

You First Episode 74: 2024 Elections & the Disability Vote - with Michelle Bishop, Monica Wiley, and Jack Rosen

Maddie Crowley (00:00:00):

You're listening to You First: The Disability Rights Florida Podcast. In this episode, we talk with Michelle Bishop, Monica Wiley and Jack Rosen from the National Disability Rights Network about disability voting rights, trends, and how disabled voters can access their vote in the 2024 election. Hey everyone, I'm Maddie.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:36):

And I'm Keith, and we're the hosts of You First. Today, we're talking with some of our good friends from the National Disability Rights Network, NDRN, about disability voting trends, election accessibility, how people living in various settings can vote, how organizations can better support disabled folks and why local elections are just as important as those big elections we have every four years.

Maddie Crowley (00:00:58):

Exactly, yeah. So that's such a good conversation and honestly, such a good kickstart into what feels like the big next steps of the election year.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:09):

Election season baby.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:12):

Now that it's finally hit September, we're really in the thick of it.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:15):

Yeah. We're rolling.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:18):

Now that I think about it, I think this is either coming out during disability voting rights week or just the week after, so we're really in the swing of things.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:25):

Yeah, that's true.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:27):

But before we get into the conversation with our friends from NDRN, Keith and I want to flag a couple new resources that Disability Rights Florida has for you just in preparation for the upcoming elections. So first, we have two brand new fact sheets about how to do supervised facility voting in Florida. So if you live in an assisted living facility or a nursing home, there's a special process to vote called supervised facility voting at the place where you live. So we have a fact sheet about that.

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We also have a fact sheet about submitting basically a voting access or a voting discrimination complaint, which is called a HAVA complaint. HAVA stands for Help America Vote Act, and essentially that fact sheet is just going to help you walk through how to submit that form and what kind of information they're looking for when you submit that form, letting people know that you experienced something not okay at your poll site or wherever you were voting. So those are our two fact sheets.

(00:02:31):

We also have two sets of videos for the in-person voting machines at the various poll sites if you were to go in person to vote. So we have explainer videos teaching you and the poll workers and whoever might engage with that equipment, how it works, how to use it if you use various different assistive technology, say audio or tactile, like a tactile, almost like a gaming pad, and then like sip and puff machine, et cetera. It teaches you how to use those machines.

(00:03:03):

And then we have brand new videos about doing accessible vote by mail, which is now an option in Florida as of late. So how you cast your ballot and vote by mail if you have a print-related disability, whether you're blind, have low dexterity, whatever it might be, or however that accessible vote by mail ballot could benefit you. So those are those videos we have. We also have a brand new brochure that talks about these different things. It talks about your rights, talks about what you need to go vote, how to vote in person, by mail, all

of this different stuff. So that's a more condensed resource of everything we have on our website.

(00:03:48):

And last but not least, we have a disability voting rights hotline. So if you experience any issues voting or registering to vote due to a disability and you live in Florida, you can contact our disability voting rights hotline at 877-352-7337 and someone will be able to help you navigate that or mitigate any issues you have. All of these resources are on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/voting, and we really hope these resources can be helpful to you this election year and encourage you and support you in making your voice heard when you go to vote this year. So yeah, without further ado, let's get into the interview.

Keith Casebonne (00:04:35):

Hey everyone, thanks so much for being on the You First podcast today. If you can all introduce yourself, start with your name, pronouns, job title, a brief visual description, and maybe how you got into this work.

Michelle Bishop (00:04:46):

Thanks so much for having us on. Hi y'all. I am Michelle Bishop. I am the manager for Voter Access and Engagement at NDRN, the National Disability Rights Network, coming to you from lovely Washington D.C. My pronouns are she/her/hers, and I am a white woman with very unruly curly brown hair, and as always, my black plastic rim signature nerd glasses. That's how you can always recognize me. I actually got into this work because I have, for my whole life, been super-duper nerdy about voting and I have told this story before, so I bet some of you over it already, but to prove it, I can prove it, I registered to vote the day I turned 18. And I know that doesn't sound really nerdy yet. You might be like, "That sounds normal," but there's two important things you need to know about that story.

(00:05:33):

One, it was not an election year. It's not like I was going to go vote later that year. I was just really stoked about voting. And two, this was before online voter registration existed. So when I say I registered to vote on my 18th birthday, I don't mean that I did it from home pulling up my web browser, I mean I had to go to the local library and get a physical voter registration card and return it and fill it out with a pen and everything. So there's a good chance that I was destined to be here. I might be made for this job.

Monica Wiley (00:06:04):

And I echo that. Hello, I am Monica Wiley, the Voter Engagement Specialist, and I have the great pleasure of being managed by Michelle Bishop, which is why I agree with her that she was definitely made for this position. Pronouns is she/her. I am a lovely black, African-American woman with lovely brown skin tone, some lovely glasses to compliment my look today. They're leopard with a little bit of teal down the bottom. And then I have some lovely flowing locks that has a little bit of gold, brown and blonde mixed in that's just going to the side of my face, just compliments the look for today. I normally have on some lovely nails with some bedazzle. That will happen in a day or so. I had to get my nails redone, so the old set had to come off, which you will see a new set probably if I ever happened to be on this podcast again.

(00:07:00):

And I wish I could say that my story was as great as Michelle in terms of why I fell into this work. But mine unfortunately was due to some barriers to voting as a person with a physical disability. I encountered that when I first was able to vote and it was just very hard and it was very full of intensity, not because I was scared to vote, but because of the lack of having the support and proper access to vote. And that led me to being a very passionate individual about access to voting and making sure that my community is able to vote. And that's about my story.

Jack Rosen (00:07:45):

And hi, I am Jack Rosen. I am NDRN senior digital communications specialist. I am a white man in my 30s with brown hair and a short beard. I'm wearing a blue and white striped shirt. I always hate following Monica because I am so much less descriptive than she is. It's always a tough act to follow. I came to this work in, I suppose, a bit of an untraditional way. I am a person with learning disabilities and my background is in politics. And during the start of the pandemic, after I had finished up graduate school, I saw there was an opportunity to help get out to vote with NDRN. And I told them the truth. I didn't know a ton about disability rights at the time, but I knew about my own experiences as a person with a disability and I knew about my own experiences doing campaign work and I told them about why I wanted to do this work. And thankfully, I got that opportunity. And now four years later, I'm here.

Maddie Crowley (00:08:56):

Well, that's wonderful and we are so excited to have y'all on. This is like a star guest panel of folks. For those who are listening that are unaware, our three friends here are from the National Disability Rights Network that's based in DC and essentially, it's almost like a parent organization to all of the different disability rights blank, so Disability Rights Florida,

Disability Rights, I can't think of a state, California. So all of the different states have an organization like ours and NDRN, the National Disability Rights Network, that for... It having a long name, we'll refer to it as NDRN for likely the rest of the podcast, is like this teaching and organizational kind of a structure and kind of parent to all of our orgs that also does really awesome work, especially with voting.

(00:09:48):

So thanks y'all. As a visual description for me, this is Maddie speaking. I'm a white person with blonde and brown hair wearing a black headset and a beige sweater, surrounded by lots and lots of plants, and it's going to be a really great conversation. So first, before we get into all of the nitty-gritty questions we have, could you give us an overview kind of the current state of voting accessibility and election access for people with disabilities in the United States?

Michelle Bishop (00:10:26):

Oh, what a question. It is so diverse everywhere you are in the US and that's because in large part, elections are very state and local. Very few election laws are federal. It really mostly is governed by the state and run at a hyper local level. But the interesting thing about this election is that the 2020 presidential election was actually one of the more accessible elections we've ever seen, and that's because of COVID-19. We made a lot of good decisions about making it easier to vote early, vote by mail, vote however it's going to work for you, curbside voting.

