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**STATEMENT OF LEE PAGE**

**SENIOR ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR ADVOCACY**

**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**TO THE**

**UNITED STATES ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION**

**REGARDING**

**“PRIORITIES, POLICY AND STRATEGY: NEXT STEPS FOR THE EAC”**

**MARCH 19, 2015**

On behalf of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this roundtable discussion for “Priorities, Policy and Strategy: Next steps for the EAC”. PVA is a congressionally chartered national veteran’s service organization dedicated to meeting the needs of its members – veterans with catastrophic spinal cord injury or dysfunction. PVA has a long history of advocating for the right to vote. Almost all of PVA members use wheelchairs so in order to vote the polling place must be accessible.

I wish to commend the United States Election Assistance Commission (EAC) for the exemplary work which has improved the accessibility of voting and resulted in the increase voter participation of Americans with disabilities. The EAC has successfully encouraged state and local election administrators to improve the accessibility of voting. The EAC website houses multiple documents that have been designed specifically to educate jurisdictions of the need and the requirements to make the electoral process accessible for voters with disabilities. EAC Resources include: Making Polling places accessible video, EAC Quick Start Guide on Accessibility, EAC Quick Start Guide on Serving voters in long

term care facilities, EAC Election Management Guide Chapter 9: Polling Place and Vote Center Management and Chapter 19: Accessibility. Furthermore there is a link to Disability.gov at the Department of Justice website for further information about the Americans with Disabilities Act, and ADA Checklist for polling places.

Over the years the Commission consistently invites disability advocates and accessibility experts to participate in its roundtables as well as other venues. The Commission has embraced the Help America Vote Act's mandate that Americans with disabilities should be able to vote privately and independently as well as in the same time and manner as other voters. The disability community has learned that accessibility is best achieved at the beginning rather than struggling with retrofits. The commission and its staff have embraced this notion and we are grateful.

However, there is still much to do to improve the total accessibility of our nations voting processes.

A public opinion survey conducted by Rutgers University and graciously funded by the EAC compared the 2012 general election voting experiences of voters with disabilities with other voters. This first of its kind survey documented that voters with disabilities feel they are respected by poll workers at roughly the same rate as able-bodied voters. This is a major achievement. Unfortunately 30% of voters with disabilities experienced a problem voting compared to 8% of the general public.

This survey details the specific problems which voters experienced as well as documenting the types of disabilities which experienced problems this detailed information has provided a roadmap to improve the accessibility of voting.

The key results on disability and voter turnout include:

- 15.6 million people with disabilities reported voting in the November 2012 elections.
- The voter turnout rate of people with disabilities was 5.7 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. There would be 3 million more voters with disabilities if they voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who are otherwise similar in age and other demographic characteristics.
- Employed people with disabilities were just as likely as employed people without disabilities to vote, suggesting that employment helps bring people with disabilities into mainstream political life.
- The voter registration rate of people with disabilities was 2.3 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. The lower voter turnout is due in

part to a lower registration rate among people with disabilities but more to lower turnout among those who are registered.

The key results on voting difficulties and experiences include:

- Almost one-third (30.1%) of voters with disabilities reported difficulty in voting at a polling place in 2012, compared to 8.4% of voters without disabilities
- The most common problems reported were difficulty in reading or seeing the ballot, or understanding how to vote or use voting equipment.
- People with disabilities were just as likely as those without disabilities to say they were treated respectfully by election officials
- Almost one-third of the voters with disabilities required assistance in voting, most commonly given by election officials or family members
- Among voters with disabilities, 6.5% used extra features or devices in voting such as large displays, magnifiers, lowered machines, and accessible voting machines
- While three-fourths of voters with disabilities said it was very easy to vote at a polling place, this is lower than for voters without disabilities, and 5.8% of voters with disabilities said it was somewhat or very difficult to vote.
- Over one-fourth of voters with disabilities voted by mail in 2012, compared to one-sixth of people without disabilities. Among people with disabilities who voted by mail, about one-tenth reported difficulties and the need for assistance in filling out or sending the ballot.
- Asked about alternative voting methods for the next election, majorities of people both with and without disabilities say they would prefer voting in person in a polling place. Among other potential options, people with disabilities are relatively more likely to say they would prefer voting by mail, while people without disabilities are more likely to say they would prefer voting by Internet.

These findings point to the difficulties faced by many people with disabilities in exercising the right to vote, and establish a baseline that may be used to judge future progress in improving the voting experience for people both with and without disabilities.

On a broader scope, other issues adding to the stress of voting include: re-locating polling places, aging of pole workers, training of pole workers, long lines to vote, unfamiliar voting equipment, aging voting equipment, registration process and lack of adequate accessible parking.

There are three things the EAC could do rather quickly that would assist in accessibility:

- Quickly adopt the voting system guideline standards that identified as VVSG1.1. There are a few modest improvements in this document that will improve accessibility.
- Reappoint Dr. Diane Golden to The Technical Standards Guidelines Committee. She is highly qualified and has the respect of the disability community.
- And recommend that the accessibility best practice quick start documents be updated and revised.