Training Poll Workers for Accessible Voting

Supporting voters with disabilities at the polling place

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Sarah Blahovec
Whitney Quesenbery
Center for Civic Design

Sharon Laskowski
National Institute of Standards and Technology

Abstract

Accessible voting systems are a key feature in polling places that enable voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) requires that each polling place have a voting system that is "accessible for individuals with disabilities, including nonvisual accessibility for the blind and visually impaired," and that it must provide "the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for other voters." These systems must be available for all voters, but many voters who are blind or have low vision, voters with mobility disabilities or who lack manual dexterity, and voters with cognitive disabilities need accessible voting systems to vote privately and independently.

This report and companion sample training slide presentation (available for download and modification) are intended to assist election officials as they develop their poll worker training. This work is in response to the inconsistency of available training materials for poll workers on how to set up accessible voting systems and support voters in using them. In addition to ensuring that poll workers know the legal rules for disability voting rights in the polling place, it includes guidance for helping voters while preserving their independence and privacy.

Keywords

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Introduction

Voters with disabilities continue to experience barriers to voting that make it difficult or impossible to exercise their right to a private and independent vote. Three recent reports show that despite improvement in the last 20 years, there are still persistent challenges.

In "Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections: Final Report on Survey Results," The U.S. Election Assistance Commission surveyed nearly 1,800 voters with disabilities and nearly 800 voters without disabilities. They found that while 10 percent of voters without disabilities experienced difficulties voting in person in 2020, 18 percent of voters with disabilities experienced difficulties.[1]

On March 7, 2021, President Biden issued Executive Order 14019, "Promoting Access to Voting," which recognizes that "people with disabilities continue to face barriers to voting and are denied legally required accommodations in exercising their fundamental rights and the ability to vote privately and independently." Section 7 of the Executive Order directs NIST to examine barriers to private and independent voting for voters with disabilities, including poll worker[2] training.[3]

In response to the Executive Order, NIST Special Publication 1273, "Promoting Access to Voting: Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Private and Independent Voting for People with Disabilities," NIST identifies inadequate training of poll workers as a barrier to voting for people with disabilities. It states that "voters with disabilities are delayed in using accessible voting machines or are unable to use them at all when poll workers are not trained to operate accessible voting machines." NIST identifies several challenges, including poll workers not knowing how to set up and use the machine, poll workers being unfamiliar with the accessible machine's features, and poll workers being unfamiliar with the rights of voters with disabilities and gatekeeping who is allowed to use the machine. These barriers may delay or completely prevent voters with disabilities from casting a private and independent ballot.[4]

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[1] Schur L, Kruse D (2021) Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections: Final Report on Survey Results. (EAC, Washington, D.C.) https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Disability_and_voting_accessibility_in_the_2020_elections_final_report_on_survey_results.pdf.

[2] In conformance with the VVSG 2.0, we refer to any person who interacts with those coming to vote as a "poll worker." This includes any poll worker, election day worker, early voting worker, or other temporary staff engaged in supporting the voting or vote counting process. U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2021) Voluntary Voting System Guidelines. (EAC, Washington, D.C.). https://www.eac.gov/voting-equipment/voluntary-voting-system-guidelines.

[3] Executive Order 14019 (2021) Promoting Access to Voting. (The White House, Washington, D.C.), DCPD- 202100209, March 7, 2021. https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/DCPD-202100209.

[4] Buchanan, K.E., Mangold, K.C., Laskowski, S.J., & Reczek, K.K. (2022) Promoting Access to Voting: Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Private and Independent Voting for People with Disabilities. NIST Special Publication (NIST SP) 1273. https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.SP.1273, p. 69.

Reducing in-person barriers starts at the polling place

Accessible voting systems are a key feature in polling places that enable voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) requires that each polling place have a voting system that is "accessible for individuals with disabilities, including nonvisual accessibility for the blind and visually impaired," and that it must provide "the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for other voters."[5] These systems must be available for all voters, but many voters who are blind or have low vision, voters with mobility disabilities or lack manual dexterity, and voters with cognitive disabilities need accessible voting systems to vote privately and independently.

