

You First Podcast - Your Voice, Your Vote!

Episode 6: Accessible In-Person Voting

Keith Casebonne: You're listening to "You First," the Disability Rights Florida podcast. On this episode of Your Voice, Your Vote, let's talk about accessible in-person voting.

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Keith: Hey there. I'm Keith.

Maddie Crowley: And I'm Maddie.

Keith: We're the hosts of You First. On the previous episode of Your Voice, Your Vote, we talked about what it's like running for office with disabled candidates and accessibility advocates who striving to make campaigning and civil engagement more inclusive to the disability community.

Maddie: On today's episode, we're grateful to have Sarah Goldman, the Director of Administration and Youth Initiatives at the Florida Independent Living Council, and Alex Mosca, a Public Information Specialist at the Leon County Supervisor of Elections Office, here on the episode to talk about accessible in-person voting.

As voters with disabilities, you have the right to vote in-person, receive assistance to vote, and use accessible voting machines.

Keith: Yes, and our two guests will go over what rights you have, their experiences with in-person voting, and how we can continue to make voting more accessible and inclusive for all voters.

Hey, Sarah and Alex, thanks so much for being our guests on the podcast today. We really appreciate it. If you could each tell our listeners a little bit about yourselves. Go ahead, Sarah, start, if you don't mind.

Sarah Goldman: Sure. Thanks so much for having me, Keith. My name is Sarah Goldman. I currently live in Tallahassee, Florida, so our state's capital, and I have cerebral palsy. I use a wheelchair and a walker to get around. My activities of daily living are impacted.

So things like getting dressed, getting in and out of bed and taking a shower. I require personal care assistance for that. Through my life of having a disability, I've become a big advocate and want to advocate for people with disabilities and equality for all of us.

I currently work as our Director of Youth Initiatives and Administration over at the Florida Independent Living Council and also adjunct teach at Florida State University on the side. Before coming to the Florida Independent Living Council, I was a legislative aide in the Florida legislature for four years.

Keith: Great, Sarah. Thanks so much for being here. Alex.

Alex Mosca: Sure. Hello, everybody. My name is Alex Mosca, and I am with the Leon County Supervisor of Elections Office. I serve as a public information specialist at that office, so I do publications, web design, communicating with media, sharing information, and doing events like these out in our community.

Thank you so much for having me here today. I do think this is a wonderful opportunity to engage with members of the community here in Leon County. A little bit more about my background is, before I came to the Leon County Supervisor of Elections Office, I worked for the Florida Department of State Division of Elections for around a decade.

In that office, I did help to design training materials for training poll workers to provide assistance to persons with disabilities. Although I'm not a person with a disability myself, I have done some advocacy work on behalf through my professional career to provide that service to voters with disabilities, which is of critical importance.

Keith: Yes, indeed. That's all great. Thanks so much, Alex, for being here. Let's just start with a basic question here. What does accessible in-person voting look like for people with various disabilities?

Alex: Sure. I'm happy to talk about for a little bit from the perspective of a supervisor of elections office. Under Florida law, every in-person voting location -- and that's an election day polling place or an early voting center -- is supposed to have, and does have, accessible voting equipment available.

That equipment is designed to allow voters with disabilities to be able to vote with little to no assistance in privacy and in security of their ballot. That should be available at every polling location in every single county in Florida by law.

The poll workers should be able to use, set up that equipment, and provide that assistance as needed. That's the basic core idea behind what the requirement is.

Sarah: I think for me, learning so much about what the different accommodations are at the poll has been big. Through being on Access the Vote Florida and being part of that coalition, I've really been able to get a better understanding of what my accommodations and rights are as a person with a disability going to the polls.

Learning about things like a head pointer or a mouse stick to help me with my limited dexterity, those are all things I didn't even know that I could ask for at the polls. I love the assistance technology, the ATI with the Braille and the different buttons that you can use.

I just think it's great how much technology has advanced to really help people with disabilities vote at the polls in-person.

