

Government Accountability Board

State of Wisconsin

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
July 11, 2013

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G.A.B. Issues Polling Place Accessibility Report

MADISON, WI – Wisconsin’s polling places are becoming more accessible, but some people with disabilities and the elderly still face significant obstacles when they vote, according to a new report from the Government Accountability Board.

Over the last three years and 16 elections, the G.A.B. conducted unannounced inspections at 1,614 polling places in 921 municipalities in 66 of the state’s 72 counties. Inspectors found more than 10,000 violations of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which require polling places to be accessible to people who use wheelchairs and have other physical challenges. On average, inspected polling places had 6.5 violations.

More than one third of those violations (3,786) were serious enough to prevent a voter with a disability from entering a polling place and casting a private and independent ballot, said Kevin Kennedy, director and general counsel of the G.A.B.

“This new report details the kinds of accessibility problems that still exist at polling places in Wisconsin,” Kennedy said. “While we have made great improvements over the last decade, we still have quite a ways to go to ensure everyone with a disability is able to vote privately and independently.”

Elections Division Administrator Michael Haas noted that many of the problems found by inspectors require relatively minor corrections, such as signs printed too small for someone with a visual impairment to read. “These kinds of problems can be fixed at little or no cost by municipal clerks,” Haas said. “In more serious cases, local governing bodies will need to consider funding repairs or renovations to ensure access to the polls, or securing alternative polling locations.”

Wisconsin’s 1,852 municipal clerks are responsible for making sure polling places are accessible, which Haas said is not always easy when they must often rely on buildings the municipality does not own. However, the G.A.B. will provide technical assistance to clerks who need help, and the agency has federal funds available to assist municipal clerks with the purchase of supplies to make polling places accessible, Haas said.

Kennedy said the G.A.B. staff has worked closely with the disability community in developing its accessibility survey tools and reviewing the results contained in the report. The results of the accessibility inspections are summarized in a report the Board is required to submit to the

legislature every two years. In addition to Wisconsin's Election Day accessibility inspection program, which is unique in the nation, the report also describes other steps that state and local election officials have taken to improve polling place accessibility, including improved training of clerks and election inspectors.

The report is available on the G.A.B. website: <http://gab.wi.gov/publications/reports/2013-accessibility-report>.

The Board's website also has voting accessibility resource pages for people with disabilities (<http://gab.wi.gov/voters/accessibility>) and for clerks who are responsible for making sure polling places are accessible (<http://gab.wi.gov/clerks/guidance/accessibility>).

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