

Exercise Your Right to Vote



“Basically, I’m a second class citizen.”

That’s how [Kathy Hoell says she feels when she is trying to vote](#). Hoell is a wheelchair user who also has a “strained and raspy voice” because of a brain injury. She says that when she has gone to vote, she has been led to stairs she cannot climb and told she cannot use an accessible voting machine because it has not been turned on. She has also actually been told she is not “smart” enough to vote.

Those of us with mobility impairments know the physical and emotional difficulty of trying to get to places that are not designed for us. When you must crawl up stairs that do not have railings (as I have done), it is exhausting and humiliating. But when those barriers keep us from voting, it is downright un-American and, in many cases, unlawful.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the **Help America Vote Act (HAVA)** require that polling places be accessible, and list in great detail what that is supposed to look like. Among other things, polling places must have accessible parking, ramps, curb cuts and unobstructed pathways to the voting booth. Polling places must also provide auxiliary equipment (such as voting machines that assist people with visual and manual dexterity problems).

This sounds great, and many improvements have been made. However, a 2016 inspection from the [Government Accounting Office](#) revealed that [nearly two-thirds of 137 polling places](#) had at least one impediment to accessible voting. These problems included a lack of

the requirements listed above, as well as a shortage of trained poll workers.

These laws have been around for decades, so why aren't more polling places in compliance? Most likely, it is because not enough people have challenged the conditions they find when they go to vote. Many people with disabilities simply are not aware that they have these rights, and they are often not included in campaigns to get out the vote.

But this is changing: Around the country, organizations like the [National Multiple Sclerosis Society](#) and the **AARP** are publicizing information about the voting rights of people with disabilities, and encouraging community organizations to contact their polling places in advance to inquire about accessibility.

People can also [file complaints with the U.S. Department of Justice \(DOJ\)](#). The DOJ has taken many of these complaints and filed lawsuits against government entities for lack of accessibility. A lot of these suits have resulted in settlements where the county or city agreed to make their polling places accessible.

In conclusion, contact local community organizations (and your county elections department) and ensure that your polling place will be accessible on that crucial day. **AND THEN GO VOTE!**