

**Election Assistance Commission Public Hearing July 17, 2009**  
**Comments submitted by Tennessee Disability Coalition**  
**relative to**  
**2009 Accessible Voting Technology Initiative**

The Tennessee Disability Coalition is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit alliance of 42 groups and organizations in Tennessee that have joined to promote the full and equal participation of men, women and children with disabilities in all aspects of life. Our member groups are predominately organizations operated by individuals with disabilities or their families. Member agencies represent people with a wide range of disabilities, and all ages. Some are disability specific groups, e.g. paralyzed veterans, cerebral palsy, autism, the Deaf and hard of hearing. Others are directed across disability, but are issue focused, e.g. civil rights, independent living, or employment.

The Coalition and its member agencies advocate for public policy that ensures self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of society. Voting is fundamental to protecting the rights of people with disabilities and is therefore central to the Coalition's mission and that of its member agencies. As a part of our mission, the Coalition undertook a nonpartisan voting initiative in 2001 that continues today. Objectives of the campaign are to

- Increase the number of people with disabilities who are registered to vote and the number who vote.
- Decrease/eliminate the barriers to voting for people with disabilities, including policy barriers, access barriers, and social and practical barriers.
- Establish a network of local, grassroots VOTE! Committees that organize for registration, poll access, get-out-the-vote (GOTV), issues advocacy, and election campaigns in their own communities.
- Provide broad-based and targeted voter education on both the voting process and disability-related issues.

Volunteer leaders and staff have served on our state's HAVA committee and assisted with all aspects of implementation. They have worked locally with election officials on accessibility of polling places and voting systems.

The Coalition applauds the efforts of the EAC to support research to identify and develop technological solutions that ensure all citizens can vote privately and independently. Increasing the accessibility of new, existing, and emerging technological solutions in voting is an important goal for all voters, including those with disabilities.

As the Commission establishes its research agenda, we recommend that the EAC include research specific to the methodologies that will enhance consumer ability to effectively use technology in polling places. The issues of poll worker capacity, quality, training,

and knowledge are ripe for examination. The best, most innovative technological solutions are only effective if voters have easy access to effective training and technical assistance.

These frontline election assistants are the primary officials interacting with voting systems, and voters. Not only are poll workers responsible for the accuracy, transparency, and accountability of elections, they are frequently the only source of assistance for people with disabilities who need to enter polling places and use voting systems. In an increasingly complex and changing election environment; one in which there are and will be technological advances, the people who manage and implement the changes and the process are especially critical. The primary human elements at the “street level” of voting are poll workers and voters. This human element should be included in the research agenda.

There are a number of research and evaluation activities that could assist in understanding the scope and nature of challenges faced by the existing pool of poll workers, and tests potential solutions. At the Tennessee Disability Coalition, we are particularly interested in the prospect of increasing the recruitment and use of poll workers who have disabilities. Research and evaluation could address questions about the need for adequate numbers of poll workers, poll worker competency on disability and accessibility issues, best practices for accommodating disabilities in polling places, and expertise with assistive technology.

In our experience, research on voter preparation, voting accessibility, and voting process and system enhancements benefits by the active involvement of people with disabilities as an integral part of every aspect of the research.