



# Communication and Etiquette Considerations When Working with Voters Who Have Disabilities

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**Abstract** When trying to provide the most optimal voting experience for voters, it is important to understand who they are and how they see themselves. This is especially true of voters with disabilities. The way individuals identify their disability as a part of their life and how they adapt or adjust to address challenges associated with disability will not always be the same. When serving the public and working with voters, it is important to understand that there are diverse orientations toward diversity and to not assume what type of resources a voter may need to ensure that information is communicated effectively.

**Keywords** Accessibility • Americans with Disabilities Act • poll workers  
• communication

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When one is planning to travel abroad, researching the etiquette and appropriate ways to communicate in the destination country is both advisable and helpful. Just as in international travel, this approach to interacting with the people you meet may be helpful in major cities where different cultures dominate certain communities. Understanding others and how to treat them appropriately is always the key to proper etiquette and effective communication regardless of the differences that may exist.

Throughout the Election Day you will probably find yourself around people who are unlike you in various ways, culturally and physically. Every person you meet has something that is different from you. One may wonder how we can communicate or help others in our work if everyone needs different things. The answers can be found by understanding our differences and responding based on that knowledge. Such is the case with poll site etiquette and effective communication with voters with different disabilities.

Understanding appropriate poll site etiquette and communication are two of the topics covered in a series of online training videos produced by Evan Terry Associates (ETA) for poll workers in New York City.<sup>1</sup> Serving voters who have mobility-related disabilities, such as those who use wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, and canes, will certainly differ from the ways you respond to the needs of voters who are blind, deaf, or have speech-related or cognitive disabilities. To ensure the best results, ETA worked with dozens of voters with disabilities to create poll worker training videos that focus solely on proper etiquette and effective communication with voters with disabilities.

When it comes to exercising their right to vote, people with disabilities are no different from anyone else. Yet historically, the voting rates of people with disabilities nationwide have been significantly lower than that of others. One of ETA's objectives in producing these poll worker training videos was to help reverse that trend. Well-trained poll workers can actually help to make sure that each and every person with a disability has an opportunity to vote in an integrated environment that is both dignified and convenient. We've found that video instruction helps poll workers understand the challenges associated with voting by people with disabilities and how they can help to eliminate or minimize those problems. The videos demonstrate the most common barriers to access that poll workers are most likely to encounter on Election Day and that they can correct.

<sup>1</sup>Training videos are accessible at [www.boevideos.com](http://www.boevideos.com).

*So, what is appropriate etiquette and how can poll workers communicate effectively with voters with disabilities?*

Some voters may consider themselves people with disabilities; some may consider themselves simply as people who live their lives differently. Each person has different strengths and skills. Some people use wheelchairs, crutches, hearing aids, a white cane, or other devices to live independently. To some people, an automobile could almost be considered a mobility device to get them to their poll site because those people would tire if they had to walk a long distance.

As with anything new or unfamiliar, it's not uncommon to be unsure how to best interact with someone who is a bit different from you. You may fear saying something inappropriate or offensive if you've not been around someone with that disability. To help alleviate those fears, the videos give poll workers confidence in how to best interact comfortably with people with a wide variety of disabilities. The key lesson conveyed is to communicate directly with the person and ask them if they'd like any assistance and, if so, how you can best help them.

Some disabilities are obvious while many others are not. This can create a challenge. Just because someone has a visible disability doesn't necessarily mean that they are in need of assistance. That's why help should only be provided when it's requested. If anyone asks for help and it's a simple request, most poll workers can simply provide it. If it's a complicated request, or if it will take much time or otherwise distract one from their assigned election role, you'll need to have a policy about what individual poll workers should do. It may require stopping and helping immediately, referring the voter to a specially trained poll worker, or referring them to the person in charge of the poll site.

There is a good chance that poll workers will come in contact with voters who have limited mobility during Election Day. They might use a wheelchair, a scooter, a walker, or a cane, or they might not have any visible signs of their mobility disability. Take care to respect each person's space. Don't hover over them. Avoid touching them or any equipment they might be using. For most people, that equipment is part of their personal space and should be respected. Most people do not like to be touched by strangers. People with disabilities are usually no different in that. Also, be sure not to ever push someone's wheelchair unless asked. It's their chair and they will want to keep control over it whenever they can. So don't just push them where you want them to go.

Another group of people with disabilities is those who have communication-related disabilities; many are deaf or hard of hearing. These disabilities are not always easy to spot so be alert and think about how to communicate most effectively.

