



Episode 44- Voting Rights and Accessibility

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Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of the Quest Family of Content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities and those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire, and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you, you; whether you are one of us, love someone who is, or are on another journey altogether. Thanks for joining. Now, let's get started.

There is something very big coming very soon, unless you've been living under a rock, you are aware of what I'm talking about. Voting day is November 5th. This is a huge election that includes a presidential vote, and we know that unfortunately from time to time, people in the neuromuscular disease community or in the broader disability community can run into some obstacles when trying to exercise their right to vote. So today I have two experts with me who are going to talk through information that you may need, questions you may have, and where you can find any additional information that you may need to get ready for voting day.

So first up, I have Shaun Hill with me who currently serves as the manager of Public Policy and Advocacy for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. Shaun is a veteran government relations professional who has worked continuously in the healthcare arena, championing causes on behalf of both patients and providers, working through legislative regulatory and advocacy channels to impact change.

And in many of these roles, she's led the charge on advocacy campaigns such as MDA's current initiative Access the Vote, which you will hear more about in just a little while. And not to be outdone, I have Mark Fisher with us, the director of Advocacy Engagement at the Muscular Dystrophy Association. In his role with MDA, Mark leads the grassroots program and advocacy volunteer efforts. He works to empower advocates and connect them with key decision makers in order to advance public policies that improve the lives of the neuromuscular disease community. And in 2023, Mark was honored to receive the Top 20 in 2023 Award from The Advocacy Association. Phew, thank you both so much for being here.

Shaun Hill: Thank you for having us.

Mark Fisher: I'm super thrilled to be here. Thanks, Mindy.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. So there is no shortage of things to talk about on this topic, so I am going to dive right in, and whoever wants to catch this question, let's just talk a little bit about some of the common barriers that people with disabilities face when trying to vote. Let's set us up with some of the challenges first and then we'll talk about the solutions.

Shaun Hill: Well, certainly there are a ton of logistical challenges. I mean, does the polling place have ramps? Are the doors wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs? Are the voting machines accessible? Transportation issues. Does a person with disability have a way to even get to the polling place? Those are just some of the issues off the top of my head that come to mind.

Mark Fisher: Yeah, Shaun's right. I mean, the physical barriers that are in place for folks who have disabilities to get into the voting precinct. I mean, if you can remember, these places are churches or schools or neighborhood places and just have physical barriers that might be in place that could hurt folks, the ability just to get in that building. But there's actually some barriers before that election even happens. Every state has their own different roles, especially how to register to vote. Some use forms that might not be the most up to date, they might not be the easiest for folks to fill out. So even getting registered, there could be some accessibility issues. And then just some of the voting options have constantly changed. Some states, you might have a longer window to vote early, which I know we'll talk about, and that might have shrunk a bit. Drop boxes might have shrunk a bit. So it's constantly changing each state, but there are definitely still some barriers that folks have to overcome.

Mindy Henderson: Now, let me ask you this just as a follow-up. When you show up at a polling place, there are, of course, people there working at those polling places, and I don't know if they're always volunteers. I think a lot of times they're volunteers. I don't know if that's a hundred percent of the case. But I've heard just anecdotally, I've heard from people who have showed up to vote, and there may be confusion amongst the people helping to run the voting polls out of the kindness of their heart in a lot of cases or a sense of duty. What can we expect

in terms of how much individuals who are there and are in charge should know about what is and isn't allowed and accessible and things for us? And what should we come armed with in terms of facts and information about what we need and how we're going to get it?

Shaun Hill:

I think when we talk about making a plan, I think for the disabled voter, that's imperative. Like you said, these people may be volunteers, but at every polling place, there should also be a polling place supervisor. So that may be a person that's armed with more knowledge than some others that may be assisting. But anything you could bring, I think screenshots, ADA rules, anything that might be beneficial for their lack of knowledge if you come prepared with it. So if you already have the knowledge of, "I have the right to take someone into the booth with me. If I don't have anyone to take with me, I can request that a voter worker goes in with me to help me be able to navigate the voting process." So I think it's almost like having to prepare for a test, so to speak, that you have to come in the door armed with all the knowledge. So in case others are not aware, you're able to provide that valuable information.

