



# Best Practices: Accessible In-Person Voting



**U.S. Election Assistance Commission**  
633 3rd Street NW, Suite 200 | Washington, DC 20001  
[www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov)

## Introduction



Voters with disabilities represent approximately one-sixth of the American electorate. This growing demographic encompasses a broad range of voters, including those with mobility, visual, communicative, physical, or cognitive impairments. Voters with disabilities face unique obstacles when exercising their right to vote.

The rights of people with disabilities to vote privately and independently with equal access to voter registration and the electoral process is secured through the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), and the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act. These laws have created a series of rights that ensure voters with disabilities can access all portions of the electoral process in a manner that is accessible to them. Under HAVA, voters with disabilities have the right to be able to mark, cast, and verify their ballot privately and independently.

Title II of the ADA requires state and local governments to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to government services and information, including the voting process. Additionally, the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act requires polling places to be accessible.

This guide will highlight the primary barriers to in-person voting and provide best practices to help ensure voters with disabilities have equal access to this crucial piece of the voting experience. The checklists and best practices in this guide can be utilized by election officials, policymakers, and advocates to better serve the disability community.

## Scope

Election officials must consider a broad range of accessibility needs to serve their voters, including both visible and invisible disabilities. Many challenges exist, including harnessing a wide range of assistive tools, maximizing available technology, and ensuring voters can vote with confidence. Elections officials can often enhance accessibility with small, practical, and cost-effective adjustments. This document is designed to provide election officials with recommendations on accessibility considerations and best practices to ensure that all voters can vote privately and independently.

## Roles and Responsibilities

Elections are administered by a mix of full-time and part-time staff adhering to federal, state, and local regulations. This staff is often supplemented by temporary employees, often serve as poll workers at polling places. While part-time and temporary staff receive extensive training, ensuring accessibility can be a complex process. Some examples of staff responsibilities related to accessibility include:

- **Election Officials and Administrative Staff:**

- Setting an overall strategy to meet the accessibility requirements outlined in HAVA, ADA, and other laws.
- Developing and overseeing the accessibility and usability of the election office's website.
- Procuring and deploying accessible voting systems and assistive devices to polling places.

- **Temporary Employees and Poll Workers:**

- Assisting voters with the use of accessible voting equipment to ensure that all voters can cast a ballot privately and independently.
- Providing assistance to voters based on state and federal legal requirements.

## Goals



The recommendations contained in this guide are intended for election officials who are responsible for ensuring accessibility in elections. These checklists and best practices will help election officials improve the accessibility of their in-person voting processes. The EAC recognizes there are external and perceived concerns that impact voter behavior. While the ADA and HAVA codify accessibility standards in many aspects of elections, states have wide-ranging laws and requirements that govern the voting process. After reviewing applicable federal, state, and local laws, elections offices may want to adopt the practices described in this guide that best fit the needs of voters.

HAVA Section 261, authorizes payments to states and units of local government to ensure access to the polls for individuals with disabilities. The laws that govern accessibility throughout the elections process are vital requirements but can also serve to improve the voting experience for all. Below are some questions election officials should consider implementing to ensure accessibility for in-person voting:

- Are voting processes, training, outreach, election information, and post-election activities accessible?
- Are there any challenges to ensuring polling places are accessible? How do you inform advocacy organizations about voting locations? What needs to be communicated with people who have different access needs to ensure polling place accessibility while maintaining individuals' privacy and independence?
- What voting options are available to in-person voters? How might these options assist voters who otherwise may have difficulty casting a ballot in-person?
- Are poll workers trained to be considerate of a wide range of individuals with disabilities, including those with physical, cognitive, and mobility challenges?

## Accessible In-Person Voting

In-person voting is the most widely available voting option; every state and territory is required to conduct in-person voting for federal elections with at least one accessible voting machine per polling place. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) mandates that voters with disabilities be able to mark, cast, and verify their ballots privately and independently using an accessible voting machine. In addition to voting, some states have offered a more comprehensive voting experience.

Voters in some states are now able to register to vote or cast their ballot using an alternative voting method such as curbside voting or ballot drop-boxes. Accessibility extends beyond the polling place. Voting equipment, communication methods, and other voting activities must all be accessible to voters with disabilities. Election officials and decision makers should evaluate every component of the in-person voting process to ensure voters with disabilities can access them.