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And in the years since, what we've seen is that some states have taken those innovations and made them more permanent for their voters and some have started rolling them back. What options are available to you is very dependent on where you are. And so we're seeing a lot of different barriers state to state, as well as a lot of the traditional barriers that we usually see. Less than half of America's polling places are fully accessible to people with disabilities. And so we see a lot of challenges still with voting in person, even though the ADA is three years old, however old it is, as well as traditional vote by mail, even though it's been expanded, is really a paper-based system that doesn't work for people with print disabilities. So even though we've seen a lot of expansion of options, we've also seen some of that contract and we've also some good policies that still need to be made accessible for people with disabilities.

Keith Casebonne (00:12:00):

Thanks for that overview. Yeah, it is interesting that 2020 was so groundbreaking and instead of continuing along those lines, some states have decided that it's not in their best interest to make elections accessible for everyone, and that's really upsetting. Quick visual description, I'm Keith. I am a white man with brown hair and a salt and pepper beard wearing a blue shirt, and you can see my messy desk next to me and a beige wall in the background. If y'all can tell us some of the... Let's talk about some of these barriers that are out there for people with disabilities when trying to vote. What are some of those common barriers?

Michelle Bishop (00:12:37):

Sure. I can talk about some of the traditional barriers and then I think it's really great we have Monica on today who could talk a little bit about those barriers that come in terms of voter engagement. But really when we think about access to the vote in very literal terms, I did mention less than half of America's polling places are accessible. If you just look at the locations that we're using, it's maybe about 40% that could be considered accessible, meaning that a lot of them have insufficient parking lots that don't have accessible spaces for people with disabilities. They don't have an accessible path of travel to get from the entry to the voting booth. Those types of barriers, doors that are too heavy that aren't being propped open, there's stairs but there's no ramp or no elevator. Some of those really traditional barriers that we see that are covered by the ADA, they are ADA violations when you see those at your polling place.

(00:13:32):

When we also look at the voting station itself where you go to mark your ballot, those are even less accessible. And so when you take that and you combine it with that architecture data, it drags the number of accessible polling places down to less than 20%. Less than one in five polling places could actually be considered fully accessible. And that's because there's supposed to be an accessible voting system there for you to use. But increasingly, we see that it's not there or it hasn't been set up and turned on for use. The poll workers haven't been trained on it and they don't offer it to you. They don't have headphones out if you need an audio ballot. They don't have it set up so that a wheelchair can access it easily. They don't have it set up for your privacy so that voters who are waiting to check in to vote can't see the selections that you're marking.

(00:14:18):

So at any point in the voting process that you look at, we still see some barriers. Online voter registration has made voter registration significantly more accessible, but not for people with disabilities if you don't design that web portal accessibly. And so we still see

challenges at every point in the system, but I think what we're also looking at going into 2024, Monica, I'd love to hear you speak on it, is that lack of engagement with people with disabilities and the electoral process more broadly.

Monica Wiley (00:14:48):

Absolutely, Michelle, and that's a great segue into this. From me being on the grounds and being connected to some of the civil rights organizations and social justice organizations where we have the intersectionality of individuals with disabilities that may even be connected and a part of these organizations, what we're not seeing is the lack of a voter engagement type of program for people with disabilities.

(00:15:19):

So either they don't have one or their program that they do have, it's almost non-existent. It's just on paper saying, "Hi, we somewhat recognize that we have individuals with disabilities in the black and brown community," but that's it. No terms of what does that look like? How are we interacting with individuals with disabilities and being an ally for us, and making sure that they know their rights as a voter or even a first time voter, especially when it comes to if you have a change of address and depending on the state that you live in, that could potentially purge you.

(00:15:58):

So a voter with a disability, especially with impacting mostly black and brown individuals with disabilities, we're seeing that problem. My job is to make sure that these civil rights and social justice organizations recognize that we exist and that we have these additional challenges and barriers. Alongside Main Street, there's additional challenges and barriers, but we're also part of your community. So how can we work together and you be a stronger allyship to us because we exist here? So how can we make sure that we are connected in that way?

(00:16:34):

And then I also wanted to just echo a little bit more what Michelle was talking about terms of accessibility because I come to it too for the perspective of making sure that curbside voting is one of the avenues, I am a strong proponent about it. And Michelle is smiling because I was one of the architects that was responsible for that in Virginia and we're trying to get that done here in the state of Maryland. And while I know everybody doesn't drive and it's a good resource, it's a good apparatus for those that are disabled, including pregnant women who develop temporary disabilities. Let's not forget them as well. They

may be temporary part of our community, but they're part of our community and they exist and they should be able to vote, pull up to the curbside voting to their voting location and cast their ballot without having any type of undue harm and stress on their body.

(00:17:28):

So I am a sad proponent of curbside voting. I think it would be a great apparatus for our community in so many levels and ways. But in terms of the engagement piece, yes, that is what we are building here at NDRN and we're starting to see more of some civil rights and social justice organizations say, "Hey, you know what? We did not recognize or we did not have a strong disability program and engagement. We would love to partner with you on this to build out more of that connection and allyship to make sure that we are engaging the black and brown community and the diverse community of people with disabilities and voters with disabilities because of the intersectionality." And I have several ideas and I can go on and on, and I know we all pretty much have the time for that. I always save them for my one-on-one meets with Michelle. I always say, "Michelle, I have an idea," and then it goes into another idea and another idea. But that's pretty much in essence what that engagement piece is about.

Maddie Crowley (00:18:26):

Yeah, that's phenomenal and so exciting to hear about that y'all are doing this work in partnership with these other orgs that have traditionally met various other communities, marginalized communities to address their needs, but considering the intersection of disability and say race or gender, et cetera, what you just highlighted, is really important. I also want to highlight what you mentioned about pregnant folks and what you mentioned as far as a temporary disability. Say if someone who has an injury or breaks their leg and they can't stand or have to use crutches and get in and out of a polling place, so accessibility is more, it benefits everybody and we're a broken record to say that because we all know that, but when you break your leg and need to have accessibility features or who knows, a whole host of short-term to semi long-term injuries, medical complications, whatever it might be, are going to benefit from these different things that y'all just laid out.

(00:19:37):

I did want to ask a question in clarifying something that Michelle brought up regarding the lack of accessibility at different poll places. And this could be a question for anybody, but could you speak a little bit to the issue with churches and places of worship being a huge part of our polling sites in the United States, yet under the ADA, there is religious exemption for those places to be accessible?

Michelle Bishop (00:20:07):

So that's a really important point to bring up because there are a few types of polling places that are very common because they exist in almost every community, if not every, and they're willing to serve as polling places, which is also important. The locations have to voluntarily serve as a polling place. One of the very common ones is churches. And you're right, churches are typically one of the only things that are exempted from the ADA based on that separation of church and state. But when a church is serving as a polling place, it is required to meet the ADA regulations as a polling place during that voting. So you can use all kinds of workarounds, right? You can put portable ramps, you can prop open doors that are too heavy, you can put temporary handles on doorknobs that can't be operated with a closed fist, you can tape down cords. There's a lot that you can do.

(00:20:59):

It's amazing what you can accomplish with duct tape and orange traffic cones, if I'm being honest, at a polling place. You can really in MacGyver the situation and orange traffic cones, a temporary signage enough can make accessible parking spaces where they don't exist in your parking lot. So there's a lot that you can do to make it work for election day. And I think this is also really important as well, when we think about schools serving as polling places, if school is in session, sometimes we get to use the part of the building that we get to use. And I don't think we always think about that as an accessibility issue because schools are covered by the ADA. But the path of travel that we're given, the parking lot that we're given to use may not be the most accessible.

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You also run into issues if the kids are there, are they allowed to prop open those heavy fire doors or is that going to be a fire code violation? There's a lot to negotiate and think about there. Interestingly enough, one of my favorite examples is that in some parts of the country, it's actually not uncommon to use people's houses as polling places, like somebody's private home also not covered by the ADA, but it is when it's a polling place. So you better have a stable, firm and slip-resistant driveway with not too much of a slope and you're rolling door to your garage open and your garage emptied out or something to make it as accessible as possible. But it is complicated. That's why organizations like Disability Rights Florida are so important because election officials get the locations they can get, and if they're not ADA compliant, they've got to figure out how to make it work.

