

## Episode 4: Voter Experiences

**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 last of our "Access The Vote" series, where we have spent 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](http://DisabilityRightsFlorida.org).

Before we begin this episode, we do want to provide a breaking news update. Just this week a federal judge in Florida allowed the voting registration date to be postponed until October 18<sup>th</sup>. This gives us plenty more time to get registered to vote.

Our guests today include Barb Page, Natalie Alden, and Victor Panoff, all three of whom are advocates at Disability Rights Florida and colleagues of mine for many years now. In this episode, each of them will tell us why they feel it is important for persons with disabilities to vote, discuss their past experiences when voting, tell us how they overcame any obstacles they faced, and tell what advice they can give to you if you face your own issues when going to the polls.

As we have discussed in previous episodes, voters with disabilities sometimes run into accessibility issues during the voting process. The insight provided in this episode will empower future voters by knowing what to do if they encounter any issues while voting.

Welcome, everyone. Thanks again for joining me. We're going to start today with Barb Page. Hey, Barb, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**BARB PAGE:** Hi, Keith. I am a wheelchair user and have been for most of my life. I have been a Florida registered voter for over 30 years and continue to exercise my right to vote.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** And so, in your opinion, why do you think it's important for individuals with disabilities to make sure they get out and vote?

**BARB PAGE:** Well, I believe it's not only our right but our honor. It's one of the few times that we all as a community of individuals with disabilities get to really exercise our voice and tell our legislators what we want, what we don't want,

who we want to represent us, who we don't want to represent us – and that is best done through voting. I encourage everybody with a disability to vote, because it is your voice that is heard the loudest and you don't want someone else to vote for something that you want or don't want.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Absolutely. So what methods do you prefer when you vote? Do you prefer to vote by mail or do you do early voting? Or do you go to the polls on Election Day?

**BARB PAGE:** I have always gone to the polls on Election Day, and this is the first year that I'm going to try the vote-by-mail. So, we'll see how that goes.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Okay, so why did you prefer to go on Election Day – and then what changed that you want to vote by mail now?

**BARB PAGE:** Each Election Day, depending on how I feel because of my disability, I'm always concerned that on Election Day I may not feel well. And I don't want to risk that chance of not being able to go to the polls on Election Day. And so this year I thought, "Let me protect myself so that I don't miss that very small window of Election Day." I've always wanted to go on Election Day because I thought it's part of that experience with the majority of other people, but over the past years, things have changed significantly. and there's early voting and there's vote-by-mail. And so there's so many more opportunities. So for this year, I'm going to do vote-by-mail. I may go back to voting at the polls on Election Day, but for this year I'm going to give it a try.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Excellent. That's great. Can you share with us any obstacles or issues that perhaps you've faced when going to the polls?

**BARB PAGE:** The major obstacles that I've experienced have been architectural accessibility. One time I remember years ago, my precinct shared, I think it was in a church. And there were two precincts side by side, and literally the doors were side by side. Precinct one was through the left door, and precinct two was through the right door. The precinct that I was registered to go to had a step into the same room, but because of the terrain the other door was flat. And so, you know, that was an easy fix, I just went in the wrong door, if you will, and was able to go into the shared room. That was an easy fix and an easy solution.

Most recently, my other precinct when I moved was at a different church and there was no accessible parking. And for me, I need an accessible parking space that also has an access aisle for my van. And they had designated spaces for people with disabilities but no access aisles. And so, I would just usually just take two spaces and not have a problem – it wasn't overly crowded usually at that time. But I said something to one of the poll workers. And it took a while, but I

just noticed this year that they've restriped it and now every accessible parking space has an access aisle. So, I was really happy to see that.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Well, that's great. And it sounds like speaking up was the best thing you could do, even if it took repeated attempts.

**BARB PAGE:** Exactly.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right. Great. What advice would you give to someone who is maybe going to vote for the first time and is preparing to vote in this election? What kind of advice might you give that person to make sure that they are able to access their right to vote?

**BARB PAGE:** Well, I think that my advice is not only to people with disabilities, but to everybody. It is to really research the issues, read the amendments, do your homework, and understand what everything says and what it means. And if you can, do a little bit of research on each candidate who you're interested in learning more about. I would do that. And again, I don't think this is limited to just people with disabilities, but it's certainly inclusive of that.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Absolutely. And just for our listeners, if you want to go back and listen to episode 3, it talks completely about making a plan, and there's also more information about making a plan to do exactly the kind of preparation that Barb is speaking about on our website at [accessthevote.org](https://www.accessthevote.org)

Thanks a lot, Barb. I really appreciate you sharing your insight with us and experiences.

