

Testimony of Johnnie F. McLean
Election Assistance Commission
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Thank you to the Election Assistance Commission and the Executive Director Tom Wilkey for the opportunity to share experiences and thoughts from the State of North Carolina.

It comes as no great revelation that humans in general and elections officials in particular view any change as suspect. Most of us believe that “if it ain’t broke – don’t fix it.”

As an example, most elections officials were prepared for the end of reasonable administration of voter registration activity as we had known it to exist when the passage and subsequent implementation of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 became reality. Personally, I was pleasantly surprised and amazed when it became obvious that the voter applicant could complete the mail-in voter registration application by him/herself more completely and accurately than those submitted by “registration commissioners” appointed for that purpose.

One reality that I observed in North Carolina’s Department of Motor Vehicles Drivers License examiners is that the more experienced examiners were the ones resistant to the additional duty to offer voter registration to their clients. Those newly hired examiners, however, saw the task simply as part of their job responsibilities from the beginning. There was software added to the drivers license examiners’ computers to ensure the question was asked, however, a change of attitude was necessary to make it work.

It seems to me that accessibility requirements for voters with disabilities or language proficiency challenges will encounter the same mindset. Those precinct officials that have experienced changes during their many terms of service will be the most resistant to new programs. Our State Board’s Executive Director Gary Bartlett has participated in the Accessibility Taskforce and worked for the past several years developing and implementing programs that had as priority and continuing focus, to change the manner in which precinct officials view voters with disabilities. Rather than concentrating on the disabilities, the precinct officials are trained to see them only as voters and to treat them with the dignity and respect all voters deserve.

Training videos in this area have been prepared and widely distributed. They are available on the State Board of Elections website for anyone to view and/or download for use and duplication.

The State Board of Elections staff also developed a checklist survey of polling place accessibility requirements and directed each county board of elections to complete the survey for each polling place. The required participation of the county’s designated coordinator for accessibility matters provided another view for consideration. As part of the survey, each county board of elections was to photograph with a digital camera various portions of the polling place. The results of this program is that any voter in the

State may now view their voter registration records and view the digital pictures of their respective polling place. All voters would have the opportunity to check out any potential individual challenges they might encounter at the polling place and make advance requests for transfers or alternative voting arrangements.

One of the prevalent attitudes encountered at the onset of this project was the mindset that curbside voting was available at each polling place as well as magnifying glasses available in the voting booths and that no additional provisions were necessary. The State Board of Elections took the position that every polling place should be ADA compliant and that curbside voting and/or magnifying glasses alone were not sufficient. As of this date the State Board has issued just over two million dollars in grants to the county boards of elections to accomplish the goal of accessible polling places. The funds were not to be used for voting equipment but to upgrade the physical polling place location.

Usage of the grant funds was approved only for improvements to public buildings utilized as polling places. A few grants were awarded to be used in upgrading privately owned buildings used as polling places if there were some county funds used in the upgrades as well as a somewhat long term agreement with the owners of the private building. This arrangement was encountered in residential areas where no public buildings are available for use as polling places.

The State Elections office maintains communication with disability organizations and known advocates. Annual meetings with these organizations help to maintain a dialogue with these groups and keep matters of common concerns in the forefront. There are a few county boards of elections members from the disabilities community. Their participation in the ADA compliance program is invaluable.

North Carolina, like so many other states, is experiencing a change in the predominant language of its citizens. Currently, the fastest growing segment is the Hispanic community. We are fortunate to have a Special Projects Coordinator on staff with the primary responsibility of development of outreach programs for this growing group. Along with that, he translates into Spanish the ballot instructions for every election regardless of the population percentage reported by the Census Bureau. Only in the past couple of years has our voter registration application form contained the ethnicity category of Hispanic, therefore, we continue to gather that voter registration statistic for future use in program development.

North Carolina has several areas we are developing for compliance with HAVA and the Voluntary Voting System Guidelines. However, I believe an attitude change of election administrators, polling place officials and voters will be the change that receives the least media attention but will have the greatest impact on the elections process. The process for voting is far too precious for us to allow our human nature to control our abilities and determination to do whatever is necessary to make voting available and accessible to all voters.