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And we don't necessarily expect our elections officials to know how to do that on their own. A lot of them do because they're amazing and they work really hard, but we don't expect them to be experts in elections and in disability and access. Our thought is more than anyone else about running elections, which is in itself big and complicated, but we know all about the ADA and accessibility and what people with disabilities need. We are experts in ourselves. Let's put that together and let's work together to make our polling places as accessible as possible. But like you said, it's complicated. It seems very simple on the surface, but when you really get into the nitty-gritty, it can be a little more complex.

Maddie Crowley (00:23:18):

Yeah, thank you so much for illuminating that. I think some folks with disabilities get discouraged if their polling site is a place of worship, a church, etc. But if it's inaccessible, that's against the law, you should know that. And there's Disability Rights Florida and other election protection groups that can assist you with that. So speaking of another kind of way of voting are folks that are in different facilities living or residing in different facilities across the United States, whether that's a long-term care facility, a nursing home assisted living facility, jails, hospitals, et cetera. Depending on what state you're in, they might have a different name for that, but that's the broader context of what we're talking about. So what are some of the ways that folks residing in these facilities can vote, and what opportunities or resources or info might be lacking in this area for this population of voters?

Michelle Bishop (00:24:20):

That is such a great question. We've been thinking about this a lot. I mentioned 2020 earlier and how that election really put a spotlight on access. And I think it did the same for voting in long-term care facilities and residential facilities, specifically making it clear how tenuous their access to the vote is. Actually, I think this is a great idea when it's doable. Sometimes, nursing homes and long-term care facilities are used as polling places, which I think is great because they tend to be a little more accessible than some of the other things around them. So probably a pretty decent polling place. And for everyone who lives in that facility, that's going to be their polling place because where they assigned is based on their address. If you live at the polling place, that's going to be your polling place, which means they just have to get to the lobby or community room or whatever it is that's being used in their own facility where they live and they're going to be able to vote and it's going to be a lot easier.

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So I do love when I see that done. Otherwise, a lot of what we rely on is either the local elections officials or friends and family coming into those settings to make sure that the

residents are able to vote. And in 2020 when those facilities very reasonably had to close their doors to protect the residents from a pandemic, none of those folks could get in. Which means a lot of those people, I'm afraid, weren't able to vote in 2020. We saw a lot of complication around that. It falls then to the facility staff to assist the residents, and Center for Medicare and Medicaid services would tell you they absolutely have an obligation to do that. They did issue a memo about that in 2020, but we're talking about people who on a regular basis aren't sitting around playing computer Solitaire on the job. That is a busy gig, and especially in 2020, I can't imagine how overwhelmed they must have been.

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So throwing one more thing on the pile, even if there is an obligation to do it, it's a lot. And I don't think that we can rely on the facility staff exclusively to make sure that the residents are able to vote. So it's something that we're thinking about and talking about a lot right now. I think that there's not one fantastic solution that's going to solve that problem, and I think it's going to be a combination of things. I think we should use those locations as polling places when we are able to. I think we have to make sure our vote by mail is as open and accessible as possible for the residents to be able to use that as well, especially if they can receive market return it electronically and they're not reliant on the mail service or someone to drop it in the mail for them or return it for them, whatever it may be.

(00:26:53):

I think that right to assistance that we have under federal law, you can get assistance from a person of your choice. The only limitations on that are your employer or your union rep. So if you have someone you trust who you want to assist you to be able to do that, I think it's really important. If you had to rely on somebody else to make sure your ballot gets marked the way you want it or gets returned and gets returned in time so it's counted, you would want it to be someone you trust and not someone who is assigned to you. So I think that it's really kind of a patchwork of different rights and options that I think are going to make it work best for people in long-term care facilities.

(00:27:31):

But one of the things that I love about organizations like Disability Rights Florida, is that those are populations of folks that we're working with all the time. And so I think Monica's right, that we often get excluded from some of the mainstream get out to vote efforts. People are not necessarily going into residential facilities, institutions, jails and prisons, nursing homes, long-term care facilities and talking to the people there about the fact that they have the right to vote and making a plan to vote. But that's something that we think

about all the time and that's a gap that we can fill as a network of disability rights organizations.

Monica Wiley (00:28:09):

And I just want to add to that, Michelle. Thank you, that was a great response and overview. And in terms of the jail piece, this is a program that we are definitely very passionate about. It was something that I had brought to Michelle and it just so happened that a colleague of ours at NDRN was working closely with a couple of organizations such as The Sentencing Project that we just did a webinar on about those that are incarcerated and having their rights restored. I know there are a couple of states, not a lot, there are a few, and I believe Tennessee is one of them, where you can go inside and do voter registration drives, but that is something that we need to do and expand further on because again, that definitely does impact our community in terms of people with disabilities. It also impacts the black and brown members that are in these jails.

(00:28:59):

And so we definitely need to make sure that we are doing all that we can in terms of engagement and policy and laws to make sure that they have their rights restored. And this is something that I'm very passionate about and this is also something that NDRN is passionate about. Of course, Michelle Bishop, who is my lovely boss, is passionate about as well. So this was definitely a great question and it's something that we need to do better at. I am not an expert in this area and that is why we are definitely connected with individuals like Disability Rights DC who has someone there that does a lot of work in this area, again as well with The Sentencing Project and then a couple of staff members we have on staff at NDRN. But thank you for the question, Maddie, about this. In terms of long-term care facilities and jails and prisons, it's definitely critical that we make sure that they can have their rights restored and be a part of our voting bloc.

Keith Casebonne (00:29:52):

Yeah, thanks to both of you for that, really those wonderful answers. A lot of great information there. And yeah, it is a unique challenge and one that a lot of people who look at voting rights don't necessarily turn their attention to. So when you mentioned agencies like Displaced Florida and others, we're already there, so it makes sense to... That's where we try to expand our efforts to make sure that they're able to vote appropriately. So are there any new policies or laws being proposed or enacted that could affect voting for people with disabilities in this 2024 election?

Michelle Bishop (00:30:30):

So in terms of what we're seeing happening with legislation around the right to vote, we're seeing a lot. I've mentioned it before and I won't harp on it too much, but we have actually seen record numbers of bills introduced nationwide since the 2020 election addressing everything you could possibly imagine, some things that will really expand options and access to the vote, and some that could have more of a negative impact on different types of voters. So it's really a mixed bag depending on where you are. I feel like Florida probably feels the same way, I would imagine. Florida always sees a lot of legislation around voting rights and a lot of action around voting rights because you all are so important. It's a blessing and a curse to be a really important state when it comes to federal elections. So they probably keep you very busy.

(00:31:21):

Some of the trends that we're seeing at the state level, because that's really where the action is these days, we are seeing unfortunately, attempts to restrict that right to voter assistance. That actually comes from the Voting Rights Act of 1965, one of the most important pieces of federal legislation ever passed in the United States that protects people of color in particular from voter suppression efforts, but it actually does include that right to the assistant of your choice other than your employer or your union rep if you're a person with a disability.

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And we see a lot of state legislation attempting to further narrow that down and say, "Well, and also this type of person and this type of person can assist you," they can't do that. They can't say it can only be a friend or family member or only be a caretaker or staff at your facility. They can't do that. Saying an assistant can only help no more than two or three people in any given election, they can't do that, because if you can only assist three people, the fourth person to ask you is being denied the assistant of their choice.

(00:32:18):

But we are seeing a lot of attempts to really restrict that I think are problematic, and something that we're really paying attention to and working on. We have seen increases in curbside voting that Monica mentioned earlier, and I used to have a really love-hate relationship with curbside voting because you can't say, "Our polling places are inaccessible, but it's okay because you can vote curbside." That's not a thing. You can use it as a stopgap measure until you make your polling places fully accessible.