Mindy Henderson:

That's great. I love the screenshot idea. That's really smart. And I suspect that there are multiple places where people can find information that outline what their rights are, what should be accessible, how it should be accessible, and all of that. I mentioned Access the Vote, MDA's campaign, and we've got an entire website dedicated to voting for people with disabilities. Can y'all talk a little bit about Access the Vote and if there are additional places where they should go to get sort of official information that like you say, Shaun, they could potentially print and bring with them if needed?

Shaun Hill:

Sure. On the Access the Vote website, there's certainly a great deal of information about voter rights. There's certainly information in terms of making that plan and kind of step-by-step logistics of things to do on the front end. There's a frequently asked question section that I think would be helpful to voters to prepare. There's also information beyond navigating the polling place in terms of just giving voters an opportunity of how they should prepare in terms of making the decision about who they're voting for. So we've also provided a great deal of materials around assessing the candidates and how you do the research on the front end prior to election day. So I think all of those things are helpful. In addition, there is a U.S. Election Assistance Commission that offers a great deal of help, particularly for disabled voters, and could navigate people through what your rights are, what you're entitled to, and also navigating some challenges, and if they should occur, what recourse you have and what are next steps.

Mindy Henderson:

That's super. This may be a stupid question, I suspect the name of the site is probably in the URL, but what is the website for Access the Vote?

Shaun Hill:

It is mda.org/vote.

Mindy Henderson: Ah, okay. Even simpler than I thought. I love it. Mark, is there anything else you want to add about resources? Or is Access the Vote a good place to start? And then do we link out to other places from there, like Shaun was saying?

Mark Fisher: Yeah, I would say mda.org/vote is the way to go. Shaun mentioned some really good ones. The one that I really like that Shaun did mention is the United States Election Assistance Commission. It's a government agency. It clearly outlines everything that folks have rights to. In addition, there's vote.org, which we link off to a lot. It's a very handy site, but equally is easy to remember URL. And then there is a spot on there, and then we might get this in a second, of what to do if you run into a problem and who you can call to help resolve any issues that you have. So there's a hotline on there that folks can call. They have day of issue.

So Access the Vote is hopefully kind of a one-stop shop where we will provide you the information or we'll link off to something really that might be even more useful. I'll say that with MDA, we're non-political, nonpartisan. So all we want is for folks to vote. We don't tell you who to vote for. We don't tell you which candidate to vote for. We just want you to vote. So there's no leanings, no political leanings. Our goal is to get you to cast that ballot.

Mindy Henderson: Love it. Love it. And I love that you mentioned that phone number too, that toll-free number that you can find on, did you say vote.org?

Mark Fisher: It's on mda.org/vote.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, it is. Okay, perfect.

Mark Fisher: Yep, it's in FAQ.

Mindy Henderson: That would be probably a wise phone number to bring with you just in case. So that's great information. Is there anything particular that you hear from people in the disability community that's maybe one of the biggest misconceptions about our rights to vote or the biggest challenge that people come up against?

Shaun Hill: I think there is a misconception that in an effort to accommodate the disabled voter and perhaps a need to take someone with you to assist you, that there is a concern or fear that your vote may not be private, that you're not voting independently. And I think the polling places certainly are charged with making sure that even if you need assistance, that is done in the most private manner so that like anyone else, your vote is your vote and no one else has privy to that. So I think that slight concern over perhaps if it's not someone you're bringing into the booth, but rather that you're requiring the assistance of a poll worker, that, is my vote still private? So I think that's a possible concern among voters.

Mindy Henderson: That makes sense.

