

Disability Rights Vermont

Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access

Barriers to Voting for People with Disabilities and Proposed Solutions: Focus Group Project

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**Barriers to Voting for People with Disabilities and Proposed Solutions:
Focus Group Project**

**A special project by Disability Rights Vermont in partnership with the
Vermont Secretary of State’s Elections Division**

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Executive Summary

Disability Rights Vermont (DRVT) is a private, independent, not-for-profit agency mandated by federal law to protect and advance the rights of individuals with disabilities, including pursuant to the Help America Vote Act of 2002. During the Summer of 2019, with important financial support and planning input from the Vermont Secretary of State's (SOS) Elections Division, DRVT initiated a Focus Group Project to learn more about existing barriers to voting faced by Vermonters with disabilities as part of our continuing mission to increase voting access among Vermonters with disabilities. The Focus Group Project was intended to identify whether previous efforts to improve access and turn out have been effective, as well as to identify new proposed solutions people with disabilities themselves recommend to eliminate the existing barriers to voting.

DRVT contacted various disability-related organizations around the state to obtain their assistance and convened 10 Focus Groups between December 2019 and March 2020. There were 126 participants representing many individuals with a wide variety of disabilities, gender identities, ethnicities including refugees for whom English was a second language, and of different socio-economic statuses.

The Focus Groups demonstrated an overwhelming interest on behalf of the participants to help identify and problem solve barriers to voting faced by Vermonters with disabilities. At the outset, voting was considered very important by Focus Group participants, though a few did express a sense of apathy and distrust mostly based on nationwide electoral processes and the current political climate, and in some instances due to the barriers they had faced related to past voting experiences.

Participants universally reported they were aware of, and at times had experienced themselves, barriers to voting facing Vermonters with disabilities. The most significant theme identified by participants was the lack of accessibility of voting information and materials. Participants noted that they were unaware of or could not access these things due to visual disabilities, cognitive disabilities

or limited English proficiency. Participants identified that materials were not visually accessible, written in accessible language that accommodates people of all ages and abilities, and were not available in alternative formats. Many participants also noted the inability to easily access, in understandable ways, information about the voting process itself and about candidates running for office. Knowledge of and access to accessible transportation to and from the polls was also emphasized in almost every Focus Group as a significant barrier to voting by Vermonters with disabilities.

Participants' proposals to improve voting related largely to initiatives to do more to assure that every voter can get to an accessible polling place with accessible transportation where accessible voting materials would be available, and that voters with disabilities were informed of, and confident that, these accommodations are consistently available. Participants emphasized that improved outreach and education to people with disabilities regarding the voting process and candidate positions, and options and assistance to exercise the right to vote, will be crucial to overcome the identified barriers to voting for Vermonters with disabilities. And this would go a long way in reducing voter apathy and distrust. Overall, the theme expressed by Focus Group participants was one of inclusion and accommodation so that voters with disabilities had the same opportunity and the appropriate accommodations to vote as all other voters.

Importantly, DRVT found also, from participating in the Focus Groups and from post-Group surveys, that the experience of being at the Focus Group was extremely helpful for participants to gain a better understanding of their voting rights, dispel voting misconceptions, and feel empowered to participate in our electoral process.

Actionable ideas identified to improve electoral participation for voters with disabilities focus around three main areas:

1) increasing opportunities for voter education and improving the accessibility of information about voting, including the process itself and the candidates running for office;

2) transportation to the polling place, and to events or venues where voters with disabilities are encouraged to participate in discussions about voting, political candidates, and public policy; and

3) increasing opportunities for people to learn about and/or obtain assistance and accommodations to effectively participate in the electoral process.

The imperative to implement these ideas for improvements is clear given the universal expression that barriers to voting by people with disabilities still exist in Vermont despite being clearly identifiable. In addition, we now have the Covid-19 pandemic. The disruption and uncertainty it may bring to voting in the near future must underlie all planning as we consider how to improve turnout among Vermonters with disabilities. Of note, is that the barriers identified by Focus Group participants, as well as many of their suggested actions to remedy those barriers, are the same or similar to barriers and solutions identified by DRVT voting outreach and surveys in 2009 and 2012. The time to act on a Statewide, multi-stakeholder effort to overcome barriers to voting for Vermonters with disabilities is now.

DRVT is grateful to the participants in the Focus Groups, the organizations that hosted the Groups, and the Vermont Secretary of State Elections Division for their important support of this project. Working together, and allowing the experiences and ideas of people with disabilities to lead the way, more and more Vermonters with disabilities will exercise their Right to Vote.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Disability Rights Vermont's PAVA Program

Disability Rights Vermont (DRVT) is a private, independent, not-for-profit agency mandated by federal law to protect and advance the rights of individuals with disabilities. DRVT is Vermont's designated protection and advocacy system and is a member of the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN). DRVT receives federal funding through a variety of grant sources, including Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities (PADD), Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI), Protection and Advocacy of Individual Rights (PAIR), Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS), Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Traumatic Brain Injury (PATBI), and Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA).