Keith: Yeah, it's definitely gotten better over the years. There's still room to go forward, but definitely has been a steady improvement. Let's talk a little bit about the accessibility features of in-person voting. What are the requirements at the polls for the accessibility, and how often are those requirements followed, or sometimes, unfortunately, not followed?

Alex: In terms of outside of the equipment itself, the polling location, the building that it housed, the grounds, the path of travel that the voter would need to take from a sidewalk or from the parking lot to the polling room. All of that is supposed to be accessible.

Supervisors of elections offices, when we are selecting polling locations, we have a checklist that we use to identify and review the accessibility features and then where there are potential deficiencies that need to be remedied. That could maybe there's stairs, and there needs to be a ramp.

That could be as simple as having a temporary ramp that we put in-place. It could be even a more long-term engagement with the facility to help them construct a permanent ramp at that facility. Since each polling location in Florida, there are thousands and thousands of them, and each one is its own unique building that has its own requirements, its own history, its own physical setup.

Each of those is going to end up looking a little different, but the core idea is that that facility needs to be accessible, whether that be through temporary accommodations or permanent accommodations, to allow a voter to be able to access it, and for voters with disabilities, and for the general population as well.

A lot of this stuff, it makes the voting experience better for everyone involved.

Keith: Have you run across instances here in Leon County, maybe, where certain polling places weren't following those requirements, or poll workers maybe weren't as prepared as they could have been, or weren't following the guidelines, and there have been issues because of that?

Alex: We work really closely with the facilities to get this all set up in advance. Our polling locations, most of them are pretty static. We have longstanding relationships with them, and they might be the same location for 10, 20, 30 years at times. That helps to keep things in-place.

Of course, things do change. This year is a redistricting year in Florida, and so all of the underlying lines that set up what those precincts look like, the underlying geography got shifted around and scrambled. As supervisors of elections, we have to then redraw the precinct lines.

That means sometimes those polling locations also change. Change, of course, is an opportunity to make things better as well. In Leon County, we used that to switch to sometimes some newer facilities that have better accessibility, better parking setups, are more centrally located.

It can be really challenging to find facilities that are willing to sign up to serve as polling locations. We're very thankful the longstanding relationships that we have here in Leon County, because it lets us have those facilities, or have those types of permanents, improvements, and be established locations so that those accessibility features, we can understand them in advance and set those accommodations in-place as needed.

It's something that is, we are always looking at.

Keith: That's great. It's good to have those ongoing relationships, and even with poll workers, too, to know that they know what they're doing, and the consistency will be there each election cycle.

Alex: Yes, poll workers, that is something that we are always recruiting and training, are poll workers, because there's always a churn. Individuals that are coming in to become new poll workers and getting trained and then people that are leaving poll workers.

Maybe they did it once. They thought, "Oh, that was cool. I don't really want to do it again." Some folks, they do it for 10, 20 years. Sometimes, they just, they get older, and just can't quite perform that service anymore. We're always training new folks, and training for accommodating and assisting voters with disabilities is a part of our core training that we provide to our poll workers, required under state law, and something that we are very happy to fulfill.

I wanted to ask you, Sarah, about your experience as well. Have you had that in-person voting experience, and what was that like for you?

Sarah: Yeah, it's actually a great, fun story. I have now been a vote-by-mailer, and before we started recording, telling Alex that this election, I am going to go vote in-person, because I feel so much prepared to know what I can ask for and advocate for when I get to the polls.

My very first time I was able to vote at 18, I was so excited to get to the polls. My dad drove my there. I felt how your first experience voting...

Keith: Oh, yeah, it's exciting.

Sarah: Yeah, and I was in my manual wheelchair, so I'm unable to push myself around in my manual wheelchair. I currently have a powered chair now. I remember getting there, and they wouldn't let my dad back with me to go vote. The poll worker said, "It's OK. We'll take care of you. Whatever you need."

I get back there, I'm at a table, and I'm filling out my ballot, which I had no issue doing. When I was done, the poll worker was not in the room, and I had no way of explaining that I was done and needed somebody to push me out of the room.

