

# T E N N E S S E E   D I S A B I L I T Y   C O A L I T I O N

## **Introduction**

As part of the Accessibility and Assistive Technology team for the Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV) grant, the Tennessee Disability Coalition (TDC) was tasked to serve as an interface with the disability community to exercise their voting rights and to with volunteers to participate in RAAV pilots to break down barriers for voters with disabilities. TDC along with Paraquad worked extensively with local election administrations to train poll workers and voters with disabilities.

The Tennessee Disability Coalition (TDC) was founded in 1989 with the mission to promote full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life. Today we are an alliance of over 47 member organizations who work together to accomplish this goal. Since the passage of HAVA in 2000, TDC has worked throughout Tennessee to break down barriers to voting for people with disabilities. By establishing local vote committees, people with disabilities in various parts of the state worked with county Election Administrators to train poll workers on accessibility and train community members on their voting rights. We have successfully seen the development of a formalized poll worker training by Disability Rights Tennessee who all 95 Tennessee counties use, and continue to advocate for voting machines to be the primary medium by which Tennesseans vote. Currently only 2 Tennessee counties use paper ballots. Our local vote committees also worked with local Election Administrators to conduct poll site accessibility surveys. In 2011 TDC continued its decade long work on increasing participation in voting by joining the RAAV team as a subgrantee.

## **Project Timeline**

In November 2011 TDC hired a civic engagement specialist to work with the RAAV team. TDC began to develop relationships with county Election Administrators to identify problems and setbacks to determine our research and training models. To learn about the voter experience we conducted a phone survey in March 2012 following the Presidential Preference Primary. We were able to reach over 500 voters with disabilities in Tennessee to with responded positively to the voting experience. 84% of Tennesseans were highly satisfied or highly satisfied with their experience and 70% believed that poll workers were knowledgeable about accommodations available to individuals with disabilities.

Encouraged by these results we continued to test the voter experience in August 2012 and November 2012. In August we recruited exit pollers in three Tennessee counties (Davidson, Williamson, and Hamilton) to survey voters. We received over 500 responses. We received results that mirrored the phone survey – voters continued to be satisfied with their experience. We also observed a very low incidence of disability, which election administrators will echo, saying they believe most voters with disabilities vote during our early voting period or by absentee ballot.

In November 2012 TDC credentialed poll watchers to be inside the polling places. We wanted to make sure that voters were accurately conveying their voting experience and to be able to observe the poll workers inside the polling place. We worked with two counties for this project (Williamson and Hamilton). These poll watchers were given accessibility checklists and were each asked to write a report

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reviewing what they had observed. Our volunteers found relatively typical Election Day problems particularly in a presidential election. Our most reported problem were long lines. Also minorly reported were some accessibility issues almost exclusively related to parking. Thousands of voters were observed, and there were no instances where a voter was not able to cast a ballot in our testing locations. Volunteers observed that there were few people with observable disabilities at the polling place on Election Day. Poll workers were generally friendly and helpful. Our research into the voter experience has been helpful in learning that generally, Tennessee voters feel satisfied with the way elections are run. They feel that poll workers are knowledgeable and helpful, and the statewide use of voting machines drastically cuts down on the learning curve for voters and poll workers alike. Election administrators believe their biggest problems are training time and poll worker retention.

From the three Tennessee election in which TDC observed the voter experience, we continually learned that voters were generally satisfied with their experience. Knowledgeable and helpful poll workers, coupled with low incidence and long standing relationships between advocacy groups and Election officials has proved to make voting a positive experience for voters with disabilities. While testing the voter experience was important, TDC continued to work with county Election Administrators to understand their best practices and learn where they needed additional training.

TDC staff met with over 40 county Election Administrators to learn how they trained poll workers around accessibility and accommodations for voters. From these meetings we learned that the most popular training medium was in person lecture style that typically lasted between 1-2 hours. Almost all Administrators felt they needed more training time but funding was an issue. The second biggest problem was Administrators has no way of knowing whether poll workers were retaining the information they were trained on. From meeting with RAAV partners across the county, a common theme amongst election officials was the more training materials the better. Job aids were a common tool to help poll workers remember what they learned in training. Tennessee Election Administrators did not have job aids relative to accommodating voters with disabilities. TDC, along with Paraquad began to develop picture guides that were step-by-step picture supported information of how to cast a regular and audio ballot on a voting machine. We developed these for all 5 voting machines currently being used in Tennessee and sent them to all county Election Administrators to use as job aids for the November 2012 Presidential election.