The Voluntary Voting System Guidelines 2.0 (VVSG 2.0), developed by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), have detailed requirements which ensure that:

1.   All voters can access and use the voting system regardless of their abilities;

2.   Voters can mark, verify, and cast their ballot privately and independently;

3.   Ballots and vote selections are presented in a perceivable, operable, and understandable way and can be marked, verified, and cast by all voters; and

4.   The voting system and voting processes provide a robust, safe, usable, and accessible experience.[6]

The inconsistency of poll workers' understanding of how to use the accessible voting machine and assist voters with disabilities is evident in data on the voting experiences of voters with disabilities. In "Experiences of Voters with Disabilities in the 2012 Election Cycle" The National Council on Disability analyzed survey results from nearly 900 voters with disabilities. They found that 45 percent of voters with disabilities who were surveyed reported barriers using the voting machines, and 25 percent of respondents identified untrained poll personnel as a barrier. These barriers, along with other barriers in accessing the polling place, contributed to 20 percent of respondents saying they were not able to exercise a private and independent vote.[7]

The Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV), funded by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, included several projects focused on training poll workers to properly assist voters with disabilities in using the accessible voting systems. Paraquad and the Missouri Disability Vote Coalition conducted Election Day Experience Interviews with 1,200 voters with disabilities in

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[5] Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), Pub. L. No. 107-252, 116 Stat. 1704-1706, 42 U.S.C §301. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-107publ252/pdf/PLAW-107publ252.pdf.

[6] U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2021) Voluntary Voting System Guidelines. (EAC, Washington, D.C.). https://www.eac.gov/voting-equipment/voluntary-voting-system-guidelines.

[7] National Council on Disability (2013) Experience of Voters with Disabilities in the 2012 Election Cycle. (National Council on Disability, Washington, D.C.) https://ncd.gov/publications/2013/10242013, p. 63.

Missouri and Tennessee and found that voters with disabilities encountered poll workers who weren't comfortable with and knowledgeable about disability, accommodations, or the accessible voting systems. They found that while 11 percent of poll workers were not confident in setting up the electronic voting machines, 29 percent of poll workers were not confident in using the accessible features on polling machines.[8] Furthermore, they identified training poll workers on how to use the accessible features of voting machines as one of their three key best practices.[9] This RAAV project resulted in the creation of a comprehensive poll worker training curriculum that emphasizes interactive, hands-on training for better retention and familiarity, as well as the creation of job aids that poll workers can reference on Election Day.[10]

This report and training slides were developed to help election officials improve their training materials and practices for poll workers who assist voters with disabilities using accessible voting systems. To create this training, we conducted a detailed literature review, including public comments from the Request for Information for E.O. 14019 "Promoting Access to Voting," and had conversations with eight subject matter experts associated with disability advocacy groups. These experts shared their knowledge on assisting voters with disabilities and their experiences using the accessible voting systems while voting. This background research all noted the inconsistency of available training materials for poll workers on how to set up accessible voting systems and support voters in using them. The resulting training slide presentation (available for download and modification) ensures that poll workers know the legal rules for disability voting rights in the polling place and includes guidance for helping voters while preserving their independence and privacy.

How Election Officials Can Use This Training

This training consists of a PowerPoint slide presentation to train poll workers on assisting voters as they mark, verify, and cast their ballot. It can be used to supplement your[11] existing training materials on assisting voters with disabilities. The training is specifically dedicated to assisting voters with disabilities with accessible voting systems. Therefore, it can be incorporated with your training on general disability assistance, checking in voters, and hand-marking a ballot.

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[8] Paraquad, Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV) (2015) RAAV Poll Worker Training Project: Training Poll Workers on Disability, Accessibility, and Accommodations. (Paraquad, St. Louis, MO). https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/RAAV%20Paraquad%20Final%20Report.pdf, p. 22.

