

## You First Podcast: Your Voice, Your Vote! Episode 2: Accessible Vote By Mail

**Maddie Crowley:** You're listening to "You First," the Disability Rights Florida Podcast. On this episode of "Your Voice, Your Vote," a podcast series all about voting and disability issues, let's talk about accessible vote-by-mail.

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**Maddie:** Hi, there. I'm Maddie.

**Keith Casebonne:** I'm Keith.

**Maddie:** We're the hosts of You First. On last week's episode, we laid the foundation of this new podcast series by talking about disability voting laws, where we touched briefly on accessible voting options.

**Keith:** Today, we're excited to chat with Doug Hall and Marsha Bukala, two Floridians with disabilities who have fought for and now utilize accessible vote-by-mail.

**Maddie:** Yes, it was great to talk with them and learn about the history of accessible elections in Florida, how they've advocated for accessible voting options, and what insights they have about casting a ballot as a voter with a disability. We hope you enjoy.

Hi, Doug. Hi, Marsha. Thank you so much for being here to talk about accessible vote-by-mail, voting with a disability, electronic ballot return, all of that good stuff. Can you please both introduce yourselves to our listeners today?

**Marsha Bukala:** I'm Marsha Bukala, and I live in Orlando, Florida for about 18 months now.

**Doug Hall:** I'm Doug Hall. I have lived in Daytona for a long time. I first moved here in 1976, so I've been here for a while, and very involved in the community.

**Maddie:** It's so great to have you both on today. Thank you so much for taking some time to chat with me today about this important conversation. I would love to start out the podcast by really just laying the groundwork and sharing with our listeners about what is accessible vote-by-mail, and why is it so important to y'all as voters?

**Doug:** I can start. I started voting in 1968 when I turned 21, which was the minimum age to vote at that point. I think I've voted every time since then. I have seen quite a change in voting accessibility over the years from, when I first voted, they said I couldn't vote, because I was blind.

Then I got a Democrat and a Republican to try to fit in the green monster with me, which was ridiculous. Then, after that, finally, I was able to bring my own person in to vote for me. I didn't like any of those, because voting is a secret, independent process.

By Florida constitution, it says all voting is secret. Nothing is secret if you're telling somebody else how you're voting.

The other thing is that you don't know -- hopefully, you don't, or there's a problem -- you don't know if that person is filling out the form the way you want it or the way they want it. Voting, it's a right, but it's also a responsibility. Yes, it's important. I know this discussion about is accessible vote-by-mail. That's really important, because until 2020, there was no accessible vote-by-mail in Florida.

**Marsha:** I started losing my vision about 12 years ago. I've always voted, ever since I was of age to vote, but as it got more difficult for me to be able to read a ballot, and I was living in Illinois, and I was able to get magnification. Then I moved to Florida in 2017.

It was a challenge going to the voting polls and the accessible voting machines not being set up. When I heard about accessible voting by mail, I was really excited about that. Then I had heard from Sheila Young, from the Florida Council of the Blind, that they had been working towards that.

Then eventually, there had to be a lawsuit for us to be able to do something independently and privately, like we should be able to do it.

**Maddie:** You both have mentioned the lawsuit. Would either of you be willing to shed some light on what that was like, your involvement, or the results of what took place?

**Doug:** Considering I was involved from day one, I suppose I should talk about it. The Florida Council of the Blind and our members worked with the secretary of states and the supervisors for years to have accessible voting. Originally, we had to really work to get accessible voting machines into precincts. They originally didn't even have that.

They got that. My feeling was, and the Florida Council of the Blind's feeling was that any other voter has the right, the option, to vote either at the poll, or if they don't want to, they can vote by mail. We couldn't do that. A blind person had to depend on a sighted person to fill out their form, which we were very much opposed.

We felt, whether somebody votes by vote-by-mail or at the poll, they should have the option to doing what they want, not saying they have to do something. Well, before the lawsuit, people who were blind or had print impairments did not have the option of voting secretly if they wanted to vote by mail.

We ended up, the Florida Council of the Blind, ended up suing the State of Florida, the 67 supervisor elections, the elections board, the governor, whatever it is. We ended up suing them, because we felt they were dragging their feet. At that point, we were all told that, in order to for a system to be used in Florida, it had to be checked out and had to be certified by the elections department in Tallahassee.

They were dragging their feet. They were refusing to move on certifying the Democracy Live system, which was the only game out there at the time. Democracy Live, with our assistance, had filed many filings to get certified, and they just refused to do anything.