People with disabilities should be included throughout the process, from decision-making and development to testing and implementation. Organizing a testing group that represents a diverse set of needs is essential to ensuring effective policy. A cross-disability focus group can offer suggestions and inform better policy decisions. In addition, the available voter registration options should be communicated in an accessible manner through different platforms.

The first step to ensure accessible in-person voting is to select a polling place. The three major considerations for selecting a polling place are the physical accessibility of the building, the building type (public or privately owned), and location. Priority should be given to physically accessible locations that are reachable by public transportation and the majority of the voters served by the location. The basic requirement for a polling place is that the pathway into and throughout the building from either public transportation or a parking lot is accessible.



## ADA Requirements: Building Access

- At least one door at the accessible entrance must have a minimum clearance width of 32 inches.
- Doors must be operable by someone with limited mobility in their hands.
- Doors may not have high thresholds that impede voters who use mobility devices in crossing the threshold.
- Inaccessible entrances must have signs directing voters to the accessible entrance.

### Building Accessibility Checklist

#### Best Practice for Accessibility

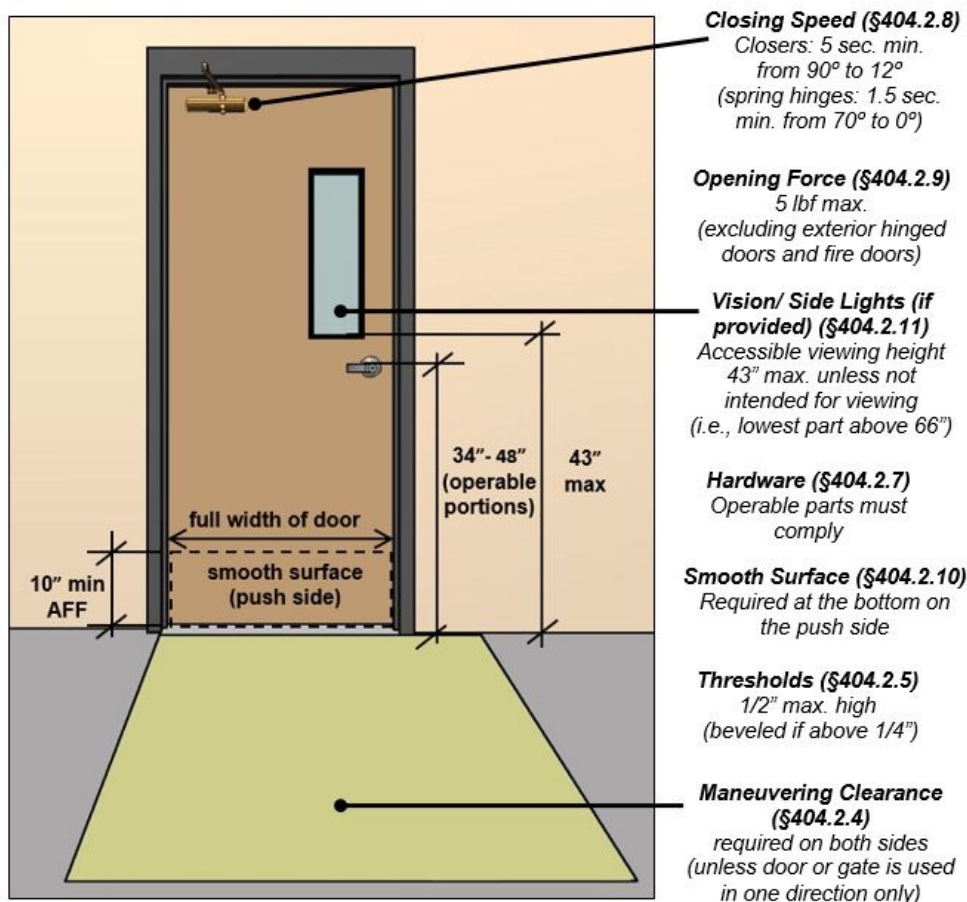
#### Completed?

- Is the accessible entrance clearly marked with accessible signage?
- Do any inaccessible entrances have signs directing voters to accessible entrances?
- Are the entry and exit doors unlocked and propped open?
- Are chairs available to voters in line?
- Is there an accessible route through the polling place?
- Does the polling place have accessible restrooms?

