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Partnering for Positive Outcomes

Riverside County, California

Submitted by:

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**Partnering for Positive Outcomes
Registrar of Voters
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Approximately 56 million Americans have some type of disability. Accommodating voters with disabilities is a challenge faced by election officials. Accommodations that are inadequate or not addressed may reflect negatively on the elections office creating the perception of disregard for a segment of the voting population. Such perceptions can result in the office being the target of negative criticism.

In Riverside County, California, disability rights advocates served as poll watchers evaluating accessibility of locations used to serve voters. Their reports were critical of deficient accommodations and election workers' unawareness of how to properly accommodate voters with disabilities. Their reports resulted in creating controversy, but not communication.

Concerns most often raised were:

- Access to polling places
- Polling place set up and design
- Privacy
- Accessible ballot
- Poll worker attitudes/education

Seeking to address some of the deficiencies in the county's 720 polling places spread across 7,200 square miles, the Registrar of Voters partnered Include Me, Inc. specializing in disability advocacy and accessible design. Certified consultants with disabilities and expertise in the use of accessibility standards accompanied elections personnel and participated in conducting accessibility surveys in the eastern portion of the county using the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Checklist for Polling Places.

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) Elections Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities (EAID) offered the opportunity to broaden the office's partnership and add two additional disability rights advocates/consultants with disabilities—Californians for Disability Rights and Access Unlimited. All three consultants observed the functionality and accessibility of operational polling places from the disabled voters' perspective during California's February 5th Presidential Primary Election. The consultants' findings revealed less than optimal accommodations at many polling places. Their recommendation was to educate poll workers on the proper set up and configuration of polling places, the importance of a marked and obstruction-free path of travel to the polling place, and attitudinal barriers exhibited toward serving the disabled voter.

The challenge was how the disability consultants could reach more than 3,000 poll workers attending poll worker training at 158 different sessions over 30 days prior to the June 3rd Statewide Primary Election. The decision was to produce a DVD presentation, *Through Our Eyes: Providing Accessibility for Voters with Disabilities* that would be given to poll workers at training to take home and watch.

In order for it not to be “just another training film,” dramatizations were used to create an emotional impact on the audience – an impact that would heighten overall awareness of the challenges faced by voters with disabilities. The goal was to stimulate poll workers to think “outside the box” when it came to providing accommodations on Election Day.

The project was driven by the disabled advocates/consultants who wrote the script based on actual events that illustrated some unfortunate voting experiences, followed by simple guidance on how the issues could be easily remedied.

The local network of agencies serving disabled persons was contacted for participation as well. The project included the *Community Access Center*, *Rolling Start*, *Include Me, Inc.*, *Access Unlimited* and *Californians for Disability Rights*. These organizations provided all the performers for the production—all of whom were citizens with disabilities. Over forty performers appear in the DVD, shot at various locations throughout Riverside County.

Using video technology, the DVD simulates the vantage point of a voter with disabilities and allows the viewer (i.e., poll workers) to vicariously experience situations that may be encountered in the simple act of casting a ballot. The video was produced in a series of three segments: Attitudinal Barriers, External Path of Travel, and Internal Polling Place Setup. Preceding each of the teaching segments is a dramatic presentation of potential obstacles to voting by citizens with disabilities. To make the point that these were undesirable experiences, these vignettes were shot in black and white and from the point of view (POV) of the disabled voter. For example, to simulate the challenges faced by a sight-impaired voter, the POV was slightly blurred. In another scene, the camera shook to simulate the effort of necessary to move up a flight of stairs by a voter using a walker.

Sensitive to the potential of alienating the audience (i.e., poll workers), the program begins with an announcement that the negative depictions of some poll workers were deliberately exaggerated for dramatic effect. The program concludes with an example of the optimal voting experience.

The partnership with disabled advocates/consultants resulted in former critics bringing their experience and perspective into the process to educate the elections office in providing optimal service to disabled voters. Disabled participants in the program repeatedly expressed their appreciation to county personnel for their efforts to make voting more accessible.

Over 3,000 copies of *Through Our Eyes* have been distributed through poll-worker training classes. However, the viewing audience may be as much as four-fold the number of DVDs distributed as family and friends watch the program along with the poll worker.

Partnering with the disabled community converted critics into supporters and created a timeless tool that will be used in elections to come and shared with other election offices.



Figure 1 - Opening Title, "Through Our Eyes"



Figure 2 - Pre-production meeting



Figure 3 - Shooting "on location" with Mr. Lonberg and Ms. Goldkorn



Figure 4 - Mr. Collins interviewed for "Through Our Eyes."



Figure 5 - Director Berkebile sets up for crane shot



Figure 6 - Ms. Goldkorn supervises the setup of the "perfect" polling place.