



## **ADA Live! EPISODE 34: THE DISABILITY VOTE - THE SLEEPING GIANT WAKES UP!**

**Event Date:** July 6, 2016

**Presenter:** Jim Dickson, Co-Chair of the National Council on Independent living (NCIL) Voting Rights Committee

**Host:** Celestia Ohrazda, Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University

**VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER:** (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Good afternoon, and welcome to WADA ADA Live. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, welcome to the 34th episode of ADA Live. My name is Celestia Ohrazda. I am the Information Technology Consultant for the Southeast ADA Center and also today's host. The topic of today's show is "The Disability Vote - the Sleeping Giant Wakes Up"

With us today we have Jim Dickson the Co-Chair of the national Council on Independent living (NCIL) voting rights committee. Jim has been part of the voting rights committee leadership team, which passed The National Voter Registration Act also known as the "NVRA" and the "Motor Voter Act" and the Help America Vote Act also known as HAVA. He has been working to grow the disability vote for 34 years. Last month Melanie Bull and Donna DeStefano from the Tennessee Disability Coalition were our guests, talking about Voting Access and what Poll Workers Need to

Know. I encourage all of you who may have missed episode 33 to listen to the archive on our ADALive website at [adalive.org](http://adalive.org). Jim, welcome to our show.

**JIM DICKSON:** It's an honor and pleasure to be with you

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** This is a very exciting year with the presidential election in November. I'm guessing that many people who do not typically vote during the non-national election years will want to be casting their vote this year. Today our focus of the show is on the disability vote. You have named this episode, People with disabilities, the sleeping giant wakes up. why did you choose this name?

**JIM DICKSON:** I chose it because if people with disabilities voted at the same rate as the abled bodied, that would add at a minimum 3 million more votes in a presidential election. There is more discussion and activity amongst the disability community for this election than I have ever seen. That's a very encouraging sign. Of course, there is along distance between talking the talk and walking the walk so it we will have to see how rigorous and measurable turning out the disability vote becomes on November 8.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Wow, three million more people. That is amazing. Just how many people with disabilities have voted in previous national elections?

**JIM DICKSON:** In 2012, there were 15.6 million people with disabilities who cast a vote. That comes from a superb study done by Syracuse and Rutgers University. That's the good news. We have almost caught up to the voter turnout with the abled bodied in presidential general November elections.

The bad news is that in primaries and off year elections our voter participation rate is terrible. terrible. Less than 15% of us vote in primaries and another huge problem is that many of us who cast a ballot only vote for the first three or four races at the top of the ticket, president, senator and governor and such. As we go down the ballot to the all-important races for state legislators, city council, mayor legislators, city council, mayor, the drop-off rate is huge. And the worst cases the number of people who vote the down ticket races will be a drop-off of two thirds from those who vote for president.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** You said in 2012, 15.6 million people voted in the national election. Just to get an idea, what percentage is that and how do people with disabilities voting behaviors compare with the general population and with other minority groups?

**JIM DICKSON:** There are several ways to describe it. There were nearly twice as many people with disabilities who voted as Latino Americans. There were almost as many people with disabilities who voted as African Americans. The turnout rate, thanks to the great work done by Syracuse and Rutgers, differs amongst different segments of our community. The hearing impaired actually vote at a rate slightly higher than the abled bodied. The blind and visually impaired vote at a rate slightly lower than the abled bodied. And then we move down, people with mobility issues, people with intellectual disabilities, psychiatric brain disabilities vote at a much lower rate. In those communities only about 30% of people with disabilities who could vote actually do vote.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Thank you Jim, my next few questions are about how voting has changed over time. The way we vote has changed a lot over the past 10 years with the advances of technology and everything. How has this affected voting accessibility?

**JIM DICKSON:** It depends on which point in the changes you look. In terms of polling place accessibility, there are still problems though we have seen a steady improvement in wheelchair accessibility. Every polling place has a machine which would allow a blind person like myself or others with disabilities to cast an independent private and security ballot. Most of the time those machines work. Regretfully, often the poll workers don't know how to turn on the accessibility features or don't want to. I believe we are moving to a standard where every device in a polling place that all voters use will have the accessibility features automatically turned on when the machine is turned on for everybody. That will help greatly.

More and more people are voting absentee. While for some elements of our community, marking a paper ballot and putting it in an envelope is doable with the result that about 44% of people with disabilities nationally will cast an absentee ballot, for many parts of the community voting absentee requires loss of privacy. There is technology that is offered to overseas military and other voters which would allow a person to vote privately and securely from their home, computer or their own smartphone. We need to get that offered to people with disabilities as well.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Wow, that sounds like a lot of changes that have taken place. In the future are there likely to be changes in the way as a country we vote that will affect voters with disabilities?