The videos also instill an important part of communicating effectively—the poll workers' attitude. Poll workers are reminded to think about the volume and their tone of voice when dealing with voters, especially those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

It's important not to make any voter feel as if they are an inconvenience. Each poll worker is there to assist and to serve, so let everyone know that's your purpose. Don't be patronizing or talk to anyone like they are a child. If they're voters, they're adults, so treat them that way. Following these key points not only will help make the voting experience more pleasant, but voters will be even more likely to participate in future elections.

Being a good listener is one of the best ways to be an effective poll worker. No voter likes communicating with someone who only cares about putting in the minimum effort and time and does not take the time to listen to them. This is especially applicable with voters who have cognitive, intellectual, mental, or developmental disabilities that affect their processes of perception, memory, judgment, or reasoning. These are usually invisible disabilities. A few examples are dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder, autism, Down syndrome, and dementia.

Be patient, flexible, and supportive when assisting anyone who seems to be having difficulty in the poll site. They may have trouble coping with the crowd, confusion, or noise. They may have difficulty understanding or interacting with you, or even just reading instructions or their ballot. Take time to understand each voter and make sure that they understand you. Be attentive to what they're saying. Listen to them, and don't try to finish their sentences. That might feel like you'd be helping, but in reality you'd just be just cutting them off.

When assisting people with cognitive disabilities, try to limit distractions and keep things simple. Just take everything one step at a time. You may provide assistance in order to help them understand the written instructions but be careful not to tell them for whom to vote. Give them as much time as they need for understanding instructions and making decisions. Your patience and care for these voters will help them feel at ease as they cast their vote.

There are many people who use service animals for reasons that may not be visible or apparent. If a voter says a dog is a service animal, then it

is permitted in the poll site. A service animal is neither required to “wear” identification such as a vest or bandana nor is the voter required to provide documentation that the dog is “certified.” If a dog is not under control, you can have it removed, but that is seldom a problem with trained service dogs. Finally, service dogs are not pets. When service dogs are in a poll site, they are working. That means you should never touch or interact with the animal. These dogs have a special job to do and petting a dog can distract it.

Eye contact is also important for all voters. Looking each person in the eye is a good way to demonstrate that you are focused on them. Speak directly to the voter, especially when communicating with voters who may be accompanied by an interpreter, personal assistant, or family member. The poll worker might need the help of the assistant to communicate with the voter, but keep in mind that it’s the voter you are helping, not their assistant. So make sure the voter is the focus of your attention.

Speak clearly and use short, simple sentences. Don’t pretend to understand if you don’t; it’s okay to ask them to repeat themselves. If they’re having a hard time understanding you, don’t shout. Most of the time volume is not the problem, but rather background noises or the tone or clarity of the speaker’s voice. That’s why it is important to keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth and not to chew gum. This will make the task of reading your lips much easier for the voters who read lips. If the voter doesn’t understand something you’ve said, try saying your question or comment differently. If they didn’t understand you the first time, chances are that simply repeating it again won’t help. Sometimes different words are heard and understood better than others. So try again, but in a way that is simple and clear. Finally, if verbal communication isn’t possible, or, if the voter prefers, have a pad of paper and pen handy for written communication.

Some voters will have speech-related disabilities. Just like when you’re working with a voter who is deaf or hard of hearing, if you don’t understand something the voter said, don’t pretend that you did. Ask the voter to repeat what they said and then repeat it back to them to be sure you understood them correctly.

As children we were taught to treat others the same way we would want to be treated. That is the perfect mindset for poll workers to have as they serve every voter—treat everyone with respect and dignity. It might seem obvious but it’s easy to forget, especially when choosing your words and actions. That’s why it’s important to focus on the person and not their

disability. Put the person first and the disability second, even in choosing your word order. For example, a voter who uses a wheelchair is a person with a disability, not a disabled person. Don't use words like "crippled," "handicapped," or "special needs voter." Those words can be offensive or demeaning to many people.

Voters with disabilities will be more open to communicating their questions and concerns with a poll worker if that worker displays patience and respect for them, their disability, and their thoughts. Simple actions like using a person's name, making eye contact, and actively and patiently listening when a person speaks will make the voter feel appreciated and respected. Actively practicing patience is critical.

Poll workers play a very important role in providing each and every eligible citizen the opportunity to vote without regard to ability or disability. It is important for election officials to direct the hard work and attention of poll workers to the details of communication that provide voters with disabilities with these opportunities. These communication tools are important to use with all voters, and help protect the civil rights of voters with disabilities as well.

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