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But one of the things that I really learned in the last couple election cycles, we hadn't thought about it this way before, is that even if all your polling places are fully ADA compliant, which I doubt that they are, because that's really hard to do. I've never seen a jurisdiction that was like 100%, this is perfect. But even if it was, there are people for whom just getting in and out of the car is a challenge. Walking any length of distance, standing for any amount of time in line is going to be a challenge. And curbside voting is an awesome reasonable accommodation for those folks that's just going to make voting work for some people in a way that we haven't seen before.

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So we love where we see those expansion of curbside voting. There's a lot of back and forth right now on making vote by mail more accessible, mailing someone a piece of paper and expecting them to be able to physically handle it, read it, mark it is something that people with print disabilities can't do, which includes people who are blind or low vision, people with different types of learning disabilities, people who don't for whatever reason have full manual dexterity, that ability to handle the pen and paper. And so we're seeing a real rise in sending those vote by mail ballots electronically, if nothing else, to the folks who really need it, like military and overseas voters and people with disabilities so that they can receive it and market it electronically, and ideally, return it electronically, and at no point have to interact with that paper, which makes the process inaccessible.

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So we see a lot of movement on that in a number of states that's actually really exciting and really opening up opportunities for people with disabilities, especially if they still have a need to socially distance. We are seeing a rise in the COVID numbers right now. So for people who are immunocompromised and people with underlying conditions, when they're making their plan to vote, they're still thinking about social distancing even if some other folks aren't. So they're still wanting to use curbside or make sure vote by mail is going to work for them so that they can vote in November and do it safely. At the federal level, we're not seeing a lot of movement in Congress around voting legislation, but there are some things introduced.

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We have done some work around the Freedom to Vote Act, which is a very large omnibus bill that has some really great stuff in it for voters with disabilities. Unfortunately, the most recent version still has in it a requirement that everyone would have to use a paper ballot, whether or not it's accessible to them. And so that's something that we find to be extremely problematic and not comply with ADA that we're working on. But we do also see,

every year since 2013, introduction of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act that would fully restore the Voting Rights Act and allow us to once again use federal preclearance so that jurisdictions that are known to use voter suppression tactics wouldn't be allowed to implement anything new without going through the Department of Justice first. So we can put a stop to bad practices before they happen rather than letting them happen and then litigating to try to get rid of them and voters are losing their vote all while that's going on since that's a lengthy and costly process. So there are some things that we are excited about for the future as well.

Maddie Crowley (00:35:47):

Thank you so much for explaining all of that. Yes, Florida is a lovely... Is it referred to as a battleground state essentially, or a swing state? Where in recent years, yes, it's been won... Primarily, it's quote, unquote, "Red State," won primarily by Republicans, but it's still technically considered a swing state as are a couple others, Pennsylvania, I think Wisconsin as well. So those are just some of the things that I think you were mentioning.

(00:36:18):

Additionally too, I wanted to flag that Disability Rights Florida, while we're talking about vote by mail and some of these accessible voting practices, Disability Rights Florida worked with our state rev up chapter called Access the Vote Florida to produce some really great voting videos about how to use the accessible in-person voting machines and how to use accessible vote by mail, which the accessible vote by mail videos just came out about a month or two ago. So those are really new and really exciting resource, and you can find those on our website, on YouTube, on Access the Vote Florida's website, et cetera.

(00:36:52):

But if you don't know how to use your polling places, accessible equipment or accessible vote by mail option in your county, that's a resource to you about how to use that. Another thing I'm shamelessly going to flag is that Disability Rights Florida has been working a lot. What y'all talked about are supervised... In Florida, it's called supervised facility voting, and in addition to other facility voting, it's two separate things. Supervised facility voting is something that takes place in assisted living facilities or nursing homes and is a special type of voting process where your supervisor of elections official will come to where you live and essentially host a mini poll site there. So that's an option for folks who are listening to know about or tell their loved ones about, that's an option if that's not already happening where they live.

(00:37:49):

And lastly, we did a fact sheet about how to submit a HAVA complaint. So HAVA stands for the Help America Vote Act, and it can sometimes be confusing by process or whatever to the navigate some of these complaint processes, but if your poll site's inaccessible or you experience discrimination, or you think something funky happened when you tried to go and vote, you can submit a HAVA complaint and they'll investigate it. And this is really important. I don't do our elections work here at DRF, y'all can probably illuminate this further, but speaking from the conversations that I've had, the more you show that these poll site inaccessibility issues are happening, or that disability-related voter discrimination is happening, it kind of forces the powers that be to take action. Because unless we're naming these things or submitting complaints about these things, not that it excuses it, but sometimes they may not know the fullest extent to what things are happening. So I didn't know if I wanted to pause and see if y'all had anything you wanted to add to that. If not, I can move on.

Michelle Bishop (00:39:02):

I think that's so important. I do always stress for all voters, but especially voters with disabilities first and foremost, make your plan to vote in advance. Think about what methods you're going to use. Am I going to vote in person? Am I going to do it during early voting? Am I mailing it in? Am I putting in a drop box? What am I doing? And how to make sure that works for you and that's accessible for you, especially if you're going to need to line up things like transportation or someone who's going to assist you or any of those things because that can take a little extra time to put into place. We love making a plan to vote and especially researching your ballot in advance to make sure you know. I have to research my ballot in advance and I do this for a living, and I have to sit down and read plain language explanations of all those ballot measures and propositions for my ballot because holy, they're so confusing, right?

(00:39:51):

So big fan of making a plan to vote. I make a plan to vote as well. So definitely worth doing. I think you also want to know who you're going to call. I hear Ghostbusters in my head every time I say that, but you want to know who you're going to call if things go wrong on election day, right? If you show up to your polling place and it was supposed to be accessible to you and it's not, or they won't let you bring in your service animal, or they won't let the person of your choice assist you, whatever it may be, the worst thing you could do is forfeit that vote. You should never. Don't let anything stop you from voting. If you're eligible and you're on the rolls, you should cast your ballot. And so knowing who you're going to call to assist you if something happens, Disability Rights Florida, of course I have to hype up as being a great option there to assist you.

(00:40:37):

There's always other hotlines as well. We work with Election Protection, that's the 866 Our Vote hotline, O-U-R-V-O-T-E. What I love about them, they have multiple methods to contact them. So there's usually a website chat and you can text and there's multiple hotlines that provide different languages. In addition to English, they have Spanish, Arabic, and about nine different Asian languages. But what I love about going to somebody like Disability Rights Florida is that we get the disability of it all and can provide much more comprehensive advice around disability stuff. If you are deaf or hard of hearing, National Association of the Deaf also runs a video chat hotline for speakers of ASL. So you want to have that stuff handy. Or like you said, how do I do a complaint through HAVA or to the Department of Justice if it's something really serious? But one of the things we see a lot, because I work those hotlines on election day, and we'll get some calls around inaccessibility and disability stuff, and I'm always shocked.

(00:41:33):

Okay, here's a really specific example. One time we get a call because there was a polling place that actually had an accessible entrance around the corner, but the poll workers didn't know that. So they hadn't opened it up and set up signage to direct you. They thought there was only this one entrance and you had to park and then go up a grassy hillside to get to the entrance. Totally not ADA compliant. So a gentleman who uses a wheelchair shows up and very well-meaning poll workers decide to lift him in his wheelchair and carry him up a grassy hillside. I love the dedication. Unfortunately, that's incredibly dangerous, and that man could have been very seriously injured and all that. That's also a lawsuit waiting to happen for those county elections officials. Not great. What stuck with me about that story was that the person who called wasn't the voter who uses the wheelchair, was the non-disabled person in line who saw that and was like, "That doesn't seem right."

(00:42:24):

And these people with disabilities ourselves, we got to call that stuff in. Even if you ended up successfully casting your ballot, tell Disability Rights Florida if you saw something that wasn't right while you were there, or if it should have been accessible and it wasn't and you had to jump through a bunch of hurdles. If you did and you still cast your ballot, that's awesome, but let Disability Rights Florida know so that hopefully, you don't have to do all that next time. Even if the poll workers are amazing and they're lovely to you and they're really respectful, that's great. We love that. But if there is something wrong, we still need to know.