**JIM DICKSON:** I'm sure of that. More and more information both simple ballot, candidate information, find your polling place, check and make sure that your you know where your polling place is, all of that information is on line and annoys me no end that many election websites are not accessible. Election officials think if they put a pdf ballot up it will be accessible and it's not. It's particularly annoying because companies like democracy live and others who sell products and services to election offices have the capacity to make the website accessible, the sample ballot accessible. Many places in the world offer the voter a choice in when or how to vote. You can go to the polling place. Some places in the country we have early voting which is a big boon to people with disabilities because it means the there are fewer places to put the equipment and most election offices have been very good about placing early voting sites easily accessible to public transportation.

And other parts of the world and only in Alaska in this country a person can vote from their home, using electronic equipment. Estonia votes totally on the internet. No polling places. Other countries around the world are moving to no polling places. Electronic voting not only makes it accessible and eliminates the accessibility problems, though NICL believes we will still need polling places and people should be offered a choice. But electronic or digital voting reduces errors, speeds up the count, most Americans don't know that maybe i shouldn't say this, but depending on the type of system you vote on, between about half a percent and about two and a half percent of all people who cast a ballot will not get it counted. Paper has particularly high failure count rates whether you vote in the polling place or by mail. Going to digital voting will reduce those failures to count rates significantly.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** These statistics are startling. ADA Live listening audience, if you have a question about voting access or the disability vote, please submit it at any time at our online forum at ADAlive.org. Now a word from our sponsors.

**ANNOUNCER:** The National Council on Independent Living is the longest-running national cross-disability, grassroots organization run by and for people with disabilities. Founded in 1982, we have represented thousands of individuals with disabilities and organizations including Centers for Independent Living, Statewide Independent Living Councils, and other organizations that advocate for the human and civil rights of people with disabilities throughout the United States. To Learn more about The National Council on Independent Living visit their website at [www.ncil.org](http://www.ncil.org)

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Welcome back to our show. We're talking with Jim Dickson about voting access and the disability vote. Let's switch gears here. We were talking about the disability vote and how voting has changed over the last 10 years. Now let's talk about voting accessibility. Last month NBC reported that many polling places themselves that were used in the 2016 primaries in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia were not accessible. Does it do any good for people with disabilities to complain if their local polling place is inaccessible?

**JIM DICKSON:** Yes. there are still problems. It's outrageous, on the plus side we have seen some progress. Folks should complain to their local independent living center. Or you can actually go to the Department of Justice and file an ADA complaint. Be sure to mention the day you were there and the actual address of the polling place. The Department of Justice has brought several suits to enforce accessibility in voting and there are more in the pipeline. Also on the problem of inaccessible on line voter registration websites, just last week the Federation for the Blind and the Independent Living Center at New York city filed the suit in federal court because New York State's on line voter registration system is not accessible. There is no doubt that we are going to win. That our lawyers will make a lot of money. And hopefully the judges will make the decision in time to affect this presidential election.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Thank you, Jim. This question is a follow up to that question. If somebody is already at the polling place and they are experiencing problems voting, you don't have the time to file a complaint and things like that because they want to get their vote cast. What can you do at that point?

**JIM DICKSON:** You can call 1-800-OUR-VOTE and actually speak to an attorney. In addition to that, you can prepare yourself. There is on line some invaluable information. The United States Election Assistance Commission, eac.gov, has put together a packet of information for election officials and citizens on what the law requires, on how to be accessible. It's called Ready16. As part of that they have also produced a Disability Bill of Rights which is the official statement of the United States Government. You can download it from our website and also see [ncil.org](http://ncil.org), and go to the vote page. And you can also find it at the Department of Justice ADA website.

I encourage people to make sure that their local election officials are using the ready16 materials which again are at eac.gov. And folks should download and widely distribute the Disability Voters Bill of Rights. The Election Assistance Commission also has them available in braille.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Thank you Jim. Those sound like very valuable resources. Just to highlight, if you are at the polling place the number to call will be 1-800-OUR-VOTE. And the resources are Ready16 and the Disability Voters Bill of Rights. We will make sure that we post those on to the resource section for this episode. Before we continue here is a word from our sponsors.

