



COMMENTS
OF
LEE PAGE
ASSOCIATE ADVOCACY DIRECTOR
OF
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
FEBUARY 7, 2008

On behalf of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), thank you for the opportunity to submit my comments on the Draft Report: Free or Reduced Postage for the Return of Voted Absentee Ballots submitted by the Election Center.

After review of the Draft Report I concur that if free postage is determined by Congress to be desirable for absentee and mail in ballots, then it must be free to all voters and the costs should be appropriated at the Federal level, not passed on to the states and the United States Post Office as an unfunded mandate.

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801 Eighteenth Street, NW ★ Washington, DC 20006-3517
phone:(202) 872-1300 ★ tdd:(202) 416-7622 ★ fax:(202) 785-4452 ★ www.pva.org



The study of voters included in this survey said that 70 percent of those with disabilities would be far more likely to vote if postage was free on absentee ballots. However 89 percent of this group said they would still vote by absentee ballot even if the postage was not free.

What this shows is that people with disabilities are a determined segment of the U.S voting population who want to vote.

However, people with disabilities still face many barriers in exercising their right to vote. People with disabilities are the most disenfranchised segment of the U.S. voting population. People with disabilities are least likely to be employed, least likely to have transportation or access to accessible transportation, least likely to have any form of identification, and are economically poor and low income or on fixed incomes.

Furthermore there are many barriers that still exist in the process of voting. Polling places are still not fully accessible. Barriers can be found because of inaccessible entrances, one or two steps through out a path of travel, no accessible parking, lack of directional signage, and heavy and unopened doors.

Barriers still remain in casting a ballot. As you know, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) required jurisdictions as of January 1, 2006, to have one accessible DRE voting machine per polling place in order for people with disabilities including those who are blind or have limited vision, to be able to cast an independent ballot. Many jurisdictions have not complied and in some instances states have determined that the ballot for record would be 'verified paper record' (VPAT). The VPAT is not verifiable by people who are blind or visually impaired. Other barriers that voters with disabilities could face are paternal from poll workers and or other voters in reference to their disability or the right to vote.

The General Accountability Office (GAO), in recent testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging, said that there have been improvements in voting accessibility from 2000 to the 2004 election but gaps in policy and implementation still remain.

In their conclusion GAO states, "Ensuring that seniors and individuals with disabilities successfully cast their vote in an election requires government to think broadly about access, including access to transportation, access into buildings, access with respect to voting equipment, and access to various alternative voting methods. The increase in

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state provisions and reports of practices to improve the accessibility of the voting process is encouraging. At the same time, the complexity of our election system is such that we can not be assured that these provisions and reported practices reflect what actually occurs at polling places on election day. Understanding and addressing accessibility gaps is an enormous task for our state and local election officials who are challenged by a multiplicity of responsibilities and requirements they must attend to within resource constraints. As our population ages, and with it the percent of voters with disabilities swells, the expectation of accommodation and assistance to participate in this basic civic exercise will grow, making accessibility a key performance goal for our election community.”

Free postage for mail-in or return of absentee ballots would be one less burden that the disability and seniors’ community would have to face. It might not sound like much, but a first class stamp can be a burden / barrier. This population might not have access to stamps. They do not have or pay bills. They could be homebound or in institutional settings, low income, or have no transportation to procure a stamp.

The Senate Special Committee on Aging just held a hearing on, “Older Voters: Opportunities and Challenges in the 2008 Elections.” The testimonies received focused on the disenfranchisement of aging seniors and those with disabilities that are in long term care facilities or institutional settings. Twenty-nine states have no guidelines for voting accommodations for residents of long term care facilities. “Unfortunately, election officials have paid little attention to two key issues: assuring that residents of long term care facilities have access to the ballot, and preventing unscrupulous persons from exploiting their vote.”

The majority of states have no guidelines, those that do are inadequate. They lack the proactive steps to register residents. They rely on residents to apply for an absentee ballot. Federal long term care regulations mandate nursing homes to respect resident’s voting rights, but they do not provide any guidance on how a facility can ensure this requirement.

Voting by absentee ballot and no fault absentee or early voting is on the rise. The main reason is convenience for the voter. It allows the voter more time to go over the issues and the candidate’s position before casting the ballot. Free postage for mail-in and absentee voting will only increase the participation of the voting populace which should be a priority in ensuring our strong democracy.

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