
From the Office of Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz

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IMPROVING BALLOT ACCESS FOR DISABLED VOTERS

Legislature considering Election Day test of touch screen technology

Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz demonstrated Thursday how touch screen voting technology would improve ballot access for the state's estimated 400,000 potential voters with disabilities as well as senior citizens and others needing assistance on Election Day. There are an estimated 30 million persons with disabilities eligible to vote in the U.S., but according to a 1999 Harris poll, fewer than 30% of these potential voters voted in the 1996 presidential election.

"Touch screen technology can help ensure that disabled voters are afforded equal opportunity to cast private, independent ballots," said Bysiewicz during a press conference at the State Capitol. "Between 200,000 to 300,000 of Connecticut's citizens with disabilities do not vote. Voter participation in the state could increase significantly through the use of new technology."

State and federal law is clear about poll access for the disabled, but compliance is far from complete. Nationally, during the 2000 presidential election, the General Accounting Office found that 84 percent of polling places were physically inaccessible to the disabled and not one of the 496 polling places visited by the GAO had voting equipment adapted for blind voters. In Connecticut, blind and visually impaired voters must rely on a poll worker or a person they brought with them to assist in casting a ballot, and can never be assured that their choices were accurately reflected.

"For many people with disabilities, participation in the electoral process means confronting both architectural barriers and inaccessible ballots," said James D. McGaughey, Executive Director of the State Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities. "The electronic voting technology now emerging promises to enable many more voters with disabilities to cast their ballots in the same places and with the same privacy, dignity and independence as others."

Many touch screen voting machines are similar in size and weight to laptop computers, and are easily accessible and transportable. Lever machines are often inaccessible to voters in wheelchairs because of the difficulty in reaching the levers and reading the ballot. Audio hookups and Braille instructions would provide the state's estimated 45,000 blind and visually impaired citizens the ability to vote without assistance from another person.

"There is a reason that people go into a voting booth alone and pull the curtain behind them before they place their vote," said Chris Kuell of the National Federation of the Blind. "Our voting system is designed with absolute freedom in mind including being free of pressure from any outside observer. This freedom needs to be extended to the blind and visually impaired."

"This demonstration of new accessible voting technology demonstrates the

importance of freedom in America," said Donna Balaski, Executive Director of the State Board of Education and Services for the Blind. "Each and every citizen is guaranteed not only the right to vote but also the right to a private vote. With the advancement of adaptive technology each and every citizen's voice is heard."

Last week, the General Assembly's Government Administration & Elections Committee approved a demonstration test of "ATM-type" touch screen voting machines for at least three municipalities during this year's state elections. Exit polling to solicit voter comments on the new technology is also part of the proposal now being considered by the Legislature.

"This is an opportunity for the State of Connecticut to bring voting technology into the 21st Century and ensure voter equity," said Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin B. Sullivan (D-West Hartford). "Disabled voters and others who need assistance on Election Day deserve to have privacy when they vote, and this new technology will allow them to vote on their own and be sure that their vote has been cast in the manner that they wished."

"Eventually our lever machines will have to be replaced, so it is important to look at alternative voting technologies now," said House GAE Chairman Jim O'Rourke (D-Cromwell, Middletown, Portland). "Improving ballot access for the disabled and getting feedback from voters on touch screen systems are compelling reasons to conduct a test this year."

Bysiewicz also pointed to election reform efforts in Washington where Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd, the House of Representatives and President Bush have all proposed funding for state's to buy new voting technology. In order to qualify for the funds, Dodd's bill requires states to provide voting systems that are accessible to individuals with disabilities, including non-visual accessibility for the blind and visually impaired.

"As someone with a legally blind sister, I'm reminded in a very personal way of why we need to do everything we can to ensure that disabled Americans aren't shut out on Election Day," Dodd said. "That's why it is critically important that we develop an election system that encourages the disabled to vote, and ensures that their vote is fairly and accurately counted."

"AARP recognizes that some of our members, particularly the frail, elderly and persons with disability, may have difficulty in exercising their right to vote using existing voting machines," said Brenda Kelley, State Director for AARP Connecticut which represents 600,000 members. "Accordingly, AARP fully supports this voting demonstration project."

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