

**Voting Is for Everyone:  
A Voting Guide for Iowans with Vision Loss**

**Presented by**



**The Iowa Council of the United Blind**

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## **Introduction**

**Voting is the cornerstone of a democracy. It benefits both the health of the American political system and the people who participate in it. Voters have a powerful impact on public policy and government. Elected officials are more likely to listen to the policies and political concerns of constituents who vote. They pay more attention, make more appearances, and make more appeals to those groups who vote. Voting also carries benefits for those who vote. Citizens who vote are associated with a host of positive civic, health and social activities. They are more engaged in other activities like volunteering or contacting their elected officials to express their concerns. They are more informed about local affairs and are more likely to contribute to the well-being of their communities, knowing they can have a positive impact on what happens.**

**Representative democracy is undermined when there are groups of people who do not vote. Seen as insignificant, many of these groups remain uninformed about elections and do not get contacted or have access to information in an election campaign. Voter participation is a learned activity. New voters need help finding the location of their polling place and a number to call for help, learning their voting options,**

**and understanding what's on the ballot or the impact of an election on the issues they care about. Communities who have been traditionally underserved and underrepresented in the democratic process often face significant barriers to voting, both discriminatory and inadvertent. These groups are the ones least likely to understand and participate in the voting process.**

**Iowans who are blind or severely visually impaired comprise one of these underserved, underrepresented groups. Voting in elections can provide them with the opportunity to voice their opinions about elected leaders and policies and to help shape the future by electing candidates who share their views. Elected officials make decisions and pass legislation that directly impact the lives of these individuals on all levels, from the design of city intersections to the right to use public facilities to the health benefits available under Medicare and Medicaid. Consequently, voting for candidates who share their views is one of the most effective ways for citizens with vision loss to influence the policies and legislation that affect their lives.**

**Despite the enactment of local, state, and national legislation, blind and visually impaired citizens often face barriers to voting, both in accessing the voting process and in gathering current information about the issues and candidates that will allow them to make informed decisions. They are not sure how to register**

**to vote, find the location of their voting station, or decide which method of voting works best for them. They don't know how to exercise their right to cast a secret ballot or what to do when that right is violated. The 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) requires that at least one accessible voting machine be available in all polling places for federal elections, thereby enabling many blind and visually impaired voters to vote privately and independently. Yet surveys conducted by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) show that the percentage of blind voters who were able to cast a private and independent ballot on an accessible voting system has declined from 86 percent in 2008 to 75 percent in 2012 to 83 percent in 2014. Unfortunately, poll workers and blind voters themselves rarely receive training on how to set up or operate these machines. According to another NFB survey, following the 2008, 2012, and 2014 federal elections, untrained poll workers were the primary reason why blind voters were not able to cast a private and independent ballot on an accessible voting machine. Of the blind voters surveyed by the NFB in 2014, 29 percent said that poll workers had problems setting up or operating accessible voting machines as compared to 33 percent in 2012 and 19 percent in 2008.**

**Many Iowans with vision loss are also not sure of the best ways to access current information about candidates and issues. They get mail about elections,**

**issues, and candidates in print that is difficult or impossible to read. Political ads broadcast on television often contain vital information that appears on the screen but is not spoken aloud. Full involvement in the political process is no longer limited to gathering information from television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Email is often the method of choice for constituents to contact candidates and elected officials. Through such social media as Twitter and Facebook, voters can submit questions during debates and forums and share their opinions about issues and candidates with others.**

**Many citizens are now using their smart phones to participate in the political process. With its built-in speech system known as VoiceOver, the iPhone is the smart phone most accessible to individuals with vision loss. Through the iPhone, a blind person can electronically access printed materials, podcasts, email, social media, television programs, and other sources of up-to-date information. Several apps are also available that will allow the blind user to magnify print and to scan and read mail and other printed materials. Learning how to use the iPhone effectively, however, has a steep learning curve, which is often extremely challenging for beginners. These problems are complicated by the fact that many persons with vision loss who would like to vote do not know how to make the necessary accommodations for their**

**blindness. Frustrated by these barriers, it is not surprising that many of them choose to opt out of the political process altogether.**

**The purpose of this guide is to insure that Iowa's voters with vision loss have the opportunity to participate fully in the state's voting process. It will show you how to access the steps in the process by using helpful low vision and blindness techniques. It will also acquaint you with some resources that will allow you to use the assistive technology features built into the iPhone to access the information essential for becoming an informed voter. Most often, voting law violations occur as a result of lack of knowledge rather than malicious intent. Voting officials and voters themselves frequently don't understand the law or operate under outdated information. As citizens with vision loss, we must take personal responsibility for knowing the laws and our rights under them. If we don't know the law, we cannot know when it is being violated.**

