State Office: Iowa Secretary of State Paul D. Pate

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Title of Program: The Voting Accessibility Quick Check Guide

Project lead: Heidi Burhans, State Elections Director

Description of the program: The key to ensuring polling places are accessible is providing poll workers with the necessary tools in a format that is easy to follow. The Iowa Secretary of State’s Office accomplished that objective with the Voting Accessibility Quick Check booklet. It includes valuable information about accessible voting equipment and signage and can be used as a measuring tool to ensure polling spaces are accessible for wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

All Iowa polling places are inspected for general ADA compliance. The Voter Accessibility Quick Check booklet is an additional resource for precinct election officials to have on hand to ensure the polling place stays accessible throughout Election Day. Partnering with Disability Rights Iowa, we produce and distribute these booklets to every precinct in the state.

Subject area of nomination: Elections
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HISTORY

When Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate returned to office in 2015, one of his top priorities was helping veterans and Iowans with disabilities vote. That initiative turned into a multi-pronged effort at voter and poll worker education, community outreach, and providing the necessary resources at every polling place. The initiative was a finalist for the 2017 NASS IDEAS Award.

The program continues, with additional tools to ensure polling place accessibility. A crucial one is the Voting Accessibility Quick Check booklet, which was provided for all 1,600+ polling places in Iowa ahead of the 2020 general election.

SIGNIFICANCE

Secretary Pate and Disability Rights Iowa partnered to produce the Voting Accessibility Quick Check booklet and distribute one to every polling place in the state. The booklet is a tool for precinct election officials to ensure polling places meet American Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements and to quickly recognize and fix any accessibility issues that may arise on Election Day.

Taking extra time and care to make sure the polling place is accessible allows Iowans with disabilities to have a positive voting experience when they show up to cast their vote. We want to provide all 99 Iowa counties with as many resources as possible to achieve that outcome.

The booklet includes information about accessible voting equipment, spacing, signage, and it can be used as measuring tool. The panels in the easy-fold booklet provide the necessary measurements and accessibility requirements for outside the polling place, entrances to the polling place, and inside the building.

Polling places are busy on Election Day. Due to a high volume of people coming in and out of the building, the initial set up could inadvertently change. Tables and chairs might move. Signs could shift. Walkways that were accessible when the polls opened might have obstacles accidentally placed in the path. That’s why the Quick Check Guide is such a useful tool. It’s a tangible, handy, easy-to-follow booklet that any poll worker can utilize to check for accessibility and adjust when needed.

The ADA Checklist is a 25 page document that provides technical assistance for polling place accessibility. A few years ago, the Secretary Pate provided tablets to all 99 counties with the ADA Checklist installed in app form. This allowed auditors to have a handy tool to identify and set up polling places ahead of elections.

The Quick Check Booklet is a fantastic supplement to the ADA Checklist to use on Election Day. It is just six pages, with graphics, and a measuring tool. It is an easy-to-manage instrument poll workers have found useful and helpful.

IMPACT/RESULTS

“The Quick Check booklet helps poll workers make the voting experience more welcoming and accessible to people with disabilities,” said Jane Hudson, executive director Disability Rights Iowa. “Increased attention to accessibility will encourage more people with disabilities to participate, making our democratic process more obtainable for all.”

All Iowa polling places are inspected for general ADA compliance. The Voter Accessibility Quick Check booklet is an additional resource for precinct election officials to have on hand to ensure the polling place stays accessible throughout Election Day. Having one at every polling place on Election Day helps ensure accessibility for all Iowa voters and is a tremendous tool for poll workers.
The U.S. Election Assistance Commission’s report on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections showed significant progress in making voting easier for people with disabilities. Among people with disabilities who voted in person, 18% reported difficulties. This is down from 30% in 2012.

Despite the improvements, there is still much more work to be done. The Voter Accessibility Quick Check booklet is something every precinct election official in the country should have on Election Day. It’s a tool that helps make elections more accessible for eligible voters. The booklet also makes our precinct election officials’ jobs easier. Those are two goals every state election commissioner should strive to achieve.

Iowa’s county auditors, poll workers and disability advocacy groups have praised the Quick Check Guide’s booklet.

“It is of the utmost importance that people of all abilities have the proper access to their polling location, so this tool is great for county auditors and their staff to do a comprehensive review of polling locations and make any necessary adjustments to those locations,” said Ryan Dokter, Sioux County Auditor and president of the Iowa State Association of County Auditors.

This project can be replicated in every state at minimal cost. It is a simple addition to the election toolkit, but an extremely valuable one.

“We hope that the Quick Check booklet can be used by other states to improve election accessibility for more voters with disabilities.” – Annie Matte, Communications and Voting Outreach Coordinator with Disability Rights Iowa
SUPPORTING MATERIALS

The first page provides valuable information about overall polling place accessibility, voting machines, and the contact number for the county auditor’s office.
The second page provides information about how to ensure the area outside the polling place is accessible. It includes a graphic on the required number of accessible parking spaces, measures for ramps, and information about the path from accessible parking to the building.
Page three provides details about entrances to polling places. This includes information about signature, necessary entryway width, door handles and wall space.
The fourth page covers the area inside the polling place. It includes necessary measurements for paths, signage, objecting hanging from the ceiling and useful tips about carpets and furniture.

Unfolded, the entire booklet spans 36 inches and includes a ruler at the bottom that can be utilized to quickly check measurements.
On the back side is the ‘One Last Check’ page. This simple checklist offers an easy review of the major steps that election officials need to take to ensure full accessibility at the polling place. Completing the checklist means you’ve ensured all voters can navigate the polling place, outside and inside, and are easily able to cast their ballot.

There is also a ‘Notes’ page in case poll workers want to write important information onto the booklet.

Altogether, the Voting Accessibility Quick Check Guide is a very useful tool that helps election officials ensure polling places are accessible at the beginning of Election Day and is a great asset for poll workers to ensure it remains accessible throughout Iowa’s 14-hour Election Day timeframes.