

Episode 3: Make a Voting Plan

KEITH CASEBONNE: Hi, I'm Keith Casebonne. Welcome to "You First," brought to you by Disability Rights Florida. The purpose of You First is to discuss the rights of individuals with disabilities, putting your rights first. This episode is the third of our "Access The Vote" series, where we're spending four episodes focusing on voting rights.

This podcast is produced by Disability Rights Florida, a not-for-profit corporation working to protect and advance the rights of Floridians with disabilities through advocacy and education. You can learn more about Disability Rights Florida on our website at DisabilityRightsFlorida.org.

In this episode, we will cover the steps you should take to plan how you will vote in elections. This episode will cover important topics, such as: the importance of learning about candidates, the importance of casting an informed ballot, and how to make a plan to have a successful voting experience.

To talk about these issues, our guest today is Bill Cowles, the Orange County Supervisor of Elections. Bill Cowles has been the SOE since 1996 and we have worked with him on several projects.

With elections rapidly approaching, make sure you start planning *now* for how you're going to cast your ballot!

Thanks for being here with us today, Bill. **Could you tell us a little bit about your position as the Orange County Supervisor of Elections?**

BILL COWLES: Yes, and thank you for the opportunity to participate and to reach out to a segment of our community that needs to be prepared for this election. As Supervisor of Elections, I think of it as two different responsibilities. One is everybody knows about voter registration and voter registration is a year-round process because it's a live, active file that constantly changes with other persons moving into Florida and registering or people are moving out of Florida or they are moving around in Florida. Besides updating their address, then we do have to deal with those issues about voters who pass away, felons... So, it's a live active file that we're responsible for maintaining. Along with it goes voter education.

On the other hand, we're responsible for conducting elections at the municipal, the county, the state, and the federal level. And so, while there may be statewide elections every other year, we're conducting elections throughout the years when it comes to special elections, and with municipal elections like here in Orange County where we do them in the spring. And many of us are doing special elections for students to teach them the voting process or, particularly here in Orange County and Orlando, where we have lots of conventions, we get asked to do special

elections for conventions. I think it comes down to voter registration and conducting elections is what people see as our two major responsibilities.

KEITH CASEBONNE: So, what are some of the issues that have arisen in Orange County involving voters with disabilities not being able to cast a ballot easily?

BILL COWLES: Well, I think there are three major areas that I think of. The first one has to do with accessibility to the polls and that could include the physical movement throughout an early voting site or at a polling place on Election Day. The second has to do with the voting equipment that is available to a person with a disability when they try to vote and also what types of assistance are available to them. And then, finally probably the key issue is transportation to and from the polling location. I think those are the three areas that we hear the most about from our disability community.

KEITH CASEBONNE: So, Bill, when those issues arise in your county, what do you do to resolve them?

BILL COWLES: Well you know, let's break them down in terms of the accessibility at the polling locations. There is set by the federal government a survey for surveying our polling places as to their accessibility. So, prior to every election cycle in each of the counties in Florida, there is a survey done to a facility to see what needs to be done in terms of making the polling place accessible. For example, here in Orange County, some cases we have polling places, such as churches, who are exempt from the ADA requirement, but need ramps in order to get up and into the polling place, and so our county has built ramps and marked them as to what facility they go to. And so the county will go out and install the ramps prior to Election Day and then go back and pick them up after the election, and then save them for future elections.

KEITH CASEBONNE: That's wonderful!

BILL COWLES: Surveying is done to determine if a facility needs the use. The other area about equipment...that's an area that is evolving. It is probably one that doesn't have perfection at this point, is that there is not one piece of voting equipment that truly meets all the needs of an individual with all different-type disabilities. So basically, the equipment that is used in the state I think is more directed to voters who have potential limitation in vision or are blind, and so that's where we have had machines that have audio ballots, so a voter can listen to the audio and then make their selection.

And right now in Florida, there are three different-type systems used. There are some counties that are still using the touch screen voting system, but the numbers become small in terms of the counties with those. Many have gone to what's called auto mark, where a voter puts their ballot into the machine, their paper ballot into the machine. Then there is a touch screen with an audio of the ballot so they can

mark their ballot on the screen, and then it prints in and fills in their choices on the paper ballot that goes into the tabulator, just like the other voters.

And here in Orange County and many of the large counties in Florida, we're now using the new technology called Express Vote, which is where the voter votes on a screen, has the audio ballot, and then it prints out a card strip with their choices on it, and then they are allowed to put that ballot into the tabulator just like the other voters do on Election Day or at early voting.

And then, you know, the last one about transportation is one that is many counties have arrangements with their county bus system for free rides on Election Day. Many of the voters here in Orange County have learned that if they are using a transport it sometimes is better to come to a larger facility like our office that can accommodate and also provide a place to wait for their ride home versus going to a polling place that may have limited parking and limited space on where to wait. So, you know, those are some of the things that the counties and here in Orange County that we make sure to go through and make sure that all of our locations and our service is accessible to all voters.

KEITH CASEBONNE: And I'd like to add that more information about those specific voting systems sorted by county is on our website at AccessTheVote.org for anyone who is interested in learning a little more about how those accessible voting systems work.

