

Voting Accessibility Enhanced in Northeast PA

The Young Adult Advocacy and Advisory Group of the Northeast PA Center for Independent Living has been working to assess the accessibility of voting sites in their region with the help of a PADDCC grant. Through a survey, they captured a quick snapshot of polling places and then presented the results to local elections officials. Please read the recent newspaper coverage below.

Accessibility of polling places has improved

The Scranton Times-Tribune

By Jim Lockwood, Staff Writer

September 20, 2014

Most accessibility problems at polling places in Lackawanna, Luzerne, Wyoming and Susquehanna counties are minor and readily fixable, according to a survey conducted by the Center for Independent Living in Scranton.

Center representatives discussed the issue Friday with elections officials from the four counties — Marion Medalis and Glenn Howey of Lackawanna County; Marisa Crispell of Luzerne County; Florence Ball of Wyoming County; and Laura Watts of Susquehanna County — and three state legislators, Rep. Mike Carroll, D-118, Avoca; Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski, D-121, Wilkes-Barre; and Rep. Sandra Major, R-111, Bridgewater Twp.

Because the center is based in Scranton, the survey and follow-up visits to polling sites focused on Lackawanna County, said Sharon Quinn, the center's outreach coordinator. Half of Lackawanna County's polling places were reviewed in the primary election and the rest will be examined in the general election. A final report will follow.

Reviews done so far revealed mostly minor problems related to a lack of signs in parking areas indicating the way to, and identification of, accessible entrances, Ms. Quinn said.

"Signage was the biggest issue," Ms. Quinn said. "It was amazing how easily many of these issues were rectified."



Keith Williams, NEPACIL Director of Advocacy, Glenn Howey and Marion Medalis of the Lackawanna County Election Bureau, and Christian Budney, YAAAG representative, reviewing the results of the accessibility survey

The survey was funded with a \$9,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council to the center's Young Adult Advocacy and Advisory Group.

Voting accessibility challenges also may evolve as an aging populace gives rise to new issues involving mobility, dexterity, vision and hearing, Ms. Quinn said.

"We're going to have a lot of people 100 years old who still want to vote," Ms. Quinn said. "We're sort of in the beginning of anticipating what could be a big onslaught" of new issues.

The legislators noted that big strides have been made in polling place accessibility.

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Governor Corbett Signs Bill Changing Department of Public Welfare's Name to Department of Human Services

Sept. 24, 2014 – Harrisburg – Governor Tom Corbett signed House Bill 993, officially changing the name of the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to the Department of Human Services. The bill also establishes a tip line for recipient and provider fraud.

“The time has come to bring the Department of Public Welfare into a new era of assisting Pennsylvanians,” DPW Secretary Beverly Mackereth said. “Helping families in need secure heat, food and other necessities is just a fraction of the human services work performed here in the department.”

The department has more than 16,000 employees and oversees 94 county assistance offices statewide. It also oversees adoption services, child protection services, juvenile justice facilities, state hospitals, long-term care, early childhood education, child support, Medicaid, employment and training services, mental health, and supports for individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities, among other things.

“For the past several years, advocates, families, legislators, and providers have diligently worked to make this change happen,” Mackereth said. “Our new name will reflect the

services and supports our agency currently provides to individuals and their families.”

The new law will officially take effect in November, with a phased-in approach and measured transition to the new name beginning at that time. The department will replace deliverables, such as letterhead and business cards, as needed and integrate necessary system changes with scheduled upgrades to effectuate the change in the most cost-effective manner possible.

“The time has come to bring the Department of Public Welfare into a new era of assisting Pennsylvanians.”

“While our name may be changing, I can assure you, our commitment to assisting our most vulnerable population is unwavering and our current services will remain intact,” Mackereth concluded.

For more information, visit www.dpw.state.pa.us.

Voting and Civic Engagement How is Pennsylvania Doing?

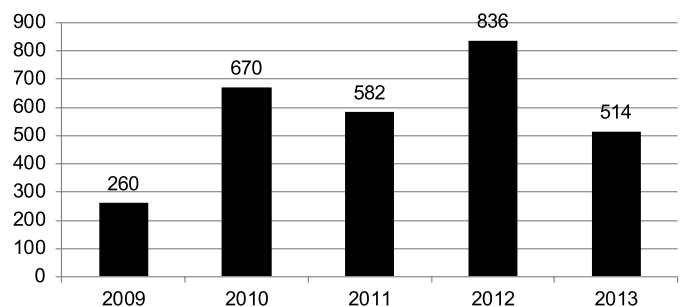
The Disability Voting Coalition’s “We Count!” campaign has focused on the duties of disability service providers to provide voter registration services (required by the National Voter Registration Act). The NVRA requires all agencies that provide services primarily to individuals with disabilities to offer voter registration services with each application for service or recertification of eligibility and each report of a change of address.

On June 30, Pennsylvania released the report for 2013. How did PA do? Not so good. Disability agencies in Pennsylvania registered only 514 voters. This is the lowest total since 2009, when only 260 were registered. Paratransit agencies registered 217 voters (compared to 361 in 2012).

Not all agencies had a smaller number of registered voters in 2013. County assistance offices had a dramatic increase in registrations. In 2012, county assistance offices registered 10,311; in 2013 county assistance offices registrations were 47,028!