I was just sitting in there and sitting in there and sitting in there, probably for close to 15 minutes, before finally, somebody came and checked on me and said, "Are you OK? Are you done?" I said, "Yes. I had no way of flagging you down to notify you that I needed assistance of leaving the room."

She was able to take me out and bring me out to my dad who was waiting in the car, but just as a first-time voter, not feeling like I had any autonomy or control over the environment that I was in was very unsettling and anxiety-provoking, and it made me not want to go back and do that in-person, which is why I have done it by mail since then.

Now, being older, and knowing what my rights are, I feel confident in how far we've come in the last 12 years since that's happened that hopefully, I'll have a better experience, and our poll workers are better trained.

Alex: I really appreciate you sharing that story, because that is a really powerful one, of ways that shows that, even with good intentions, there can really be gaps in that experience due to ignorance on the part of a poll worker, then having a really unfortunate voting experience for a person.

I'm sorry that happened to you, because just hearing that story, I think there were three different ways where I winced in hearing about that, and ways in which the poll workers that made mistakes that affected you and affected your experience. That is not what should have happened, and I'm sorry about that.

Sarah: It's OK. Like I said, it's 12 years ago. I feel like we've come a long way since with our training. Not every poll worker is as knowledgeable of people with disabilities. That's where I feel like, through learning how I advocate since I was 18 years old, it's partly my responsibility to now advocate for my needs better, which I'm an advocate for teaching other people with disabilities how to do the same thing.

Keith: And conversations like this, other resources. That's why it exists, to spread messages like this, talk about it, and make sure the awareness is up. It is unfortunate that a few people without disabilities, they don't consider accessibility barriers at the polls or anywhere, really.

It's really unfortunate that these experiences happen. Well, Alex, as an election official, what do you want other supervisor of election offices and poll workers across the country to know in order to best serve the disability community?

Alex: Sure. That's a really great question. One thing I would say is just the fundamental bedrock of how to approach this service to just treat everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of who they are, regardless of conditions, regardless of how you perceive them.

If you go into it with that mindset, the mindset of treating everyone the same to the extent possible, and treating them all with dignity and respect, regardless of who they are. That can go a really long way. The magic words that we train poll workers to use is to offer assistance to everybody, because we don't know what a person may need.

A person may have invisible disabilities. They may have a disability but may not need, choose, request, or want assistance. Just offer it to everybody, and that way, people who do need it will then have the opportunity to, you've made that space for them to step on into that to say, "Yes, I would like some assistance. That'd be great."

If they don't need it, then that's OK. Just to make that space available for everyone, and that way, you're not judging, you're not treating anyone differently. You're opening the doors and letting everyone access that space.

Keith: Yeah, no one's being singled out or made to feel awkward or in a weird predicament.

Sarah: Can I chime in on that real quick, Keith?

Keith: Please.

Sarah: I love everything you said, Alex. Also, one thing I really want to hone in on is that no two people's experiences are the same. I think it's important. I love that question of asking everybody, and to not make an assumption of...

I have cerebral palsy, and my cerebral palsy looks a lot different than somebody who may not be able to move their arms or be able to communicate with their speech. To not just lump people in a box of, "OK, this person's in a wheelchair. They're going to need this accommodation."

Or, "This person has low vision. They're going to need this accommodation." The spectrum looks way different, which is why I think it's so important that you ask. Letting people make that decision and advocate for what they need is great.

Alex: Thank you for sharing. Yeah, I think it's the best approach to take. In fact, there's one thing else I would add, to be able to share a message with other supervisor of elections offices, poll workers, as a very basic level, is that this stuff is not something extra.

It's not something special that we have to do. It is a core part of the service that we need to provide to our entire community. Here in Leon County, we have that as part of our mission statement. Our mission here in Leon County is to provide outstanding voter services and accessible elections in Leon County with integrity, transparency, and accuracy.

That accessible election, that is a core of what we do. It's not something special. It's not something extra. It is part of what we do on an everybody basis. I think that having that mindset in our office helps tremendously in our approach. I would hope that other offices take a similar approach as well.

Keith: Yeah, indeed. I think that's wonderful. Really, what you're describing is essentially universal design, the merger of universal design and accessibility. If everything was designed for everyone, there isn't a need for separate accessibility.

