

Testimony for House Bill 1253

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

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Re: Testimony for Access to an accessible absentee ballot

Greetings Chairman Vedaa, and members of the House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to you about the right to vote by people who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise have a disability which prevents them from independently marking a paper ballot.

I'm offering this testimony as an advocate for people who are blind and visually impaired and to help represent the advocacy goals of the North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB).

FYI: A resolution on accessible absentee voting adopted by the Board of the North Dakota Association of the Blind is being submitted with this testimony

Since 1982 I have fit the definition of someone that's "legally blind" and for the past 35 years haven't been able to read print. After my loss of eyesight, I couldn't read the printed ballot and had to rely on a family member to mark the ballot for me. Although I have every confidence that my ballot was marked the way in which I had wanted it to be, I still greatly desired the opportunity to exercise every citizen's right to vote a secret independent ballot.

As a consequence of the problems that were experienced with the Presidential election in Florida in 2000, The Help America Vote Act (HAVA), was enacted by the U.S. Congress in response to these voting issues. This Act included provisions to supply voting systems for people with disabilities who with this equipment, could cast a secret ballot independently.

After the accessible voting machines became available at our polling sites here in North Dakota, I haven't missed the opportunity to vote in every election since 2002 using this equipment. I did vote in last fall's election at a polling site in Fargo using the accessible equipment installed on the ExpressVote machine. My voting experience, as a person who is blind, was featured on a local news program.

Testimony for HB1253 (Allan Peterson) page 2

Put simply, we are advocating that provision of a secret, independent accessible ballot be provided to absentee voters who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise have a disability which prevents them from casting a secret ballot independently.

We can report to you that there are a number of states that have implemented technologies that do allow people who are blind to vote using an absentee ballot. Perhaps not surprisingly the methodology to do so isn't uniform from state to state.

Personally, as someone who has no functional eyesight, I could vote an absentee ballot if it were sent to me electronically in an accessible format. I use software that allows me to read what is on the computer screen. This is technology that I use every day to communicate to send and receive Email messages, join meetings over the internet, and gather information over the worldwide web.

If for example, were the Secretary of States Office to send me the ballot that's sent to our overseas uniformed military people, I could easily mark my ballot with my equipment and send it back to them electronically. Also, I could send the ballot electronically to the Cass County auditor's office and it could potentially be printed using a fax machine.

There a host of reasons why voting using an absentee ballot is more convenient to voters who are blind, visually impaired, or have print disabilities. It's been our experience that many poll workers are not familiar with how to instruct a voter who is blind or visually impaired on the use of the accessible features of the voting equipment.

Access to a secret independent ballot is a fundamental right of every citizen in our nation which rightfully prides itself on its democratic principles. This right is also supported and reaffirmed in our nations' laws principal among them being the Help America Vote Act, the America with Disabilities Act, and the Vocational Rehabilitation Act.