DRVT's PAVA program is focused on ensuring that people with disabilities throughout Vermont have equal access to the electoral process. DRVT conducts outreach to individuals with disabilities in all settings throughout Vermont. We provide information about voting rights, assistance with voter registration and requests for absentee ballots, and address accessibility issues. DRVT has a long history of working collaboratively with the Vermont Secretary of State Elections Division and local voting officials to ensure the voting rights of people with disabilities are protected and expanded, polling places are accessible, and poll workers are well trained regarding the rights and accommodations for voters with disabilities. DRVT has also sponsored state-wide candidate debates at the former Austine School for the Deaf, conducted over 180 polling place accessibility surveys, conducted client surveys and other efforts to assess barriers and solutions to voting access, and we continue to publish the non-partisan Voter's Guide for People with Disabilities and distribute it throughout Vermont.

B. Voter Turnout and Barriers to Voting for People with Disabilities – National and State Research

National experts in the field of Disability and Voter Turnout Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse recently reported that while voter turnout throughout the United States increased in the 2018 mid-term elections, there continues to be lower turnout rates overall for people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities.¹ Using data from the Current Population Survey Voting Supplement for 2018², Schur and Kruse found that in the 2018 elections, 49.3% of people with disabilities reported voting, compared to 54% of people without disabilities. Interestingly, people with hearing impairments were found to have a higher overall voter turnout rate, 57%, than all other eligible voters including people without disabilities. People with mental or cognitive disabilities had the lowest voter turnout rates, at 37.1% in the 2018 elections. Specific to Vermont, they report that voting turnout for people with disabilities increased from 31.2% in 2014 to 45.1% in 2018 while the turnout rate for people without disabilities increased from 44.2% in 2014 to 56.3% in 2018. The reported increasing levels of voter turnout among voters with disabilities is good news, but the remaining gap in voter turnout between people with disabilities and their peers without disabilities is a continuing call for action.

Schur and Kruse identified that nationally the most common reason for people not registering to vote was “a lack of interest in the elections or politics,” although their data is promising in that less people with disabilities than people without disabilities reported that opinion (35.5% of people with disabilities versus 44.1% of people without disabilities). However, as for people with disabilities who were registered voters but did not vote in the 2018 election, illness or disability was the most common reason for not voting (41%). The second most common reason, at 12.1%, that registered voters with disabilities indicated they did not vote was “not interested, felt my vote wouldn’t make a difference.”³

¹ <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/2018disabilityturnout.pdf>

² <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting.html>

³ *Id.*, at pages 9-10.

DRVT, through our Pre- and Post-Election Surveys in 2009 and 2012⁴, found that in Vermont many voters with disabilities identified not knowing how or where to vote, not having transportation to the polls, not having enough information about candidates running for office, and not being interested in voting as barriers to voting. While only a few prior survey participants indicated that they had experienced difficulties voting in the past, those who did reported that their difficulties included: requiring assistance to read the ballot due to literacy issues; requiring assistance to complete the ballot due to mobility issues; experiencing increased anxiety when around groups of people; and feeling that the voting process was intimidating for those who have never voted before. Notably these identified barriers and recommendations to overcome them were remarkably similar to the input received throughout the current Focus Groups.

II. DRVT'S FOCUS GROUP PROJECT: SEEKING INPUT INTO BARRIERS TO VOTING AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

During the Summer of 2019, as part of DRVT's continuing mission to increase voting among Vermonters with disabilities and ensure equal access to the electoral process, DRVT initiated a project to learn more about current barriers to voting for people with disabilities. The project sought to identify whether previous efforts to improve access and turn out were implemented and effective, and to identify new proposed solutions people with disabilities themselves recommend to eliminate continued barriers to voting.

DRVT researched best practices for conducting Focus Groups, including specifically for Focus Groups for people with disabilities regarding barriers to voting.⁵ We developed an overall design for the Focus Group project, a strategy

⁴ <http://disabilityrightsvt.org/pdfs/HAVA/Post-Election%20Program%20Evaluation%20Report%20-%202012%20Final.pdf>
<http://www.disabilityrightsvt.org/pdfs/VP&A's%20PAVA%20Pre-Election%20Program%20Evaluation.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.shoreline.edu/pscme/reports/Y4/FocusGroupGuide.pdf>;
http://www.globallearningpartners.com/downloads/resources/10_Tips_for_Effective_Small_Group_Facilitation.pdf
https://www5.hertsmere.gov.uk/democracy/documents/s33685/20150331AR06_App_2_Barriers.pdf

to implement it, and a budget that was partially funded by the Secretary of State's (SOS) office after their approval. We also identified potential locations to conduct the Focus Groups that would provide a mixed geographical distribution, both urban and rural populations, include diverse cultural factors, and participants with a wide range of disabilities.

