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Disabilities advocates push for better voting access

By: [Andrew Nicla](#) November 1, 2019



Renaldo Fowler (Photo by Andrew Niclas/Arizona Capitol Times)

All Teresa Moore wants is a fair shot at the fundamental right to vote.

A Midwest native, Moore, who has cerebral palsy and relies on a wheelchair, moved to Arizona in the 1990s, became involved in voter advocacy and is now a board member of Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE), which pushes for policies for a voting bloc she says has historically been inadvertently overlooked and put at a disadvantage

“We want to be seen,” she said. “We want people to know that voting is important to us, and to have that right to go to the polls and make that statement is something that we want to do and that we do participate in.”

SABE's priorities include better training for polling workers, improving website accessibility, and, most importantly, allowing people with guardians to vote. Advocates said if politicians and election officials take more time to consider how current laws and practices affect access to voting, tens of thousands of Arizonans would benefit.

About 35 million Americans with disabilities are registered to vote and have disabilities that affect how they look, communicate, move and think. In order to better serve them and make the voting process as easy as possible, Congress has, over the years, passed a number of laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Help America Vote Act of 2002.

But Renaldo Fowler, senior staff advocate at the Arizona Center for Disability Law, says there's much left to be accomplished.

What has made his work a little easier, Fowler said, is that Arizona election officials, such as Maricopa County Recorder Adrian Fontes, have been receptive to the issues that advocates have raised. He said Fontes meets twice-a-year with advocates at roundtables, where they discuss what the county can do to increase the number and quality of accessible voting machines, which can enlarge text, read ballot measure explanations to voters and be raised and lowered.

Over the past 10 years, Moore said, the county has ensured that at least one of these machines is at every polling place. A lot of people with disabilities, however, don't ask to use these machines because they aren't aware they have that option.

Advocates also suggest increasing curbside voting, increasing voter registration and awareness among the disabled community, and improving poll worker training on accommodating voters with disabilities.

Oftentimes, polling places can become crowded, confusing and overwhelming for everyone, said Moore, who has volunteered as a poll worker and has seen its shortcomings.

The reasons for these complications are numerous, interconnected and differ between urban and rural counties, Moore said. In urban counties, fewer polling places exist, which leads to larger crowds and confusing lines. Rural counties, too, have fewer polling places but they are also often further away. Many had been moved after being found to not fully comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

A recent survey from civil rights groups found that Maricopa County closed 171 polling locations, or about a quarter of them, between 2012 and 2018. Also, 320 voting sites in 13 of the state's 15 counties had closed, the second most in the nation. Fewer polling places, some of which had been closed and moved without much notice, can confuse people, especially those who are mobility challenged and have to plan their days around voting, advocates said.

While solving that issue will take more time, Fowler said ensuring everyone's ability to vote, particularly those who rely on guardians to help them make decisions, can be tackled sooner. In

most states, some people with disability cannot vote because they are found to “lack capacity” or are “incompetent” – unless they modify their guardianship before a judge.

Arizona has a limited guardianship provision that allows people who cannot manage certain aspects of their lives, while fully capable of managing others, to vote. The problem is a lack of awareness of this law, Moore said, suggesting doing away with the guardianship hurdle completely.

Advocates singled out Sen. Michelle Ugenti-Rita, R-Scottsdale, as having unintentionally put people with disabilities at a disadvantage.

SB1072, which Ugenti-Rita sponsored and shepherded to Gov. Doug Ducey’s desk, requires voters to present identification, such as a driver’s license. Advocates said this disadvantages those with disabilities because they may not have the same access to a traditional license for a number of reasons.

Ugenti-Rita said she is open to having conversations to help ensure she and other lawmakers don’t unintentionally create hurdles.

“The overarching desire to want to make voting as accessible as possible is a universal desire,” Ugenti-Rita said, adding that the state should be open to reasonable accommodations. “If there’s an opportunity to fix the system or address it in a way that maintains election integrity, I don’t see why that would be a problem,” Ugenti-Rita said. “We want to make sure everybody has an opportunity.”