**This guide is being presented to Iowa's voters with vision loss by the Iowa Council of the United Blind (ICUB), a nonpartisan consumer organization whose membership is composed mainly of Iowans who are blind or severely visually impaired. If you would like more information about ICUB or about voting in Iowa, please contact Sandy Tigges at 515-277-1256 or**

[tiggess@dwx.com](mailto:tiggess@dwx.com). You can also contact the president of ICUB, Carrie Chapman, at 515-657-1461 or [c.chapman657@yahoo.com](mailto:c.chapman657@yahoo.com).

**ICUB would like to thank Prairie Meadows for its generous Community Betterment Grant that makes the production and distribution of this guide possible.**

### **Finding Information about the Voting Process**

**The two best sources of accurate voting information are the Iowa Secretary of State (SOS) Office and the auditor's office in the county in which you reside. In fact, much of the information in this guide comes from the SOS website, [sos.iowa.gov](http://sos.iowa.gov). SOS is the state government agency charged with overseeing elections and campaigns. County auditors also serve as Commissioners of Elections for their county. In addition to federal, state and county elections, they assumed the duties of all city, school, and special elections. They prepare and supervise the printing of ballots and programming of voting machines, as well as order all election supplies. They conduct schools of instructions, according to law, for all precinct election officials and are responsible for their employment on Election Day. They also prepare and monitor the**

**processing of all absentee ballots in order to aid voters who will not be voting at the polls on Election Day.**

**Both SOS and county auditors' offices can be contacted by phone, by email, and online. You can even find out who your county auditor/Commissioner of Elections is by calling the SOS or going to its website. The website of the Iowa State Association of County Auditors (ISACA) also includes links to the websites of every county auditor in Iowa. These offices can help you:**

- Register to vote**
- Get a sample ballot**
- Vote early**
- Get an absentee ballot**
- Learn when elections are scheduled**
- Find your polling place**
- Learn how to use an accessible voting machine**
- Learn about your rights as a voter with a disability**
- Investigate the violation of voting rights**

**Although the SOS website is compatible with screen-enlargement and screen-reading software, the website of your county auditor may not be. Johnson County, for example, has a well-designed site filled with**

**valuable, easy-to-find information. Other counties do not. Some of them are poorly designed and rely on PDF formats that often are not accessible to individuals who use screen-reading software. If you find your county auditor's website difficult to navigate, let them know. Often, they are not aware of accessibility issues and will make the necessary modifications if the problems are drawn to their attention.**

## **Registering to Vote**

**The state of Iowa tries to make it as easy as possible for you to register to vote. If you apply for a service from the state, such as a non-driver ID or rehabilitation training from the Department for the Blind, you will be asked if you want to register to vote. As Election Day nears, you will have volunteers knocking at your door asking if you want to register to vote. You can register months before an election or on Election Day itself. But if you don't register, you will not be able to vote.**

**To qualify to register to vote, you must be a U.S. citizen, an Iowa resident, and at least 17-1/2 years old. You must be eighteen, however, by Election Day to vote. You cannot register if you are a convicted felon whose voting rights have not been restored, have been**

**judged mentally incompetent to vote by a court, or claim the right to vote in any other place. If you are not sure if your voter registration is active, you can call your auditor's or SOS office and ask. You can also go on the SOS website and enter your name and zip code. The site will then show you if your registration is active, where your polling place is located, and the steps you need to take to register.**

**There are a number of ways for you to register to vote. You can call the SOS or county auditor's office to have a registration form mailed to you. If you have some usable vision, you can fill out the form yourself. If not, you can get assistance from a friend, family member, or auditor office employee. You can also download a fillable PDF form from the SOS website. In either case, you must then return the completed and signed form to your county auditor's office.**

**To take advantage of registering to vote online, a non-operator's ID or an Iowa driver's license is required. You can begin the process from the SOS homepage by clicking on the Online Voter Registration link. You will be transferred to the Iowa Motor Vehicle Division website, where you will then be prompted to login with your name, the number on your ID or license, and the last five digits of your Social Security number. You will then begin the registration process. Both this and the SOS websites are compatible with screen-enlargement**

**and screen-reading software. The SOS site also contains links to blind-friendly YouTube tutorials that can help guide you through the registration process.**