We basically decided enough is enough. We're going to sue. We sued the end of June. Well, no, the end of May, beginning June, we sued the state and whatever it is. Now, interestingly enough, according to the state, our lawsuit had nothing to do with it.

However, I find it very interesting that we filed our lawsuit at the beginning of June, and the middle of July, they certified Democracy Live, which I thought was interesting they did that. They said our suit had nothing to do with it. In essence...

**Marsha:** Right, convenient timing.

**Doug:** In essence, what happened was that the state certified Democracy Live, and they said, "We have nothing to do it. You have to negotiate with all the 67 county supervisors. We have nothing to do with it. It's up to the counties to make a decision."

Before that, the state said they had to approve it, but they changed it. Thanks to the disability independence group, Florida Council of the Blind, and some other people, we ended up negotiating -- and attorneys -- we ended up negotiating with the supervisors about having accessible vote-by-mail.

Initially, in September, by September of 2020, only five counties were chosen to be pilot counties to test it to see if it worked in the November election. Those five counties were Miami-Dade, Pinellis, Volusia, Orange, and Nassau. I think that's five.

**Maddie:** Yeah.

**Doug:** I happened to live in Volusia, and I think 60 percent of the people who voted using it in the 2020 election were from Volusia. Again, like anything else, it took involvement by people to step up and say, "I want to vote this way."

**Maddie:** Right. Thank you so much for sharing that background of where we're at now with accessible vote-by-mail, your advocacy, and all of the folks that were involved in that lawsuit to be able to get accessible vote-by-mail more secure in the state of Florida.

I want to circle back to something that you mentioned at the beginning as you were explaining the lawsuit, that a lot of folks who are not blind, low vision, or have some kind of visual impairment, that they might not understand is why the ballot isn't accessible. Why isn't at-home ballots or mail-in ballots accessible for blind folks?

**Doug:** Good point.

**Maddie:** It's such a simple question, but for folks that never think about this kind of thing, they might not understand why.

**Doug:** Like I said, my philosophy is that, whether somebody uses the accessible vote-by-mail or at-the-poll, it is immaterial to me, as long as the person votes. My feeling is the person should have the option to vote whichever way they want, which mandates that both processes are accessible. That's what we were pushing for.

Now, what's interesting, I'm going to mention real quick. Back in 2020, we ended up suing, because the state said they had to certify any system that was being used in Florida. I find it interesting that, afterward, they decided no, they don't have to be certified. Any system can come in and be used, which is interesting that they changed that.

In essence, like I said, five pilot counties were set up. The lawsuit was five named people who belong to the Florida Council of the Blind agreed to do a class action lawsuit. I was one of those five.

**Maddie:** Thank you so much for being that advocate and being here today to tell the tale of the history of voting not just in Florida, but these are broader themes that could be applied across the country, and honestly, across the globe. It's conversations like these that continue to push access forward.

I'd love to talk a little bit more about what it's like voting by mail with an accessible vote-by-mail ballot.

If, Marsha, you want to take us through the process of what it's like to request an accessible vote-by-mail ballot, how you've received them, if you have any insight if that's different throughout the state, any barriers you've faced. Just take us through that process. What was that like for you to get your ballot?

**Marsha:** I do live in Orange County, and we do use Democracy Live. When I decided to call the supervisor of elections, I believe it was back in June. I asked about the accessible vote-by-mail ballot, and I was transferred around, I think, to two different people, because they weren't really sure what I was talking about.

To back up on that, too, first, I went to their website. I was trying to find something about accessible vote-by-mail and the steps that you take, because it definitely tells you how to request a vote-by-mail ballot, but nothing about accessible vote-by-mail ballots.

Then I received my ballot in the mail, and I'm like, "I got a paper ballot in the mail. Why don't I have anything that says I requested accessible vote-by-mail?" I then called the supervisor of election again and said, "I requested accessible vote-by-mail, and I was told that I would get an email, but I'd like to know who this email was going to come from, because I'd like to put that in my contacts."

No one could tell me that. Anyways, lo and behold, Sheila Young from the Florida Council of the Blind, I contacted her about this. She lives in Orange County. She actually doesn't live far from me. She contacted the supervisor of elections, and my goodness, I think within 48 hours, I got an email that said, "Vote by mail."

That was good news that I got that, and then when I did call the supervisor of election, I said, "How am I going to know where to sign this envelope? I know there's the privacy sleeve and things like that." The one thing, you do have to have a printer to be able to do it, which I think that is an issue.

Luckily, I do have a printer, and I had paper and ink, so I was able to do that. I will say, the instructions were pretty clear on where to sign in the email. It said that, when you're holding the envelope, have the flap to your right. About two inches from the bottom is where you're going to sign it, and you need to date it.