**ANNOUNCER:** The Southeast ADA Center is your leader in providing information, training, and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government, and individuals at local, state, and regional levels. The Southeast ADA Center is a member of the ADA National Network and serves eight states in the southeast region. For answers to your ADA questions contact the ADA National network at 1-800-949-4232.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Welcome back to our show. We're talking with Jim Dickson Co-Chair of the National Council on Independent living (NCIL) Voting Rights Committee about the disability vote. I understand that voting accessibility can still be an issue for many people with disabilities. How can anyone with a strong interest in disability issues improve voting access?

**JIM DICKSON:** There are several things that can and should be done. I'm also going to say that we can't allow lack of access to prevent us from casting a vote. We got the ADA crawling up the steps of the U.S. capitol. if you have to crawl to vote, I think you should. but there is a lot that can be done. Number one, reach out to your local independent living center and offer to join their voting rights committee. Number two, you can reach out to your local elections office and request to be on their accessibility working committee and if the local office doesn't have such a committee, we should urge the office to create them. I would say 65, 75% of local election offices have already in place an accessibility working committee that meets two times a year. And it's a vehicle to provide advice on how to improve access. Also, last but not least, contact your local election office and volunteer to be a poll worker. Nobody knows more about accessibility than those of us who have disabilities. And you will get paid for the day. And if you are on social security, you do not have to report the income. Depending on your local election laws, the pay for a poll worker will with run at a low of \$50 to as high as three hundred for the day. Many election offices also offer split shifts so if transportation or stamina limit your ability to work for 12 hours, you can put in a four or six-hour shift.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** Thank you, Jim, sign me up. Are there resources that voters with disabilities should use not only to educate themselves about access to voting but also to reach out to their local election office to make sure the office has these resources?

**JIM DICKSON:** yes. there is a wealth of material on the website of the American Association of People with Disabilities, [aapd.org](http://aapd.org). And I would encourage people to look there. All around the country local coalitions are springing up called REV UP The Disability Vote. And there are materials there so that you can get create one in your

state or get in touch with the existing rev up campaign. There is also material available at the Department of Justice website, [doj.gov](http://doj.gov). under their voting and disabilities sections. And there is a wealth of material at [ncil.org](http://ncil.org). Lastly, any listener can feel free to e mail me directly at [james.charles.dickson@gmail.com](mailto:james.charles.dickson@gmail.com).

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** That's is very generous of you to give us your e mail address and we can reach out to you directly. And ADAlive listening audience, we will post these resources on the [adalive.org](http://adalive.org) website so we can have them all in one place. Jim, we are almost out of time but I have one last question for you. Accessibility is important, what can the community do to increase the voter participation of people with disabilities?

**JIM DICKSON:** It is very important that people with disabilities start running for office. That will increase the turnout when we have accounts who know about disability and campaign on it. We can learn a great deal from other minority groups. Begin by running for local office. County councils, school board, city council, state legislature. There are a number of disability leaders now who actually sit in state legislatures, town councils, et cetera, but we need many, many more. We need to be growing a bench so that we will come to the day when people with disabilities are running for mayor, governor and president to the United States - running on a disability platform.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** This has been an excellent show and very informative. I have learned so much. It's a pleasure to have you.

**JIM DICKSON:** I'm glad to do it. next week, July 11 through 15, is National Disability Voter Registration Week. I hope all of your listeners will participate, not only by registering to vote, but by registering up the vote. You can reach out to [revup@aapd.com](mailto:revup@aapd.com) to learn more about next week's disability voter registration week.

**CELESTIA OHRAZDA:** It is a pleasure to have you on our show. I would like to thank Jim Dickson, Co-Chair of the National Council on Independent living (NCIL) Voting Rights Committee. This show will be archived on our website, [ADALive.org](http://ADALive.org), please share this episode with friends and colleagues that may be interesting in voting accessibility and the disability vote. and thank you also to our ADA Live listening

audience. The Southeast ADA Center is grateful for your support and participation in this series of WADA ADA Live broadcasts. You may submit questions about any of our ADA Live topics by going to [ADALive.org](http://ADALive.org). Please join us the first Wednesday of the month at 1:00 Eastern for another episode of WADA ADA Live.

**VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER:** (Music) Thank you for listening to ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center. Remember to join us the first Wednesday of each month for another ADA topic, and you can call 1-800-949-4232 for answers to your ADA questions.

\*\*\*

REMOTE CART PROVIDED BY:  
ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION SERVICES, LLC  
P.O. BOX 278  
LOMBARD, IL 60148

Remote CART, Communication Access Realtime Translation, is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be an exact record of the proceedings.