DRVT contacted various disability-related organizations around the state, and with their assistance, convened and facilitated a series of Focus Groups seeking input on voting experiences from a wide variety of people with different disabilities. With the SOS's generous contribution, DRVT was able to provide participants with food and refreshments during the Focus Groups and a \$30 stipend for each attendee's participation. (See Appendix A for an example of one Focus Group flyer distributed to publicize and invite participants to the event).

Two DRVT staff were assigned to plan and facilitate a total of 12 Focus Groups of approximately 10 participants per group, with each Focus Group lasting 90 minutes.⁶ A uniform script and the specific questions to be asked of Focus Group participants was developed so that the two DRVT staff conducting the Groups independently would obtain consistent information. DRVT also created and mailed follow up surveys to each Focus Group participant after each group which was designed to elicit additional feedback about the group and collect demographic information.

Focus Groups started with DRVT staff providing a brief introduction about DRVT, the purpose of the group, our intent to publicize the input gathered (in a way that would not be attributed to any specific participant), how individuals would receive their stipends, and laid the foundation for respectful group conversation. The DRVT facilitator then asked an introductory, "ice-breaker question", and moved on to a discussion of voter eligibility criteria and voting rights in Vermont. After conversation and questions about those topics, the facilitator asked the

⁶ This plan was developed pre-COVID-19, before Vermont's State of Emergency was ordered and restrictions involving physical/social distancing were put into place.

following three questions (completing input and discussion on one before moving to the next):

1. Is it important to vote? Why/why not?
2. What are some barriers to voting (i.e. why do some people choose not to vote, or what do people who have voted find difficult or off-putting about it)?
3. What proposed solutions would you suggest that could help eliminate those barriers (i.e. what would encourage you to vote, or vote more often)?

DRVT staff took notes on large poster-size paper, at times with help from participant volunteers, about each participant's answer and read the responses back to participants to assure accuracy and accessibility for all participants. Follow-up questions were asked to elicit more details when warranted and to gauge group consensus or dissension on particular input provided. DRVT displayed each of the posters around the room for easy reference during the ensuing discussions.

III. RESULTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

DRVT facilitated 10 Focus Groups across Vermont between December 2019 and March 2020 with a total of 126 participants.⁷ The groups were held at the following locations:

- Vermont Center for Independent Living in Bennington County;
- The Inclusion Center in Windham County;
- Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired – Peer Associated Learning and Support Group (VABVI-PALS) in Windsor County;
- Health Care and Rehabilitation Services (HCRS – community mental health agency) Life Enrichment Center (LEC) in Windham County;
- Vermont Center for Independent Living in Rutland County;

⁷ The last 2 additional Focus Groups planned, in Addison County and Orange County, were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Another Way Peer Drop-In Center in Washington County;
- 2 separate groups at The Howard Center (community mental health agency) in Chittenden County
- Green Mountain Support Services (GMSS) serving Lamoille and Caledonia Counties;
- Northwest Counseling and Support Services (NCSS) Academy of Learning serving Franklin & Grand Isle Counties.

DRVT is grateful for the assistance provided by peers, advocates, and staff at the Focus Group locations with the planning, scheduling, providing accessible space, and publicizing of DRVT's Focus Groups.

The Focus Groups demonstrated an overwhelming interest on behalf of the participants to help identify and problem solve barriers to voting faced by Vermonters with disabilities. The responses to the three questions asked, and the follow up surveys about the experience of participating in the Focus Groups, provided important and actionable information for DRVT and others to use when developing plans to increase voter turnout among Vermonters with disabilities.

A. Is it Important to Vote? Why or Why Not?

The answer to this question among the majority of participants was a resounding "YES!" The reasons put forth by participants included acknowledgment that voting makes a difference, reiterating the slogan "Your Vote is Your Voice", that voting is a civic duty, and voting makes people feel like an important part of our society. Some participants were adamant that their vote did matter and that voting was "a way to elect or remove officials who have enormous sway over our lives." Participants reiterated that voting was a privilege and that "if you don't vote, you can't complain." Participants also noted that voting was a way to show "our representatives that they have to represent everyone, that people are watching." Motivations for voting were well expressed by participants stating "I can elect officials who will fund the programs I am in and care about, like

disability-related issues...” and “vote for people who won’t cut off people’s benefits.” (See Appendix B for details on specific participant comments).

DRVT concludes from these participant responses that there is a great opportunity to help empower and motivate Vermonters with disabilities to increase their voter turnout based on the various and persuasive reasons identified. Emphasizing through outreach, public service announcements, social media, and in-person/virtual meetings the many reasons why different people with disabilities find it important to vote will help encourage others to become more enthusiastic and committed to voting too.

B. What are Some Barriers to Voting?

The response to this question was of crucial significance because participants from across Vermont reported that they did experience, or were aware of, significant barriers to voting faced by people with disabilities.

Participants identified that accessing polling places for people with mobility impairments remains a concern. Problems accessing polling places identified by participants included: lack of accessible parking at polling places; lack of an accessible route into the polling place; lack of sufficient space in the polling place to move around freely; long lines and a lack of seating while waiting to vote; lack of a fragrance-free environment; the polling place being chaotic and distracting; possibly not being welcoming and offering appropriate supports; and even lack of adequate lighting.