Mark Fisher: And I would just add to that that any sort of accommodation or an accessible voting machine or accessible polling place, those are your rights. Those are your rights. You can exercise them. So everyone in this country obviously has a right to vote if they meet certain standards that we all know. But if you do, that's your right, and you have every reason to demand that you have the ability to cast your vote. So there's laws that protect you, there's laws to ensure that you can cast your ballot. You have every right to exercise those.

Mindy Henderson: Love it. Okay. Let's talk about voting machines for just a second and what features and sort of, I don't want to say alterations, but what should an accessible voting machine look like? Are there certain requirements or criteria for making a voting machine accessible? And does every polling place have one? And if not, how can you find one that does?

Shaun Hill: I don't know that there is a uniform standard. I think probably like most things' type with voting, that it tends to be on a state-by-state basis. I think it's probably prudent to either call your polling place ahead of time to, one, be able to make sure that they have a voting machine that could accommodate your needs. And if not, that gives you lead time and try to see if then you can navigate to a polling place that may be able to accommodate your needs or to see what can be done to assure that that type of voting machine is available at the polling place that your voter registration card dictates that you go to. But I'm not sure in terms of uniformity. Mark, do you have any knowledge of uniformity? Or is that governed state by state?

Mark Fisher: Yeah, some insights to that. I would also say that federal law requires that every polling place have an accessible voting machine.

Mindy Henderson: It does.

Mark Fisher: At least for federal elections. So that is required. But Shaun brings up a good point. Just because it's required, doesn't mean you ... We all know how many different voting places there are. Just because they're required, it might not mean they have one or it's in service. As some states are leaning towards paper only ballots, and they might inadvertently not know that they have to have an accessible voting machine, which are more electronic. In my polling place, we're almost a hundred percent paper ballots. But in the rush to do that, they might get rid of the accessible voting machine because they don't want electronic voting machines, but they have to have an accessible voting machine in every location by federal law. But Shaun makes a good point of doing a double check to ensure that they are doing that and that it's functional, because sometimes just because they have one, it might not be functional.

In terms of the features, you can expect them to have for folks to have visual and audio impairment. So you can put headphones on so they can read the ballot to you. You can have it so they enlarge the text. Some of the newer ones, they're able to connect to personal devices to help select the candidate you want. But it's a little bit all over the board. And you can imagine, as things, as

technology improves, the voting machines will improve as well. So a voting machine that might have been accessible 15 years ago has probably seen some things. So it might not be as fast as a new one that might be able to read you the ballot quicker or print the ballot out quicker for you. So like a lot of things election-wise, it probably does vary a bit of what an accessible voting machine would offer, but they are required in federal election in every polling place. So the rest is sure, but Shaun's right to do that double check just to ensure that you're polling place actually has one.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. If you do show up at your polling place, and let's say maybe you tried to call and you couldn't get through or who knows what, and so you go and they don't have an accessible voting machine, it sounds like, I'm going to make the assumption that maybe they are required to accommodate you in some other way by maybe having someone that works there or someone who's with you help you vote using a different machine. Obviously, you've got the option of going somewhere else, but is all of that true? Are they required to accommodate you somehow if they don't have the right machine?

Shaun Hill: Yeah, they are required by law to make sure that you're able to exercise your right to vote. So if that means kind of navigating through a different process, then they would have to do that.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. Okay. So let's talk about getting to a voting station. I think it was mentioned earlier. That can be one of the challenges, is transportation and getting to the voting station. If a person doesn't drive and doesn't have someone readily available to help them or to drive them to the polling station, what are the rights of people with disabilities around getting to a voting station? Is there anything spelled out around just that transportation piece?

