

May 16, 2006

To: The Common Council Organizational Committee

From: Alicia Sidman, Disability Rights Wisconsin

Subject: **Accessibility of Polling Sites**

Disability Rights Wisconsin (formally the Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy) is the designated protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities across Wisconsin. We receive funding through the federal Help America Vote Act of 2002 to work on voting rights issues for Wisconsinites with disabilities.

Starting in September, every polling site will be required to have an accessible piece of voting equipment so that people with disabilities can vote privately and independently. Clearly, this will be a huge transition for municipal clerks, poll workers and voters.

In conjunction with the pending voting equipment, starting in 2004, the State Elections Board has worked with municipalities to ensure that polling sites are accessible for people with disabilities. Municipalities were required to fill out a self-report accessibility survey created by the State Elections Board and fix all areas where the polling site was not accessible. If this could not be accomplished, then the polling site could be moved to an accessible location.

In the fall of 2004, Disability Rights Wisconsin (then Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy), gathered a group of volunteers to complete the same accessibility survey that was created by the State Elections Board on a few of the polling sites in Madison. Our volunteers identified major accessibility problems that were not identified by City of Madison in the self-report survey that was completed for the State Elections Board. We provided the City of Madison (along with the Municipal Clerk, Sharon Christiansen) a report of our findings in early 2006.

The accessibility problems DRW identified and reported to the City were not addressed prior to the April elections, and this caused people with disabilities problems on Election Day. Since then, however, the City has reviewed the accessibility concerns we identified and has come up with suggested solutions.

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Protection and advocacy for people with disabilities.

This is a great first step; however, the accessibility of polling sites is an ongoing issue. In addition, despite best intentions, I believe there are still access barriers at Madison polling sites that have not yet been identified and resolved. This is because it can be difficult for someone who does not have experience with the identification access barriers to notice problems. Also, many of the accessibility barriers (such as signage, ensuring that accessible entrances are locked, etc.) are variable from Election Day to Election Day, and conditions (such as erosion of concrete, as an example) can cause once accessible features to be inaccessible.

As you may be aware, people with disabilities vote at a rate of 15 percent below the general population and the decreased voting rate has been tied to the barriers that many people with disabilities face at the polls. Clearly, the right for votes with disabilities to have equal access to the electoral process must be a priority.

I recommend that the City of Madison take both an ongoing and a planned approach to addressing barriers for voters with disabilities. It is vital that the approach be linked to results – a decrease in barriers at the polls for voters with disabilities. I think it would be helpful to have a plan, with input with people with disabilities, which identifies the issues and solutions. Some solutions might include:

- 1) the completion of an annual accessibility review by a trained city official for each of the polling sites;
- 2) the increase in the number of poll workers to assist voters with access into the building as well as with the new voting equipment; and
- 3) voting equipment demonstration events for voters to try out the new equipment prior to Election Day;
- 4) a mechanism for ensuring that the planned activities have been completed and followed up upon.

I strongly encourage the Common Council Organizational Committee to take action on this issue.