TDC performed its final pilot on March 5, 2013 during Chattanooga Tennessee's municipal elections. Understanding that poll worker retention is a forefront problem on Election Administrator's minds, we wanted to see if we could combat this through a partnership with advocates and election officials.

To research this, TDC worked with the Hamilton County Election Commission to create a pilot. We set up a test group of 2 polling places (8 poll workers) and a control group of 2 polling places (8 poll workers). Both groups received the tradition training from the Hamilton County Election Commission given every election cycle. The test group was given additional training from TDC. They received two in-person training on materials created and tested by the RAAV team. They spent an extra hour in-person setting up and going through the access features of a voting machine. Then they received additional materials and job aids from TDC via mail and email.

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TDC anecdotally gathered evidence from the poll workers post-election to see if their retention was higher. Because of a low turnout election and continued low incidence of people with disabilities using access features on the voting machines, much of what the poll workers learned was not able to be put to use. The test group of poll workers was able to recall information that the control group was not able to. We along with the poll workers believed the pilot to be a success. Poll workers were happy to receive additional job training and believe that take home, online, and day of materials all make them more successful and prepared for their job.

Year three of the RAAV project was spent sharing this information with election officials across the country at the Election Center's one day seminars on accessibility. TDC participated in 6 seminars with Paraquad on a panel to discuss our work on the RAAV grant. TDC continued to work with local election administrators to develop relationships and increase the usage of job aids for 2014 elections.

Also during year three, TDC began to work with other Tennessee stakeholders to disseminate our information and brainstorm ways to continue our this work. TDC, along with Disability Rights Tennessee and the Tennessee Secretary of State's office are committed to discovering ways to offer more information for poll workers and voters. Together we are developing a training video for voters with disabilities and poll workers to debut in the summer of 2015. This video will feature voter's rights and responsibilities, accessibility, disability etiquette, and assistive technology for voting machines. The video will be posted on YouTube and featured on all stakeholder's and the Secretary of State's website. We will also use it to train Election Administrator's to then train their poll workers.

## Major Findings and Suggestions for Future

- Election Administrators in Tennessee believe that voters with disabilities are satisfied with their voting experience and they are providing a good service. All of TDC's voter experience surveys support this. **Recommendation:** Election officials should continue their work to make voting a positive and successful experience for all voters.
- Election Administrators believe they need more training time and they need to start looking at training poll workers on difference mediums. Planning the shortest possible training time to keep poll workers engaged and save funds can lead to disability/accessibility training being put on the backburner. Administrators spend their time focused on new voting laws and regulations and technical assistance. In order to poll workers to continue to serve voters to the best of their abilities, every training time needs to have a focus on accessibility. **Recommendation:** Administrators should continue partnering with disability advocacy organizations to troubleshoot budget friendly and time efficient ways to train poll workers. Advocacy organizations in Tennessee have developed an accessibility training manual used widely in election trainings.
- Poll workers feel confident and prepared to handle Election Day problems related to access.
- Poll workers and election administrators who used the Election Day picture guides believed it was a helpful job aid and yielded extremely high satisfaction. They are widely used throughout the state.

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- As the population continues to age, more voters will require assistance than not. The three biggest barriers voters have to successful voting are standing, seeing the ballot, and marking the ballot.

**Recommendation:** Barriers to the polling place are not always visible. Poll workers needs to offer assistance to every voter than enters a polling place to ensure each voter can privately and independently cast his ballot. As voters age the incidence of invisible disability will increase. significantly in the voting booth creating longer lines at the polling place. Accommodating seniors with invisible disabilities will speed up the voting process and will help eliminate lines. Election Administrators should consider hiring more poll workers with disabilities to help troubleshoot Election Day problems.

- Training on different mediums sets poll workers up for success. **Recommendation:** Take the focus off on memorizing and retention by giving poll workers access to different types of training materials. TDC will create a video in 2015 to give poll workers a different medium of training and train voters before election day.