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California's protection and advocacy system

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Disability Rights California, Hosting Election Day Hotline for Voters With Disabilities

Oakland, CA – Californians with disabilities who plan to vote in the election on November 4 have an ally in assuring full and equal access to the voting process. With funding from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), Disability Rights California, formerly Protection and Advocacy, Inc. (PAI), is sponsoring a toll-free hotline for voters with disabilities who have difficulty accessing polling places, casting ballots or general questions about the voting process. This is the fourth year that Disability Rights California has operated the hotline.

The purpose of the hotline is to fix problems on Election Day that are causing disenfranchisement of individuals with disabilities. We know there are many barriers affecting a person's ability to vote such as: limited access to registration materials; wrong information from providers, conservators, relatives, and facility staff about the person's right to vote; judges who take away a person's right to vote when they should not; transportation problems getting to and from the polls; poll access problems for people living in nursing homes and other residential facilities; poll access barriers such as very limited or no accessible parking or curb ramps; doorways and aisles that are too narrow; voting equipment placed on inaccessible tables or stages; poor disability access trainings for poll workers; and, poll sites said to be "accessible" when they are not.

Disability Rights California staff are available to answer voting access questions before the election. So, if anyone has had problems voting or anticipates a problem, please contact us as soon as possible.

"Advancing the human and legal rights of people with disabilities."

Disability Rights California's hotline is equipped to receive voice and TDD calls, and will be staffed from 7 am to 8 pm on November 4th. The toll-free number for voice calls is: **800-776-5746**. The toll-free number for TDD calls is: **800-719-5798**. Individuals who speak languages other than English should state their language and an interpreter will be connected to the call. Callers who wish to use the California Relay Service, Speech to Speech Service or Video Relay can dial 711.

Complaints received by Disability Rights California's Hotline in the February 5th Primary and the June 2 local elections showed a pattern emerging with the use of new voting machines by people with disabilities. In general, due to a lack of training, cumbersome rules and unfamiliarity with the machines, some poll workers were not ready to ensure privacy in voting or troubleshoot access issues. For example, Fred Nisen, a Disability Rights California Attorney in its HAVA program, had problems accessing his polling place because of poor signage to the accessible entrance and actual barricades on the accessible route to the polling place. Then, the machine did not work properly and the poll workers did not know how to reset it. "It is ironic that, in addition to advocating for others' right to vote in an accessible polling place, I have to advocate for my own right to vote," says Nisen.

Garnet Magnus, a Peer and Self Advocacy Coordinator for Disability Rights California, has been providing information to people who reside in facilities in order to get out the word that they can vote. There are barriers that individuals in facilities face that are unique, including: (1) misinformation from relatives as well as their conservators; (2) lack of awareness of whether the conservatorship papers took away their right to vote; and (3) failure of service providers to follow-up with residents who wish to vote either by mail and/or at poll sites. "People in facilities are excited about voting but many do not know how to go about it," said Magnus, "Many service providers do not have enough staff to devote for education and technical assistance with ballots, voting guides, and/or registration materials."

People with vision impairments have problems at the polls. Sara Hadsell, an advocate for Disability Rights California who has a vision impairment, has had several problems trying to vote. Once, she showed up to her polling place, where she was informed that they had no large print voting machines there, and if she wanted to vote that way, she would have to go to another location a few blocks away, where apparently all those who needed accommodations were voting. This information was never in any of the written ballot materials which were sent out ahead of time. In the past two elections, they had an accessible machine at the polling place, but when she went to vote in the morning, nobody knew how to use

the machine, and it took almost an hour while the polling place volunteer found and read the instructions and figured out how to work it.

In addition to operating its own hotline, Disability Rights California staff will be working in collaboration with the Election Protection Coalition to ensure that individuals with disabilities calling the Election Protection Hotline can get answers to their disability related questions. The Election Protection Hotline number is: 1-866-OUR-VOTE, and is equipped to handle English and Spanish speaking callers.

About Disability Rights California

Disability Rights California is a non-profit advocacy agency that provides free legal services to advance the human and legal rights of persons who have disabilities. Under HAVA, Disability Rights California is charged with ensuring “the full participation in the electoral process for individuals with disabilities, including registering to vote, casting a vote and accessing polling places.” Since receiving HAVA funds, Disability Rights California has engaged in a range of voting-related activities, including registering Californians with disabilities to vote, developing nonpartisan educational materials, providing education and outreach, working with the Secretary of State and county election officials and helping voters with their individual voting issues.