

Transcript for Vote for Access- Episode 3: At The Polls

IMANI: Imagine this. It's Election Day.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A young, black woman with arm crutches walks down the street.

IMANI: You've researched the candidates, you know where your polling place is, and you've arranged transportation.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: She stops and looks up at an enormous flight of stairs.

IMANI: Then you arrive at the polling center, nothing goes to plan, and you can't cast your vote.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: She shakes her crutch angrily.

IMANI: The truth of the matter is, you could plan for everything and still be met with inaccessibility at the polls. My name is Imani Barbarin, I'm a disabled voter, and this is Vote for Access.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Imani in the studio.

IMANI: The Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA has been in existence for decades, and is designed to provide equitable access for people with disabilities. Since this law is the age of your average millennial, how come the ADA is less enforced than my student loan repayment plan?

IMANI: In addition to the ADA, there are several laws. The Help America Vote Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act of 1984, and National Voter Registration Act of 1993. These laws already demand that voters with disabilities have the right to accessible, private, and independent voting. However come voting day, this often isn't the case. Let's hear from Parmie from Alabama about their day at the polls.

PARMIE: I need accommodations that are accessible and operable. And when I say accessible, I mean that when I get there if there is a machine there that has print on it, I'm not able to see what the print is. So I would

need to know what is on the screen. On several occasions when I have gotten to a polling precinct, the machines are somewhat still in the box, not plugged up, and I've actually been told that they were not going to turn them on. I have poll workers that are not sure how to utilize the machines, the AutoMARK specifically, to help me vote on the machine when I get there, and sometimes I even have poll workers that stand behind me while I'm voting and they're watching the screen as well.

IMANI: Voting with the need for accommodation can be a gamble when you consider all that is out of your control. Legally, polling places are required to be accessible, so what can be done to improve access? There are several things that should be considered for polling places to be accessible. The space should be physically accessible with safe ramps available. Accessible parking and access to transit should also be prioritized. If you have an invisible disability, having seating available while you wait is super important. Some places have an option called curbside voting. It's a drive through for voting. It doesn't fix the problem of having an inaccessible polling place, but if it's staffed and easy to locate, it can add another option for access. Accessible voting units or AVUs, allow voters to make selections in a variety of ways. The machines need to be set up properly in a place with privacy and poll workers need to know how to use them. They should also offer the use of the accessible voting unit to all voters. For example, a voter with dyslexia may prefer to use an AVU to listen to ballot information rather than reading. Good poll worker training can make inaccessible spaces more accessible.

CHRIS: I'm Chris Swope. I'm the City Clerk for the City of Lansing. Michigan got all new equipment just a couple of years ago, so it was a different piece of equipment. The poll workers hadn't used it as much, hadn't had as many voters come through and use it, and we started to get feedback from a couple of voters that they felt discouraged from using it, and that was the last thing we wanted. If those people that are there to assist a voter through the voting process don't feel confident or seem confident with a part of the process, or a piece of the equipment, it doesn't instill confidence in the voter.

IMANI: Although 60 to 70 percent of polling places are inaccessible, there's no national outrage or even awareness. Eric from Michigan spent years trying to vote and was finally successful.

ERIC: And I was inside the polling location, and they said they had the auto voting machine, but all they had was the headphones and the midi control, but they did not have the device for me, and I was like "that's it, I'm not gonna do it."

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Eric in his power chair in front of an AVU.

ERIC: As you can see that's the machine. I mean it wasn't even plugged in. I was finally able to vote private and independently 20 or 21 years later.

IMANI: The longest anyone who wants to vote should have to wait is the 18 years we all have to wait in America. If you can't get to a polling center, you can contact local officials to ask for assistance. Options like the Election Protection Hotlines, and reaching out to your local Protection and Advocacy agency can provide you with support on Election Day. Dial 866-OUR-VOTE. Dial 866-687-8683.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Imani on the phone.

IMANI: Hello, yes, I need some help. It's a hot mess here right now. And keep watching this series at VoteForAccess.us.

ERIC: This is Vote for Access.