

# ELECTION CENTRAL



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## Making Voting More Accessible

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly 56 million Americans live with some type of disability. Within the 56 million disabled Americans, many struggle to make their voices heard on Election Day while being a group of people that desperately wants to participate in the process.

In the 2020 election, 17.7 million people with disabilities voted and roughly 2 million reported having some kind of difficulty casting their ballots.

Our office regularly works with employees from Dominion Care, a company dedicated to developing life skills to people with intellectual disabilities.

Sandra Ward, state director of waiver services at Dominion Care, said everyone who wants to vote, should be able to vote.

"It's important for people to be able to get into the hospital or into the post office. It's also important to help everyone find ways to access voting," Ward said.

Ward said the government often makes decisions that impact Americans with disabilities.

"Medically, autonomy, funding for different things that are really life or death for some people. It's important for their voice to be heard," Ward said. "There are able-bodied people in the government making the decisions. The voices of people that need those specific services or funding are never taken into consideration, it's a failure on the community level."

Ward said she started with her work when she was a teenager babysitting for a family with three autistic children. From there, she started working in children's group homes then in adult group homes.

Melissa Balmer, activity and skills coordinator at Dominion Care, worked together with Ward this past Election Day with our office, visiting six different precincts. Balmer also helped our office coordinate a mock election for Dominion Care clients last month and she was eager to help our office again.



Melissa Balmer on the left and Sandra ward on the right



Client from Dominion Care participating in the mock election

“Individuals that identify with developmental disabilities are immediately put into a category by society that say they’re not fit to vote or that they shouldn’t have the right to vote,” Balmer said. “The truth is that these individuals have the right to do everything that anyone else does.”

When visiting the precincts, Ward and Balmer follow ADA guidelines and look for physical accessibility in each location, which includes making sure that there’s a ramp and appropriate height and locations for signages.

Our office has a lot of work ahead of us in order to improve the polling locations’ accessibility.

Some polling locations’ signage were not easy to read or hung too high, doors were too heavy, or not wheelchair accessible. These are issues that may prevent a voter with disabilities from voting.

Balmer and Ward’s feedback is being heavily taken into consideration for future elections. Our office greatly appreciates their work in helping us make voting more accessible for everybody.

While we emphasize in each election that in-person Early Voting, absentee ballots, and curbside voting are available to everybody, we also want to make sure that voters with disabilities can vote the same way as able-bodied voters on Election Day. It is important to us that everybody can vote with privacy and dignity.

## Did you know?



- Express Vote machines are located at every polling location in Richmond, not the entire state of Virginia. Many localities use ADA voting machines that are different from the Express Vote.
- Assistance with voting from a family member or a friend or a poll worker is allowed