the VAAC developed was an accessibility checklist for poll workers to complete on Election Day. We receive calls every election about accessibility issues, so it was clear that the current process was not working.

ADA reviews are done on each polling place on a regular basis, but the accessibility checklist was aimed at poll workers on Election Day and are things that a poll worker could handle in real time. For example, poll worker can't get a ramp placed over stairs, but they could have a worker stationed at the door to let in voters if the door handle is inaccessible.

Our goals for the accessibility checklist were:

- **Ensuring that polling locations are adhering to ADA and BVRE requirements for accessibility.**

In addition to the ADA requirements, BVRE currently requires polling locations to have headphones for an audio ballot ready and have chairs available for voters who can't stand.

- **Emphasizing the importance of accessibility to our poll workers.**

Having a separate required checklist, rather than it being muddled by the other documents used by polling locations, underscores BVRE's dedication to accessibility.

- **Making it easier to complete.**

The checklist is 14pt font in Tahoma, one of the most accessible fonts. It is written in plain language and has minimal visual clutter. It also has locations pre-populated, so we minimize the information a poll worker must fill in.

Example 1: Checklist from the U.S. Department of Justice

Ward:_____ Precinct:_____ Staff:_____ Date:_____ Time:_____					
Address:_____ Location name:_____					
E	Route from Entrance Into Voting Area	Yes	No	N/A	Comments/ Remedies
E1	Is the route at least 36" wide? (§403.5.1)				

Example B: A requirement from the South Carolina State Election Commission's Poll Managers Handbook (2024 edition)**Voting Area**

- There must be a clear route throughout the entire voting area that is at least three feet wide.

Example C: A checklist item from BVRE's Accessibility Checklist**Interior Pathways**

- ☐
- Pathways are at least 3 feet wide and clear.

- **Empowering our poll workers.**

Our poll workers are always looking to help with more tasks at the polling location. Serving as the polling location's Accessibility Liaison gives them an elevated status, allows us to provide additional training, and provide us with a contact at the polling location if any accessibility issues come up.

When we are developing new programs or processes, we consider the replicability of them in other jurisdictions. The VAAC is low-cost. The committee members are volunteers and do not receive payment for their participation. Despite this, we received many interested parties, the majority of whom expressed excitement at being invited to join this committee. This checklist was made in-house, and the only cost was printing the accessibility checklists and measuring tapes for each location.

Training

The required training for poll workers all centers around compliance with ADA. We wanted to expand our accessibility training to include information about additional accessibility accommodations, interacting with voters with disabilities, and providing services to voters with disabilities.


All training for the 2024 General Election included a hands-on section showing poll workers how to use accessible features on our ballot-marking devices. We also included information on service animals, which the VAAC requested.

In the future, we plan to incorporate more training on respectfully interacting with voters with disabilities, which is something that poll workers can use in their everyday lives.

Example D: Slide from early voting training on accessibility

Accessibility

- **Always ask before assisting anyone.**
- **Disabilities can be invisible.**
- **Don't assume anything about a person's ability or disability.**
- **Each person is different.**
- **Treat everyone with respect.**



To achieve this, the committee focused on several key tasks and goals. These included identifying and addressing barriers throughout the entire voting process, from registration to the act of casting a ballot. Additionally, the committee worked to ensure that information on BVRE's website and other materials was accessible to all voters.

The Future of the VAAC

As we move into 2025, the VAAC is currently working on two projects:

- Accessibility Menu

Voters often remark that they aren't aware of the accessibility resources available to them. The VAAC is working on developing a menu that showcases all our accessibility accommodations.

Once the menu is finished, we will create large print posters to hang in our polling locations and ensure poll workers are trained and ready to provide support for any of our voters' needs.

- Buddy Passes

In South Carolina, a voter can ask for assistance at the ballot marking device if they meet one of the following qualifications:

- Are blind or vision-impaired
- Unable to read or write
- Have a disability.

Voters often ask for assistance at the check-in station before they are sent to the ballot marking devices. However, the election workers aren't always able to communicate that a voter has asked for assistance, especially during busier elections. Then, when they

are being assisted at the ballot marking device, the voter must explain again that they've requested assistance.

We will have the accessibility menu printed on the buddy passes so poll workers can circle the accommodation a voter needs. The voter can then hand the buddy pass to an election worker at the ballot marking device and they will not have to disclose again that they qualify.

The passes will be color-coded (in shades that are accessible to colorblind election workers) so that we will be able to easily tell if a voter will be receiving help from someone of their choosing or if they'd like assistance from an election worker.