

Government Accountability Board

State of Wisconsin

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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 past two years and seven elections, the G.A.B. conducted inspections at 808 polling places in 568 municipalities in 48 of the 72 Wisconsin counties. Inspectors found almost 4,000 accessibility problems based on the standards established by 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. There was an average of 4.9 problems per polling place in 2014-2015, compared to 6.5 problems in the G.A.B.’s last report in 2013.

Forty-two percent of the violations (1,652) 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. Most of the remaining problems do not represent major obstacles to participation, and most problems can be remedied by little to no cost solutions.

“This new report details the kinds of accessibility problems that still exist at polling places in Wisconsin,” Kennedy said. “While municipalities continue to make great improvements, we still have quite a ways to go to ensure everyone with a disability is able to vote privately and independently. The G.A.B. is committed to visiting every polling place in the state, which we are on target to do by the end of 2016.”

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.”

Haas said the G.A.B. has leveraged technology to streamline polling place accessibility inspections. Inspectors use tablet computers loaded with special software to record findings during inspections and take pictures of any problems they find. When inspectors return from the field, data is uploaded from the tablets into the G.A.B.’s AccessElections system, checked for accuracy and used to generate reports for clerks.

In the last two years, the G.A.B. has created a new online tool for local election officials to review their reports, submit plans on their efforts to fix any problems, and even order free accessibility supplies such as signs and other tools to assist elderly voters and voters with disabilities. The new online tool has eliminated the need to print and mail bulky inspection reports and responses between the G.A.B. and clerks, and allows for more efficient tracking, Haas said. The system also allows G.A.B. staff to customize reports with photos and details from site visits, which makes it easier for clerks to understand and remedy accessibility problems.

Wisconsin's 1,853 municipal clerks are responsible for making sure polling places are accessible, which Haas said is not always easy because they often have to rely on buildings the municipality does not own such as schools or churches. 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://www.gab.wi.gov/publications/reports/2015-accessibility-report>.

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

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