[9] U.S. Election Assistance Commission Paraquad and the Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (2021) Suggested Practices to Improve Accessible Voting. (EAC, Washington, D.C.). https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/28/RAAV%20Paraquad's%20Suggested%20Practices%20to%20Improve%20Accessible%20Voting.pdf.

[10] Paraquad, Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV) (2012) RAAV Poll Worker Training Project: Poll Worker Training Guide. (Paraquad, St. Louis, MO). https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/Paraquad%20RAAV%20Election%20Worker%20Training%20Guide.pdf.

[11] This section and the following sections are directly addressing election officials using this report to customize the accompanying training slide deck for use in their poll worker training materials.

The training is broken into five sections, which are summarized in the next section of this report:

1. Disability rights during voting
2. Accessible voting systems
3. Assisting voters with disabilities
4. How to assist: checking in a voter, setting up the voting system, while they are voting, and verifying and casting their ballot
5. Summary and resources

The slides also contain speaker notes with greater detail that you can use when presenting this training. You are prompted to tailor the training slide deck to your jurisdiction's specific rules, procedures, and voting systems throughout the report. Sections that you should customize to your jurisdiction are highlighted in gray and enclosed in brackets. Guidance on how to customize these slides is available in a gray box to the right of the slide.

On the slide titled "Our accessible voting system," for example, you are prompted to input information about your jurisdiction's voting system. Step-by-step instructions are listed in a gray box next to the slide. You are guided to insert a picture of your jurisdiction's accessible voting system and insert the name of the voting system on the slide. Under "the features of this system include," you will list the different accessibility features that your jurisdiction's system has, such as audio ballot, tactile controls, and changing the text size and contrast. It is important to list these features so that poll workers know what options are available for voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently. At the bottom of the slide, you will let poll workers know where they can find more information on Election Day, such as the poll worker training manual.

Election officials should consider creating Election Day job aids and incorporating their use into the training. The Research Alliance on Accessible Voting's Poll Worker Training Pilot Project found that poll workers found Election Day job aids to be helpful, and poll workers frequently referenced those job aids when assisting voters with accessible voting systems.[12] Job aids, such as picture guides or checklists of the voting system's accessible features reinforce key training concepts and act as a reference on Election Day.

In addition to this slide deck, this report also includes best practices for poll worker training. You are encouraged to read through these recommendations and consider implementing them along with your existing poll worker training materials.

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[12] Paraquad, Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV) (2015) RAAV Poll Worker Training Project: Training Poll Workers on Disability, Accessibility, and Accommodations. (Paraquad, St. Louis, MO). https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/RAAV%20Paraquad%20Final%20Report.pdf, p. 23.

What the Training Covers

Section 1: Disability Rights During Voting

Section 1 provides introductory information about disability rights during voting and voters with disabilities. This includes:
1.   a definition of disability
2.   the rights of voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently
3.   the accessibility requirements for voting systems.

Some of this information may be covered in your jurisdiction's existing poll worker training materials. If your jurisdiction has more comprehensive training on assisting voters with disabilities, it can be incorporated into this section or replace this section.

Section 2: Accessible Voting Systems

Section 2 introduces accessible voting systems in greater detail. It provides examples of how accessible voting systems support voters with disabilities and enable them to vote privately and independently. It gives clear examples of an accessible voting system's accessible features and how they support voters with different disabilities.

In this section, you can customize the training to your jurisdiction's accessible voting system and its features. Poll workers should become familiar with the main accessible features on the voting machine and how to assist voters with accessing features such as the audio ballot, text size, and contrast controls.

You can also incorporate references to job aids where poll workers can learn more about these features, such as the poll worker training manual, instructions from the voting system vendor, or a checklist of features of the accessible machine.

Section 3: Assisting Voters with Disabilities

Section 3 introduces best practices on assisting voters with disabilities overall and outlines the policies and procedures poll workers must follow when assisting voters with the accessible voting system. It goes into detail on who may and may not assist voters in the polling place, allowing you to customize the slide to your state's rules.