**BARB PAGE:** Thanks, Keith.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** So let's turn our attention to Victor. Hi, Victor. Thanks for joining us today. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Hi, Keith. My name is Victor. I'm a person with a visual disability. I use a white cane to walk around. It's evident from looking at me that I'm a person with a visual disability because my eyes are opaque. I have been voting for over 40 years now.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Excellent. So tell us, in your opinion, why do you feel it's important for individuals with disabilities to vote?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** I believe it's important for people with disabilities to vote, for us to exercise our franchise as a total voice as a community.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Absolutely. Couldn't agree more. So what methods of voting do you prefer? How do you go vote?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Well, I have in the past gone to early voting. I've gone to my local polling place. I have not done absentee ballot or mail ballot in the past.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Okay. And so what are your reasons for voting early or voting on Election Day?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Well, I like to go to a physical place to vote because it's part of an ambiance. It gives me the feeling of participation, a feeling of participation in the process while I'm there with other people and there are other voters around. It gives me the opportunity to be a part of the environment at a local polling place, either at an early voting location or my local polling place.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right, that community feeling is often a special thing. So tell us a little bit about something that has affected you from voting effectively, an obstacle or an issue that you've run into when you've gone to vote.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Oh, I don't even know where to start. Well, I'll start at the beginning. Typically, when I go to either an early voting location or a polling place, the first thing that they ask you when you walk in is to read the oath and sign a display. And typically they hand me a piece of cardboard with the oath on it and I say, "I'm blind." And it has been described to me the look that people give me of "oh, what do we do now?" Because I have never encountered a location where they have had that initial oath when you walk in in an accessible format.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Wow.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** They don't supply it in braille. They don't have an audio of it. And so they read the oath to me out loud, which already sets me apart. That's part of the issue that I have with these non-accessible – because it sets me apart. It makes me feel different.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Because there are people already backed up behind me in line, because it takes some time while I'm negotiating and navigating with the workers at the polling place and it's embarrassing, frankly.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** And if they only had it available in braille or in an audio form, you could pop some headphones on and listen, and you'd be moving right along.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Well, that's just the beginning of it. Then they read it to me and I have to sign the display. The display is sitting there on a table and someone has to guide me over to the table to sign the display. And actually place a pen in my hand so that I can sign the display. There are no markers. Sometimes if you go to let's say an ATM, there's guides that allow someone with a visual disability to at least know where the buttons are, a ridge or something that tells you where to sign.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** So that's usually the first thing I encounter. The last time I went to vote, I finished signing and they said to go over to the table with the green tablecloth.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** It's as if they're not listening to you at all.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Well, yeah. It's like it's not registering that a blind person isn't going to know where the table with the green tablecloth is. So I again repeat, "Where's the table with the green tablecloth?" And I go over there and they hand me my ballot. And by this time I've explained to them that I want to use the accessible voting machine, which in my area is an Automark. And by that time they've called the supervisor, there's already a line behind me. Typically, people that have come in the same time as me have already voted and left. So they now take me with my ballot over to the Automark machine, which typically is in a corner with a cover on it. And they ask me if I need to sit, and I'll say "I don't need to, but this will probably take a while." And so I sit in the chair and they hand me my ballot, and I will say "I need the headphones." And then they'll probably call someone over, hand the headphones to me, and then decide to turn the machine on.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** So the machine is not even powered on?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** About half the time they have to boot it up.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Wow. And does that take another chunk of time to get going?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** It takes some time to get going. Now, they hand me the earphones. I will then say, "Can I have an alcohol wipe?" Because I don't know where these earphones have been.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Sure.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** They'll then run to the supply box and find the box of alcohol wipes that come with the Automark kit. This is a fairly long explanation to say that virtually every time I've gone to vote, the polling staff has not had any training in how to accommodate someone with a visual disability and the Automark machine.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Yeah, it sounds like that. I mean if they had had the proper training, those wipes would have been available. The machine would be on. They would be helping to guide you to where you had to go versus telling you to go to the green table. It does sound like a big lack of training, unfortunately, and awareness on the part of the polling place workers.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** So I put the headphones on. And I put my ballot in the Automark machine. And every election or primary that I've voted, the same thing has happened. Apparently, the default volume for the Automark machine is set at one or two. So when you put the ballot in, it starts telling you the instructions. The volume is so low you can't hear the instructions on how to raise the volume. I then raise the volume. Typically, the machine, once it's booted up, it works pretty well. In the last couple of elections, it works pretty well. There are some pronunciation issues. For instance, when you vote on amendments, it doesn't say the word "Number One Amendment," or "Amendment Number One." It will say "Amendment No One," or "Amendment No Two."