I will say, it was really easy. It just warmed my heart to be able to do it so quickly, by myself, and not have to go to a polling place, worry about COVID, transportation. It just made it so simple. Then I did mail it in, and the really exciting part was when I went to the SOE's website, it said they had received.

The only downside, I will say, to it is you don't get your sticker that you voted when you go in-person. Which was a big deal when I lived in Chicago and I was working, because we could go to vote in the morning and then come into work a little late if there lines were long.

That was my experience, and again, that was my first time doing accessible vote-by-mail.

**Maddie:** Thank you so much for running us through that.

**Doug:** It's interesting. You mentioned about the process. One of the questions you had on the thing was how was the different from one location to another, and there is a big difference from county to county, because each supervisor of elections and their county council decides how they want to do it.

Thank goodness Volusia's county council told Lisa Lewis she could do whatever she wants. What she did, and it was her first time, was what she did is she put a raised dot on the envelope and said, "You just sign and date to the right of that dot."

**Maddie:** Very smart, yeah.

**Doug:** Now, the other thing is, one of the things she said, and of course, Tallahassee's changed their mind, I guess, but she said you don't need to date it. Sign it is important, but actually, you really don't need to date it, because when you mail it in, it's date-stamped when they get it.

**Maddie:** Oh, yeah, OK.

**Marsha:** Wow, OK.

**Doug:** I don't know how it's being done at this point. Lisa Lewis worked with consumers. We actually had a mock election that she did to show people how it worked, to give people an idea how it worked. She also assisted us, and we had a statewide Zoom meeting educating people about Democracy Live and accessible vote-by-mail.

She was interested in doing, her statement to me is that her job is to make sure people vote, not to keep people from voting. There are things there. One of the things I think is important is that people were encouraged to participate, were encouraged to vote. Then we gave feedback. I think that's important.

I think the turnout probably indicates that, because I think there were 60 people that ended up voting in the 2020 election in November. I think 30-some of them came from Volusia. That tells

you something right there. I think it's because there was encouragement by the officials, and also encouragement and education by the consumer groups, whether it's the council or the NFB.

The leadership of the consumer groups educated their members and other people about the process, and I think that's important.

**Maddie:** Doug, I was going to ask you, is there anything on Lisa's website about accessible vote-by-mail?

**Doug:** We talked with her about that. My wife, that's one of the things she explained to Lisa about that was not mentioned. I have to check. I don't know if it's in there now. I know that she did put in the accessible sample ballot, which other counties are doing, too.

I'm going to check and see. I don't know whether or not it's on their website yet. I need to check. I know it's one of the complaints we had of her, that they really need to educate about that. She actually did. Her office did actually put out a brochure discussing accessible vote-by-mail.

**Maddie:** Some of the things that you all had brought up as you were talking about your personal experiences with accessible vote-by-mail is that even though huge steps have been made to make this process more accessible and more available to folks, there are still some barriers when trying to get your accessible vote-by-mail out to your elections officials, which is the varying rules when it comes to your signature, or whether or not you have a printer.

Can y'all talk a bit maybe to what you've experienced when it comes to those barriers and maybe perhaps what your fellow community members have experienced when it comes to this becoming a more accessible voting option, but still the fact that there are such pretty big barriers still in-place?

**Marsha:** I think the biggest barrier is having to have a printer, and not having information on the website. I will say, if you use a screen reader, and I just use it, the one on my iPad, it was really easy. I accidentally, even in one of the races, I voted for two people. [laughs]

It told me that I needed to uncheck one of them. I think, moving forward, if we can get to where we truly electronically submit our ballots, it would be such a positive.

**Doug:** I agreed. That's a problem we're dealing with. The State of Florida made a decision that they didn't trust the electronic voting. They wanted voting by paper or whatever. They did not trust electronic, because it can be hacked. Of course, we've said anything can be hacked, if you want to.

We've been pushing the state to agree to electronic return. If a person was able to do electronic return of their ballot, people would be more likely to use it. There still is a problem that the system requires the person have access to a computer, an iPhone, or something along that line, and that's limiting some people, but it still opens up to many people.

If we could get electronic return approved, it would make things a whole lot simpler. One of the things I want to mention is that, actually, electronic return is already being used around the country in different places, and it also it's OKed for people who are overseas and in the military.

If that's the case, my question is, if that's the case, why can't I do it, too? We're advocating for that.

