

Voter Rights and Wrongs

Sept. 13, 2000

I am a member of a group in Philadelphia that believes that voting is a fundamental right to being an American. This right is sometimes denied to people with disabilities in ways most people are not aware of.

One problem is that the voting machines are not accessible. Our group, after over a year of trying to find out the facts, has just learned that the selection has been made concerning the purchase of new voting machines by the City of Philadelphia and that supposedly they are accessible to people with disabilities. I saw the brochure for the first time yesterday and the chosen machine looks good. However, no one on the Mayor's Commission on People with Disabilities voter access committee has been contacted or allowed to check out the new machines personally, even when we asked to. We are hoping they are indeed accessible.

Another problem, even if the machines are accessible, is the fact that out of the 1681 polling locations in Philadelphia only 42 are fully accessible. Some are marginally accessible, no step to get in, but that brings the number up only slightly. Less than 5% of our total polling places are accessible. This is a very poor ratio even compared to other cities and, we feel, is blatantly against everything the ADA stands for.

We would like the Board of Elections to institute a plan that all polling places be accessible by the year 2005 and begin by requiring that all new polling places that are chosen must be accessible to people with disabilities. Portable ramps could improve the numbers immediately. Our group is insisting on a policy of "No new inaccessible polling places". as the place to start. We feel it is incumbent upon the Board of Elections to actively seek out and investigate possible accessible polling locations that such as firehouses, schools, even supermarkets in effort to remedy this wrong. If we can get our post offices and food stores accessible (and that's the law), shouldn't we have our polling places accessible? Should there be any argument here?

To some of us, absentee ballots just don't cut it, but some people feel just fine about absentee ballots and that's okay. All people should be allowed to vote in any way they choose. Every method should be available to every person. People with disabilities should not be prevented from going to the polls if they want to the same way able-bodied people are not prevented from using absentee ballots if they want to. By the way, try telling any other minority group that the only way they are allowed to vote is by absentee ballot.

Which brings us to the next problem that not enough people with disabilities are registered percentage-wise. Our group is presently engaged in a voter registration effort to build these numbers. It is vital to show we have the clout as a voting bloc. Then the politicians will be falling all over themselves to deal with our issues such as health care, jobs, recreation, to name a few and which, by the way, are also your issues. We are, after all, part of your community.

For me, going to the polls is the way I choose to vote. When I go to vote, I see my neighbors and their children. We are all out in the weather and there is activity and excitement in the street. The men and women that sit outside the polls help me to get my portable ramp out of my van. It is set up carefully to help me mount the two steps to get in with my scooter. The same two ladies are always there at the table to sign me in. One hands me her cane so I can reach the levers. When I come out they offer smiles and tell me "I wish everyone had the same commitment you do." I feel important. I am important. I vote.

Jessie Jane Lewis

Chairperson

Voter Accessibility Reform Initiative

A Committee of the Mayor's Commission on People with Disabilities

H- 215-483-7660

E-mail- jjlbody@aol.com