Despite efforts made by DRVT, the SOS and some local voting officials over the years, the Focus Group participants persuasively demonstrated more work is needed to assure that all polling places are accessible and that the public, especially voters with disabilities, are clearly informed of this accessibility.

Participants identified concerns about marking ballots because they were either not aware of the availability of accessible voting machines at the polling place, they did not know how to use the new accessible voting machines, or not being confident the polling officials would be available to provide accommodations, especially if they had not requested them prior to Election. Similar to the concerns raised about accessing the polling places, Focus Group participants expressed that within the community of Vermonters with disabilities the concern over being able to understand and independently mark a ballot remains and should be a high priority for outreach and action going forward.

Participants also reported that lack of accessible information about candidates and political issues was a significant barrier to voting. Some expressed not having the technological means to readily access information while others expressed not being able to read information from candidates or on voting rights in general, due to language proficiency, intellectual disability, or visual impairment. Due to the lack of information accessible to participants and others with disabilities, some participants expressed a lack of confidence in being able to vote and to vote effectively.

Transportation to the polls was frequently identified as a significant barrier to voting. Rural participants reported not having consistent reliable assistance to vote in person at the polls and a lack of adequate public transportation. Several participants identified that inclement weather might also play a role in their ability to get to the polls on Election Day.

DRVT concludes that voter apathy and a distrust of the voting process, important barriers also identified by Focus Group participants, are closely related to the access concerns identified by participants. When voters are not confident they have the information they need to vote, not confident they can get into polling places and effectively cast their own ballot without undue burden because of their disability, and not confident that candidates know about their concerns and will respond to them, the sense of apathy and powerlessness in society greatly increases, suppressing the vote and obstructing the social and therapeutic

benefits of voting in America. As one participant eloquently noted, after voting, “at the end of the day on Election Day it feels good, I can go to bed with a clear mind and say I’ve done my best.” The Focus Groups and their description of barriers to voting in Vermont clearly emphasized that this feeling of belonging and empowerment caused by effectively exercising one’s right to vote is not being optimized in Vermont and that optimizing voter turnout among Vermonters with disabilities is crucial to our overall societal health. (See Appendix C for details on specific participant comments).

C. Proposed Solutions to Eliminate Barriers to Voting

Focus Group participants had a lot to say about solutions to the barriers to voting they had identified regarding physical and information accessibility, transportation and voter assistance opportunities, voter apathy and mistrust of the political system. Participants had many creative ideas to overcome the identified barriers and increase voting by Vermonters with disabilities. These included intensely publicizing, through a variety of media sources, information about candidates, election dates, and the accessibility (including potentially fragrance-free environments) of the polling places. Participants also suggested enhancing voter education early in our school systems for students with disabilities, including information about voting rights of people with disabilities, how to register to vote, and how to cast one’s vote. Many proposed solutions to voting barriers related to assuring that polling places and voting materials were accessible. Accessibility for Vermonters with disabilities would include timely information about how to access voting registration, the voting process and the different ways to vote, candidate positions, how to get to the polls if assistance is needed, and how to cast a ballot. Overall, the theme expressed by Focus Group participants was one of education, inclusion, and accommodation so that voters with disabilities had the same opportunity and the appropriate accommodations to vote as all other voters. (See Appendix D for details on specific participant comments).

While DRVT did not specify this in its original work plan, we learned while conducting the Focus Groups that this forum was a tremendously useful means of disseminating education about voting rights and processes to individuals with disabilities. Throughout the discussions, DRVT was able to dispel misinformation about voting rights in Vermont, provide accurate and often at times new information that was not previously known to participants, and to inform of the various ways to vote afforded to all Vermont citizens. One conclusion from our Focus Group project is that the process of convening Focus Groups, and other similar empowerment efforts, is itself an important tool to increase access to voting for Vermonters with disabilities. (See Appendix E for article published in *The Bennington Banner* about one of DRVT's Focus Groups).

D. Participant Follow-Up Surveys

Along with participant stipends, DRVT mailed follow-up surveys to all Focus Group participants. Of the 126 participants, 24 surveys were completed and returned to DRVT. The survey responses indicated: that the mean age of survey respondents was 49 and median age was 55 years old; that participant disabilities included physical/mobility impairments, visual impairment, hearing impairment, Cerebral Palsy, developmental delay, intellectual disabilities, mental illness, and traumatic brain injury; that about two thirds of survey respondents lived independently; about half had reliable access to transportation; almost all were registered voters; and most participants enjoyed the experience enough to state they would participate in a similar group in the future. Participants were unanimous in their feedback that having participated in the Focus Groups themselves was an empowering and important experience for them in terms of voting enthusiasm and ability. (See Appendix F for details on specific participant comments).