If you do the same things for everyone, to where everybody can access what they need, that, in my mind, the golden standard, the thing to really push for. What other additional accessibility efforts do you think could be made at the polls? What maybe is missing that could be added?

Alex: That's a question. Sarah, from your perspective, is there something that you think is lacking that you have seen in your experiences?

Sarah: Because it's been so long since I've been at the polls, it's hard for me to say. I think, in the early days, when I did have that experience, just knowing what my rights were or having somebody maybe who was specifically at the table to say, "I'm trained. I can assist you," I think that's really important, too.

Just having a key person who can be the person to say, "I'm going to assist you with whatever you need." I don't know, that's a great question, Alex. How many people are trained? Is it all of your poll workers? Is it a select few of them? How does that work?

Alex: Sure. In our polling places, there'll be several different poll workers who have different tasks and responsibilities. You have a clerk who's running the site. You'll have an assistant clerk that'll back up in case the clerk is unavailable, can handle the more complex tasks.

There are machine inspections. They're the folks who stand next to the voting machine and handle that process. The folks who handle the check-ins, full of the electronic poll books to

check the voter in and give them the ballot. You then have a deputy who normally will patrol outside the polling site, maybe assist or communicate with voters that are standing in line.

That maybe is the individual that maybe more than anyone else is having that face-to-face contact. Well, everyone's obviously interacting with voters, but can have that aspect of greeting the voter as they're entering the polling place and engaging with them at the first opportunity.

It might be a good thing for us -- and I don't know about this myself, but I can check and talk with my folks about -- who is the person who's making that initial contact point and engagement with voters to open that door and open that space for those conversations about accessibility, about assistance. That's a really good point. Honestly, I don't know, and I should find out.

Sarah: I also think maybe -- and this is something that Access the Vote, I know, is working on as a coalition, is -- educating people's rights to know what is available to them at the polls, but sending out a guide.

If you're coming in-person, and you are a person with a disability, having the supervisors of elections send something out of what to expect or a little manual that can walk through the steps of what they need and the different options that are available for them, I think, would be really helpful, too.

Alex: That's a great point, and our reduce, we have a voter guide that we put together and as well as an election guide. In this year, because of COVID and supply chain disruptions, we were forced to cut down the length of our election guide from something like 24 pages to 12 pages, and had to just take a slash and burn to cut it down to...That was tough.

If I had the space, that should absolutely material that should be in there, discussions about the accessibility features and the combinations that are available, but people won't know about it if you don't tell them about it.

Sarah: I'll add one other thing really quickly. When you're training poll workers, too, always encourage them to speak to the individual as an individual. I think so many times, as a person with a disability, I am talked down to, or I don't understand what's happening, or assumptions are made about me that...

Again, I don't know what the training is for the poll workers. I doubt that this is ever the case, but even to just have a poll worker that treats you as a human and not somebody that needs to be pitied could make or break somebody's experience when they're going to vote.

Alex: Absolutely. That is something that is emphasized, is treating everyone with dignity and respect. That key message really does need to be hammered home because no one wants to be dismissed, to be looked down upon, to be pitied, as you're describing.

We don't want any of our voters to have that kind of voting experience. We want to be open, and accessible, and respectful to everyone in our community.

Keith: Another great resource that's available for someone who's going to vote in the polls is available also at the Access to Vote Florida website, which is [accessstovote.org](https://www.accessstovote.org). A couple of videos that we just made, Alex being one of the two people involved in those videos for us.

There's two accessible machines used throughout Florida. We had some videos made on the instructions, and information, and features, and so on of how to use the accessible voting machines because sometimes you come into the polls and you're put in front of the machine. You don't really know what to do.

This is a nice overview. It goes over everything. Those are available. I think they'd be very helpful this election season.

Alex, do you want to talk a little bit about the experience putting that together and what kind of information you can get from those videos?

Alex: It was a wonderful partnership with Disability Rights Florida and a self-advocate to record those videos and I think they'll be a tremendous resource. You're absolutely right in that voters may not know, they won't know unless the information is shared with them, the depth of the accessibility features that exist on our equipment.