Shaun Hill: I don't know that there is anything in terms of spelled out rights. I think there are certainly recommendations that could be made. Certainly, we know the shared ride services such as Lyft and Uber in some cases provide free or discounted rides on election day. But again, depending on where you are in the country, their wave program or the vehicles that they have to cater specifically to the disability community are few and far between. There could be the pursuit of going through other paratransit companies. Sometimes local agencies, local office or disability may garner volunteers to be able to transport disabled voters back and forth through the polls. So again, I think it goes back to that notion of planning for election day. In some cases, that's where I think the option of early voting may be helpful just because there is a challenge. Everybody's trying to get there on November 5th and everybody's experiencing challenges that perhaps the opportunity to avail yourself of early voting may avert some of that.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely.

Mark Fisher: Just to add to that too, if you know who you're going to vote for, maybe know what party you're going to be voting for, I would reach out to that local party's office and say, "Hey, can you get me to the polls?" I worked in a campaign a

while ago, and our office had volunteers who that was their whole volunteer role during election day, was to help folks get to the polls that day. So that might be a way to go to reach out to your local party office and see if they assist you. Trust me, if they think you're going to vote for one of their candidates, they're going to get you to that polling place or find an option for you to get to that polling place. And then so many community groups. I can't tell you how many church groups do this, how many community service organizations that are not affiliated do this. I think that, Shaun is right, making that plan ahead of time to figure out how you can get to the polls. If you need that, I think there are some options to explore.

Mindy Henderson: That's fantastic. I would not have thought of several of those options. So that's all really helpful. We've talked a little bit about this, but I just want to go back to it one more time. If you get to a voting station and somebody is unhelpful or aware of our rights, is there anything else that you guys want to throw out there apart from the suggestions that have already been made of maybe how that should be handled?

Shaun Hill: Well, I think that, as I mentioned earlier, that first line of defense is always the poll supervisor. I think if that person is unaware or not helpful, I almost feel like then you start going through the various options. You come prepared with what you know your rights are. Mark mentioned earlier the telephone number, that's kind of the election hotline. So maybe even in that moment, that call may have to be placed. I would hope that people wouldn't encounter barriers based on those that work there. But in the event that those things happen, I think we just kind of go down the ladder in terms of recourse.

Mindy Henderson: That's perfect. Of course, we hope that that will not be something that anyone who's listening to this encounters, or anyone else for that matter. But unfortunately, it's something that I know has come up in the past, and so just so that we can all be ready. If you're not yet registered to vote, what are the different options that are available to get registered? Specifically, if you have a disability and you're maybe not incredibly mobile in terms of transportation, can you register online? Does it vary from state to state?

Mark Fisher: I might go. It varies from state to state.

Mindy Henderson: Okay.

Mark Fisher: So first, my first advice, if you're not registered, do it now. Whenever you read this, do it now, because every state has different rules, different deadlines. Some are 30 days out, some are closer to the election day. Some, you can register in person. It's the gamut of your options, but it really does depend on the state and maybe locality. Some, you can a hundred percent register online via a form. Now, I'll be candid, some of those forms are not entirely accessible as we would hope they would be. But there are some online options depending on the state you're in.

And then again, I go back to some of the community groups. You could probably find a nonpartisan, non-political affiliated community group who would be doing a voter registration drive that might be able to assist you in your community. If you live near a college town, I guarantee there's some sort of college group, whether it's associated with free or some sort of a ride. I did some of these voter drives back in school that might be able to assist. So I'll say it again, it's like what Shaun has said, make that plan and that plan starts with registration. But yeah, it's a wide, wide variety. Anything from 30 days out to some places, you can register on election day if you want, and you could do that in person. It just depends.

Mindy Henderson: Great. Where would someone go to look to see what their state's rules and things are?

Mark Fisher: I would say [vote.org](https://www.vote.org).

Mindy Henderson: Or could you just Google how to register to vote?

Mark Fisher: You could do that. [Vote.org](https://www.vote.org) is one. We link that from mda.org/vote. You can go to [vote.org/](https://www.vote.org/) you could probably Google your state election office or state election commission. They might be able to help you as well. I think the good news is, there's a lot of organizations that want to help you vote. Now you got to be discerning. Do they have an agenda? Do they not? But MDA is definitely right up there, that we can help you get started. But there's a lot of good information. But I would say [vote.org](https://www.vote.org) is kind of where I'd go. We link that off from our website. And then you can always Google your state election commission and they can help as well.