**You can even register and vote on Election Day, but you must do so at the correct polling place for your current address. You must prove who you are and where you live. The best way to do this is with a non-driver ID card or valid driver's license with your current address printed on it. If you don't have either of these items, you can use a photo ID that is current, valid, and shows an expiration date, such as:**

**--Iowa non-operator ID card**

**--Out-of-state driver's license or non-driver ID card**

**--U.S. passport**

**--U.S. military ID**

**--ID card issued by employer**

**--Student ID issued by Iowa high school or college**

**If your photo ID does not have your current address, you can use another document to prove where you live if it has your name and current address. These documents include a residential lease, utility or cell phone bill, bank statement, paycheck, and government check or other government document. If you cannot prove who you are or where you live, a registered voter from your precinct may attest for you. Both you and the**

**attester will be required to sign an oath swearing the statements being made are true.**

**You will need to update your registration if you change your name, address, or party affiliation. Just fill out a new registration form and return it to your auditor's office. If you moved within the county, you may also report a change of address on Election Day at the polling place for the address where you now live. You may be asked to show identification that includes your name and current address. Acceptable forms of identification include:**

**--Utility bill**

**--Bank statement**

**--Paycheck**

**--Government check or other government document**

**If you move to a different county, you can also register to vote on Election Day.**

**Sometimes, there is confusion as to what constitutes a legal signature on voting documents. If you are unable to sign, you can use a rubber stamp or mark to sign. You can also ask for assistance and have someone sign the form on your behalf as long as it is done in your presence and with your permission. Your signature does not have to be notarized. An individual who has your power of attorney does not have the**

**authority to sign a voter registration form, request an absentee ballot, or cast an absentee ballot on your behalf.**

## **Getting a Sample Ballot**

**Sometimes you may find it helpful to read a sample ballot before Election Day. It will give you more time to study the candidates and issues that appear on the ballot. It will also acquaint you ahead of time with what a ballot looks like and the offices and issues you will be asked to vote on. You can request sample ballots in print from your county auditor's office in person or by mail. You may also be able to download a sample ballot from your county auditor's website. Keep in mind, though, that these forms may be in a PDF format that is not easily accessible to screen-reading software. Some voters with vision loss find it helpful to read the ballot with screen-reading magnification software on their computer or iPhone. Others print out the downloaded ballot and scan it with an optical scanner that will translate the document into spoken text. Still others have a friend or family member read the document to them. In any case, let your county auditor's office know what problems you are having and how best they can serve your needs as a voter with vision loss.**

## **Finding Your Polling Place**

**You can find your polling place by calling the SOS office or the auditor's office in your county. You can also locate it on the SOS website by following the "Find My Polling Place" link. Representatives from the political parties in your area are also eager to have you vote and are happy to provide you with this information as well.**

## **Getting to the Polls**

**As a non-driver, getting to your polling place can be problematic, especially if the weather is bad or the site cannot be reached by public transportation. The government cannot provide you with a ride to the polls, but candidates and partisan and nonpartisan organizations can. As Election Day nears, organizations often run "get out the vote" campaigns that offer transportation to the polls. You can give them a call to arrange a ride. As Election Day nears, you may also be contacted by some of these organizations to see if you need a ride to the polls.**

**Some voters with vision loss choose to get to the polls by walking or arranging their own transportation**

**with a taxi or a ride from a neighbor, friend, or family member. Still others decide to cast an absentee ballot or to vote early at their county auditor's office where lines are short and when public transportation is more available.**

## **Casting Your Vote**

**You can cast your vote at your designated polling place, at your county auditor's office, or by absentee ballot. Choose the method that works best for you. It is not important how you vote but that you do vote.**

**If you want to vote privately and independently, you will need to use an accessible voting machine at your assigned polling place or at your county auditor's office. By law, every polling place in Iowa must have an accessible voting machine and all instructions must be printed in large type. If you have never used such a machine, you may want to make a visit to your county auditor's office to practice. The SOS website also contains links to helpful YouTube tutorials that can show you how to use one. Poll workers seldom encounter voters who want to use an accessible machine, so by using one, you will be providing them with a valuable experience.**

