

Testimony for HB 1253

To: Committee Chair Shawn Vedaa & Members of the Senate Government & Veterans Affairs Committee, North Dakota 67th Legislative Assembly.

From: Zelda Gebhard, President and Legislative Liaison, North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB). Lobbyist 2020-2021 #1072
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Re: Testimony offered for HB 1253, specifically for access to accessible absentee voting.

Good Morning, Chairman Kasper and members of the North Dakota House of Representatives Government and Veterans Affairs Committee.

I am testifying on behalf of myself as an individual who is legally blind, and also as the president and volunteer lobbyist of the North Dakota Association of the Blind. We are a nonprofit membership organization. Our 250 members live in your neighborhoods and work in your communities.

We are in favor of HB1253. We specifically support the amendment that provides an accessible option for electors with a disability, which prevents them from reading or marking a paper ballot, an option to vote absentee in an independent way.

We very much appreciate the availability of the ExpressVote in every polling place in ND. These accessible voting machines allow us to cast a secret ballot independently while at the polling place. Currently the only absentee voting allowed in ND is a paper ballot. This doesn't work for those of us with disabilities, like vision loss, who cannot read or mark the ballot.

Therefore, I urge you to consider changes in our state law that would allow us to vote fully electronically in the secure and safe way that is currently an option for our military who reside out of state. This would fulfill the rights granted to us by federal legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

As you consider the many bills brought before you concerning voting in ND, I thank you for thoughtfully considering the needs and rights of all citizens of ND including those of us with sight loss.

*See also NDAB Resolution 2021-04 listed below:

NDAB Resolution 2021-04:

Equal Access to An Accessible Absentee Voting

WHEREAS, federal and state law requires equal access to the ballot and voting experience, including the right to a private and independent, verifiable accessible absentee ballot; and

WHEREAS, technology to make an absentee ballot accessible is available and represents an economical way to make the voting experience available to persons with disabilities, many of whom experience difficulties in traveling from their residences to designated polling sites; and

WHEREAS, the State of North Dakota has received federal monies to conduct its state elections, a small portion of which could be used to acquire statewide accessible technology to make the absentee ballot accessible to qualified voters;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of the North Dakota Association of the Blind at its meeting on this Sunday, January 10, 2021, that:

1. Its members call upon the leaders and members of both houses of the North Dakota Legislature to recognize this protected right, consider and pass legislation if needed to make accessible absentee voting available to all qualified voters in North Dakota on an equal basis.
2. Respectfully urges the Governor of the State of North Dakota to sign any such legislation which meets the above goal; and
3. Strongly encourages responsible elements of State Government to certify one or more accessible absentee voting systems which meet the goal of this resolution and strive to make such system(s) available to qualified voters in North Dakota's 53 counties.