



### **Who is impacted by this issue?**

The issue of voting rights impacts Wisconsinites who are eligible to vote and have a disability. The CDC indicates that 26% (1 in 4) of adults have some type of disability, so this is a significant number of voters, and a diverse population. Although the disability vote is potentially large, people with disabilities are underrepresented at the polls. The *Rutgers University Fact Sheet on Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2018 Elections* notes a 10.4% gap in Wisconsin voter turnout between citizens with and without disabilities.

### **Why is this issue important?**

Voting is one of the most fundamental rights of our democracy. It is imperative that people with disabilities have a voice in choosing their elected officials, because once elected, they will make decisions about programs and services that are vitally important to Wisconsinites with disabilities. Many people with disabilities access programs and services funded by the federal, state, or local governments to support them in maintaining their health, accessing education and employment, and participating in their communities.

### **How are supports for this issue funded?**

Elections are supported by a combination of federal, state, and local government funding. Historically, states have authorized local jurisdictions (counties or cities/towns) to run elections on their behalf following state-specified rules, and have expected local jurisdictions to pick up most of the bill. A few examples:

- ⇒ In Wisconsin, local governments are responsible for selecting accessible voting machines from a list approved by the state, and for purchasing this equipment.
- ⇒ Accessibility audits of polling places are paid for by a combination of federal funds and state funds.

### **What are major concerns related to this issue?**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Help America Vote Act (HAVA) and other federal laws are intended to protect the rights of voters with disabilities, but many still experiences barriers to exercising their constitutional right to cast a ballot. Some of the barriers reported by voters with disabilities include:

#### **Accessibility concerns**

- ⇒ Polling place accessibility concerns, that may limit access for voters who use mobility aids such as walkers or wheelchairs.
- ⇒ Communication barriers, such as those experienced by deaf voters.
- ⇒ Each polling place is required to have an accessible voting machine to allow voters with disabilities, including those who are blind or low vision, to vote privately and independently. Many voters benefit from the accessible voting machine; however, other report that the machines are not available, not functioning correctly, or that poll workers are not aware of this option and do not offer this choice to voters.
- ⇒ Inaccessible ballots. Wisconsin does not have a screen reader accessible, ADA compliant absentee ballot. Voters who rely on assistive technology to vote privately and independently do not have equitable access to absentee voting.



# VOTING RIGHTS

**Photo ID:** Many Wisconsin residents who have a disability do not drive; they do not have a driver's license and may not have other acceptable photo ID required to vote. While a free ID for voting can be obtained at Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) offices, it may be difficult to get transportation to the DMV. This is a concern across the state, and may be an additional challenge in rural area due to limited hours at DMVs.

**Failure to provide accommodations:** The law requires access to disability related accommodations, such as the ability for voters who have difficulty accessing their polling place to vote curbside, access to a signature guide, or the option for a voter with a disability to have someone assist them with completing their ballot if desired. Some voters report that they are denied an accommodation or that it is not available.

**Transportation:** Because so many voters with disabilities are non-drivers, transportation to the polling place is a major barrier.

**Limited training for poll workers:** Poll workers play an important role in supporting voters and ensuring that elections are accessible and inclusive. Poll worker training requirements of two hours don't allow much time to cover accessibility, disability related accommodations, accessible communications, and other disability related topics.

## How has this issue been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Because many people with disabilities have high vulnerability for COVID-19, voting in person has become high risk, yet many experienced barriers to absentee voting. During the 2020 April and May elections, there was a significant increase in the number of voters with disabilities who reported barriers to voting. Some of the barriers that emerged or increased due to COVID-19:

- ⇒ For those who needed a state Photo ID for Voting, the DMV closure and lack of access to safe transportation made it virtually impossible to obtain the needed ID.
- ⇒ Absentee voting was preferred due to the pandemic, however, difficulties many voters with disabilities struggle with the requirement to provide a copy of photo ID because of limited access to technology or limited ability to upload or copy photo ID.
- ⇒ Blind voters and others who rely on assistive technology to vote privately and independently did not have equitable access to absentee voting as Wisconsin does not have an ADA compliant screen reader accessible absentee ballot.
- ⇒ The witness requirement for absentee ballots was a barrier for some voters with disabilities who live alone, and could not safely get their ballot witnessed.
- ⇒ No Special Voting Deputies in care facilities; no family members or other visitors to assist. Residents were not allowed to leave facilities to vote in person, but may not have received assistance with voter registration or requesting an absentee ballot.