IV. CONCLUSION

The Vermont Secretary of State and participants in the Focus Groups deserve a great amount of thanks and appreciation. DRVT is grateful for our continued

collaboration and partnership with the SOS Elections Division, the time and effort Focus Group participants expended to assist in the effort to improve voting access for people with disabilities, and for the quality of their input, which will lead the way towards a better voting experience. As always, the mandate “Nothing about us without us!” rings true when discussing how to improve voting among Vermonters with disabilities. DRVT believes the results of the Focus Group project are compelling and heartening. People with disabilities across Vermont, as represented by the 126 participants, are eager and willing to participate in the voting process and to help their peers participate as well.

Actionable ideas identified for improvements in outreach to voters with disabilities include:

- 1) increasing opportunities for voter education and improving the accessibility of information about voting, including the process itself and the candidates running for office;
- 2) transportation to the polling place, and to events or venues where voters with disabilities are encouraged to participate in discussions about voting, political candidates, and public policy; and
- 3) increasing opportunities for people to learn about and/or obtain assistance and accommodations to effectively participate in the electoral process.

The imperative to implement these ideas for improvements is also clear given the universal expression that barriers for people with disabilities still exist in Vermont. Working together, and allowing the experiences and ideas of people with disabilities to lead the way, more and more Vermonters with disabilities will exercise their Right to Vote.

Please contact DRVT at info@disabilityrightsvt.org or 1-800-834-7890 for more information or to provide comments on this report.

V. Appendix

A. Appendix A: Focus Group Flyer



**WE WANT
TO HEAR
FROM YOU!**



*****FOCUS GROUP*****

**Barriers to Voting
for People with Disabilities
& Proposed Solutions**

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2019

10:00 AM—11:30 AM

Room 266 (2nd Floor)

Asa Bloomer Building—88 Merchants Row Rutland, VT

\$30 stipend for your participation; Light refreshments will be served

This is a chemical-and scent-free event. For more information, to register and/or to request accommodations such as a sign language interpreter contact

(by Friday, Nov 15th please)

Merry Postemski at 1-800-834-7890 ext. 112 or email: merry@disabilityrightsvt.org

YOUR VOTE MATTERS!

This event is made possible through funding through the Help America Vote Act of 2002 and a generous contribution from the Vermont Secretary of State, Elections Division

DRVT will remain available on site directly following the Focus Group to provide individual assistance with voter registration, absentee ballots, voting rights, etc.

B. Appendix B: Participant Responses – Is it Important to Vote?

Focus Group Participant Responses: Is it Important to Vote? Why or Why Not?

1. It Makes a Difference/Your Vote is Your Voice:

- It's a way to make changes, to effect change at a higher level.
- Who's in office affects what is going on, like policies and laws.
- It's a way to elect or remove officials who have enormous sway over our lives.
- Elected officials will make a difference: maybe we can't make a difference nationally, but we can make a difference here locally.
- We can get what we want for the country.
- My vote matters.

2. It is a Civic Duty:

- It is part of being a citizen.
- It is a privilege that not all people have (such as in other countries).
- We are lucky in our state that we don't need ID to vote.
- If you don't vote, you can't complain.
- The more people who vote shows it is a healthy democracy and shows our representatives that they have to represent everyone, that people are watching.

3. It Gives You the Freedom of Choice:

- I can elect officials who will fund the programs I am in and care about, like disability-related issues.
- We can vote for people who won't cut off people's benefits.
- It gives a good description of what people believe or favor.
- At the end of the day on Election Day it feels good, I can go to bed with a clear mind and say I've done my best.

C. Appendix C: Participant Responses – Barriers to Voting

Focus Group Participant Responses: What are Some Barriers to Voting?

1. Voting Accessibility:

- Physical access to and within the building.
- Lack of available accessible parking.
- Will it [the polling place] be fragrance free?
- Will accommodations be available?
- Having to wait in extremely long lines without seating: “I get tired, I can’t stand for a long time.”
- The environment is loud, chaotic, crowded, overstimulating, and overwhelming, “too much information at once; information overload”, the polling place environment is “not trauma sensitive.”
- The process is intimidating.
- “I can’t understand the ballot.”
- Visual accessibility, “unable to see well”, “lack of adequate lighting in the voting booth.”
- “I can’t read the ballot” (cited by both those with visual impairments and those with language or literacy barriers).
- Having access to ASL.
- Lack of interpreters at polling places (without having to make the request in advance) “having to make accommodation requests often feels burdensome on us.”
- Not knowing that an accessible voting system is available at the polling place, or that the accessible voting system is “too complicated.”
- Not being aware of the many options for voting.
- Time/work schedules/childcare.

2. Information Accessibility:

- A general lack of information or not knowing where to access information.
- Not having the means to access voter education information, including about candidates and what they stand for “I don’t know enough about the candidates to vote”, “I don’t know who to vote for”, “I don’t know enough about the major issues addressed by parties”, or not having enough information about local elections candidates and issues.
- Not having information about how to vote, where to vote (particularly in larger municipalities with different voting wards or precincts), different ways to vote, early and absentee voting options, and the voting process in general.
- “Not knowing that I can vote.”
- “I don’t feel confident enough to vote”, “I don’t know how to vote”, “I don’t understand how to vote.”
- Written materials and candidate information is “hard to read” due to visual impairment, limited English proficiency, cognitive/intellectual disability, or literacy issues.
- Forgetting to vote, “the [election] date slipped my mind.”

