Dated: August 21, 2020

On August 24, 2020, legislators from across the state will gather in Boise for a special legislative session to discuss the November election. On the agenda are proposed amendments to Idaho’s election laws, which include allowing counties to create voting centers to facilitate in-person voting on election day. While DisAbility Rights Idaho and the National Federation of the Blind of Idaho appreciate the state’s forethought in planning for the November election, we want to ensure the legislature considers an absolutely vital component to this process: accessibility.

It is estimated that 23.1% of adults in Idaho have a disability.\(^1\) This means there are hundreds of thousands of potential voters with disabilities residing in Idaho\(^2\)-- each of whom has the right to vote in a manner that provides the same opportunities for access and participation, including privacy and independence, that voters without disabilities receive. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case in past elections.

This past spring, Idaho transitioned to an absentee mail-in ballot only system for the May primary election. While such a system is certainly accessible and much more convenient for some, it proved to be completely inaccessible to others. We acknowledge that the Secretary of State’s office, including Secretary Denney himself, communicated a commitment to ensuring that primary election processes would be accessible to voters with disabilities and encouraged such voters to reach out to their county clerks to request any needed accommodations to this process. Sadly, this commitment went unfulfilled as voters with disabilities faced numerous challenges with mail-in voting, resulting in some Idahoans being unable to vote.

Barriers included:

- an inaccessible “Idaho Votes” website, incompatible with screen readers, leaving voters who are totally blind without the ability to register to vote or request an absentee ballot online;
- calls to local county clerk’s offices going unanswered – even for weeks at a time – delaying the ability of individuals to request needed accommodations, assistance with registering, or even that a ballot be mailed to them so they may vote; and
- county elections officials denying requests for accommodations including denials of large print or Braille ballots.

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\(^1\) [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/pdfs/Idaho_Disability.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/pdfs/Idaho_Disability.pdf)

\(^2\) [https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ID](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ID)
As many Idahoans were able to register and then exercise their right to vote from the safety and convenience of their homes, several individuals with disabilities were left with a choice of either: relying on someone else to complete their ballot, thereby forfeiting their right to a private and independent vote, or leaving the safety of their home during a pandemic in order to travel to the local clerk’s office to use an on-site accessible voting machine.

It is imperative that proactive measures be taken now to prevent any such barriers from occurring in the upcoming November election. County elections staff must ensure that they are effectively and actively communicating with their citizens regarding the process for requesting accommodations. Calls and emails must be answered. Requests for accommodations must be addressed. Accessible registration forms and ballots must be provided – perhaps even electronic ballots that can be completed through use of screen reader technology and then printed in order to be submitted securely via the mail. Polling places, including any voting centers, must be ADA compliant in regards to parking, entrances, signage, etc. State and/or county websites used for voter registration and ballot requests must be accessible.

On behalf of all Idahoans with disabilities – hundreds of thousands of which may be eligible to vote in this upcoming election - we ask that the Idaho Legislature carefully consider the accessibility of Idaho’s current election system and any changes that may be made during the Special Legislative Session to ensure that each and every voter can participate in this important process.

/s/
Courtney R. Holthus, Esq.
Advocacy Director for DisAbility Rights Idaho

/s/
Dana Ard, President
National Federation of the Blind of Idaho