(00:42:54):

So we want people with disabilities... We shouldn't have to be advocates when we go to vote. That's not right. We shouldn't have to, there shouldn't be extra hoops for us to jump through. We shouldn't show up ready to advocate for ourselves when a lot of other non-disabled folks just get to show up and cast their ballot and never have to think about it that hard. I know it's not fair. But if we want to fix it, we do need folks to tell us what's happening on the ground so we can get out there and advocate for you after election day or on election day if you're not getting to cast your ballot to make it better.

Monica Wiley (00:43:26):

I echo everything Michelle said, and I think most importantly, I would say the two biggest things as a voter with a disability, especially if you are a first-time voter with a disability and you may not know exactly what to expect on your ballot, especially if there are some ballot measures and things of that nature, feel free to ask questions. Make sure that you have your questions in place. It is okay to ask questions there. To a certain extent, it's no right or wrong answer unless it's depending on something of the example that Michelle was saying. But make sure that you become knowledgeable with what to expect or potentially expect on your voting ballot. And secondly, I would say the biggest hurdle is transportation. Sometimes, you have to have more than one backup as a form of transportation because transportation tends to be one of the biggest issues.

(00:44:17):

And so be willing to make sure that if plan A for transportation doesn't work out, then there's plan B. Speaking of churches, there are a lot of churches that are coming together and working with some of the parent transit companies during election day to make sure that voters with disabilities have that access to get to their polling location and sometimes not even being charged if they are a voter that relies on Medicaid. So making sure that you have more than one form of transportation is critical because more often than not, sometimes plan A for transportation doesn't work out. You have plan B. And make sure that you know the different types of transportation availability that it's available on election day, and having that and making sure that you are covered all the way around. But that's the only two things I wanted to add to what Michelle was saying. Everything else, I second, third, fourth, fifth, I 100% agree.

Maddie Crowley (00:45:20):

Yeah, definitely. Thank you all so much for expanding on that. I really appreciate it. And this will be in the intro of our podcast, but just for repeating it, our Disability Rights Florida voting hotline is 877-352-7337. So if you have issues voting or registering to vote due to a disability-related reason, you can call our hotline and we'll be able to help you. I want to

pivot back to something for a moment, but what is the impact of returning citizen restrictions on the disability community? Are there any other barriers that y'all want to uplift? Any other barriers related to access that are compounded by folks who are multiply marginalized?

Michelle Bishop (00:46:11):

Absolutely. When we talk about returning citizens and people who have experienced incarceration, one of the biggest barriers out there we find is bad information. First of all, if you haven't been convicted of a felony, you should have the right to vote in all states. And so there are people actually who are actively in jails and prisons who may have the right to vote. In some states, you actually can vote while incarcerated, but everywhere, if you're maybe just in jail awaiting trial and have not been convicted of a crime, you should be eligible to vote. And I think there's a lot of misunderstanding out there about that.

(00:46:48):

But for returning citizens, we find there's a lot of misinformation. People who are told, "You'll never be able to vote again," when the truth is in most places, you can get that right to vote back. It looks a little different when you're eligible and whether or not you need to re-register or apply or whatever it may be. But there's a lot of misinformation about that. And we are really concerned about that given the overlap between those two communities. And the fact that we do tend to over-incarcerate people with certain types of disabilities. So it very much has a very real impact in our community. And there are a lot of folks who I think believe that they can't vote and that may not be true.

(00:47:24):

So one of the things we're working on really hard right now is just making sure that we get good information out there. And also for folks who are in jails and prisons who are currently eligible to vote, that they're making that accessible for the residents, that they're doing things like Monica had mentioned, Disability Rights DC, they get accessible voting equipment brought into the facilities for the eligible voters there to be able to cast their ballots on an accessible piece of voting equipment rather than just relying on something like paper absentee ballots or that sort of thing. But we've been finding the biggest barrier is that there's just not a lot of good information out there about whether or not you're eligible and what you need to do to be able to vote.

Keith Casebonne (00:48:03):

All right, thanks for that. And one thing I want to mention too, when we're talking about voting hotlines and the like, a lot more than just people in Florida listen to this. So if you need to get resources for whatever state you live, the quickest way to do that would be to go to [ndrn.org](https://www.ndrn.org). And at the very top of the screen, you see a link that says, "Find your P&A," and just pop in your state, and then you can contact them for all sorts of disability rights assistance, but voting for sure and find out what their voting resources are, hotlines, things like that, want to make sure to call that out and folks who are not in Florida have some connection to some resources out there.

Michelle Bishop (00:48:45):

Absolutely. It's the best place to go because as we said earlier, voting is different depending on where you are. And the rules and the options that you have are going to vary state by state. NDRN could talk about this all day, but the best place to go to know exactly what are the rules in my state and the options that I have in my state is right to the disability organization in your state because they're going to really have that expertise on what the options look like for you where you are. The same way we love our Florida voters and we always encourage them to go to Disability Rights Florida, go right to the source for good information.

Keith Casebonne (00:49:16):

Yeah, for sure. So what is the current state of the disability voter turnout gap? What is the power of the disability vote if we all showed up in 2024 and voted?

Michelle Bishop (00:49:45):

The potential power of the disability vote is actually incredible. Rutgers University actually has some data on this, and they have estimated there's about 40 million eligible voters with disabilities in the United States, four, zero, 40 million. That number is huge. We have never had a federal election that was determined by 40 million votes. I mean, a normal gap is maybe like 3 million votes, right? There's a big gap, maybe 7 million votes determined an outcome in an election, never 40 million. So if we're being honest, people with disabilities, all of us who are eligible, cast our ballots, could probably determine the winner of any election that we've had in the United States. We could absolutely be that powerful. I say it as potential power and how powerful we could be because it doesn't matter unless we actually do that, right? Our folks need to show up and we need to vote, and we do still lag behind on disabled people a little bit.

(00:50:43):

And that number goes up and down. We've seen a closing of the gap in recent elections, I think because we've made them more accessible. Even if we did it in the name of COVID, I'll take it. We made it more accessible and more of our people were able to cast their ballots. But we still can lag behind anywhere from I think about 3% to 6% behind non-disabled voters in terms of our turnout. And I know that doesn't sound like a huge number, 3% to 6% doesn't sound like a lot. Didn't say 80%, 75%, but when we're talking about tens of millions of eligible voters, even those small percentages represent millions of votes, that could be 3 to 5 million votes that were lost. And as we said, and that 3 to 5 million voters are usually determining factor in federal elections. So even that small gap that still remains is really powerful.

(00:51:30):

So I think sometimes when people think about my one little vote, it doesn't seem that big, and maybe it doesn't seem that powerful, and it doesn't seem like it's going to determine the outcome of an election. There are a list of elections that were actually determined by one vote, so you shouldn't feel that way. But I get why folks do when we're looking at so many millions of Americans. But it's not about your one vote. Your single vote's not really an individual action. It's a community. It's all of us casting our one vote, right? An election is built on a house of cards, like a house of votes that all come together. Everyone casts their one little vote and they all pile up together. And then we have a say in who is running our government and whether or not they're listening to people with disabilities when they do it.

Monica Wiley (00:52:17):

And let me just add to what Michelle just said about it's not just our one vote, it is a community that supports the power of the vote. I want to add more about the power of the vote. What some people fail to realize is that you have, for example, which I have mentioned... So Michelle, as one of the programs, I want to see if we can do it, if it is all possible. You have special education educators that when they are going to go and cast their vote, they are voting not necessarily on their personal interests per se, but on the community, the people in which they serve. And that adds to the power of our vote because these special education educators that work with individuals with disabilities, students with disabilities, they want to make sure that they have people that is running the government that's going to support them and support the work that they do to educate students with disabilities. That adds to the power of the disability vote.