3. Distrust of the process:

- A lack of belief that the system works as designed, “I don’t believe anymore I can trust it – are the voting machines safe? Is the outcome legitimate?”, “a rigged outcome already decided.”
- Concerns regarding the electoral college for presidential elections.
- A lack of trust in candidates “it is hard to trust what candidates say”, “what alternative motives might they have”, “voting doesn’t matter - politicians are corrupt”, “they [politicians] lie.”

4. Voter apathy:

- “Not interested in voting.”
- “Thinking my vote doesn’t count.”
- The feeling that “nobody cares what I think.”
- “Apathy, lack of caring, cynicism gives into despair.”

- “Every year I try and every year I am disappointed [with the outcome of elections] so I give up, why bother?”
- Feelings of disempowerment and that the individual’s vote “will not matter”, “candidates don’t care about disability-related issues”, “it feels like our leaders don’t care what we have to say.”
- “Being judged for my voting choices”
- Not enough “fresh faces” running for office, “same old same old names.”

5. Transportation:

- A lack of transportation in general, particularly in rural areas
- A reliance on family members, care providers, or agency staff who are “unwilling” or “unavailable” to bring eligible voters to their polling place on election day.
- Inclement weather impacting the ability to get to polling places.

6. Other barriers:

- Absentee ballot requests are only good for one year (needing to be resubmitted each election cycle).
- “The people in my household don’t vote and don’t support me voting.”
- “Voter registration equals [being automatically registered for] jury duty.”
- Lack of connections to the community, i.e. cultural deaf community.

**Focus Group Participant Responses:
Proposed Solutions to Eliminate Barriers to Voting?**

1. Voting accessibility:

- Assure sufficient accessible parking.
- Assure accessible access to the polling place.
- Have flyers around polling place with contact information about curbside voting.
- Being able to get around in polling place.
- Wheelchair accessibility.
- Provide seating and avoid having to stand for a long time.
- Polling locations should discuss ways to reduce long lines for “big elections”
- For busier polling location e.g. in a “big” election (2020 presidential) add more polling locations to reduce lines/waiting time – this would reduce voting-related stress and anxiety; extend voting hours.
- Make reasonable accommodations [more readily] available.
- Have friendly polling place staff asking all people at polling place if they need anything.
- Polling places should have people on site to help voters especially those that don’t understand how to vote.
- Have people available to read ballot to people.
- Make accessible voting system available for try-out in a safe/no-low stress environment e.g. bring the machine to groups where people with disabilities regularly meet.
- SOS provide each polling place with poster about accessible voting system availability that will be prominently displayed at polling places.
- Have language interpreters available.
- Have ASL interpreters available.
- Fragrance free.
- Make ballots available in braille.

2. Information Accessibility:

- More community education about voting.
- More information and training about voting processes, voting rights, voters with disabilities, ways to vote, early voting, absentee ballots, curbside voting.
- More education in schools about voting. Mock polling places and mock voting.
- Start young; educate children early and often about voting (the 'special' mayoral election in Fair Haven was mentioned in 2 groups as an example of this).
- Provide "welcome packet" when moving to a new city or town with voting information and registration.
- Provide affordable access to the internet and social media to use the online voting portal, to get information on voting and about candidates. This information should be accessible and understandable to all. Use different ways to disseminate information.
- Encourage local groups to help keep people informed of candidates and their platforms.
- Education about the candidates, where they stand on specific issues, history of candidates, etc. Checklists about how candidates have voted in the past.
- Accessible candidate debates. Broadcast debates with interpreters in addition to subtitles/closed captioning.
- Have town/city website pages that identify local candidates' top priorities, candidate statements, voting records and achievements.
- Videos about candidates as well or being able to google candidates (without being required to sign up for their website in order to access more detailed information).
- More education about accessible voting options.
- Bring information to where people congregate i.e. bingo halls, senior centers, colleges, housing centers.
- Make voting information, i.e. registration, absentee ballot requests, and ballots visually accessible, and available in large print and braille
- Have pictures of candidates at polling place.

- Have voter registration agencies also post voting dates and voting information, contact numbers for help to vote.
- Provide more reminders about upcoming elections and absentee ballot request options and deadlines. Post this information everywhere.
- Provide advertisements/notifications for voting and election day identifying that is a fragrance free event.
- Reach out to the diversity of the disability community through all available means e.g. social media, short voting topic videos (absentee voting; curbside voting); collaborate (beyond outreach to traditional organizations/individuals); go to where people are e.g. long term care facilities.
- Distribute DRVT Voter's Guide widely. Get more readable information out to potential voters.
- Create a Voter's guide for local elections in addition to statewide.
- Create a non-partisan website with candidate information.
- Hold more voting-related Focus Groups.
- Provide phone call reminders/phone notification and public service announcements (radio, television, social media) reminding voters of election date.

