

Separate but Equal

Eugene summit tackles challenges faced by voters with disabilities.

If you were told you couldn't vote unless someone else came inside the polling booth with you, or punched a mail-in ballot for you, what would you do?

Long shut out of casting ballots in privacy, people with disabilities nationwide have typically had to rely on someone else's help to read, write or physically manipulate voting materials. Sometimes, polling stations can't even accommodate wheelchairs, and millions of adults with mobility, vision or cognitive disabilities have given up on the idea of voting. Many have never even registered.

"For many of us, voting is something we hear about but haven't done," says Lynnae Rutledge, a manager for the Department of Human Services and a cofounder of the Lane Independent Living Alliance (LILA).

Alicia Hayes tells the story of going to vote soon after becoming disabled at 18. Her father let her off at the curb so she could cast her ballot while he parked the car. But the polling station wasn't wheelchair accessible, and Hayes had to have the ballot brought outside to her.

"And there, on the curb, I came out to my (Republican) father for the first time as a Democrat," Hayes says, eyes twinkling. Now the director of the Department of Children and Families and ADA coordinator for Lane County, Hayes says, "So you can understand why I am all for private, independent voting."

In Oregon, over half a million people or more than 21 percent of adults have some kind of disability. When specific attempts are made to reach voters with disabilities — such as Marion County's effort since 1997 to provide blind voters with tactile ballots — turnout rates far exceed those of the general population.

Change is happening slowly. Last year, prompted by the 2000 election fiasco, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which attempts to overhaul voting systems across the country. HAVA has been called a "civil rights bill" for voters with disabilities, requiring states to improve disabled access, privacy and independence through the use of electronic voting devices. Oregon has received \$6 million to date to implement HAVA, with tens of millions more to come.

LILA recently organized a summit with state and county election officials to increase awareness of difficulties faced by voters with disabilities, and to obtain commitments in Oregon beyond HAVA requirements. Paddy McGuire, deputy secretary of state, Frank Garcia, Oregon HAVA manager, and Peter Sorenson, Lane County commissioner, attended the summit along with 125 others. Several summit speakers with disabilities, including Hayes, shared their voting experiences to illustrate a long-standing problem.

Carole Patterson, the organizer for LILA, said her first experience in advocacy was helping disabled voters at the Texas polls about 15 years ago. She drove a quadriplegic man to the polling station, and remembers an election worker trying to assist him: "Would you like to vote for Bob Smith, or would you like to vote for some woman?"

"His experience was certainly not equivalent to other voters' that day," said Patterson. "I realized ... that it is often unintentionally

that people with disabilities are disenfranchised from voting."

Patterson spoke in place of the listed keynote speaker, Jim Dickson, who was in Florida testifying against the city of Jacksonville for purchasing new voting equipment "in clear violation" of the Americans with Disabilities Act. A letter from Dickson, the vice president of the American Association of People with Disabilities, called Oregon "the ideal state" to solve "a problem that affects millions of disabled Americans."

Patterson explained ways states could fulfill HAVA requirements: by recruiting people with disabilities to train election workers or to work as election staff and volunteers themselves. She also suggested making election websites accessible to adults with sight problems, and simplifying language in voter pamphlets to help adults with cognitive disabilities.

The day's events included side demonstrations of new electronic voting technology. A stubby black computer occupying a back room was actually a \$3,600 voting machine by Avante International, of the kind that HAVA requires all states to install. The machine uses extra large displays and spoken word for voters with poor vision.

Mary Lee Turner, a rehabilitation teacher and mobility instructor for the Oregon Commission for the Blind, put her white cane aside to try her hand at voting alone using the audio mode.

A metallic voice led Turner through the instructions. The gathered crowd burst into laughter at one point when the voice intoned, "If you select the wrong candidate, please do not panic." There would be a chance to verify and change selections before the final ballot was cast, it explained.

"That is so cool," Turner said after she was finished. "The voice sucks, but hey."

"That was the first time I've ever voted by myself," she added. Before this, Turner said, she would get a free cassette version of the Voters Pamphlet, and the League of Women Voters Guide, "but it's hard to do all that, and to know what's going to be on the ballot," she admitted. Such guides only helped disabled voters who already knew where to look prior to an election, Turner said.

For those who may not be able to venture outside their home to cast their vote, the access summit had an experiment of sorts to offer: telephone voting.

Deputy Secretary of State McGuire tried out a demo on a cell phone in front of the summit audience. While calling it "way cool," McGuire pointed to some areas for improvement and explained there was a "statutory problem with implementing this system in Oregon." Right now, he said, Oregon defines a ballot as a piece of paper, and a telephone system would not be acceptable under current state law.

With \$44 million earmarked for Oregon to fulfill HAVA requirements, "We have to have vision to make things possible that others may tell you are not," Patterson concluded at the summit.

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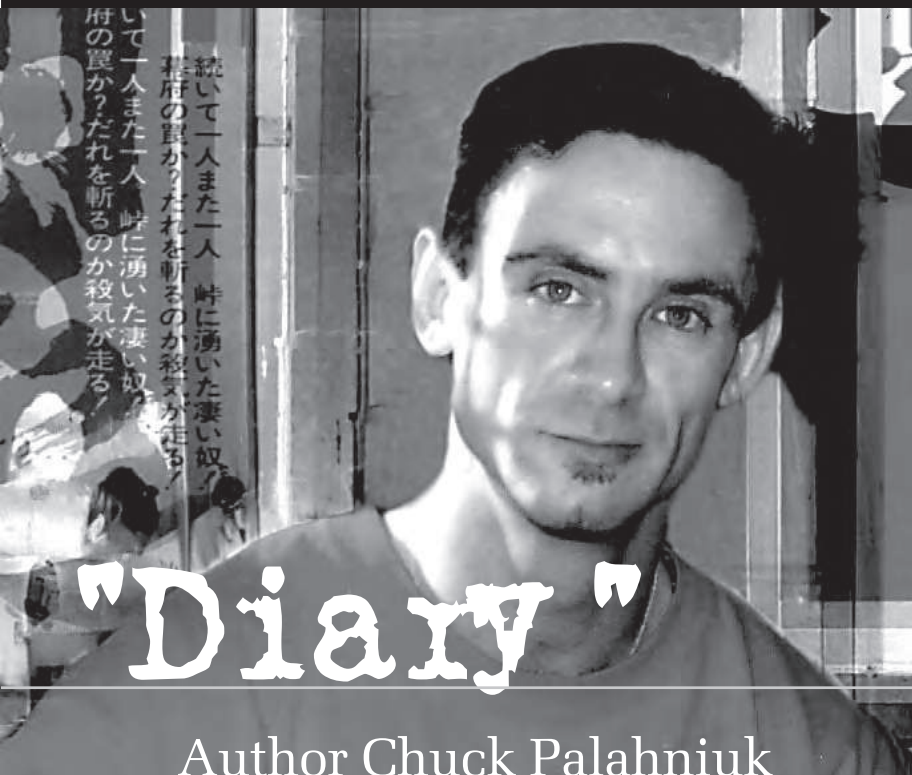


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