July 22nd, 2024

U.S. Election Assistance Commission

633 3rd Street NW, Suite 200

Washington, DC 20001

National Coalition on Accessible Voting (NCAV) Re: Request for Comment: Accessible Digital Form Filler Tool for the National Mail Voter Registration Form

The National Coalition on Accessible Voting appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the new digital form filler tool for the National Mail Voter Registration Form (NMVRF), created by the General Services Administration’s Technology Transformation Services Office of Solutions (GSA TTS).

We strongly support the development of the form filler tool by GSA TTS. The disability rights and civil rights communities have urged GSA to update its websites (such as Vote.gov) and forms (such as the NMVRF) to ensure accessibility.[[1]](#footnote-1) Without a fully accessible NMVRF, GSA and EAC do not provide full and equal access to their programs to promote voter registration, and thus as executive agencies they are in violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.[[2]](#footnote-2) GSA TTS’ digital tool is an important first step toward achieving required digital accessibility for people with disabilities.

However, the form-filler tool does not yet meet all required accessibility standards. GSA TTS should continue to test and improve its form-filler tool to ensure it complies with Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The NCAV is a coalition with the mission of expanding and maintaining voting access for people with disabilities. Our members are from more than 25 civil and disability rights organizations who meet, discuss, and collaborate on voting rights policy every month, primarily at the national level. Members use the NCAV’s information-sharing functions to promote accessibility and the power of the disability vote. For example, more than 200 stakeholders from across the civil rights community registered for a webinar where the NCAV presented on the barriers to voting faced by people with disabilities. The NCAV also writes statements, public comments and briefs on federal voting rights policy.

As a voting rights coalition, we know that voter registration is a critical first step that must be completed to participate in our democracy. The NMVRF has long been held out to the public as an easy-to-find, universal voter registration method. We therefore are invested in ensuring that all versions of this form, particularly those designed for increased accessibility and useability, are developed with the input of the disability rights community.

Our comments address the need for a fully electronic submission method, browser compatibility, and the form’s general accessibility and useability.

# Comment One: We appreciate the form-filler tool’s increased readability. We encourage GSA TTS to improve upon these features. We recommend that GSA TTS ensure the form filler’s text can be magnified by a screen reader and rendered in a larger font size. We recommend that GSA TTS revise the form filler and its instructions into plain language.

The PDF version of the NMVRF was twenty-seven pages long and included instructions for all fifty states.[[4]](#footnote-4) This made the form cumbersome to navigate and difficult to use for many people with disabilities, including people using screen readers and people with cognitive disabilities. The new form-filler tool uses instructions from the person’s home state only, walks the user through each step, and is only five pages long when printed.

We recommend and expect that the form filler will be translated into all languages required for jurisdictions covered by Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act.[[5]](#footnote-5) Wherever possible, we additionally recommend that GSA TTS conduct outreach by advertising its new form-filler tool in languages other than English.

We recommend that GSA TTS (if it does not do so already) use form-filler text that can be made larger and screen magnifier compatibility because both increase accessibility for many users with vision disabilities.[[6]](#footnote-6) WCAG 1.4.4 also requires that users be able to resize webpage text to up to double its original size without the use of a screen magnifier.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Revised Section 508 Standards incorporate and require the use of the WCAG 2.0 at Level AA.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We recommend that the form-filler and its instructions be tested by users with cognitive disabilities and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and revised into plain language where necessary. We appreciate that the form-filler’s greater simplicity will make it easier for many people with disabilities to use. However, the NMVRF must also be accessible to people with cognitive disabilities and people with IDD. We recommend the use of a 3rd to 6th grade reading level in the form’s instructions and content.[[9]](#footnote-9)

# Comment Two: We appreciate that the NMVRF form-filler tool is more accessible than the PDF. However, the tool still does not meet all accessibility standards required by law. We recommend that GSA TTS conduct extensive accessibility testing to ensure its tool is accessible under all circumstances and to all users with disabilities.

The original PDF was highly inaccessible. According to the ACLU and Demos in their July 2021 comments, use of an accessibility tool created by the SSA revealed 33 separate accessibility issues across many different features of the PDF.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Several members of the disability rights community tested the form-filler for themselves. Unlike the PDF, it can be completed without accessibility issues by some screen readers under some circumstances. However, the form is not yet accessible under all circumstances.

One tester, Kolby Garrison at the American Council for the Blind (ACB), found violations of WCAG 2.0’s “On Focus'' requirement when attempting to select her state. GSA must comply with WCAG 2.0 at Level AA.[[11]](#footnote-11) Two testers - Stephanie Flynt McEben at the National Disability Rights Network and Doug Towne of AccessReady- were able to complete the form but detected unusual text characters not visible to users who were not using screen readers. Unusual text characters reduce the form-filler tool’s useability and confuse users with disabilities. It is not enough for the form to be completable using a screen reader; It must also be easy to understand and use.