3. Distrust of the Process:

- Elect officials who will ensure the validity of the vote.
- Paper ballots, make voting machines not hackable and virus free.
- Do away with specific political parties – too divisive the way our system is currently.
- Used ranked voting.

4. Voter Apathy:

- Reconsider age of voting - allow younger ages to vote.
- Provide more opportunities to register to vote - more than at DMV (not accessible where located with no transportation), maybe at post office. Have voter registration agencies advertise that service more.
- Broaden automatic voter registration (similar to what DMV provides when getting license or ID).

- Keeping open mind, dialogue with others.
- Call candidates' offices and tell them to convince me why does my vote matter.
- Have candidate forums.
- Get back to basics without being in a political contest.
- Help people feel that they have a vested interest in the vote.
- Help people understand that 1 vote really can make a difference. Add a "one vote matters" page to DRVT Voter's Guide.
- Provide incentives to encourage local voters to come out to vote and feel like their vote is welcomed.
- Free coffee or donuts. Have free or low-cost snacks/drinks available at polling locations.
- Get paid to vote.
- Make presidential and mid-term election days a holiday.
- Make it a law that people have to vote.
- Make voting a better experience "put positive energy out there."
- "Using your voice, participating in advocacy for change".

5. Transportation:

- Have more buses on the route on Election Day or election specific buses for the election.
- Provide free passes for public transportation on Election Day.
- Create Election Day carpools.
- Have a pool of volunteer drivers to take people to the polls (vetting first for safety).
- Have designated agencies and community organizations make their shuttle vans available for voter rides.
- Provide transportation/rides to the polls: ride-share; SSTA; local bus companies could donate a bus & driver; city buses offer free pick-up and drop-off at the polls; have buses stop at public housing locations and at 'gathering' places; have taxi/cab drivers donate rides.
- Encourage case manager/support staff to provide rides.
- Compile a list of who provides transportation and distribute it widely.

6. Other Barriers:

- Hand-deliver absentee ballots to people in nursing homes, hospitals, other institutions.
- Vote by mail.
- No expiration date on absentee ballot requests (automatically renewed for each election).
- Distribute mass mail-in ballots.
- SOS could implement on-line voting.
- “We need to make sure the people living with a home care provider can vote on their own without influence, pressure or not being able to go at all if they choose [to vote for] someone different than [who] the home provider [chooses].”
- Offer peer support.
- Creating connections to communities/organizations through social media.
- Voting in groups, solidarity.

E. **Appendix E: *Bennington Banner* article**

Group discusses barriers to voting with disabilities

Posted Wednesday, February 12, 2020 7:00 pm

By Patricia LeBoeuf, *Bennington Banner*

BENNINGTON — Transportation issues, a lack of interpreters and general frustration with the voting system are some of the barriers that people with disabilities and mental health issues face when voting, according to participants in a focus group Wednesday.

Disability Rights Vermont, a statewide advocacy agency, hosted the focus group, called Barriers to Voting for People with Disabilities & Proposed Solutions, at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House.

The approximately 10 attendees spent most of the about two-hour meeting discussing voting rights in Vermont, along with barriers to voting on a local and national level, and potential solutions to those barriers.

Merry Postemski, senior investigator with Disability Rights Vermont, told the group that the meeting is one of multiple focus groups being held across the state. Input from the focus groups will be put into a public report.

Postemski began the meeting by explaining Vermont's voting requirements: voters must be registered to vote, Vermont residents, U.S. citizens and 18 years old or older at the time of the election. Vermonters can register to vote even if they are homeless, she said.

Referencing an audience member's statement that she had a criminal history, Postemski emphasized that in Vermont, "if you have any kind of criminal conviction, you can vote."

Those who have a guardian, are in the hospital or are incarcerated can also vote in Vermont, she said.

Lynn Mazza, a peer advocate counselor at Vermont Center for Independent Living, added that Vermont has adopted automatic voter registration.

The state's new automatic voter registration system went into effect in January 2017, and allows voters to register automatically when they receive or update their driver's licenses or other forms of identification at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Mazza asked Postemski about the "question of competency" as it relates to voting as that has come up recently in her work in nursing homes — "Somebody expressed her excitement to vote for Reagan."

Postemski replied that the only way a person's right to vote can be taken away in Vermont is by a judge's order.

Barriers to voting

The group brought up multiple barriers to voting, some specific to those with disabilities and some not.

One woman, who identified herself as deaf, said one barrier can be not having an interpreter at the polling place.

Mazza mentioned transportation to the polls as something she encounters, along with people not being aware that they can request absentee ballots.

"Can I say knowledge?" added another man. "Knowing what people stand for?"

Audience members also mentioned the electoral college system of voting, in which candidates who win the popular vote are not guaranteed to win the election, and the "negative results" of recent elections as reasons why people may not vote, or choose not to vote.

