

Testimony by Bob Joondeph, Interim Executive Director, Disability Rights Connecticut
Government Administration & Elections Committee
Tuesday, July 21, 2020

Good afternoon, Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, Senator Haskell, Representative Winkler, Senator Sampson, Representative France, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. I am Bob Joondeph, Interim Executive Director of Disability Rights Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding LCO 3576, which was posted yesterday on the Connecticut General Assembly website.

We believe that absentee voting will significantly increase participation in our elections by people with disabilities. But Connecticut is at risk of disenfranchising people with disabilities if certain weakness in our voting process are not addressed.

Allowing safe and equal access to voting by all voters (including those with disabilities) will require the following steps:

1. **Allowing All Voters to Vote by Mail**
2. **Creation of an Accessible Online Absentee Ballot Application**
3. **Availability of Assistive Technology to Complete Voting Materials at Home**
4. **Publication of ADA Notices, ADA Grievance Procedures and Person of Contact, on All Voter Information Webpages Statewide**
5. **Prioritize Preparation for Curbside Voting**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) make clear that voters with disabilities have the same right to a private and independent ballot as everyone else. Voters with disabilities must be able to mark, verify, and cast their ballots privately and independently, even if they choose to vote by mail.

Why these steps are important to assure full access to voting:

- **Allow All Voters to Vote by Mail:**

Voter participation will improve when they can vote from the safety of their homes. Rather than limiting absentee ballots to people with only physical disabilities or illness, voters should not have to reveal their disability or health status. People may experience equivalent barriers to voting who are:

- People with temporary chronic health conditions
- Older adults
- Women in late stages of pregnancy
- People with limited English Proficiency, low literacy, and communication needs
- People with very low income
- People without access to transportation
- People experiencing homelessness

- **Accessible Online Absentee Ballot Application:**

The current online absentee ballot application must be assessed for screen reader capability. For Blind voters, it is currently not accessible. The State must consider allowing the Absentee Ballot Application process to be completed and submitted online.

- **Availability of Assistive Technology to Complete Voting Materials at Home:**

Currently, no equipment is being offered to absentee voters to assist in filling out their voting materials and the only assistance available is having someone at home to assist them. This

is not a preferable alternative, because it interferes with the right to cast a private ballot. Instead:

- Remote Accessible Vote By Mail (RAVBM) Systems should be provided which allow voters with print disabilities to receive their ballots electronically to read and mark them on an accessible interface.
- Jurisdictions should ensure that electronically transmitted ballots are formatted for use on laptops, phones, and tablets and compatible with assistive technology such as screen readers, input devices, digital magnification, and speech-to-text software.
- RAVBM systems typically deliver ballots via email or via a secure, accessible web portal. After downloading and marking the ballot on their personal device (using whatever assistive devices are available to them), a voter can then print and mail their voted ballot to election officials.

- **Publication of ADA Notices, ADA Grievance Procedures and Person of Contact, on All Voting Webpages Statewide:**

There are no notifications about the ADA on the Secretary of the State's website. The same is true of the State Elections Enforcement Commission (SEEC), most municipalities' Office of Registrar webpages, and recruitment materials for volunteer poll workers. Immediate publication of the information identified herein would speed up the processing of ADA accommodation requests, so that people with disabilities would have the necessary tools to exercise their right to vote.

- **Prioritize Preparation for Curbside Voting:**

Often, curbside voting takes place in the same area as where handicap spaces are found. During this time, drivers may be competing for both handicap spaces and to do curbside voting. Local Election Officials should be directed to plan for curbside voting by identifying parking restrictions to accommodate disabled voters.

Disability Rights Connecticut (DRCT), has been working with constituents across the state to remove impediments to voting by mail, especially among disability communities. These efforts include referring registered voters to the State Elections Enforcement Commission (SEEC) and local Election Registrars to share their concerns about the absentee voting process.

Thank you for your consideration of these steps, which can ensure that all people are treated the same in Connecticut.