

## Ensure Every Vote Counts

By Raegan Bartlo, VP Communications

The disability community is a large member of the electorate. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act has been around for 30 years, people with disabilities still face significant barriers at the polls. This year's election may present the greatest challenge yet – the coronavirus. As state officials prepare for the upcoming elections, they must ensure secure, safe, and accessible voting options so that every vote counts.

People with disabilities accounted for nearly 17% of eligible voters in the 2016 election, totaling 35.4 million people. And if we account for eligible voters who have a household member with a disability, that number nearly doubled with 62.7 million eligible voters of the total electorate (Doug Kruse & Lisa Schur, Rutgers University).

Too often when we think of people with disabilities, we tend to think of someone fully blind or in a wheelchair, but many tend to forget about people with partial visual impairments, and the limitations of senior citizens and veterans. Many people with disabilities also have underlying health issues making them more susceptible to the coronavirus. Nearly all social distancing guidelines today call for those who fall within a vulnerable population to continue to shelter in place, even extending the warning to household members cautioning that by reengaging with society they carry the potential of bringing the virus into their home.

Accessible voting for people with disabilities presents both physical and electronic challenges. The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) observed polling place accessibility at 178 polling places in 2016. Of the 178 polling places, 60% had one or more potential physical impediments. Of the 137 where GAO was able to fully examine voting stations inside the polling place, 65% had a voting station with electronic voting systems that could impede the casting of a private and independent vote.

I recall the 2004 elections; I was standing in the cold Ohio night air encouraging people to remain in line to vote. For people with disabilities, they may not physically be able to endure long lines or harsh November weather, but this year they may also face great risk of infection if coronavirus resurgence predictions become reality.

Therefore, going to the polls this November may not be feasible for our most vulnerable citizens. As state governments scramble for secure and safe voting solutions, they need to consider every option for accessibility for people with disabilities to vote. The

Wisconsin health department reported that 36 people tested positive for the coronavirus after standing in line at the primary polls in April.

To be clear, accessibility is meant in every sense of the word – physically and electronically. States should select polling locations that have easy, safe access for those who wish to vote in person. This includes proper social distancing and safety measures. People with disabilities should be able to cast their vote privately without assistance. As an example the voting systems should be operable with screen readers. Users should also be able to cast their vote using keyboard navigation. Machines need to be placed at a level easily accessible to those in a wheelchair. Paper ballots, whether used at the polls or for mail-in or absentee voting, should include braille for the visually impaired.

Online voting registration already exists in almost every state in the nation. Therefore, online voting is not far behind and some states have already taken steps to ensure online voting for people with disabilities. Delaware allowed its voters with disabilities to cast their 2020 primary vote electronically. West Virginia passed legislation allowing the use of technology for voters with disabilities, and it was the first state in the nation to allow overseas and military voters to use an app to vote in the 2018 midterms. Electronic ballots must be digitally accessible to people with disabilities, meaning easily navigated and understood by all users of varied abilities, including those who have visual, auditory, motor, or cognitive disabilities.

Electronic ballots are still in their pilot phase. There are understandable cybersecurity concerns, but as an innovative nation, we are confident that tackling electronic balloting is on the horizon. User1st stands ready to work with state officials and cybersecurity professionals to ensure that every vote is counted. We support secure and safe elections, but this also extends to the health of our most vulnerable populations.

When preparing for what may be the highest election turnout in voter history during a pandemic, state officials need to ensure security, safety, and accessibility so that every vote counts. People with disabilities have a voice. They have a vote. Let their vote count by providing accessible options for everyone.

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### **About Raegan Bartlo**

[Raegan Bartlo](#) serves as Vice President of Communications at User1st. An award-winning speechwriter, her career began in political communications including a duration as a George W. Bush Presidential Appointee from 2003-2006. She has worked in the public

and private sectors, at the state and federal levels, to advance public policy and organization goals.

### **About User1st**

Founded with the purpose of making the power of the internet accessible for persons with varied and changing abilities, User1st provides the most advanced web accessibility SaaS solutions on the market for testing, remediation, monitoring, and compliance. User1st's solutions are deployed in a variety of industries worldwide, including financial services, retail, government, education, and healthcare. For more information, visit <http://www.user1st.com> and follow User1st on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).