Postemski said that input from focus groups will be used to look at short-term goals that her organization can advocate for, and also inform long-term goals as well.

Accessibility in voting itself was also mentioned.

Postemski said she wanted to impress upon those present that they have many voting options, including voting early at the town clerk's office and requesting an absentee ballot, which can be done in multiple ways, including online, calling and sending a form to the town clerk.

Mazza asked if someone who doesn't read well can have someone come in to the polls with them to help them. "Absolutely," Postemski replied. "[And] you don't have to give any reason why you want that help."

She added that the only restriction is that the accompanying person can't be the voter's union representative or employer.

One woman added that she has never voted before — and "a lot of the stuff, I don't understand what it means."

A lot of things have to do with knowledge and education about voting, Postemski added. "For someone who's never voted before it can be a very intimidating process," she said.

Possible solutions

Toward the end of the discussion, Postemski asked the group what suggestions they had for solutions for the barriers to voting mentioned.

One woman mentioned having connections to the deaf community, through social media, and added that it would be nice to have debates broadcast with interpreters.

In regards to transportation issues getting to the polls, one audience member suggested a car pool for the current volunteer driving efforts, to address concerns about safety. Another suggested adding more public buses on voting day.

Postemski asked about solutions for another problem some people may have — simply forgetting the date of elections.

One man said that state agencies could put up signs that list the date of upcoming elections, and add phone numbers of groups to contact for more information.

"Just to get the message out," he said. "Social services, the DMV, places like that." Cassandra Barbeau, Bennington town clerk, added that people call her office each year, thinking their absentee ballot is still valid, when in reality, absentee ballots require reapplication each year.

"I encourage people to put it on their calendar in January," she said.

At the end of the meeting, Barbeau also briefly walked the participants through sample ballots for this year, including presidential, local and school district elections.

She clarified that these are exact copies of the ballots voters will receive.

The focus group was funded through the Help America Vote Act of 2002 and a contribution from the Vermont Secretary of State, Elections Division, according to a flyer announcing the event.

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F. Appendix F: Post-Focus Group Participant Survey Responses

Post-Focus Group Participant Survey

1. Based on your experience at this focus group, how likely are you to participate in another focus group in the future if given the opportunity?

DRVT provided a rating scale in which 17 of 24 respondents answered “Yes, Definitely!; 4 responded “Very Likely”; 2 replied “Somewhat Likely”; 1 responded “Not Likely”; and no one responded “No Way!”

2. How old are you?

23 participants responded to this question, with answers ranging from ages 25 to 73. The mean age of survey respondents was 49 and median age was 55 years old.

3. Do you have a disability? If yes, please describe:

14 respondents answered yes, 3 respondents answered no, and 7 respondents left this blank. Disability descriptions included physical/mobility impairments, visual impairment, hearing impairment, Cerebral Palsy, developmental delay, intellectual disabilities, mental illness, and traumatic brain injury.

4. Do you live in your own home/apartment? If no, please describe:

17 respondents answered yes, they live in their own home; 7 respondents answered no, with 4 indicating they live with their parent(s) who in some instances were also their guardians, 1 respondent living with a home care provider, and 2 respondents not describing their living situation.

5. Do you have your own car or access to reliable transportation?

14 respondents answered yes, with 1 describing that they are driven by their parents or Case Manager; 9 respondents answered no; and 1 respondent stated “sometimes, depends on the Bus”.

6. Are you are registered voter?

20 respondents answered yes, they are registered voters; 2 said no, they are not registered voters, and 2 were not sure of their voter registration status.

7. Do you have any comments about how the focus groups went? Was there something you really liked about it? Or something that could have made it better?

18 respondents provided comments, with the responses overwhelmingly positive:

- I am glad that I registered to vote and understood the process better
- It was great and answered a lot of questions I had
- She [DRVT facilitator] was great
- The focus group was great, learned a lot and the presenter was great, kept us on track and I thought was in tune with what we were saying
- The focus group gave very solid, easy to comprehend information. I am delighted to say that as a result our group is now 100% registered and 100% of us voted in the Primary!
- I was happy to share my opinions and suggestions. [The DRVT facilitator] was completely engaged with all who wished to be heard. I am available to share on other vital issues. Please keep me on your call list. Thank you!
- Good. Liked [the DRVT facilitator]. Stipend was nice.
- We received a lot of good information.
- I thought it went well.
- I think it went really well. The information was very good. It could have been longer.
- I liked the meeting a lot. I told my brother about the meeting.
- I thought the focus group went well. [The DRVT facilitator] asked great questions and the clients shared their view.
- This class was so helpful. [The DRVT facilitator] was such a great help.
- [The DRVT facilitator] made is so everyone understood what she was talking about.
- [The DRVT facilitator] made it so everyone understood what she was talking about.

- I liked when people come together to solve a problem.
- It was good.
- I like getting together to talk about what interests me.
- [The DRVT facilitator] was good at explaining things.