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Development of an Online Course for Poll Workers to Improve the Voting Experiences of People with Disabilities

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Findings from a previous ITIF study [1] strongly suggested that poll worker sensitivity to voter needs, preparedness, and understanding of disability issues were key facilitators of voting experiences among persons with a disability. Poll workers who were unprepared to successfully assist voters with disabilities may make it difficult to vote privately and independently. The goals of this project were: to develop an effective and standardized online training program that would provide poll workers with a more in-depth understanding of voters who have special needs; and to help poll workers find practical solutions to the types of problems voters they may confront on Election Day. To these ends, during the course of this project, we:

A. Investigated the knowledge gaps that impede poll workers from providing effective assistance to voters with disabilities;
B. Identified the problems surrounding the effective integration of this knowledge into current poll worker training, and
C. Used this information to design and implement a no cost, nationally available online course for poll workers that addresses the problems of everyday voters.

A. Investigate knowledge gaps

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with poll workers, poll worker trainers, and other election officials. We also observed poll worker courses, both in-person and online. We performed a review of current poll worker training manuals and how they address assistance needs of voters with disabilities. Interviewees were recruited through the CATEA Consumer Network and through referrals from participants in the Accessible Voting Technology Initiative Design.

Once the background research phase of the process was complete, a series of interview questions were generated. The interview questions examined: current poll worker training; experiences with voters with disabilities, poll worker responsibilities to assist voters with different needs (accessibility to polling site, registration, etc.); and poll worker experiences with voting machines and their accessibility features.

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[1] Sanford JA, Harris FH, Yang H, Bell CJ, Endicott S, Salisbury L, Baranak A. (2013) *Understanding Voting Experiences of People with Disabilities*. The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, Accessible Voting Technology Initiative Working Paper Series, Working Paper #5.

Interviews were conducted with voters across 11 states including: Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas.

B. Identify current problems in poll worker training

Interview data identified many gaps and inconsistencies in poll worker training. First, states varied in both the degree of attention given to voters with disabilities during training (e.g., some states had well developed programs while other states paid minimal attention to voters with special needs), and the type of training poll workers received (e.g., training in the operation of accessible features of voting machines and/or etiquette.)

Second, interviews revealed that different states organized poll worker responsibilities in different ways. As an example, in some precincts all poll workers were expected to be able to perform the same range of duties (e.g., registration, providing assistance, and setting up voting equipment), while other states assigned specialized roles to each poll worker (e.g., one poll worker was responsible for setting up voting equipment and assisting voters with special needs, another poll worker was assigned registration duties).

Third, as the interviews progressed it became clear that many of the solutions that emerged to support these voters, could well be of utility to voters who did not identify themselves as having a disability. For example, an elderly person who uses a cane, or a person with a temporary injury, or a woman with children in tow or who is pregnant and fatigues easily, could also benefit from many of the concepts and protocols presented in this course.

During the interviews poll workers and other election officials identified multiple issues they confront at the polling place, each of which was analyzed and addressed in the course content. As examples, workers and officials observed that:

1. It is often difficult to recognize a particular need or disability (e.g., a "hidden" disability such as hearing loss, or a cognitive disability).
2. Voters who require assistance often have a combination of different/multiple needs (e.g., vision, mobility, and fatigue). Preparing to assist voters who have multiple needs are minimally addressed in current training guides.
3. Polling places are often difficult to access because of inadequate parking or unclear directions to the polling location.
4. Poll workers often experience difficulties setting-up, operating, and troubleshooting the use of accessible voting technologies. This makes it difficult to assist voters who wish to use accessible voting technologies and increases environmental stress for all involved.

C. Development of an online course

Course content was based on: 1) the most common / problematic voting barriers identified through poll worker interviews as well as from previous interviews with voters with disabilities during former project; 2) training gaps identified from a sample of existing courses; and finally, a recognition that the course must take a reasonable time to complete. The completed content was compiled into an online course that poll workers could complete in one hour or less.

The course was based on an existing accessible online course template that has been used for other Center for Assistive Technology and Environmental Access (CATEA) courses. This template conforms as closely as possible to the W3C-WAI Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and Section 508 Guidelines.

Moodle was chosen as courseware for the following reasons:

- Moodle has more flexibility; the course can be completed independently or be inserted into existing training programs.
- The information can be consulted at any time as a resource.
- The course is structured more as a series of "tip" sheets than as a lecture.
- The course requires less than an hour to complete.
- Participants are not looking for credit (though may need to show that they completed it)
- No instructor of record; no homework.
- No set start/end date (but could be added if that was requested)

The course content integrated a variety of methods (e.g., scenarios and personas) to reflect the practical, real world issues that confront both poll workers and voters on Election Days, and which provide poll workers with the problem solving skills and strategies necessary to meet those issues. The issues addressed in the course system include:

- Solutions to practical problems posed by voters with special needs
- Voting rights
- Etiquette
- Accessibility to the polling place (e.g., inadequate parking)
- Information resources for voters
- Instructions on the set-up, use, and troubleshooting of accessible voting technologies
- Effective communication with voters

Five scenarios were created using persona who represented the complexities and potential challenges poll workers might confront on Election Day, and which provided opportunities to suggest practical solutions and approaches to ensure that all voters were able to vote privately and independently. In addition, the course looked beyond people with disabilities, to include ways to assist any voter who had a different need (e.g., seniors, English language learners/ESL). For example, in *Scenario 1* of the course, "George" is an older gentleman who uses a cane and

experiences mobility and vision problems as well as fatigue. Other scenarios addressed, vision, hearing, mobility and "hidden" disabilities (e.g., hearing or cognitive problems) where communication between poll worker and voter may require additional effort. Scenarios involving voters who experienced vision and mobility problems provided the opportunity to discuss how poll workers may create an accessible and accommodating environment. In addition, specific questions raised by election officials during interviews were addressed in the context of the scenarios – for example, the rules surrounding the use of service animals by a voter.

The course was presented for feedback from election officials and other associated voting stakeholders in early 2014. More than 40 election workers have viewed course content. Sample comments have been received and coded from a number of the visitors and have been positive and constructive. Though the funding period concluded on January 31st, the coded responses are being maintained so that if new funding should become available, comments can be used for additional development and refinement iterations of the online tool, as well as possible strategies for course and course content dissemination. The feedback will be used to make revisions to course content and to suggest additional venues for dissemination.

We are monitoring potential grant opportunities that will allow us to reengage the project. In addition, we are exploring an opportunity to further develop and/or adapt this system for use as part of a grant project at the Integrated Design Research Centre housed at University College Dublin, Ireland.