(00:53:25):

And so I wanted to make sure that is also highlighted and that we recognize just how much power we do have because there are individuals such as, for example, special education educators that when they're going to vote, they're going to vote because of the population that they serve and making sure that the population that they serve, that the government is doing whatever is deemed necessary in terms of executive orders and loss that's going to support that population. So that definitely adds to our power of voting.

Maddie Crowley (00:53:56):

Definitely. Yeah. I'm always so inspired and jazzed when I think about just the potential. Disabled folks are so powerful, and with the right resources and support and access, we could literally change... Not we could, we will literally change elections. And that right is yours, that vote, that choice is yours and you should invest the time and energy to try to make your vote happen this fall. Speaking of trying to get folks to want to vote or plan to vote and all that stuff every election, some folks are not excited to go vote or they have resistance to the electoral process or how our country works, et cetera, et cetera, whatever the situation is, and making no comment or moral statement on that whatsoever. Could you talk a little bit about why voting is important beyond who you're going to vote for president, say for down ballot races or local elections? And what would you say to people who are dismayed by broader politics to encourage them to organize locally or get involved or be aware of what's going on in their local elections?

Michelle Bishop (00:55:15):

I know Monica [inaudible 00:55:17] about local elections. I already know. So I'm going to jump in first before she takes it away and say that we talked about numbers of eligible voters with disabilities and voter turnout of people with disabilities. So those numbers exist and they're real and they're public. And if I know those numbers, the people who represent you in government know those numbers too. And if they know that we don't show up and we don't vote, what that says is, "I'm not the person who gave you your job and I'm not the person who can make sure you keep it or take it away from you," because I do that through my vote. And if we don't vote, we have just already exited and we're not part of the debate and the public discourse that's going on about issues that have huge impacts in our life.

(00:56:01):

Our elected officials are making decisions about our access to education and employment and housing and transportation and healthcare, and all these things that are so important for people with disabilities to be able to live and work and play in our communities. And if we're not voting, regardless of who you vote for, the work we do, it doesn't matter to us who you vote for, we just want you to vote. Because once we can say, this many people with

disabilities are eligible to vote and they're all turning out, then our elected officials know, "I have to be accountable to these folks because they got me into office and if I don't listen to them, I won't be in office anymore." And I say that in a completely nonpartisan way, because that's true for everyone who holds any kind of elected office, but we have to show them that power first.

(00:56:51):

Otherwise, what they might be thinking in the back of their minds when you go and tell whoever it is, your county sheriff, your mayor, the school board, your congressperson, the president, whoever it is, but, "You have to listen to me on this issue. This is really important and it matters to me," and they know in the back of their minds you're not going to vote in November, they're going to prioritize something else and someone else. So I hope that folks think about that when they think, "My vote doesn't matter." It does. And it doesn't even matter who you cast it for. Just the act of voting itself really impacts how powerful we are as a community and how well we can go out and advocate for ourselves and for each other. But Monica, talk to the people about local elections. I know how strongly you feel about this.

Monica Wiley (00:57:34):

Yes, I do. Thank you so much, Michelle. And to Michelle's point, yes, I think that we need to recognize that we have the ability to make a difference. We have to be confident in who we are as a voter and as an advocate. Regardless of the type of disability that you have, recognize that you are a person, a part of the whole human experience, you are part of the voting community, and recognizing that you have the right to make a change and make a difference. So be confident in who you are as an individual. Be confident in who you are as an advocate. Be confident in who you are as a voter. So I would say that is the number one thing. And when we recognize that power within us and have that confidence and that power, then begin to bring in others that's not just voters with disabilities like yourselves, but again, strengthening that allyship through the grassroots building and grassroots coalition.

(00:58:41):

And then making sure that when we do that and we are connecting with these leaders, whether they are candidates running for a public office or whether they are incumbents running again, that they are just an added voice to the advocacy, that we are truly the ones that are on the grounds that make sure that they're doing the advocacy for us in terms of laws and policies, but recognizing that without us, they cannot do it. They cannot make that difference and that impact, and because it starts with us. So recognizing that, having

that confidence and knowing that and really saying, "I have this power to make this difference," we are the ones that's really making the difference. They're the ones adding to it by speaking on the floors and being in that respective office and saying, "I have a moral and civic responsibility to my constituents, to my voters with disabilities to make sure that we are creating laws that is going to benefit them."

(00:59:40):

So they're looking to see if we have the confidence enough and the power in recognizing our power to be able to utilize that and making sure that we are doing what we can on the local level that impacts us on a local level because that's where the boots meet the ground. That is where everything starts locally. And so where you live in your community, then you have that moral and civic responsibility to make sure that you recognize, that you can make meaningful impacts, that you can make common sense pragmatic solutions to make these changes. So be confident in who you are as an individual, as part of the human race and as a voter, and build that grassroots coalition, and connect with these leaders and let them know that we are asking you to advance our advocacy and making these changes. I can go on and on and Michelle knows this, so I'm going to stop right there. But that's what I would say in terms of this, in terms of local elections and recognizing the impact and the power that we have in making those changes.

Michelle Bishop (01:00:47):

And they all matter in really surprising ways. We talk so much about the president, but a lot of locally elected folks have a lot of power around disability issues. Your school board has a lot to do with the opportunities that disabled kids are going to have at school. Your county sheriff typically has a lot of power to decide policing priorities and whether or not we're going to focus on programs that divert people with mental illness from being put into jail and instead getting the community supports that they need. So every election really matters. And I worry sometimes because our job is to go around and call out all the barriers that we see that can prevent people with disabilities from voting because we have to call them out and name them if we're going to advocate for them to be changed. But sometimes, I worry that voters are listening and thinking, "Man, it sounds really hard to vote. I guess I'm not going to do that."

(01:01:39):

And so I want to pause and say to that for listeners that for a lot of you, it's not going to be as hard as it sounds. There are a lot of folks who go in and out in 15 minutes and get that ballot cast and the poll workers are ready for them and they're awesome. And especially if you make that plan to vote in advance and you have your plan in place, like Monica said,

your plan A, B, and C, then it's going to go smoothly for you on election day. But if it doesn't, if you look and you're like, "Look at all these barriers and hurdles and hoops of fire that I have to jump through to be able to cast my ballot," what you should take from that is not, "I guess I'm not do this." What you should take from that is, "Wow, somebody spent a lot of time and money to try to stop me from voting. My vote must be more powerful than I could ever possibly imagine. So I'm not giving that up for me or for the rest of the disabled community."

Monica Wiley (01:02:35):

Yes. Because again, we have a moral and civic responsibility to make sure that we protect our votes and protect the votes of our community.

Maddie Crowley (01:02:49):

And one, I love y'all's call to action. I think that really powerful. And one way that sometimes I've thought about it when people are like, "Local elections aren't that important, but I also don't want to vote for president," or whatever, that president was in a local election however many years ago. There is a reason that person succeeded and ended up getting to the highest office in the country. If there were people, say for example, you didn't like the president... Not saying anything specific. Say for example, you didn't like the president, if you were involved in that local election and you didn't like that person then either, maybe that wouldn't be the case that this person would have this platform and higher level of power now. So it's really important. This is where people's careers in politics start, and if you can have an impact on that, that's really important. Anyways, that's all I wanted to add. So I'll pass it over to Keith for our next question.

Keith Casebonne (01:03:45):

Yeah, I just want to say I wish I could just leave the podcast right now and go vote on something because I'm so inspired to just go vote on anything. I don't know, maybe someone can just give me a choice or something later and I'll be like, "I'm ready to vote." But yeah, seriously, all these messages are really inspiring and crucial and I'm glad that you're... It's great to hear that passion about voting. I love the message of confidence and power, just how much your one vote really does matter. And as they say, all politics is local. It is true. A lot of the things that you guys are saying about local politics, we've had other... I think Gregg Beratan on our #CripTheVote episode talked about local politics and how the impact of some of these local officials on accessibility that we often overlook as you guys just mentioned.