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** So there's some little quirks you have to get used– sort of used to.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Yeah, there are some quirks.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** But it sounds like the process just takes a long, long amount of time – unnecessarily lengthy, really.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Oh, it does. I've had people who've given me rides to go vote that have timed the process from when I've put my ballot in, to when it pops back out – a half hour, forty-five minutes.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Wow. So when this has happened in the past, obviously you've explained your disability to the poll workers. You've asked for what you need, what you want. But then, what have you done about the problem as far as, have you complained?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** I've contacted the PAVA program with Disability Rights Florida.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Ah, okay.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** And the PAVA manager, Dana Farmer, has in the past contacted the Supervisor of Election in my county. And they're aware of the problem. They've been aware of the problem. We are hoping that during this early voting period, if I decide to early vote, we've made arrangements for me to contact the Supervisor's office. And that's what I've done on the advocacy side of it.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right. So what advice would you give to others going to vote who might also have a visual disability? What would you recommend for them to do when they go to the polls, or in preparation for going to the polls?

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Well, the first thing I'd recommend is, don't give up. If you want to go to the polling place to be part of the process, and to be part of the environment, to get the "I Voted" sticker, to be able to wear it in public, don't give up. Keep fighting for your rights. Unfortunately, many of my friends and colleagues with visual disabilities have just said "I'm just going to vote by mail," because that way at least I can have some privacy, and have a friend or a spouse help me rather than stand there and have somebody read it to me.

It's really hard to describe how you feel when you're standing there being set aside, basically. Put in the corner. Literally, because that's typically where the Automark is. The feeling that you have. The feeling of being separate and apart. For people who know me, I'm not a person who cries easily. But the closest I've come to being brought to tears because of being set apart, has been at polling places – trying to exercise my right to vote. That's the most important thing that I have to say.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Don't give up.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** Don't let the process get you down and disenfranchise you.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** And Disability Rights Florida is always there to help, as well. If you the listener have a voting issue that you are having a problem getting past, or in touch with the right person, or asking for the right accommodation, or they're not providing what you're asking for, you can always call our voter hotline at 1-800-342-0823, extension 6000. During the voting season we answer the calls live and do everything we can to make sure that we can to get your right to cast a ballot fully realized for you.

Victor, I really appreciate your time and going over all this with us. Thanks so much.

**VICTOR PANOFF:** You're welcome.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** And our last guest today is Natalie. Hey, Natalie. How are you doing?

**NATALIE ALDEN:** I'm doing well.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Great. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**NATALIE ALDEN:** I'm a C5 quadriplegic and I use a power wheelchair.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Okay, so also in your opinion, we'd like to hear why you think it's important for individuals with disabilities to vote.

**NATALIE ALDEN:** I think it's really important for people with disabilities to vote because it's all a part of the American process. It's your right, and you want to be a part of everything that encompasses the American dream – and part of that is actually voting.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Yeah, absolutely. So what's the way that you like to vote? Do you vote on Election Day, or early voting, or by mail?

**NATALIE ALDEN:** Oh, gosh. I've voted all the different ways that you can. And it has been a different thing over the years for different reasons. I tried the absentee ballot. I didn't really care for it. There are some upsides to it, but I really love being able to actually go to the polls. And I would say, in the last few years I have done both early voting and voting on Election Day. And there's things I like and I dislike about both of them. And I would say, one at a time. Voting on Election Day – it's really, really great except for the fact that, you know, sometimes there's long lines, sometimes the weather can be really bad. And so, I think that's why I've kind of just started making sure I do the early voting, because it gives me the opportunity to have more choices in where I go to vote and when I go to vote.

Here in Duval County, we actually, you know, have like 10 days to go vote. And so, you can vote on the weekends, you can vote during the week, and because of the fact we have so many early voting sites, you really have a very big choice on where you want to go because we do it at the public libraries. Which is also a good thing because they're way more accessible than some of the smaller precincts that there are.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Definitely. That's a reason that we hear a lot is that the accessibility is definitely better at early voting sites in general. So, what are some of the obstacles or issues you've faced when casting a ballot?



**NATALIE ALDEN:** Well, I have very limited dexterity in my hands. And so I would say the biggest thing that I don't like about any of the polling things is that whenever you do get your ballot and you go over actually to fill it out, all of their pens are like hooked to this like cord or those little chains, and for me that's just not accessible because I can't reach up to where the pulling part is. And so I literally have to ask somebody or bring my own pen to mark my ballot.