**You may decide to ask for sighted assistance in marking your ballot at your polling place. If you choose this method, you may encounter some confusion about whom you can bring into the voting booth with you, especially since a past law had required that a representative from each political party must accompany you. That law has changed. You may now ask for help from anyone you want except your employer, your employer's agent, or the agent or officer of your union. If you ask for assistance from your precinct official, you will need to sign a form stating that you had asked for such help. If you cannot physically sign the form, you can use a rubber stamp or mark to sign. You can also ask for assistance or for someone to sign on your behalf as long as it is in your presence and with your permission. This form does not need to be notarized. You will also need to sign this form if you request assistance from an election official in completing an absentee ballot.**

**Many voters, including those with vision loss, choose to vote using an absentee ballot. Some people feel that voting this way is more convenient and gives them more time to consider their choices. Transportation may be a problem for them, and voting on Election Day may conflict with their work, travel, and family schedules. If you have some usable vision, you may be able to fill out the absentee ballot yourself. Otherwise, you will need to get sighted help. Absentee**

**ballots are not available in Braille or other alternative format.**

**Any registered voter in Iowa can request an absentee ballot through their county auditor's office, as long as they are eighteen years old by Election Day. You can ask that the request form be sent to you by mail or you can download a copy from the SOS or your county auditor's website. Completed and signed requests must be delivered to your county auditor. Absentee ballot requests do not need to be notarized or witnessed in Iowa.**

**Your county auditor's office must receive your request form by 5:00 P.M. on the Friday before the election. If your request is received so late that is unlikely the absentee ballot can be returned by mail in time to be considered for counting, the county auditor will enclose a statement to that effect with the absentee ballot. After receiving your request form, the county auditor will mail you a ballot. For primary and general elections, the ballots are mailed no later than 40 days before Election Day. For other elections, ballots are mailed to voters as soon as they are ready. With the ballot, you will receive instructions on how to mark and return it.**

**You can return your voted absentee ballot by mail. Absentee ballots received in the county auditor's office by the time the polls close on Election Day are eligible**

**for counting. Those received after the polls close on Election Day must be postmarked by the Monday before Election Day or earlier and received in the county auditor's office no later than noon on the Monday following the election. For school and some city and special elections, the return deadline may be earlier. Voted absentee ballots cannot be delivered to the polling place on Election Day. If you have not returned your absentee ballot on Election Day, you can deliver your voted absentee ballot to the county auditor's office before the polls close on Election Day, or surrender your voted absentee ballot at the polls and vote a regular ballot, or vote a provisional ballot at the polls if you cannot surrender your voted absentee ballot.**

**You may also cast an absentee ballot in person at your county auditor's office before any election. Keep in mind, though, that you cannot take the ballot home with you. You can mark your ballot with an accessible voting machine in the office, you can bring someone with you who can help you mark the ballot, or you can request assistance from an auditor office employee. For primary and general elections, absentee ballots will be available no earlier than 40 days at the county auditors' offices. For all other elections, ballots will be available as soon as they are ready. In-person absentee voting is not available on Election Day at the auditor's office unless the polls open at noon. In that case, you can vote at the auditor's office from 8:00 A.M. to noon.**

**Some county auditors use satellite absentee voting stations to provide in-person absentee voting at places other than the auditor's office. Again, you cannot take the ballot home with you. Since all satellite stations must be accessible to people with disabilities, you have the same options for marking your ballot at these locations as you do at the county auditor's office.**

### **Dealing with the Violation of Voting Rights**

**If you think your voting rights have been violated, you need to report it. Perhaps you were told that your signature on your voter registration form had to be notarized. Perhaps you were unable to cast a private and independent ballot on an accessible voting machine or were not allowed to bring the person of your choice into the voting booth. Make your report promptly, preferably before the polls close. If the problem cannot be resolved by then, you can always cast a provisional ballot in the meantime.**

**The state of Iowa takes the violation of voting rights very seriously. If you think that your rights have been violated, the Secretary of State wants to hear from you. You can contact the SOS voter hotline at 1-888-767-8683 or by email at [sos@sos.iowa.gov](mailto:sos@sos.iowa.gov). You should also contact your county auditor's office.**

**You can also file a voter rights violation with other organizations. The Iowa Disability Vote Coalition (IDVC) is “...a network of Iowa allies working together to create and grow the political power of Iowans affected by disability.” They can be contacted by phone at (866) 432-2846 or through their website at [www.idaction.org/vote](http://www.idaction.org/vote).**

**The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is also concerned about voter fraud and voter rights violations. ACLU Election Protection can be reached nationally by phone at 866-OUR-VOTE (687-8683) or by email at [letmevote@aclu.org](mailto:letmevote@aclu.org). Their email address in Iowa is [legal.program@aclu-i](mailto:legal.program@aclu-i). You can also contact the Election Protection Coalition at 1-866-OUR-VOTE.**