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At least one door, doorway, or gate, must be accessible to enter each polling location. This includes exterior entrances and interior spaces that are hosting voting activities. The U.S. Access Board provides specific information about meeting the requirements of the ADA in their [Guides to the ADA Accessibility Standards](#). These guides provide detailed information to comply with the ADA, and includes several animations and diagrams, such as the illustration below:

### Accessibility for Manual Doors and Gates



#### Double-Leaf Doors (§404.2.2)

One active leaf of double-leaf doors is required to meet criteria for clear width and maneuvering clearance. Other door requirements apply to both leaves.

<https://www.access-board.gov/ada/guides/chapter-4-entrances-doors-and-gates/#manual-doors-and-gates>

### Best Practice: Physical Barriers



Place detectable objects to indicate protruding water fountains, undersides of stairs, or similar barriers. Ensure that these objects (or any other obstacles) do not impede the required maneuvering clearance on both sides of any doors or gates.

## Best Practice: Accessible Restrooms



While not a part of the voting process, it is a best practice to ensure polling place restrooms meet ADA accessible requirements: <https://www.access-board.gov/ada/guides/chapter-6-toilet-rooms/>

## Parking Lot Accessibility Checklist

### Best Practice for Accessibility

### Completed?

- Is the parking lot surface accessible? ☐
- Are there enough accessible parking spaces? ☐
- Are there signs for accessible parking spaces? ☐
- Is there a clear path from the parking lot to the accessible entrance? ☐
- Is there an accessible drop-off area? ☐
- Is there curbside voting? ☐
- Is the accessible path to the building entrance free of vehicles? ☐

## Polling Place Accessibility

Accessibility extends beyond the built environment. Polling places should include accessible signs and instructions that guide voters throughout the voting process. Instructions should be given in multiple modalities including large print, auditory, and other languages.

Election officials should map the pathway through the polling place to ensure there are no barriers or impediments to accessibility. The accessible pathway should be publicized in voter outreach materials including on election websites with caption videos and mailers with navigational instructions.

To increase the effectiveness of auditory instruction, election officials should consider implementing strategies to reduce echo and audio reflection. This also provides an accessible environment for voters using audible ballots.



### ADA Requirements: Polling Place Access

- The voting area must have an accessible entrance and adequate circulation and maneuvering space for voters who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices.
- Within the voting area there must be enough clearance for individuals with disabilities to access and use all the voting equipment.

### Polling Place Check in Accessibility Checklist

Best Practice for Accessibility	Completed?
• Are check-in signs accessible?	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Can polling place staff communicate in an accessible manner?	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are polling staff trained on disability etiquette?	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is the check-in (voter identification) device compatible with personal assistive devices?	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Best Practice: Signature Accessibility



Signature requirements may present an accessibility barrier to blind or low vision voters and voters with physical disabilities. Accessible options for signatures include physical marks indicating a signature line, electronic signatures, stamps, and affidavits of assistance.

### In Person Registration Checklist

Best Practice for Accessibility	Completed?
• Are alternative formats of instructions and forms available?	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Are the instructions and forms clear?	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Does the form use plain language?	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Is the voter registration location accessible?	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Best Practice: Auditory Accessibility



Use table cloths, drapes, and rugs to reduce echo and audio reflection.



## Accessible Voting

Accessible voting is defined as a voter being able to mark, cast, and verify their ballot privately and independently. HAVA requires accessible voting systems for voters with disabilities in all polling places: "The voting system shall... be accessible for individuals with disabilities, including nonvisual accessibility for the blind and visually impaired, in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for others."

Voters may choose to use an accessible voting machine, personal assistive technology, or request assistance from a third party to vote subject to the limitations of Section 208 of the Voting Rights Act and state and local law. Poll workers should be aware of any available voting aids, voting assistance, or required

procedures. Staff should be trained on and must know how to operate the accessible voting machines and be familiar with the accessible features.



### Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Elections offices that receive federal funds must comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This Act requires all information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by the federal government be accessible to people with disabilities. In practical terms this means people with disabilities must be given comparable access to nondisabled people.

