

August 10, 2020

Good afternoon, my name is Philip Prehn. I am the Statewide Systems Change Advocate for ARISE, Inc. working out of our office in Syracuse. ARISE is the designated Center for Independent Living (CIL) for Central New York. We are a cross disability, consumer controlled and community-based non-profit agency. In existence since 1979, we currently serve more than 8,000 people each year from our offices in the counties of Onondaga, Oswego, Cayuga and Madison.

ARISE actively promotes changes in state policies that will enable more people with disabilities to live independently in the community.

There is no more prized right as a citizen than the right to cast your vote in elections. The hallmark of America's election system—when it is working correctly—is the ability for each individual to cast an independent ballot. It is often difficult for people with disabilities to cast their ballot without help from others.

1. People who are blind or have visual impairments cannot cast an independent ballot with a mail-in paper ballot. During the height of the pandemic, many people wanted to use the mail-in voting option, rather than cast their vote at a public polling place. The Board of Election's main system for this is to simply mail the voter a paper affidavit ballot upon its request. These ballots cannot be cast independently by the blind or visually impaired.

New York State's Accessible Absentee Ballot process utilizing some features of the internet is a confusing system that is not well publicized. It involves requesting information using a form from the state, downloading a ballot using software that and then printing up paper ballots mimicking the paper ballot/envelope system. This system relies on disabled voters to have extensive array of computer equipment. New York State must move more quickly to direct online voting for the visually impaired that can be easily accomplished by a voter with only a smartphone or tablet.

2. Improved training for local poll workers is paramount to ensure effective accessible voting at both early voting and Election Day poll sites. Among the needs that voters with disabilities have reported to our office after elections:
 - a. having poll workers helping to adjust the new iPad style sign-in portal to assist those with poor digital dexterity,
 - b. having the current Ballot Marking Device up and running when a person with disabilities comes into the polling site and requests to use it,
 - c. having poll workers who understand the problems that voters with different disabilities face when at the polls,
 - d. Eliminating the glitch that causes a ballot marking device to temporarily freeze when other voters are using the other side of the device to cast their completed ballot.

3. Our local Board of Election in Onondaga County has informed us during a recent meeting about the voting process that new voting machines will need to be chosen within the next 2-3 years. We renew our call now for New York State to eliminate the requirement for a full-face ballot on all machines—that is the ability to see all candidates for all races on one page.

The full-face ballot requirement eliminates many voting machine types that better serve the disability community than the current ballot marking device. The ability to choose a machine for our County that utilizes the ATM style—multi-screen format is less intimidating to voters, more easily viewed by those with vision impairments and expands the options/lowers the prices for local Boards of Elections seeking to replace aging machines.

It is testimony to New York State officials—both elected and appointed to work on Boards of Elections—that the expansion of the opportunity to vote has been successful in Onondaga County. We urge state officials to continue this expansion by increasing the number of early voting polling sites in Onondaga County.