

## **Transcript for Vote for Access- Episode 4: Alternatives To Polling Places**

IMANI: The United States is a vast country.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A young, black woman with arm crutches stands near an open field.

IMANI: Voters in rural areas sometimes have to travel for hours to get to a polling center. Barriers like distance, lack of transportation, and institutionalization can keep voters with disabilities from the polls. There are some alternatives like mail-in ballots or early voting. But they aren't always available or accessible. So how can we increase accessibility for those who can't make it to 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: For voters in rural areas, accessing a polling center can be difficult.

MORRIS: I'm Morris Brewer, I'm an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota tribe. We have a reservation of about 65 miles wide by a little over 100 miles long. There's nine districts here. So there are a lot of challenges just for the geographical distances we have to cover. We live in one of the most poverty-stricken counties in the whole United States. So people don't have the money for gas to get to where they're going. Anything that would make it more accessible for them to vote is, I think, the key.

IMANI: So, if getting to the polls is difficult for many voters, why not bring the polls to us? That's the idea behind mail-in ballots.

SALENE: My name is Salene Jones. One thing about one of my disabilities is that I can't be out in the cold for too much. I had to think, "Okay, do I have enough food with me? Do I have all of those things prepared? What's the weather gonna be like? Or do I have my asthma medication?" So when I had to vote in person, in Ohio I had to think about those things. In Washington, now that we're entirely vote-by-mail, I think about the important things, like, "Oh, I need to research this issue, I need to research that issue. Oh, I wanna know more about that candidate," and that sorta

thing. 'Cause I don't have to take up the mental space thinking about the logistics of getting to the polling place.

IMANI: But paper has its problems. And paper mail-in ballots don't work for everyone. For example, if you need assistance to fill out your mail-in ballot, your vote may no longer be private or independent. Low vision voters will need large print. Blind voters may need Braille or audio versions in order to access the ballot. Let's discuss accessible voting options with Michelle Bishop, from the National Disability Rights Network.

MICHELLE: So, we're really thinking through new ways for people to vote-by-mail. And I'm really excited about some them. Some states like Oregon and Maryland are looking at electronic delivery of a blank ballot. I can get a link emailed to me. I can pull up that ballot on my device at home. So if I need any type of assistive technology to access it, and I have that there or I have access to it, you know, at work or at my local library, then I can complete my ballot that way and I can still fill it out privately and independently.

IMANI: Voters with disabilities also live in institutions and may need facility support and organizational support to vote. Invasion of privacy can be a problem when voting within an institution. How would you vote with someone watching?

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Someone leans over Imani's shoulder.

IMANI: Are you just gonna linger there or what? But it doesn't have to be this way. Especially if staff create a supportive environment.

TIMOTHY: My name is Timothy Blaine Karnes and I vote every time I can. Well presently I live in Weston, West Virginia. It's a behavioral health facility. All the staff that I've come in contact with have been very helpful and very supportive in my ambition to vote. My ballot comes in the mail. I have my own table in a corner when I vote. I have no one behind me. And they stay their distance and I let them know when I'm finished. I vote. I put it in one envelope. And then into another, double sealed for safety. And I mail it off to the County Clerk's Office. It's counted, I'm happy.

IMANI: In addition to nursing home facilities and psychiatric facilities, jails and prisons are also institutions that house people with disabilities. Around 40 to 60 percent of individuals in US jails have a disability. For those in jail

who are awaiting trial, their voting rights are still intact. But is a jail required to provide you with a way to vote? That's iffy. Some facilities do make the effort in collaboration with the Protection and Advocacy system. Let's hear from Jordan about voting from a Seattle jail.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Jordan wearing dark glasses.

JORDAN: First, I never knew that I could vote while I was in jail. After my first meeting with Disability Rights Washington, they asked if I would be interested in voting on an AVU. An AVU that is accessible to someone with my disabilities. So not only could I vote but I can vote with the same dignity and privacy than any other citizen that would have. It's important for folks with disabilities to have access to vote because your vote is your voice.

IMANI: With increasing options to vote beyond the polls, we need policymakers to consider our community of disabled voters, before proposing changes, not after. There are solutions for those of us who can't make it to the polls. Get tips for self-advocacy from your state's Protection and Advocacy agency. Each state has a Protection and Advocacy agency that exists to protect the rights of people with disabilities. And keep watching this series at [VoteForAccess.us](http://VoteForAccess.us).

MORRIS: This is Vote for Access.