I'd say the other problem that I have is, you know, you are allowed to have somebody help you with your voting. To me, I want to get in and get out. And so I really don't like having to wait, because if you have somebody come or you use one of their people, then it's like this whole process that they have to fill something out in order to come and just help you. And to me, it's just much easier to just try to do it on my own. It may take me a little bit longer to actually mark my ballot, but you know, as some of the other speakers have said, you want to try to be as independent as you can. And it really gives you a very horrible sense inside of you when you have to be, you know, asking them, "Okay hey, what about this? Hey, what about that?" You know, and you feel like you're just, you know, stopping all the people behind you. And so you really have to find what's a good way for you and what makes you feel good about, you know, casting your vote.

I would say the downside about early voting is that if you vote too early, there's some things that happen in an election that happen right before voting day, which may actually change your mind on something. And so you kind of want to make sure that you have as much education as possible, and that you don't listen to the media, because the media doesn't always say everything. But you actually look and educate yourself on amendments and candidates, because you want to make sure that whoever you're voting for or whatever you're voting for is actually going to represent what you as a person want. And I just feel like, you know, it's really big for me to be empowered by going there and doing that. And I know it was said about the actual voting machines, which I feel like are very slow and there's so much that could be better with them. And that's one of the reasons I choose to do the paper ballot when I vote versus the actual computer, too.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Okay, so the experience of using the accessible voting machines has not been exactly what you would expect when trying to cast your ballot.

**NATALIE ALDEN:** No, it's not. Plus the fact that it's kind of supposed to be for people with disabilities only, and so it's kind of one of those things where you kind of feel like, well, it's not as private to me. I feel like it's not a part of the regular process and anybody could say, "Oh, well it's the one that people with

disabilities use.” And so if something is going to be left out, I would hope it wouldn’t be that.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right, I see. So what things do you do to help overcome your issues? Are there complaints you’ve made or other issues that you’ve had to get help from poll workers? Or contact the Supervisor of Elections?

**NATALIE ALDEN:** Well, for me, I actually applied and I was put onto the Election Advisory Panel here in Duval County. And I sat on that for quite a while and was able to first-hand help with the process and help the Supervisor of Elections understand the issues the disability community was having, in order to make sure our issues are being taken care of during the elections. And I really, really would say that it’s a great process to be a part of. Not just voting, but also getting involved in committees and being a part of looking at the ballots afterwards and making sure. Because a lot of that is open to the public. And so whether you’re actually on a board or on a committee, or can actually go as a part of the public, your voice can be heard and you can be saying it in a venue where you’re representing the whole disability community, because of your disability.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Right, so true. So what advice would you give to a first-time voter preparing to vote?

**NATALIE ALDEN:** I would say the biggest advice I would give is to educate yourself. Educate yourself on how you want to vote. Educate yourself of course on the candidates and everything that’s going on there. Don’t feel like you have to vote on every single thing on the ballot. If there’s a race that you don’t know the people running in it because you weren’t educating yourself on that particular race because it wasn’t important to you, don’t feel like you have to pick someone, you know. It’s really your preference and what you feel comfortable with. I would say that, make sure that if you don’t know, contact your Supervisor of Elections, ask them. Where are my early voting sites? Where is my precinct? If you are able to, either yourself or someone else that can go down, go look at where your precinct is. You may find that you would prefer to do early voting because it’s going to be more accessible, or vice versa, depending on the county that you’re in. And so I would just say, do your homework on all of it. Because it really makes the voting process much easier and you’ll actually feel much better when you’re done with it.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** Very good advice. Thanks a lot, Natalie. I appreciate you sharing your story with us, as well.

**NATALIE ALDEN:** Oh, thank you.

**KEITH CASEBONNE:** This has been a really great episode with lots of information from three advocates that I work with and respect so much. I'm going to break it down to the top five things that I think we can take away from this episode.

1. First of all, you still have time to register to vote. Your deadline has been extended to October 18<sup>th</sup>. So please, definitely, if you're not registered to vote, go ahead and get yourself registered.
2. Persons with disabilities of course represent an important part of the electorate and everyone's voice should be heard – another reason to go out and vote.
3. All voters have the right to access their polling centers.
4. You don't have to be afraid to ask for help. Make sure you make a plan in advance and be ready to vote.
5. And also for more information about polling accessibility, accessible voting machines, how to report any voting issues, you can use the [AccessTheVote.org](https://www.AccessTheVote.org) website or call our voter hotline at 1-800-342-0823, extension 6000. As I mentioned earlier, during the early voting and voting day periods, we will be answering those calls live and helping people immediately.

So thank you all again for speaking with me, and thank you to everyone for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback about the show to [podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org](mailto:podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org).