(01:04:33):

You really should, and again, we've said this, but make a plan, research the ballot, vote on everything because you don't know what you're missing. You don't know what your one vote may make a bigger difference than you realize. And when we're talking about a critical mass of people who just vote for the quote, "big" elections and don't complete the whole ballot, we're disenfranchising ourselves. It's really important. Now that being said, I'm going to turn things back to the national level and let's see if we can talk a little bit about how disability has become somewhat politicized through like we have the critiques on both Biden and Trump's health and mental health. There's been some talk about Tim Walz's son who is neurodivergent. Can you all share a little bit about your thoughts on that politicization of disability?

Michelle Bishop (01:05:26):

It's been disheartening, I would say, to see. This is something that we struggle with a lot in our business because even just advocating for voters, we also see in a majority of states that you can lose your right to vote when you get a guardian or conservator, as if somehow maybe needing a parent in an IEP meeting to help you advocate with your school board or needing assistance managing your medications says anything about your ability to make a decision about who you want to vote for or to understand the act of voting, which it does not.

(01:06:01):

So we deal, all the time, with this outdated, really archaic prejudice against people with disabilities, especially when you look at guardianship, people with mental illness and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities that you shouldn't be voting, because these are people that we mischaracterize all the time in horrible ways, childlike less intelligent, not in touch with reality. All the terrible and completely untrue things that we say about people with disabilities that get routinely stigmatized still today. And they're losing their right to vote based on that. It has very real consequences. These types of stigmas have very real consequences for people with disabilities who are having their rights taken away by a court of law. I get really worked up about this. I'll try to tone it down.

(01:06:50):

I get really upset about this one. We are the last group of people who can be legally stripped of the right to vote just based on our identities, just based on our identities. The only other group of people I can think of are people with felony convictions. I don't think they should lose their right to vote either, but there's a triggering event there where with people with disabilities, there's nothing that you've done. You just have a disability. So we just assume that you're not capable. And it blows my mind because I do know a bunch of

people with developmental disabilities, mental illness who don't understand how our government works and don't make a good decision about who they want to vote for because they're not educated enough. Right? That happens. The interesting thing is I know more non-disabled people who have that problem and nobody's ever challenged their right to vote.

(01:07:33):

So we see the consequences of this every single day. When it comes to some of the rhetoric we're seeing about in the presidential election, NDRN issued a statement around a recent cover of The Economist magazine that put a walker with the seal of the President of the United States on it and said, "No way to run a country." The Economist should be ashamed because what does use of a walker say about your skill set and your intelligence and your experience and your ability to run a government? It says nothing. It says nothing. The stigma against disability, the ageism that we're seeing in this election levied against almost all of the candidates to me is horrifying. Having a disability says nothing about your ability to lead. And I think that we've lost sight of that in all the mudslinging that comes with a presidential election.

Jack Rosen (01:08:28):

Going to pop in here and try to answer this one as gracefully and as nonpartisanly as Michelle did. I want to also touch on something Michelle alluded to there. And we're seeing that candidates evaluated for disability by the public and the media in ways that, as Michelle said, have nothing to do with their ability to handle the office. What does it matter if a candidate used two hands to hold a glass of water if they have a little trouble going up and down stairs? I, myself am someone with not the best hand-eye coordination, and I have a slightly awkward gait. And the idea that is what people would fixate on to see if it was some sign of inability is just absurd.

(01:09:32):

And I worry that it is not just sending the message that these people aren't qualified because what if they have some sort of disability, but saying that message to young people today, people who might run for office who also have disabilities, that they have to worry that every word, every movement is going to be scrutinized to this impossible standard. Instead of asking more fundamental questions about their fitness for office, we're just gleaming on to what's superficial. And I do worry that there are... We already know there are plenty of people with disabilities who don't run because of ableism. We know that candidates with disabilities are often hurt by others' perceptions of whether they are able to do the job. And a lot of this discourse is just reinforcing that.

Michelle Bishop (01:10:34):

Okay, Jack is getting my creative juices flowing. Because what I'm thinking about now is if I saw a candidate with a disability, what that would raise for me is what extra stuff did you have to deal with to get here that your non-disabled peers don't? How tough and strong and smart and resourceful are you as a leader, that you had all those extra hoops you had to jump through and stigmas you had to overcome, and all the stuff that people with disabilities we know we have to deal with on a daily basis, and you're still here. You're still here. That, to me, actually says something incredibly positive about your qualifications for office.

Maddie Crowley (01:11:14):

This is Maddie. I was going to say something similar. For those listening, if you don't identify as disabled yourself, somebody in your life that has a disability, and I want you to think for one second about how organized and tactful and resourceful and the amount of craftiness and grit that disabled people have is a skill that we have to embody because our lives are so inaccessible. But that is what makes us... Society is lagging behind. Disabled people are some of the best leaders out there. And when you think about how talented disabled people are to handle tons of different issues at a time, navigate not only a job, but their health as their own job or whatever it is, there is... Like what Michelle just said, if I know that someone's disabled on my ballot, I'm like, I have trust. I have major trust for that person because I know that they have the skills that I admire or would want in a leader to be able to handle a political office.

(01:12:48):

And that's not even acknowledging yet everything they had to go through to even persevere to get to that point. So I just wanted to name that because I think that is often undervalued when we think about disabled leadership, whether in politics or elsewhere. So this is actually hearkening back to something that Monica was talking a bit about earlier regarding other advocacy groups and what's been a general theme in this conversation about election officials, et cetera. What are some of the ways that you're talking with some of these groups, other nonprofits, election officials, advocacy organizations, et cetera, about how they can better support and reach voters with disabilities?

Monica Wiley (01:13:36):

Sure. Thank you so much for the question. The first thing that I always say to the other advocacy organizations and social justice, civil rights organizations is make sure that when they are extending invitations to their events, whether it is online, whether it is in person,

that they are making sure that they are connecting with folks that are disabled from the grassroots, making sure that you have relationship with grassroots organizations because that's where a lot of our folks from our community, people with disabilities, the cross the village community, it's where they typically are. It's in the grassroots movement. And then recognizing that there are the intersectionality of people with disabilities, the black and brown community, the LGBTQ+ community. And then once you invite them, don't just invite them on paper. Once you invite them to their events, be willing to have a conversation with them because I always say to them is that we have more in common than we have differences.

(01:14:46):

The commonality is that this event that you have invited me to, that I have an invested interest in this, that I am drawn to this particular area or this particular event or this particular subject. And so at that point, what can we do in terms of building on that? How can we strengthen the allyship with that? How can we recognize that seeing us beyond our disability and recognizing that we are part of this community and making sure that we have a seat at the table, make room for us at the table so that we can be included in the work that you are doing. Because again, if you're having these programs, you're not being inclusive of us. How are you being inclusive of us? So I always say that... Before I became disabled, speaking of injury, Maddie that you mentioned, I became disabled by a drunk driver that killed my entire family at age of nine.

(01:15:40):

Prior to that, I didn't have a disability. So I always say the disability community welcomes everyone. It can happen to anyone at any given moment. We're bashed and buried in our community. And so I love sharing that story because it makes them have a aha moment, especially if you're an avid sports player to your point, and then you become disabled, whether it's temporary or long term, you now are a part of this community. That doesn't make me any different than you. So how are we bringing our voices collectively to do the great work that we're doing? You can't say that we're for everyone and that we're doing everything in our civic roles to make sure that everyone's included if we're not recognizing that we have individuals with disabilities that are a part of this community. So I love making sure that I share my story first because there's this automatic perception about, "Oh, we feel sorry for Monica, or we feel sorry for people with disabilities." Don't put us in one category. Don't do that.