Mindy Henderson: Great. Great. We've mentioned, and I think the theme of the day might be have a plan, have a voting plan. We've mentioned that it's come up a number of times. I think it was Mark who mentioned in passing earlier, a little bit about voting early if you can. So while we're on the topic of having a plan and making sure that you get registered yesterday, if you are not yet registered to vote, also, I think there are a lot of benefits to trying to vote early if you're ready and you know who you want to go in and vote for, and your research is all done. So I just wanted to stress that one more time.

Mark Fisher: Just to add about early Voting. A couple of things that I think is important with early voting, at least in a lot of places, they tend to have early voting centers in person that are usually in bigger places. So it might be your community center might have early voting versus maybe your local church that would have it on election day. A larger center might just be more accessible period than your local precinct would be on election day. They probably would have maybe a few accessible voting machines that would probably be more likely to operate if it's a larger venue than a smaller one you might go to on election day. So I think you might wait a little longer, you might wait a little longer, but I do think you might have a more accessible experience because these are usually in larger venues that have more things.

In addition, if for some reason something might not go as well as you thought, well then you have more times to vote. So if something doesn't go right on election day, that might be it. At least with early voting, you might have a second shot, and you never know what could happen on election day. You could have a sick child, a sick parent. You yourself might be facing an illness or something and you just can't make it that day. Well, that's the last day. So there's so many benefits to early voting that I really think, Mindy, you said it right, if you know your choice and you know what you want to do, I think it's worth taking the time just to truly ensure that your voice is heard this election, because you never know what can happen on election day.

Mindy Henderson: Love it. The other thing too, and this is just sort of a personal curiosity of mine, but as you're talking about some of the things that can go south on voting day, if you wait until the last minute, those lines can be incredibly long on voting day. Do they close the polling places at a certain time? Or do they make sure that everyone who's in line before that time hits can get in and vote? Or does that vary also?

Shaun Hill: To my understanding, the general rule of thumb is, if the polling place closes at 7:00, everyone that is in line by 7:00 will get an opportunity to go in and vote.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. That's kind of what I thought. Just wanted to make sure and ask the question. Let's talk a little bit about as a community and allies of the disability, how can we all create more awareness and a more inclusive voting environment for people with disabilities going forward?

Shaun Hill: I certainly think the key word that resonates for me is education. I think we can all use our voices to amplify the importance of disability voting rights, of educating one another. I think one way MDA has tried to do that is certainly through our Access the Vote campaign. But I think as we as individuals or various communities within our hometowns, within our church groups, within our community groups, to use those forums as opportunities to educate one another on the issue, it's certainly being amplified, certainly because it's a presidential election and people tend to be more honed in and focused on elections during the presidential election years. But the National Council of Disability has recently put out a study regarding disability and voting rights. So it's on a lot of people's radar screen, and I think if we kind of tap one another on the shoulder and say pay attention to this, then it certainly raises the issue tenfold.

Mindy Henderson: That's great.

Mark Fisher: I think for me, a couple thoughts come to mind, Mindy. One, I will plug the recent Quest magazine, the front-page story is all about some of the laws and some of the things that were passed for the disability community lately. Well, that happened because people voted. That happened because people raised their voices. They overcame some barriers and cast that ballot. If folks don't do that, then we might stall in terms of getting more things across the finish line.

So our elected officials listen to us because we're voters, so let's be a voter and let's make sure they know that our voices are heard. And continue the momentum we have seen that that article has mentioned.