### Accessible Voting Checklist

#### Best Practice for Accessibility

#### Completed?

- Is the accessible voting machine turned on and operational? ☐
- Are the voting machines compatible with assistive technology? ☐
- Is the voting machine compatible with personal assistive devices? ☐
- Are headphones and other provided assistive technology plugged in and operational? ☐



### Iowa Secretary of State *Partnership with Disability Rights Iowa*

The Iowa Secretary of State's Office partnered with Disability Rights Iowa to produce and distribute accessibility guide booklets across the state. The quick check guide includes information about accessible voting equipment, spacing, and signage. Booklet panels can also be used as a measuring tool. The Quick Check Accessibility booklet provides an easy and useful reference for counties, helping them to provide the best experience to all voters, including those with disabilities. Find the full competition submission here:

<https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/iowa-secretary-state-2020-clearinghouse-award-winner>





## Best Practice: Accessible Voting Machines



Every polling place is required to have at least one accessible voting machine. The accessible machines, features, and operations may vary by jurisdiction, so it is important for poll workers to be familiar with the machine used in their assigned polling place.

**Tip:** To ensure poll workers are familiar with accessible voting machines, they should be encouraged to use these machines during testing and training. Voters should be offered neutral instructions at check-in to make sure the machines are utilized. On Election Day, poll workers should verify that the machines are turned on and working prior to opening the polls for voting.

## Best Practice: Low-Cost Assistive Technology



Make low cost commonly used assistive technology available to voters: headphones, touch pens, and magnifying glasses.



### Contra Costa County, California

#### *Creating a Welcoming Environment for All Voters*

Contra Costa County conducts a survey of each of its 268 polling places after every election and is often able to identify ways to improve the accessibility of these locations. Following the November 2016 election, Contra Costa County Clerk, Recorder and Registrar Joseph Canciamilla realized improvements to election worker training could create a more welcoming environment for all voters. The county created the Accessible Polling Place Location and Equipment (APPLE) class. APPLE taught election workers about barriers to accessibility by simulating the needs of voters who may need assistance. This instruction has helped increase accessibility at polling places and ensured they remained accessible throughout the day.

The county also provided an Accessibility Kit to give election workers further information on how to remove any accessibility barriers at their polling place. More than 700 election workers, nearly half of the county's total Election Day volunteers, have taken the class since it was launched in January 2018. Find the full competition submission here: <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/contra-costa-county-ca-2018-clearinghouse-award-winner>

## Glossary

**Accessibility:** Measurable characteristics that indicate the degree to which a system is available to, and usable by, individuals with disabilities. The most common disabilities include those associated with vision, hearing, and mobility, as well as cognitive disabilities.

**Assistive Technology:** An item used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities.

**Eligible to Vote:** A person who meets the requirements set forth in a political subdivision for being able to vote.

**Eligible Voters:** The universe of all voters who, if they cast a ballot, would have the legal right to have eligible contests on that ballot tabulated. This would include those who do not appear in the list of eligible voters because they live in a same-day registration or no registration state and did not or could not register ahead of time.

**Inaccessible:** In the context of technology and/or websites, inaccessible pertains to the difficulties an end-user may face when trying to access content.

**Screen Reader:** Software that reads the content of a computer screen aloud. Screen readers only convey text, so all graphics must have alternative text descriptions using alt-text, captions, transcripts, or other methods.

**Web Accessibility:** The principle that all web users should have access to information available on the Internet.



## Resources and References

The references provided below include additional data about the accessibility barriers faced by voters with disabilities during the in person voting process. These resources can be used to aid compliance with the technical aspects of the checklists and best practices. Contact advocacy organizations for insight into local accessibility barriers and assistance with useability testing.

### Related EAC Resources:

- [Accessible Voter Registration Checklist](#)

### Federal Legislation:

- [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#)
- [Help America Vote Act \(HAVA\)](#)
- [Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act](#)
- [National Voter Registration Act \(NVRA\)](#)

### Advocacy Organizations:

- American Association of People with Disabilities
- American Council of the Blind
- Association of University Centers on Disabilities
- ARC
- Developmental Disabilities Councils
- Independent Living Research Utilization
- National Federation of the Blind
- Nation Association of the Deaf
- National Council on Independent Living
- National Disability Rights Network

### References:

- [ADA Checklist for Polling Places](#)
- [Guide to the ADA Accessibility Standards](#)
- [Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Election: Final Report on Survey Results](#)
- [Enhancing Accessibility in U.S. Elections](#)
- [Fact sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2020 Elections](#)