**Maddie:** Yeah, I think that's a very valid question. In your advocacy and in your outreach efforts to get electronic ballot return to be a reality in Florida, what do you think that timeline would be? For folks that are listening and hoping that's something that they can utilize in the future, do you think that's something that could happen in the next couple years, or do you not know?

**Doug:** It's going to happen. I realize it's going to happen. The problem is we need to get people in there that are willing to make changes, and to realize that electronic is not the bugaboo that they try to say it is, that it could be done.

How much, how long, I don't know. I'm beginning to think we're going to end probably have to do some legal actions to enforce things. Right now, the problem we have is the legislature decided that they don't like electronic returns, period.

Of course, I find it interesting that they accept military voting electronically. I think there's some issues that we need to look at to try to make some changes, but I think we have the requirement we need to educate the officials and the policymakers about just how important it is, and also, that it's not the problem they seem to think it is.

**Maddie:** I think that's such a good summary of this issue that electronic voting and security can coexist. Accessible voting and election security and safety, they can coexist. It's not one or the other. It's about finding that balance and pursuing a future of voting that's working for everybody.

**Doug:** I remember as kid, when ATMs first came out, my parents hated ATMs. You couldn't trust them. They might screw up. You cannot trust ATMs. Now, everybody uses ATMs. People needed to learn. Same with credit cards and whatever, is people didn't trust them. Now, everybody uses them.

I think it's just going to take education. I think people need to learn that change is not necessarily bad. We need to go with the changes.

**Maddie:** Is there anything else that y'all would like to touch on before we wrap up today's conversation?

**Doug:** We talked a little bit about it, but I think one of the things we need to consider is that we've got to get people to vote. If people don't use the system, it's going to fail. I used to call people and to encourage them to vote. One of the most common things I got was, "I don't vote, because it's not secret," or, "I let my spouse or my friend who's sighted do it for me" that they're used to.

The most common is, "I don't vote." I think one of the things we need to do is we need to encourage people to get out and vote. Not only to exercise their right to vote and their responsibility, and also to educate other people that it can be done.

**Maddie:** It's definitely something where, if you don't see your community and folks like you accessing the polls, it's going to take so many years, like it did, to get accessible vote-by-mail. I don't think folks have even considered the fact that it wasn't frankly a year or so ago that we had access to in Florida.

It's having the representation and having the access to seeing folks that look like you exercise their rights to really gain the stamina and push to be able to get these things that we deserve in the works.

**Marsha:** When I voted in the 2020 election, and I did go and early vote, and I used the accessible machine that wasn't set up, and had to wait and everything. Another friend went with me who was also legally blind. There were two of us to use the machine.

The one thing, when you vote at the polls, they are supposed to have additional people use that machine so that our ballot is secret and private. If there's only two people, you know who they voted for. I had a friend who was a poll watcher, and I was like, "Did they have anyone else use that machine?" because anyone can use the accessible machine.

She's like, "Nope, they didn't." That's why I think doing the accessible vote-by-mail is such a better option, because then it is actually more secret and private than even sometimes if you went to the polls.

**Doug:** You bring up an excellent point, Marsha, in that the machines are there. Like you said, anybody can use them. We need to get people to start using the machines. It's terrible. They spend \$5,000 for one of those machines in a precinct, and if one or two people use it, that's really a waste of money.

If we want officials to pay for buying those machines, we better start using them to show that they're needed. It's very important that we educate officials, and we get out there and use the machines. Whether it's voting at the poll or voting the accessible vote-by-mail, it doesn't matter to me as long as the person exercises their right to vote.

**Marsha:** I would agree with that, too. I also wonder, too, if that, we call it accessible vote-by-mail, but couldn't all, when you want to do vote-by-mail, can you do it? You want a paper ballot, or you want to do it electronically? I think the beauty of doing it with the accessible machine at the poll or doing it at home on your computer, iPad, or whatever, is you can't overvote.

I remember one year, my friends in Chicago, this huge ballot with all these judges and everything. She voted for two water reclamation or something, where you voted for three of the five. She had to redo her entire ballot.

**Doug:** If you mess up, you have to turn it in and start all over again. It's just crazy.

**Marsha:** Right. Using the accessible machine at the polling place or doing it, because people could make that mistake on a paper ballot vote-by-mail, I would assume, too. I understand everyone doesn't have a computer and things like that, so even maybe if, moving forward, we

could eventually have the accessible vote-by-mail be even for anyone who wants to do it electronically, or get a paper ballot.

**Doug:** You make a good point. Really, the accessible vote-by-mail should be for anybody who could be able to use it, not just people who are print-impaired, because it's a wonderful system to use.