You can customize this section to detail any procedures that poll workers must follow and any forms they must fill out, such as
1.   Forms such as Affidavits of Assistance that must be completed
2.   Information on ASL interpreters on Election Day, if available
3.   Job aids on how to use the accessible features of the voting system that will be available on Election Day and where to find them
4.   Who to speak to when troubleshooting a problem with the accessible voting system.

It also trains poll workers on how to give fair and impartial assistance and the importance of protecting a voter's privacy and independence while voting. Finally, it details best practices on how to communicate with voters who are Deaf, DeafBlind, or hard of hearing.

Section 4: How to Assist

Section 4 goes into greater detail on how to assist voters throughout the process of checking in, using the accessible voting system, and casting their ballot. It also covers best practices for assisting a voter when they are having a problem with the accessible voting system.

Checking in a Voter
These slides cover offering the accessible voting system to voters who are checking in. It details offering the accessible voting system to all voters as a best practice and important reminders for poll workers to remain impartial and not question a voter's disability or use of the accessible voting system. If your jurisdiction has any special rules, procedures, or forms, or it offers an accessible voting option for curbside voting, you can customize this section to include that information.

Setting up the System
This covers the steps to set up the accessible voting system and activate the different features once a voter decides to use the system. You can customize this section to the features and procedures for your jurisdiction's specific system, including how to adjust the system's physical setup, adjusting system controls such as the tactile keypad or audio output, and adjusting the screen's display.

It teaches poll workers how to offer an orientation to the voting system's key features, and includes a script that s can use for all voters to explain the features of the voting system. This script can be customized to your jurisdiction's rules and voting system, printed, and used as a job aid during demonstrations in training, testing the setup of the accessible system, and on Election Day when assisting voters at the accessible machine.

Finally, it outlines important reminders that can be customized to your jurisdiction's specific system, such as reminding voters that they can spoil their ballot if they make a mistake or that they may need to scroll to see all contests on a page.

While They Are Voting
This section shows poll workers on how to help voters during the voting session while preserving their privacy and independence. It gives best practices for how to assist when a voter asks for help, communicating with the voter while the poll worker is assisting, and troubleshooting problems during the voting session.

Verifying and Casting the Ballot
This section details how to assist voters when casting their ballot, and can be customized to systems that cast the ballot at the voting station as well as ballot-marking devices with a separate ballot scanner. For ballot-marking devices with separate scanners, it trains poll workers on how to assist a voter with printing the ballot, helping them navigate to the scanner, and assisting them with scanning their ballot.

Section 5: Summary and Resources

Section 5 summarizes key information for poll workers to remember when assisting voters with disabilities, including do's and don'ts.

Customize this section to reinforce your jurisdiction's procedures and forms, job aids, and the chain of command for troubleshooting problems in the polling place, to help poll workers carry the training into their work on Election Day serving voters with disabilities.

Best Practices

Poll worker training is neither given nor received in a vacuum. Recommendations include not only creating memorable training, but bridging the gap between training and the polling place, encouraging use of the accessible system, and connecting with the community to address specific needs in your jurisdiction.

These recommendations were developed through consultations with accessibility experts who are listed in the Acknowledgements and a review of Research Alliance for Accessible Voting's (RAAV) Poll Worker Training Project from 2011-14 (see Resources). RAAV partners concluded that poll workers benefit from training that uses a combination of methodologies, such as lectures, handouts, and demonstrations. The combination of multiple methods of learning helps poll workers to learn key information on assisting voters with disabilities, see demonstrations of the accessible voting system and how to properly assist voters, and learn where they can find information in supplemental materials such as Election Day job aids and poll worker training manuals.

