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Disability Rights Vermont 2014 Voting Experience Survey

The 2014 General Election saw a historical low record of voter turnout around the country, with Vermont voter turnout rates estimated by the U.S. Elections Project at 39.4% of eligible voters. Although the statistics indicating how many of those voters were voters with disabilities have not yet been released by the Census Bureau, prior studies consistently demonstrate that people with disabilities generally have lower voter turnout rates than people without disabilities. Often people with disabilities encounter barriers to exercising their right to vote that are as varied as the individuals themselves, and their disabilities, be they intellectual, physical, or mental health related.

Disability Rights Vermont (DRVT) is Vermont's designated Protection and Advocacy System and receives funding from the Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA) grant through the Help America Vote Act of 2002. Our PAVA program provides individual and systemic advocacy to improve access to the electoral process for individuals with disabilities throughout the state. In the days leading up to and just following the November 2014 General Election, DRVT mailed 175 Voting Experience Surveys to adults with disabilities who had received both voting and non-voting related services from our agency within the past two years. Current and former clients were asked to voluntarily provide information about their voting experiences, barriers to voting that they may have encountered in the General Election, and suggestions to improve the voting experiences of individuals with disabilities.

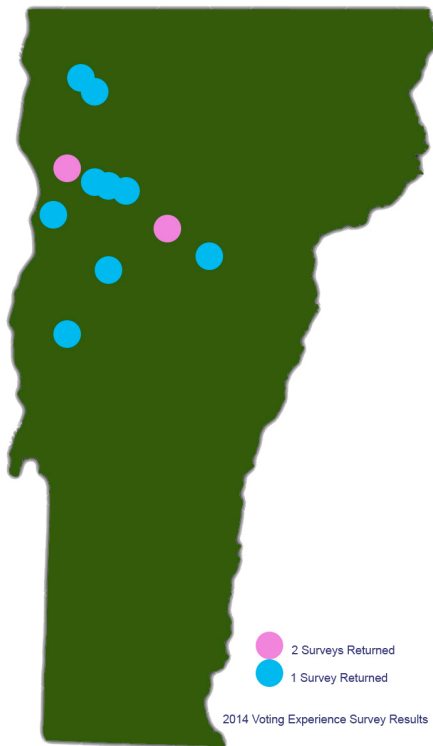
Although only eighteen completed surveys were returned to DRVT, the information provided by those who graciously took their time to provide information about their voting experiences will be used to improve upon our voter outreach, education, advocacy, and accessibility efforts throughout the state.

Of the eighteen respondents, one reported that their polling place was in Bristol, two in Burlington, one in Milton, one in Montpelier, one in Richmond, one in Shelburne, one in Shoreham, one in St. Albans, one in Warren, two in Waterbury, one in Williston, and one in Winooski. Four of the eighteen respondents did not list a polling place.

DRVT is the protection and advocacy system for the State of Vermont.

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Regarding polling place accessibility, nine respondents replied yes, the polling place in their town was accessible and six provided no response to this question. Two individuals replied that their polling place was not accessible: one informed of the lack of paratransit to the polling place in Winooski¹ and the other, from Richmond, provided no additional details in response to this question.² One respondent from Shoreham replied “somewhat” to this question, specifically citing the lack of automatic/powering doors to the entrance of the polling place.³ A respondent from Montpelier who answered yes to his/her polling place being accessible did however mention a concern that the elevator in Montpelier City Hall may sometimes be inoperable.⁴

Four respondents reported they had requested assistance or an accommodation while voting, eight replied that they did not ask for assistance or an accommodation while voting and six did not answer this question. Of the four who asked for assistance or an accommodation, two commented: “mail in ballot denied both 3/5 & 11/4” (in Winooski); and “some people got sarcastic with me because I have mental disabilities” (in Waterbury).

When asked if he/she felt discriminated against in some way because of their disability, nine respondents answered no; six did not answer; and two stated yes: “I couldn’t get there [and] can’t even get mailed a ballot...” (Winooski); and a respondent from Waterbury wrote “felt good but embarrassed because that was my first time and I didn’t know that much except for what I read.”

¹ Although paratransit to the polling place is not a requirement of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it certainly is a barrier to voting for individuals with disabilities and something that municipalities should take into consideration for future elections.

² DRVT has scheduled an accessibility survey of the Town of Richmond’s polling place to occur within the next few months.

³ Automatic/powering doors in the entranceway to the polling place is not a requirement of the ADA, however accessibility may be an issue if a door is too difficult or heavy to open. Temporary remedies to ensure accessible entranceways include leaving the doorway propped open during elections or stationing the doorways with volunteers available to open doors for voters.

⁴ DRVT has since confirmed with the Montpelier City Clerk’s office that the elevator in City Hall is currently fully operational.

Seven respondents stated that they voted by absentee ballot, while eight did not (although the respondent from Winooski indicated that he/she “wanted to”). Three respondents did not answer this question.

For those who reported voting by absentee ballot, six respondents stated that the instructions for returning the ballot were easy to understand, and none indicated difficulty with using the absentee ballot.

Seven respondents had specific suggestions for improving the voting experiences of individuals with disabilities in Vermont. A respondent from Warren recommended polling places provide an accessible bathroom; a respondent from Winooski suggested that “sign ups” (presumably voter registration and/or absentee ballot requests) be made through the Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL), Disability Rights Vermont “or someone who checks” rather than the town/city clerk; the respondent from Shoreham recommended that the door to the polling place be improved with an automatic door opening system.

Four respondents reported that they did not vote in the 2014 General Election because of the following reasons: “I didn’t have enough information about candidates”; “lack of transportation, no ballot sent..., no paratransit, not feeling well”; “no transportation”; and “I do not choose to vote and never have.”

Other comments made by respondents included a need for additional information about candidates and a thank you for the voter information on candidates provided by DRVT through our Voter’s Guide for People with Disabilities which may be found on our website at: http://disabilityrightsvt.org/pdfs/Publications/Voting%20Guide_2014_web.pdf.

The responses, while small in number, provide insight into personal experiences of voters with disabilities in Vermont. Through publication of this report, DRVT hopes to increase awareness within the Vermont community of people with disabilities, town and city voting officials, and the Secretary of State’s Election Division about the voting experience for people with disabilities and to increase access and participation in our election process by all Vermonters. DRVT wishes to thank those who provided their input. We welcome feedback about our services and suggestions to improve the experiences of voters with disabilities. Please feel free to contact DRVT at 1-800-834-7890 with questions or comments about this report, for further information about our services, or to request voting assistance at any time.