Different counties have different equipment. When I'm speaking here, I'll have to speak just specifically about the equipment we have in Leon County. There are other equipment in other counties that's going to be broadly similar, but I just don't have the depth of knowledge on that.

Here in Leon County, the machine that we use is, oddly enough, called an ice machine. It stands for Image Cast Evolution, but we call them ICE machines. They don't actually make ice, sadly. That'd be a nice feature, though.

The accessibility equipment that's in them, it's integrated at a very fundamental level. The poll worker can set up an accessible session on the machine that then allows a voter to interface with the ballot or entirely over audio. There can be a magnifier screen that can display magnification, also high contrast.

It can interface with a tactile interface device that has paddles that can be easily manipulated by a voter that may have lower dexterity or can be even foot paddles that can be used as well, and even a sip and puff attachment as well. Wherever possible, we are making that connection with the voter so that way they can access their ballot to the extent that they are capable at a physical level.

There's other options as well. A voter absolutely can have someone assist them. Sarah, when you were talking about the poll workers not letting your father come into the polls with you to provide assistance, that's not what should have happened.

What should have happened is your dad or you would have had to fill out some very brief paperwork to say that this is OK, you are requesting assistance. You're not being unduly influenced or something to that effect. Then absolutely a voter can have that person come in with them and assist with the marking of the ballot.

Many voters do choose to take that option, while other folks may wish to use the accessible features of the voting machine itself because wherever possible, we want the voter to be able to vote how they want to be able to vote. That's the basic idea there.

For those videos, going back to those videos themselves, it was a great experience to record them because it let us show off all of these different features, and that way voters can take a look at this material and say, "That's what I need. I know what to advocate for to ask for."

It's also great for us as well because we can use that to train our poll workers better as well because they can see what all the features are. Of course, we've talked about these features, but the key factor that may be missing there is the experience of the voter with a disability. For them narrating what that experience is like for them. That is invaluable.

Keith: That's a great point. We've talked about the videos and some other efforts about getting the word out. Any other ways that you guys are advocating for accessible in-person voting or suggestions on other ways that we can get the message out there and let people know that there are accessible options at the polling place?

Sarah: I can start on this one. I think the videos are great. I've posted them on my social media, and I'm encouraging my network of friends with disabilities to watch them and know exactly what they can get when they go to the polls.

It's also word of mouth. Somebody who has a good experience, telling somebody who may be hesitant to go vote in person because they're afraid of not being accommodated. It's all about word of mouth and saying, "I had a great experience. Here's where I went," if it's somebody local, or, "Hey, you can contact your local Supervisor of Elections office and just ask what options are available for you."

The more we can share the positive experiences, the more we are going to see people with disabilities getting out and going to the polls.

Keith: Those are good points for sure.

Alex: [inaudible 24:24] . Word of mouth, you're right is so important. We can put videos online, we can have stuff on our website, we can put stuff into publications, but nothing is more powerful than a personal experience and sharing that because that's a lived experience right there.

Keith: Indeed.

Alex: I have actually something I would like to share as well because we've talked a lot about in-person voting experiences. There's a whole additional aspect of voting as well, which is voting by mail.

That is something which many voters with disabilities have used because it lets them vote from the comfort of their own home, take as much time as they may need, have the assistance of a family member to help fill out the ballot, which has always been available to voters here for many years.

Recently, just with this election cycle, we're launching a new tool for voters with disabilities to use for their vote-by-mail ballots. We're excited about this and we'd love to get the word out about it. Because there are some people that have signed up for it, which is fantastic, but we'd love to see more voters be aware of it.

If they want to then use this option, it's called Enhanced Ballot. It uses the same underlying approach that allows voters overseas and military voters to look at their ballot, essentially over a computer. This then allows a voter with a disability, such as low vision or blindness, to interact with their ballot using a screen reader on their own computer.

Keith: That's wonderful.