Incorporate interactive demonstrations and activities into training

Several subject matter experts emphasized that poll workers must not just be familiar with setting up the voting machine, but also with the functions of the machine and how to properly assist voters. Election officials are encouraged to incorporate demonstrations of the accessible voting equipment as opportunities for the poll workers to interact with and use the accessible voting system. If poll workers have the opportunity to see the accessible voting system in use and to use it themselves, they will have an opportunity to acquaint themselves with its administrative functions as well as features voters will interact with while voting. "The style of training is important. Good training includes scenarios for common situations and uses adult learning principles."[13]

Create Election Day job aids

By creating Election Day job aids, such as large-print picture guides demonstrating use of the accessible voting system or checklists of accessible features, election officials can train poll workers on how to use job aids and find the information they need to assist voters, instead of focusing on retaining complex information.

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[13] Chisnell D, Quesenbery W (2014) Project Report: Security Insights and Issues for Poll Workers. (Center for Civic Design, Cambridge, MD). , p. 27. https://civicdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Pollworkers-and-security-2014-1018c.pdf

Encourage poll workers to use the accessible voting system when they vote

If your jurisdiction offers both hand-marked paper ballots and an accessible voting system, encouraging poll workers to use the accessible voting system when they vote can promote more familiarity with the system. Poll workers cannot just experience demonstrations or mock elections, but also the perspective of a voter using the machine. This also helps poll workers to understand that every voter has the option of using the accessible voting system regardless of whether they have a disability. It can also reinforce the best practice of offering every voter the option of voting on the accessible voting system or a paper ballot.

Connect with the local disability community

The subject matter experts who were consulted for input on this report encouraged election officials to connect with their local disability community, including voters with disabilities and community organizations that serve people with disabilities to:

1. Work with disability organizations to hold outreach events where voters with disabilities can learn about and test their accessible voting system before they vote.
2. Recruit disability organizations and individuals with disabilities in developing and delivering poll worker training programs.
3. Recruit people with disabilities as poll workers to increase the representation of people with disabilities at the polls (they are also likely to be familiar with accommodations, accessibility, and disability etiquette).

See the Resources section below for a description of disability organizations with voting information and access programs.

Subject matter experts cited examples of election officials working with organizations that serve people with disabilities to hold outreach events where voters with disabilities can learn about and test their accessible voting system before they vote. Experts also gave examples of election officials working with disability organizations and individuals with disabilities in developing and delivering their poll worker training programs. Furthermore, several experts encouraged election officials to recruit people with disabilities as poll workers. Disability rights organizations like the National Disability Rights Network encourage election officials to recruit people with disabilities as poll workers to increase the representation of people with disabilities at the polls, asserting that people with disabilities are more likely to be familiar with accommodations, accessibility, and disability etiquette.[14]

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[14] National Disability Rights Network (2022) National Disability Rights Network and Power the Polls Partner to Recruit More Poll Workers Before Midterm Elections. (NDRN, Washington, D.C.). https://www.ndrn.org/resource/powerpollspr/

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8. Nancy Ware, Self Advocates Becoming Empowered GoVoter Project

Resources

EAC Tips for Empowering Voters with Disabilities in the 2020 General Election

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) produced this short list of general tips and recommendations to localities on empowering voters with disabilities. It includes best practices on communicating about voting options, conducting early voting and in-person voting, addressing wait time at the polls, and promoting mail and absentee voting.[15]

RAAV Pilot Poll Worker Training Project

Under the Research Alliance for Accessible Voting's (RAAV) Poll Worker Training Project, a poll worker training pilot project was conducted in four Missouri counties. RAAV partners concluded that poll workers benefit from training that uses a combination of methodology, such as lectures, handouts, and demonstrations.[16] The combination of multiple methods of learning allow poll workers to learn key information on assisting voters with disabilities, see demonstrations of the accessible voting system and how to properly assist voters, and learn where they can find information in supplemental materials such as Election Day job aids and poll worker training manuals. As part of the project, RAAV partners developed a poll worker training PowerPoint presentation and accompanying poll worker training modules. These poll worker training modules include a list of supplies needed by trainers for conducting the training, goals of the training,

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[15] U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2020) Tips for Empowering Voters with Disabilities in the 2020 General Election and COVID-19 Crisis. (EAC, Washington, D.C.). https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/tips-empowering-voters-disabilities-2020-general-election-and-covid-19-crisis

[16] Paraquad, Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV) (2015) RAAV Poll Worker Training Project: Training Poll Workers on Disability, Accessibility, and Accommodations. (Paraquad, St. Louis, MO). https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/RAAV%20Paraquad%20Final%20Report.pdf, p. 18.

interactive activities, and questions for discussion and dialogue.[17] They can be used as an example and a template for training activities that can accompany a PowerPoint-based training.

