

Blind and disabled Iowans should not have to risk their lives to vote

The fact that blind and other disabled Iowans cannot take advantage of absentee voting independently is not only a violation of law, but of our rights as citizens of this great country.

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Did you know that absentee ballots are not accessible for the more than 50,000 Iowans who are blind or have significant vision loss, even with corrective lenses? These ballots are often not accessible to people with other disabilities as well.

Iowa's current absentee ballot system relies on printed paper ballots that cannot be read privately or independently by voters who are blind or visually impaired. As a result, these Iowans must vote either in person during a pandemic or rely on another person to help them fill out Iowa's paper-only absentee ballots.

As the current presidents of the Iowa Council of the United Blind and the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa, we are extremely troubled by the lack of options in Iowa for members of the blind community to safely and privately vote. We are risking our health if we vote in person. We are losing our self-sufficiency and right to a secret ballot if we must rely on others to fill out the printed paper absentee ballot. We want the chance to vote absentee, not just during the November election during a pandemic, but in any other election where we may not be able to vote in person. If other Iowans can vote absentee, why can't those of us with disabilities?

Michael Barber, the former president of the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa, feels he is being disenfranchised once again because he has no safe, independent and private way to vote. During most of his life, he could not vote

privately and independently because polling places did not have accessible voting machines. Then, as a result of the debacle in the 2000 Bush/Gore election, Congress passed election reform laws that included requirements that all polling places have accessible voting machines.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Mr. Barber feels that his polling place is not safe; nor can he read or fill out Iowa's paper absentee ballots. Once again, Mr. Barber and the more than 50,000 Iowans who are blind, visually impaired or disabled are being disenfranchised during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Jane Hudson, executive director of Disability Rights Iowa says, "Choosing between safety and independence is really no choice at all."

But, there is a solution. Iowa should immediately institute a ballot-marking system that can be used by blind, visually impaired and disabled voters in the upcoming November election and other future elections. Accessible ballot-marking systems typically work as follows:

- The voter with a visual impairment or disability asks the county auditor to send an absentee ballot electronically because the voter cannot read or fill out a printed paper ballot due to the voter's impairment.
- The county auditor sends an electronic version of the absentee ballot to the voter.
- The voter uses their own computer software to read, fill out, and print the absentee ballot on paper.
- The voter then delivers the printed absentee ballot to the county auditor through the U.S. mail or in person in the envelopes provided by the county auditor. (Ballot-marking systems are NOT the same as online voting, because the voter is not returning their absentee ballot to the auditor electronically.)

As a result of strong advocacy, and even lawsuits, brought by organizations like the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind, at least 20 other states have come into compliance with the Help

America Vote Act and the prohibitions against disability-based discrimination in the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Their election officials have created their own ballot-marking systems or used systems such as those already developed by Democracy Live or VotingWorks. These systems are secure and have federal security certifications. Based on their experience, accessible ballot-marking systems can be put in place in less than a week, more than enough time before the Nov. 3 general election.

The Iowa Secretary of State has told us that he must wait for the state Legislature to approve a ballot-marking system. However, legislative approval of a ballot-marking system is not required because federal anti-discrimination laws supersede any state laws. Nevertheless, we would appreciate any support Iowa legislators could provide in making a ballot-marking system a reality for blind, visually impaired and disabled Iowans.

Voting is one of the most important responsibilities we have in our political process. The fact that blind and other disabled Iowans cannot take advantage of absentee voting independently is not only a violation of law, but of our rights as citizens of this great country. We will no longer stand aside and watch the opportunity to vote pass us by. We should not be asked to risk our lives to vote privately and independently.

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As published in the Des Moines Register September 27, 2020