Alex: That is a gap there that has existed. If you're a voter with blindness or low vision, you could request a vote by mail ballot, but you can't mark it yourself without the assistance of someone else. This now lets the voter use their own technology in their own home to mark their ballot.

A key point, though, is that because of security concerns, the ballot can't be returned electronically. The ballot has to be printed out and then returned in the security envelope that we use for all of our vote-by-mail ballots.

When a voter signs up for this service, we'll send them a link to the website, the web portal where they access the ballot. We'll then mail them a return envelope. With that, they would then print their ballot, return it in that envelope, that signed envelope, so that way we have that level of security.

There's always that balance between access and security that we have to maintain when it comes to elections, but we feel that this approach improves that access while not sacrificing any elements of security. I'm really excited about it.

Sarah: That's awesome.

Keith: Indeed. I'm glad you brought that up, for sure.

Sarah: Keith, another thing I thought of when we were talking about additional accessibility efforts that can be made, we didn't even get into the conversation about transportation to the polls.

For people with disabilities, not everybody has access to...I'm privileged enough to be able to have an adaptive van that I can drive, but for people that rely on paratransit or others to drive them, we know how unreliable paratransit can be. In the last big election cycle, I saw those free Ubers and free Lyfts to the poll if you just text this code. I'm not able to just hop in an Uber and get to the poll.

I know in Tallahassee here -- maybe in one of our bigger cities like Orlando, or Miami, or Tampa, they might have accessible Ubers -- but I have never seen one in Tallahassee. Even offering that to an individual to say, "You can get a free ride," how do we make that accessible for people with disabilities to get to the polls so that they have the chance to go vote in person?

Keith: That's a great point. That's a really great addition, for sure. Thanks for mentioning that.

Alex: Yeah, that can certainly be a barrier to access. I think that the enhanced ballot, or voting by mail, can help to bridge that gap, to an extent, but it's not everything. If a voter wants to vote in-person, that voter has the right to vote in-person.

Unfortunately, at our offices, we don't have the capability to provide that kind of service to a voter to be able to provide transport. It's outside the scope of what we can do.

When we do get queries from voters about that, and that goes beyond what we can provide, that's when we turn and try to connect them with resources that may exist in the community, such as through centers for independent living or Disability Rights Florida to see if they can then help to bridge that gap.

Keith: Indeed, good. I'm glad you brought that up. That's a really addition. I thank you guys so much for your time. This has really been a wonderful conversation. Both of you, thanks again for your advocacy efforts and the work you do on behalf of people with disabilities being able to get to the polls and cast their ballot.

Sarah: Thanks, Keith.

Alex: Yeah, thank you, Keith and Sarah, and thank you for this wonderful opportunity to get the word out and communicate with all of our voters about this important stuff.

Sarah: Thank you for all you're doing, Alex. I'm lucky enough to live in Leon, where I know that people with disabilities are being taken care of, and all the good work that you're doing, so thank you for all your work.

Alex: Thank you for saying that. It's important, and I feel privileged to serve and to be able to do what I do and this office, and really proud of the efforts that we take. Always, if I could say one final thing, is if you're voter, and you need assistance, give us a call, and we will find a way to make something happen, whatever it may be. We'll try to bridge that.

Keith: Excellent. It's all appreciated. Thanks again, y'all.

Alex: You're very welcome.

Sarah: Thank you.

Maddie: Thank you, Alex and Sarah, for being on the podcast and for sharing their insight about accessible in-person voting. It was great to have them on, and a perfect send-off into the beginning of early voting in the November election.

Keith: Thanks for tuning into our series, Your Voice, Your Vote. If you missed an episode, you can listen to it on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast, or wherever you get your podcasts.

Maddie: Additionally, if you have any questions or need assistance voting, please call our voting hotline at 877-352-7337. Again, that's 877-352-7337. Disability Rights Florida can protect your right to vote.

Keith: For sure. Finally, be sure to review disability voting resources shared by our coalition partner, Access the Vote Florida, on their website at accessthevote.org. The website is a great resource for voters with disabilities and has a lot of helpful information on there.

Maddie: Definitely. Good luck with voting, everyone, and let's show the power of the disability vote.

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