Why are the numbers so low among some agencies? The Disability Voting Coalition believes there are many reasons.

Voter Registration Totals by Disability Agencies in PA



- Most agencies have received no training on compliance with voter registration duties.
- Agencies that report zero registrations, in fact whole counties that report zero registrations, see no consequences.
- Agencies often hold mistaken beliefs that non-partisan voter registration services could jeopardize their non-profit status.

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— Voting Accessibility Enhanced in Northeast PA (Cont. from cover page)

“This is an exercise in progress,” Mr. Pashinski said. “We’ve come a long way from where it was. Polling places used to be in the basements of churches, and nobody had a chance to go down if you had a disability. So now we’re trying to accommodate everyone, and it’s a learning process.”



Maddie Conway viewing an accessible voting machine on May 20, 2014, at the Dunmore Community Center, in Dunmore, PA

While voters who are disabled may vote by absentee ballot, many want to cast ballots in person. Center youth advisory member Jonathan Simpson of Dunmore said, “I want to be there. I don’t want to have to take an absentee ballot.”

Keith Williams, the center’s director of independent living services, noted that people with disabilities also may want to participate more in elections as poll workers. While the grant expires at the end of the year, Mr. Williams said, “We do want to keep the dialogue going.”

— Voting and Civic Engagement (Cont. from page 2)

But, conversations with officials for the state and with disability service providers have been unfruitful, with them insisting that all agencies are doing their duties.

Does the 2013 report shed any light on this subject? The Disability Voting Coalition thinks it does.

In addition to voter registration totals, the 2013 report also documents the number of voter registration offers made by various types of agencies. These voter registrations are documented by Voter Preference Forms. Each applicant for services must be provided with a form asking the following question: “If you are not registered to vote where you live now, would you like to apply to register to vote here today?” The form has boxes for responses of either yes or no.

The 2013 report tells us how many voter registration offers were made by disability service agencies, and how many people said no. A simple process of arithmetic allows us to figure out how many said yes.

Voting Site Accessibility Survey

1. Are there accessible parking spaces available?
 - How many accessible spaces?
 - How many total spaces?
2. Does each accessible parking space have a sign with the symbol of accessibility visible?
3. Is a passenger loading area provided?
4. If so, does this area have an accessible route for the van’s ramp?
5. Is there an accessible route from the parking area to the entrance?
6. Are ramps installed if needed?
7. Is there at least one accessible entrance with signage indicating it is accessible?
8. Is this entrance completely accessible? i.e. doorways wide enough, sufficient space inside vestibules, and beveled thresholds.
9. Is this route to the voting area accessible? i.e. wide hallways, available ramps, elevator provided, are doorways opened or easily opened.
10. Are there accessible restrooms?
11. Are the hallways clear of objects that would be in the path of voters with visual impairment?
12. Is there an accessible entrance to the voting booth/machines?
13. Is there an accessible voting station clearly identified with sufficient space to accommodate the voter’s needs?
14. Was there clear communication by voting personnel about procedures?

- A total of 8,039 Voter Preference Forms indicated that the consumer wanted to apply to register to vote, but only 514 voter registration forms were submitted by disability service agencies to county elections offices. Where did the other 7,525 voter registrations go?
- A total of 77,438 voter registration offers can be documented for all disability service agencies, including all county mental health/intellectual disability agencies. **However, by our count, approximately 816,656 Pennsylvanians were consumers of state-funded disability services last year. It would appear that only 9.5 percent of all consumers received a voter registration offer last year.**

At that rate, it would take over 10 years for each consumer to receive a single voter registration offer! Perhaps that’s why the registration totals are so low!



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Election Day Resources

Who Can You Call on Election Day if You're Prevented

from Exercising Your Right to Vote?

Call the Election Protection Hotline at 1-866-OURVOTE (1-866-687-8683)

or Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania 1-800-692-7443 / 1-877-375-7139 (TODD).

Obtaining an Emergency Absentee Ballot If You

Are Not Able to Appear in Court

If you are not able to appear in court to receive the ballot, you can designate, in writing, a representative to deliver the absentee ballot to you and return your completed absentee ballot to the county board of elections.

If you are not able to appear in court or obtain assistance from an authorized representative, the judge will direct a deputy sheriff of the county to deliver the absentee ballot to you if you are at a physical location within the county.

You will need to prepare three forms:

1. Emergency Absentee Application—After 5 on Friday
- 2.. Designation of Authorized Representative—Emergency Absentee Ballot
3. Certification of Authorized Representative—Emergency Absentee Ballot

Visit www.dvcpa.org and click on the Election Day Survival Kit button for links to the forms.

Procedures for an Emergency Application for

Absentee Ballot

The Pennsylvania Legislature created procedures for voters to vote by absentee ballot when circumstances prevented the voter from applying by the regular deadline of one week prior to Election Day.

If you become physically disabled or ill between 5 p.m. on the Friday before Election Day and 8 p.m. on Election Day or if you find out after 5 p.m. on the Friday before Election Day that you will be absent from your municipality of residence on Election Day because of your business, duties or occupation, you can receive an emergency absentee ballot, if you complete and file with the court of common pleas in the county where you are registered to vote an emergency application or a letter or other signed document, which includes the same information as that provided on the emergency application.