



DENISE W. MERRILL
SECRETARY OF THE STATE
CONNECTICUT

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For more information:
Patrick Gallahue: (860) 509-6255
Cell: (860) 463-5939

- PRESS RELEASE -

NEW VOTING DEVICES FOR VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES

Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill announced today that Connecticut will have a new accessible ballot marking system at polling places statewide on Election Day Tuesday, November 8 that is designed to improve the voting experience for people with disabilities.

Secretary Merrill said, "We know that people with disabilities are some of Connecticut's most active and engaged citizens and that they will be a force in this year's presidential election. We want to make sure that when they turn out to vote this November, they have the most high-tech services available."

The new stand-alone, tablet-based system requires no telephone or internet service and is intended to be adaptable to a variety of assistive technologies. The tablet system is a ballot-marking device that replaces the previous phone-fax technology.

The previous system required poll workers to use a designated telephone with a secure, pre-registered number to enter the system. Voters were then given a telephone handset after the calls were answered by a computer system that provided an audio ballot. Once the call ended, the ballot was faxed to the polling place.

Faxed ballots differed in appearance from ballots used by other voters, and thus were identifiable, potentially violating the privacy of the voters with disabilities that had used the system. Under the new system, the ballots of individuals with disabilities are fed through the same tabulators that count the ballots that are manually completed by other voters at the polling place.

The winning bid, in response to an RFP issued by the Secretary of the State's Office, was put forward by IVS LLC, an experienced election service company specializing in accessible voting technology. The tablet system will be available at polling places in every town in Connecticut. In addition to polling places, the new machine will be available to individuals with disabilities who

utilize the state's same day voter registration procedure and wish to vote at the Election Day registration site.

How the New Technology Works

The new technology includes a tablet and a keypad with headphones. Individuals may vote using the touch screen on the tablet, or by using the connected audio system on the keypad. The audio system, which includes headphones, works by a series of cues requiring voters to push different buttons on the telephone-style keypad to make choices for each office. Both the touchscreen and the audio provide voters with the opportunity to review and revise their choices.

After the individual has completed voting (by either touchscreen or keypad) a printer marks a paper ballot that reflects the voter's choices. The voter then feeds the ballot through the same tabulator used by other voters; the marked ballot can be scanned and counted just as any other ballot.

For Connecticut voters who have been using vote-by-phone over the past decade, the process of voting will be very much the same, except that the voted ballots are marked on an attached laser printer instead of being faxed to the polling place. The audio component may be preferable for people with visual impairments; people who prefer audio cues, including individuals who have difficulty reading; and people with learning disabilities.

Voting with a Disability

The Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities also notes that if a voter requires assistance to vote by reason of disability or inability to write on or read the ballot, assistance may be provided by a person of the voter's choice. The only categories of individuals prohibited by state law from providing such assistance are the voter's employer, an agent of the employer, an officer or agent of the voter's union, or a candidate on the ballot (unless that candidate is a member of the voter's immediate family).

"The law requires that every registered voter have an opportunity to vote independently and in privacy at a polling place, regardless of disability," said Gretchen Knauff, of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities.

The Office has developed a handbook, "A Poll Worker's Guide to Assisting Voters with Disabilities in Connecticut," which has been provided to Registrars of Voters in all communities throughout the state. The handbook includes information on accessibility, assistance, accommodation and resources, to guide people working at polling places in their interactions with voters with disabilities.

Additional information is available from the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities at (860) 297-4300 (voice) or (860) 297-4380 (TTY). Toll-free is (800) 842-7303 (voice/TTY). The website www.ct.gov/opapd also has information about voting for persons with disabilities.