Also, we have a long way to go. So we have a long way to go to make voting accessible for everyone. I mean, we're giving folks a lot of great tips and we really are, but it's not perfect. It's not a perfect system. So I would recommend as folks vote this year, take note of some of the obstacles you might've faced. Take note of some of the things that maybe we as MDA could have provided you more information on, what could have made your voting experience easier. And then tell us at advocacy.mdausa.org. You can email that to us. You can see it on our website as well. Tell us, because next year we want to grow this even bigger and get more information for folks out. So let us know how your voting experience went and what can we do in the next election to give you the more resources to make that even better.

And then the third one is stay involved, especially at the local level. So many of these laws, and candidly, hurdles, are local and state driven. When we see a cutback on early voting or a cutback maybe on drop boxes, or maybe you live in a state that has an expansion, maybe it's expansion of early voting or expansion of drop boxes, that happens at the state and local level. It's important for folks to recognize, "Oh, these are some of the challenges I had. I bet we can sell this at a state level." So keep getting involved. We have a way to go. But our lawmakers, whether federal, state or local, only will listen to you if they know you're a voter. So that's the first step, is to vote, and then we'll continue to make change after that.

Mindy Henderson: So well said by both of you. Last question, anything that you would either like to leave our listeners with in general about voting, the importance of voting, or anything about how listeners can continue to stay informed and engaged with these issues? Mark, you just named a bunch of them. MDA has an incredible advocacy team. You two are part of that wonderful team. We have a grassroots advocacy group. How can people stay informed and engaged?

Shaun Hill: Again, I think keeping a conversation going. Storytelling is among them. Share with MDA, share with others what has your experience been as you've navigated the voting process. I believe that the U.S. Election Assistance Commission reported that there are 1.95 million voters who classify as disabled that say they experience challenges when they go to vote. That's a huge number. Probably even more staggering is that that same report says that if the disabled voter were able to vote at the same rate as someone not experiencing challenges, there would be an additional 1.75 million votes cast in the United States. That's a lot of power. You have to wonder if in fact, people are staying home because of the challenges that they face in trying to get to the ballot box.

So wanting to move beyond those numbers and encourage people that it's worth it. It's worth the challenge. You are exercising your voice. You are casting your vote for decision-makers that are getting inside of local election offices, are

getting into inside the walls of Congress to make decisions that impact your day-to-day life. So despite the fact it may be a bit of a challenge is so vitally important.

Mindy Henderson: Love it. I think that that's a huge number, first of all. My mind is a little bit blown by that number that you just shared with us. And again, regardless of how you vote, who you vote for, I think that sometimes it can be underestimated how much your vote counts. But if you add your vote to that million and something, other people who are voting, it can really make a difference. And I think that what you're voting for is a very clear reflection of just the kind of world that you want to live in. Again, issues aside, candidates aside, your vote is your way to say, "This is how I feel, and this is what I am in support of, and this is the world that I want to live in." So vitally, vitally important, and I think the power of a single person's vote can't be underestimated because it's compounded when you add it up with all the other people that can get out there and vote. Mark, any final thoughts or words from you?

Mark Fisher: I mean, Shaun hit it out of the park. I mean, I'll just repeat our tagline of Access the Vote, which is, your vote is your power, access it, and access it this year. So Shaun said it perfectly. I couldn't say any better.

Mindy Henderson: Perfect. Wonderful. Well, we will leave it on that note. Again, all of this information, we've cited a lot of resources, we'll put all of that in the show notes for everyone. Shaun and Mark, I want to thank you for joining me and everyone who is listening. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to listen. Please subscribe, please share the podcast with a friend, and please go vote. Thanks, everybody.

Mark Fisher: Thank you.

Shaun Hill: Thank you, Mindy.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at mda.org/podcast. And to learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved, and to subscribe to Quest magazine or to Quest newsletter, please go to mda.org/quest. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd be grateful if you'd leave a review, go ahead and hit that subscribe button so we can keep bringing you great content, and maybe share it with a friend or two. Thanks, everyone. Until next time, go be the light we all need in this world.