Example of Election Day Picture Guide Job Aid

Christian County, Missouri's Election Day Picture Guide was produced as part of the RAAV Poll Worker Training Project. It features step-by-step picture guides on various Election Day tasks such as setting up the polling place, using the electronic voting system, and conducting curbside voting.[18]

Disability organizations

Several disability organizations work within the community to advocate for and serve people with disabilities, and many of these organizations engage in nonpartisan voter registration and civic engagement work.

Disability Rights Network

Each State has a Protection and Advocacy agency (P&A) which provides legal support, advocacy, referral, and education services to people with disabilities. Through the HAVA-funded Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA) program, which funds and mandates them to "ensure the full participation in the electoral process for individuals with disabilities, including registering to vote, casting a vote, and accessing polling places."[19] Under PAVA, P&As assist election offices with voting accessibility in a number of ways, including conducting polling place accessibility surveys and working with state and local election officials to improve the accessibility of voting.[20] P&As also work to educate people with disabilities about their voting rights and methods of voting. (www.ndrn.org)

REV UP

The American Association of People with Disabilities' REV UP Campaign is a coalition of organizations and advocates working to build the power of the disability vote through nonpartisan civic engagement. 19 states have REV UP coalitions or independent disability vote coalitions, and REV UP has partners in 44 states. These coalitions work to educate voters with disabilities about their rights and advocate to make elections more accessible. (www.aapd.com/get-involved)

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[17] Paraquad, Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (RAAV) (2012) RAAV Poll Worker Training Project: Poll Worker Training Guide. (Paraquad, St. Louis, MO).
https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/Paraquad%20RAAV%20Election%20Worker%20Training%20Guide.pdf

[18] Office of the County Clerk (2012) Election Day Picture Guide (Christian County, MO).
https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/Beals%20-%20Sample%20Election%20Day%20Picture%20Guide.pdf

[19] Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), Pub. L. No. 107-252, 116 Stat. 1702-1703, 42 U.S.C. § 15461.
https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-107publ252/pdf/PLAW-107publ252.pdf

[20] National Disability Rights Network (2012) Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA) Handbook and Training Manual. (NDRN, Washington, D.C.)
https://www.ndrn.org/images/Documents/Issues/Voting/2012/PAVA_Handbook_v7.pdf, p. 6.

Centers for Independent Living

Centers for independent living are "consumer-controlled, community-based, cross-disability, nonresidential, private nonprofit agencies" that provide independent living services such as information and referral, peer counseling, and advocacy.[21]

There are over 400 centers for independent living across the country that work at the local level and 56 statewide independent living councils,[22] and many of these organizations advocate for voting accessibility and participate in nonpartisan voter engagement. (www.ncil.org)

Local chapters of national organizations

There are also many disability organizations that serve parts of the disability community that have state and local chapters or affiliates. They include:

1.   American Council of the Blind (https://acb.org/state-affiliates)
2.   National Federation of the Blind (https://nfb.org/about-us/state-affiliates)
3.   United Spinal (https://unitedspinal.org/support/chapter-network/)
4.   People First (https://www.peoplefirst.org/usa/)
5.   The Arc (https://thearc.org/find-a-chapter/)
6.   National Association of the Deaf (https://www.nad.org/members/state-association-affiliates/)

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[21] Administration for Community Living (2023) Centers for Independent Living (DDHS, Washington, D.C.). https://acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/centers-independent-living

[22] National Council on Independent Living (2023) About Independent Living (NCIL, Washington, D.C.). https://ncil.org/about/aboutil/