So how can citizens interested in voting in the upcoming election get to know candidates and their stances on different issues?

BILL COWLES: Well that's the tough question, because in our day and age of social media and sound bytes, it's something that a voter needs to work through to truly get to understand and to know the candidates. So, I think the key thing would be to be engaged. And many times, there are opportunities to go and hear candidates speak and obviously since Florida is the swing state, the candidates are going to be in -- particularly the presidential candidates -- are going to be in our state every day up to election eve, so from that standpoint if you get the opportunity to hear them.

The other part is that whatever groups you are a member of, encourage them to invite candidates, whether it be for municipals or countywide or state positions, to come in and to talk to the groups. And it's not too late, because candidates want to reach out to potential voters in any opportunity that they can by doing that.

There are groups around the state that do put together voter guides. The League of Women Voters does have voter guides that they prepare both on local candidates and then on statewide candidates and particularly on the amendments that are done statewide.

Each Supervisor of Elections office is charged with sending out sample ballots with the information, and so you can take and use that to do your own research on the

internet, but a lot of it is really just talking to your friends and family and associates and asking them for input on what they think on the topics and also on the candidates. So it is not one of those easy ones to say, "Here is one place you can go and get it," but you've got to do your work. And the key thing is to do your homework before you get to the polling place, because on Election Day we kind of are like the end-user, and this is where you actually go and cast your vote. It's not a place to go and sit and study those long amendments.

KEITH CASEBONNE: So, Bill, in your opinion, why do you think it's important for citizens to cast an informed ballot?

BILL COWLES: Well, you know each of us want to have a say in our communities, our state, and our country, and this is our way of representation and participation. And so it's important -- and sometimes, you know, the pyramid to me is upside-down. Sometimes you know we spend so much time talking about the importance of the president, but in actuality many decisions are made at the local level, whether it be about your garbage pickup, what your taxes are, what services you have, when does school start, and when the school times end.

There are so many local decisions that these races that are on the ballot that have to do with city government, county government, and even the state government have more impact on your quality of life, and so it's very important that you be engaged in learning where the candidates stand, where their positions are, and how will they respond to questions, such as "What are you going to do on taxes? Will you increase? What about gun control?" I mean, particularly here in Orange County, Orlando, where we had the Pulse shooting, one of the hot topics of every candidate forum has been, "What is your opinion about assault rifles? Who should have access to a gun?" and those.

So there are issues that need to be discussed both at the local level but at the federal level. So, if you want to have a say or you want to make sure you pick the candidate who is going to best represent your views of what you think is best for your community, this is your chance, and that's why you should get out and vote and express your opinion.

KEITH CASEBONNE: Yeah, and that's an excellent point about local races being just as important, if not in many ways more important, and also those are the candidates that most people aren't as familiar with, and so it goes back to your earlier point about doing the research, going to events, et cetera, and learning more about those candidates.

BILL COWLES: Or why do we go from 18% turnout in a primary to 68-70% in a presidential general, you know?

KEITH CASEBONNE: Right, interesting. **Why should people plan out how they are going to vote in the upcoming election?**

BILL COWLES: Well, you know our Election Days are on a Tuesday, so that immediately adds stress because if you've got to get to work, you're responsible for getting kids to school, child care issues after work, or you just have to try to drive around in a community that has lots of traffic. So from that standpoint, you know, the process of going and voting should start by first doing your homework -- and that's to take your sample ballot and to do your things that we talked about earlier about learning who the candidates are, what their positions are, what the amendments stand for. And so every county provides a sample ballot and you can pre-mark that sample ballot at home or at work before you begin to think about going to vote.

The other part is, depending on your lifestyle, you know it used to be that Tuesday was the only day for voting, but we've now expanded it in Florida to where we have three options for voting.

The first one used to be called absentees, but the new terminology, based on legislation in 2016, is to call it vote-by-mail because anybody who wants a ballot, we'll mail it to them -- unlike in the past or in other states, where you have to have an excuse for getting a ballot. So, right now, Florida is at its all-time high on mailing out ballots to voters and so voters once they get their ballot have the time to study it and they can work on it using their networking, friends, or the internet to do their research and then mark their ballot and send it back, but you need to send it back well in advance because, with the way the postal service works today, you can't expect next-day service. You've got to leave yourself time to get your ballot back in the mail.

KEITH CASEBONNE: You want to make sure your vote's counted!

BILL COWLES: You want it to be counted and that's the major push that's going to be going on with this presidential election, to make sure you get your ballot back. Even here in Orange County, we've grown on that list of counties that now provide the postage for the ballot coming back so the voter doesn't have to pay. The other part is you can always drop it off at an early voting site or you can drop it off at the Elections office if you don't want to put it in the mail prior to the election.