**Marsha:** Oh, my god. I can't tell you. [laughs] I went to vote411.org to figure out who I was voting on some of the ones I didn't know, which usually I'd have to do that a separate day, because it's exhausting to read and answers questions.

Then my eyes would be so fatigued, and then go find someone to help me fill out my vote-by-mail. I was able to do it all within two hours.

**Maddie:** Wow.

**Marsha:** Figure out who I was voting for and vote.

**Maddie:** I think you both, this conversation brings up such a wonderful theme of just the importance of accessibility and universal design, and how accessible vote-by-mail and accessible in-person voting machines, how they can not only serve people with disabilities, but truly anybody that can use them.

It's important that we begin to have folks with and without disabilities, especially maybe folks without disabilities, start to use them, too, and then we can normalize these modes of voting and make them more accessible for the folks who need them.

**Doug:** That's right. The important thing is the person should have the option to vote any way they want to vote. If giving them the option to vote any way they want to vote encourage them to vote, then it's important. That's what we need to do.

Unfortunately, the way it was done previously, you either voted at the polls, or you didn't vote at all, or you voted to have a sighted person fill out your form for you. Prior to getting it passed by law that every precinct must have an accessible machine, to vote, anybody with a disability had to ask somebody who was able-bodied, sighted, or whatever it is to vote for them, which to me is wrong.

**Maddie:** It just goes to show how far we have come in our advocacy for accessible voting, accessibility, and access for people with disabilities truly across the board when it comes to voting and general access in the community and beyond.

**Doug:** Yes, and that's the important thing. We need to remember the positive. It's happening. It's going to take time, but it is happening.

**Marsha:** I was going to say, too, the accessible vote-by-mail, be-at-the-poll or on-the-computer, that, too, for someone who English might not be their first language, but they can understand English, they can't read it, it could work for them, too.

**Doug:** Yes.

**Maddie:** Again, it's that importance of thinking beyond the norm or the "normal" individual that's going to be voting at the polls. All of these forms of voting and accessible voting can serve so many folks with a variety of different identities and backgrounds.

Really, that's a wonderful sum-up message of this podcast, and sum-up message of what you both have shared, is that creating these systems to create more accessible voting options for not only people with disabilities is going to create more opportunities and options for everybody to vote. At the end of the day, that's what matters most.

**Doug:** Yes. It's important for people to call their supervisor of elections and indicate they want to vote accessibly, whatever it is. The negotiated settlement that we came up with in 2020 is that, by the end of March of 2022, every county will have accessible vote-by-mail of some kind, and most of them do.

There are still some that holds-out, but most of the counties now have accessible vote-by-mail. People need to use it. The other thing that I heard constantly during our lawsuit, some of the supervisors say, "But no one's ever called asking for it, so why should I do anything?"

I deal with transportation. I always remember, back in the '70s, talking about paratransit and making -- not para -- making route buses accessible. I remember a person saying, "Why should I bother making a bus accessible? People in wheelchairs don't use the bus." Well, yeah, they don't use the bus, because they can't get on it.

**Maddie:** It's not accessible, yeah.

**Doug:** That's the same kind of philosophy. Some people have the same philosophy when it comes to voting. Why should I bother changing the way we're doing things? People who are print-impaired aren't using accessible voting, so why should I bother doing it?

We need to educate the people. We also need to educate the officials and the policymakers on why it's important to do this.

**Maddie:** With that, I think things like this podcast, both of yours continued advocacy, and outspokenness on this issue, the Access the Vote Florida Campaign, all of these things are going to be able to continue to reach and successfully advocate for these issues, so that supervisor of elections' offices, poll workers, all of these folks are able to continue to make elections more accessible for people with disabilities.

I just wanted to say thank you so much to you both for being here and sharing your insight.

**Doug:** Wonderful. Thank you.

**Marsha:** Thank you.

**Maddie:** Yeah, of course, wow. It's been such an interesting conversation. You both bring so much insight and lived experience to this conversation, and we're so pleased to be able to have chatted with you today.

**Doug:** Thank you very much.

**Marsha:** Thank you.

**Keith:** Thank you to Marsha Bukala and Doug Hall for being on the podcast and for sharing their experiences as disability voting advocates.

**Maddie:** For sure. It was wonderful to chat with them. Be sure to tune in next week for the third episode of Your Voice, Your Vote as we talk about intersectionality and voting.

**Keith:** This podcast series comes out each Thursday for the next four weeks. Make sure to subscribe to the You First podcast to be alerted when new episodes drop. We're on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, and almost anywhere you get podcasts.

**Maddie:** For more information, visit [disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast](https://disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast). Thank you.

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