**Remember: voting is a right, not a privilege. Exercise that right.**

## **Resources**

**Below is a sampling of resources about voting in Iowa, sources of information about candidates and issues, and iPhone tools and accessibility. If you have questions or suggestions, contact ICUB President Carrie Chapman at 515-657-1461 or [c.chapman657@yahoo.com](mailto:c.chapman657@yahoo.com). We can share your**

**suggestions on our website at [icublind.org](http://icublind.org), our Facebook page, and our quarterly bulletin.**

- **The office of Iowa's Secretary of State (SOS) is an excellent source of voter information. They are happy to assist you with any questions or problems you may have and can be reached at:**

**Iowa Secretary of State (SOS)**

**First Floor, Lucas Building**

**321 E. 12<sup>th</sup> St.**

**Des Moines, IA 50319**

**515-281-5204**

**Email: [sos@sos.iowa.gov](mailto:sos@sos.iowa.gov)**

**Website: <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections>**

- **You can find contact information for your county auditor's office from the SOS or by going online to the website of the Iowa State Association of County Auditors (ISACA). Its highly accessible website can be reached at:**

**[www.iowaauditors.org](http://www.iowaauditors.org)**

- **ID Action-Iowans with Disabilities in Action--is a resource for Iowans with any type of disability. It offers unique tools intended to inform, educate and empower Iowans with disabilities. Connected with IDAction is a group called the Iowa Disability Vote Coalition (IDVC), “...a network of Iowa allies working together to create and grow the political power of Iowans with disabilities.” Information can be found at:**

**<https://www.idaction.org/vote>**

**Whether you lean to the left, to the right, or somewhere in between, there are many sources of good cost-free information about voting, candidates, and issues that can help you make your voting decisions. Below are just a few.**

- **You can learn all about the presidential election process from start to finish by going to:**

**<https://www.usa.gov/election>**

- **The Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, a division of the Iowa Department for the Blind, provides materials in Braille, Audio and large-print formats to Iowa residents who are unable to read standard print. You can learn more about the library by**

**calling them at 800-362-2587 or 515-281-1333. You can also go to the library's website at:**

**<https://blind.iowa.gov/library>**

- **The Iowa Radio Reading Information Service (IRIS) provides access to eight Iowa newspapers and to specialty and national magazines through subcarrier radios and online streaming. You can learn more about IRIS by calling 515-243-6833 or 877-404-4747 or going to the website at:**

**[www.iowaradioreading.org](http://www.iowaradioreading.org)**

- **Through an iPhone or a touch-tone telephone, NFB Newslite, a National Federation of the Blind (NFB) service, offers audio access to over 300 publications to those who cannot read regular newsprint. You can learn more about this service by calling 866-504-7300 or by going to the NFB website at:**

**[www.nfb.org](http://www.nfb.org)**

- **An excellent source for political fact checking is:**

**<https://www.politifact.com>**

- **Also available through the App Store, Politico gives an overview of politics, policy, and political news. You can read it online at:**

**<https://www.politico.com>**

**A lot of information, tutorials, and tools are available that can help you make full use of your iPhone and its features. Below are a few.**

- **AppleVis is a blindness community-run internet site for users of Apple products who have vision loss. There you can find tutorials, product reviews, discussion groups, and other information about iPhones and iPhone apps. Go to:**

**<https://www.applevis.com>**

- **VoiceOver Easy is a website that provides free Tutorials for using VoiceOver on your iPhone and iPad:**

**<https://www.voiceover-easy.net>**

- **The Hadley School for the blind, a great resource for self-development and skills training, offers a variety of free courses, seminars, and other information to help you take**

**advantage of the accessibility features of the iPhone.**

**Find them at:**

**<https://www.hadley.edu/default.asp>**

- **Available free from the App Store, the LookTel VoiceOver Tutorial app provides a basic introduction to VoiceOver and the gestures used throughout iOS.**
- **Many magnifying apps are available through the App Store. You must pay for some of them, but others are available at no charge. Try out a few to see which ones work best for you. A free one that some users with low vision find helpful is an app called Glasses.**
- **Several apps are available from the App Store that turn your iPhone into an optical scanner, converting printed text into speech. An excellent one is the KNFB Reader, which usually sells for \$99.99 but sometimes can be found at a reduced price. An alternative is Text Grabber, which sells for just \$.99.**