Early voting is another new feature. I think it is more known as "convenience voting," where counties open up locations around the county sometimes as much as 14 days prior, but at a minimum every county has to do eight days, between eight and 12 hours a day. An early voting site tends to be maybe a larger location. Here in Orange County, we have about three or four that are much larger and can accommodate more voters but the other part of it is that there is not as much stress when you go to early vote because you are doing it at your own convenience. You know I always talk about how here in Orange County, we are a tourist service industry and so people don't necessarily work an "8-5 Monday through Friday" job, and so we see a lot of people early voting here at our office. And I'll ask them, "why are you doing it mid-week?" and they'll say, "Today's my day off and I am taking care of my civic duty." Or I may see an older person who says, "Well, I just came from the doctor's office. I feel good today, so I'm going to vote, because I don't

know how I'm going to feel on Tuesday." So early voting takes off that pressure of trying to do it on Election Day.

But many people are traditionalists and so from that standpoint, Election Day is the day they prefer to go vote, and you have to go to your assigned location. But at the same time you also have to know where you are going to vote and that's key to know that before you leave home, work, or wherever you are leaving from to go vote. Polling places change and so it's important to check either your voter information card or on the county websites you can look up your polling place information and many of us print the polling information with a map and directions on the sample ballot that you can use. So knowing where you are going to go to vote before you leave is important because things do have a tendency to change between election years. And that's what we find in a presidential year is people who only vote in a presidential year try to go back to where they last voted and sometimes it's not there.

And then for persons with a disabilities who are using transportation: plan well ahead, make sure about pick-up, and make sure you know exactly where they are going to be taking you, and then obviously the return pick-up is key.

KEITH CASEBONNE: So, what are the steps necessary to plan how an individual is going to vote in the upcoming election?

BILL COWLES: Well, the first part is you've got to make sure that you are registered so you can participate in the election coming up. And so the first thing to do is you can verify your registration by checking with the Florida Division of Elections website or you can check with a county website in the county in which you live. So first is to verify you're registered.

If you are not registered in the state of Florida, then you have only have until Tuesday October the 11th, which is the deadline to register here in the state of Florida. If you are already registered to vote in the state of Florida, but you've moved but you haven't updated your address, you are not out of luck, because the good news is that you can update your address up to and including on Election Day. But us election officials would encourage you to change your address now, rather than later because giving us your correct address will assure you of receiving your sample ballot and it also will give you a new voter information card and so you'll have the polling place information, so you'll know exactly where to go on Election Day. We'd hate for you to go to a polling location that you think is yours and then find out we have to send you to another one. It's as easy as calling your Elections office and changing your address over the phone. That's even if you are moving from one county to another or you're moving within the county. So again everything we do in elections is based on your residence street address so having that address up-to-date is important for that.

Again, the election date is Tuesday, November the 8th, but we also talked about the opportunity to early vote or the opportunity to get a vote-by-mail ballot sent to you. The deadline for requesting a vote-by-mail ballot and have it actually sent to

you is actually Wednesday November the 2nd, but we would encourage you to do it sooner so that you have more time with your ballot but November 2nd is the last day you can request a county elections office to mail the ballot to you.

Another way to be engaged in the process, too, is to sign up to be a poll worker. Many counties are now training poll workers or looking for poll workers to work at the polls.

Vote-by-mail, we've already spoken about the deadline for doing that. And when you get your sample ballot, the sample ballot will give you your ballot and you can pre-mark it and study it and bring it in. It also will tell you information about your polling place information and the early voting information. You want to make sure you get it, so make sure your address is right.

And then if you need instructions or demonstrations, the poll workers at the polling place will be more than willing to show how, and the instructions for how to mark a ballot are at the top of the ballot. There are counties that use ovals to the left and then there are some counties that still have the arrows that you fill in over on the right-hand side. Florida law does allow assistance at the polling location. So if you need assistance you can bring your own person to assist you in the voting process or at the polling place you can ask for assistance of the poll workers and two poll workers will assist you.

Here in Orange County we have some extra stuff available at the polls for assistance. We do have magnifiers that can be used if you need that to enhance the print on the ballot. So there is assistance allowed at the polling place of your choosing or bringing a poll worker with you. So those are things I would say that are key on a check-off list to make sure that you've got everything right: Your registration status is current and up-to-date, and you've studied your ballot, you know where you are going to go vote. And then hopefully it will be a good voting experience for each voter.

KEITH CASEBONNE: And speaking of checklist, you can get a downloadable "Make a Plan" checklist on the [AccessTheVote.org](https://www.AccessTheVote.org) website. Download, print it, check it off as you go along, and that will help you keep things in order as you prepare to vote this election season.

This podcast has been rich with information. Here are the top 5 things that I would take away from this episode:

1. First of all, of course, make sure you are registered to vote and if you are not registered, get yourself registered.
2. Secondly, make a plan now for how you're going to vote. And you can choose, of course, as Bill discussed, by mail, early voting, or at the polls on Election Day.
3. If you decide to vote in person, make sure you set up transportation for getting to and from the polls well in advance.
4. Learn about the candidates, both local and national.

5. And for more information about the process and to download that "Make a Plan" checklist, make sure to visit AccessTheVote.org.

Thank you very much, Bill, for speaking with me today.

BILL COWLES: My pleasure. Would love to have everybody out to vote and get your "I voted" sticker!

KEITH CASEBONNE: Absolutely! And thank you, everyone, for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.