(01:16:41):

So what I always like to say is that when you're making these invitations, be genuine about the invitation, but also make sure that you're really connecting with us from the grassroots perspective because that's where a lot of us exist. And then from that point, be willing to have a conversation. Don't be afraid to have a conversation with us because again, we have more in common than we have differences. And making sure that when I am talking about our community and the beauty of our community, I make sure that one, they recognize that yes, we have some barriers that are different from your barriers, from mainstream barriers, but then also recognizing too that you too can have these same set of barriers should this arise. So I try to make sure that they see it from our lens, but then also see it from a totality of accessibility lens.

(01:17:30):

So I think the best thing to do is it's making sure too, as people with disabilities, we also too have a tendency to have or adopt this concept that those outside our community don't understand us or they won't embrace us or they won't connect with us. And that's not always the case either. And so I think it's more of a two-way street to a certain extent, but then also making sure that we hold these other civil rights and social justice organizations responsible, make sure that they know that they can no longer continue to operate in this way without making sure that we are included and making sure that we too have a voice in the work that is being done.

Keith Casebonne (01:18:10):

Yeah, thanks so much for that, again, this passionate response, and the perspective that you put on things is I think immeasurable and incredibly helpful for listeners. So we'll start to wrap up. What sort of changes and improvements would you like to see in future elections to ensure better accessibility for voters with disabilities?

Michelle Bishop (01:18:35):

I think actually what Monica was just talking about hit the nail in the head with that one. I get asked this question a lot about... Especially sometimes, "What's one change you want to see?" And there's not one, there's a myriad of things that need to change, and they might be different depending on where you are or what your disability is. It's big and it's complex, so it's hard to say, "Here's a couple recommendations that are going to make this work so much better for people with disabilities." What I tend to say a lot, especially when talking to elections officials is, if you remember one thing I said, it's to be inclusive of people with disabilities. I don't have one recommendation for you. What I can tell you is talk to people with disabilities. Disability access works when it's baked in from the start.

(01:19:27):

If you design a whole system that doesn't work for people with disabilities, then you have to go back and retrofit it to make it work, it's going to cost you infinitely more time and money than it would have to make it accessible up front. And if you're thinking, "What needs to be changed about this to make it more accessible?" Or, "Is this thing that we're planning right now going to work for people with disabilities?" The best way to figure that out is to ask them. You just have to ask that. We will tell you. We know what we need and we will tell you. So including people with disabilities, having us at the table is the single most important thing you can do wherever you are, whether or not you're an elections official or you are an organization that's doing outreach to voters, including us, is the most important thing you can do.

(01:20:14):

And if you're worried about bringing in people with disabilities, it's easy. One, we have a whole network of organizations. If you're in Florida and you don't know Disability Rights Florida is a problem. And we have an organization in every state and territory and in DC and one that works with Native Americans with disabilities, we got you. We can put you in touch with the disability community more broadly. If you're designing a system and you want to make sure it works with people with disabilities, you want a bunch of different people with a bunch of disabilities to look at it and tell you what makes it work for them, that's something that we can help you do.

(01:20:47):

And also just make your stuff accessible. We're hosting a meeting. Is this location accessible? Can we make it accessible? Is this zoom accessible? Do we ask people to request accommodation in advance if they might need ASL or CART or language translation, so that'll be available for them during the meeting? Our materials, our website, are those things accessible? So that we are sending a message to the disability community that you're wanted here in the first place. So if I asked for one thing going forward, it would be that, be accessible and be inclusive, and make sure that the voices of people with disabilities are being heard in whatever it is that you're trying to do, whether or not you administer elections or you work directly with voters.

Monica Wiley (01:21:26):

I second that.

Maddie Crowley (01:21:29):

I love it. This is all such good information. I'm so excited for our listeners to get to hear more about y'all's work and the work of all of the P&As across country, local orgs, organizing different rev up chapters doing such cool work. And I know that y'all have a really cool resource that is soon to be officially released on the big screen. So we have Jack here who's going to speak a little bit about that.

Jack Rosen (01:22:01):

So if you've been listening to this podcast and wondering why I'm here, and I only spoke once, it's because our friends at Disability Rights Florida generously allowed me to come on to plug our upcoming documentary, Accessing Democracy. And it follows Monica as she and I traveled up and down the East Coast ahead of the presidential election, interviewing voters with disabilities about what their lives are like, what kind of barriers they face, and what they want from the next commander in chief. Because the fact is, we are one of the largest minority groups in the country. Something like one in four voters is a person with a disability. But at the same time, in a survey done by Data for Progress, they found that 60% of with disabilities felt that politicians and elected officials do not pay attention to our community. There are millions of voters across the country who feel that politicians and those running to hold office are not dedicating the time to develop platforms focused on our community.

(01:23:28):

So we went out into the community to speak to voters about what they want from their elected officials and from the next commander in chief. Accessing Democracy, the trailer will be dropping on Thursday. That is Thursday, September 5th, a couple days from now, or in the past since this probably needs to be edited. So in addition, the documentary itself will be premiering online on October 10th, and we'll have a link where folks can register to join us for the virtual premiere of our film. And I should plug, if you are in the greater DMV area, we have been accepted into the Utopia Film Festival in Greenbelt Maryland, and we'll be screaming there. It'll be taking place between October 18th and the 20th, so be sure to check it out. It was a privilege to get to work with Monica on my directorial debut, and I want to thank her, Michelle Bishop, everyone at NDRN and our friends at Disability Rights New York who helped make this project possible.

Michelle Bishop (01:24:47):

I going to tell you right now, I've seen the film and I cried. So well worth the watch, but I think it's important that we really called people at disabilities to the carpet a little bit today about feeling like it doesn't matter if I vote and it doesn't matter who wins. And I think that we also have to call our elected officials and candidates and campaigns to the carpet as

well, because there's a reason that our folks feel that way, because there is data from Pew Research Center that says people with disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled peers to say that they're paying close attention to the election and that it really matters who wins. So it's not that we don't care. There's a disconnect in there. We know it matters who wins, but those people aren't speaking to us. They're talking about issues that impact our lives, but they're not talking to us when they're talking about us. And that's something that really needs to change.

(01:25:41):

So the film is really powerful for making that case. And if you're a person with a disability and you're thinking, "I'm going to sign up for that premiere, I want to see this movie," that's awesome. You absolutely should. But do us a favor, bring some other people with you. Ask some non-disabled folks. Ask some of your elected officials and candidates and local parties and all those folks, your elections administrators, all of them to join in as well, because when you watch it as a person with a disability, you're going to be like, "Yep, exactly. That's what our lives are like." But when non-disabled folks watch it, they're going to learn something about who we are as a community and why it's so crucial that our elected officials think about us and speak to us when they're making decisions that impact our lives.

Keith Casebonne (01:26:25):

That is really exciting. I can't wait to see it myself, and we'll have links to the trailer and to register for the screening. Very exciting. And what a great sort of uplifting way to end on. So again, thank you all so much, Monica and Michelle, Jack, it's been a really great episode. So much information. Honored to have you, and thanks so much.

Michelle Bishop (01:26:46):

Thanks so much for having us. It's such an honor to be here. We're always going to come out if you ask us. We love this podcast. We're going to be here whenever you call.

Keith Casebonne (01:26:55):

Awesome.

Maddie Crowley (01:26:55):

Thanks y'all.

Keith Casebonne (01:26:56):

Thanks.

Monica Wiley (01:26:57):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (01:27:00):

Thank you again to Michelle, Monica, and Jack for being on the show. As usual, we have a list of the various things we mentioned in the podcast in our episode show notes for you to peruse and explore, to learn more about what we discussed. Be sure to check that out for all the disability voting resources we discussed.

Maddie Crowley (01:27:18):

Yep. And be sure to like, comment, subscribe, et cetera. Any engagement you can have wherever you're listening does help us a whole lot in getting our podcast in front of new listeners and people who could really benefit from this information. And we're on all those major podcast platforms, including a version on YouTube. And we also have the recording and transcripts available, obviously for free on our website.

Keith Casebonne (01:27:46):

And as always, if you have any questions or comments about the show, please email us at podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org. We'll be taking a short break, but we'll be back soon.

Announcer (01:28:00):

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