Doug Towne of AccessReady used a Selvas-brand Polaris Note-Taker and Stephanie Flynt McEben used the Google Chrome browser with the Job Access with Speech (JAWS) screen reader. Kolby Garrison also used a JAWS screen reader and Google Chrome. Testers at the National Federation of the Blind, who used the form-filler without difficulty, tested both mobile and desktop versions of the form-filler. We do not know which browser software and screen-readers they used. Kolby Garrison and Stephanie Flynt McEben had different results despite using the same screen reader program and browser (JAWS and Google Chrome).

The cause of the different degrees of accessibility testers encountered is not known. However, we are concerned that the form-filler was released to the Federal Register without accessibility testing using a range of software, computers, cell phones, screen readers, and assistive technology. At the very least the form-filler should pass the Revised 508 ICT Testing Baseline regardless of the software or hardware used to access it.[[12]](#footnote-12) We therefore urge GSA TTS to submit the form to comprehensive accessibility testing, similar to the testing for the GSA’s modernization of Vote.gov in accordance with the President’s Executive Order on Promoting Access to Voting.[[13]](#footnote-13) We also recommend testing using different combinations of browsers, hardware, and software (such as Google Chrome on an Apple OS or iOS using JAWS, or Mozilla Firefox on a Windows OS using JAWS).

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# Comment Three: We recommend that the GSA create an electronic alternative to printing and mailing the NMVRF.

While the creation of a form-filler tool is an important step toward greater accessibility, it does not serve all voters. Voters with print disabilities[[14]](#footnote-14) are unable to sign and mail in any printed form. As of July 22nd, 2024, printing and mailing the form is the only way to submit it.

We recommend that GSA create an online submission method for the NMVRF. Options could include an online portal on Vote.gov (similar to the online portals used by individual states)[[15]](#footnote-15) or an email system. Including such a system would expand the number of voters served by the NMVRF and would benefit all voters by reducing the number of steps needed to submit the form.

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# Comment Four: We recommend that the GSA create a method for reporting accessibility barriers in the form-filler.

We recommend a method similar to the “Accessibility” link at the bottom of Vote.gov, which directs voters to a page with a statement and an email where they can contact GSA with questions or accessibility concerns.[[16]](#footnote-16) GSA could include the link at the bottom of each page of the form-filler.

We again thank the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and GSA TTS for the opportunity to comment and improve the form-filler tool’s accessibility. With most voter registration deadlines for the November 2024 general election less than three months away, it has never been more important to have an easy-to-use, accessible form of voter registration available. For more information contact Kelly Israel, the NCAV’s coordinator, at kelly.israel\_contractor@ndrn.org.

Sincerely,

National Coalition on Accessible Voting

Undersigned Organizations:

American Council of the Blind

The Arc of the United States
Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Paralyzed Veterans of America

National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities

National Disability Rights Network

1. American Civil Liberties Union and Demos, Comment Letter on Promoting Access to Voting; Request for Information; Barriers to Private and Independent Voting for People with Disabilities; Docket Number 210608-0123 (Jul. 16, 2021), <https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2021/07/26/rfi-pva-166-attachment.pdf>; Letter from American Civil Liberties Union, American Council of the Blind, Demos, Disability Rights Advocates, Fair Elections Center, National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), Paralyzed Veterans of America and The National Council on Independent Living to Robert Carnahan, Administrator, U.S. General Services Administration (Sept. 16, 2021), *available at* <https://www.acb.org/sites/default/files/FInal%20Letter%20to%20GSA.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 794 *et seq.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. GSA TTS should review the Revised 508 ICT Testing Standards to ensure its tool is compliant. *Section 508 ICT Testing Baseline*, Access Board, <https://section508coordinators.github.io/ICTTestingBaseline/> (last visited Jul. 1, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *National Mail Voter Registration Form*, U.S. Election Assistance Comm’n, https://www.eac.gov/voters/national-mail-voter-registration-form (last visited Jul. 1, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act has requirements that differ depending upon jurisdiction, Vote.gov and the NMVRF form-filler tool are public resources that must be translated whenever a jurisdiction makes the form available to its constituents. *See Language Minority Citizens,* U.S. Dep’t Justice Civ. Rts. Division, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/language-minority-citizens> (last updated Nov. 22, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *See Screen Magnifiers: Who and How They Help,* Bureau of Internet Accessibility (Jul. 24, 2017), <https://www.boia.org/blog/screen-magnifiers-who-and-how-they-help>; Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), Understanding SC 1.4.4: Resize Text (Level AA), WCAG 2.1 Understanding Docs, https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/Understanding/resize-text (last updated Jun. 20, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), *Understanding Success Criterion 1.4.4: Resize Text (Level AA),* WCAG 2.0 Understanding Docs,<https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG20/Understanding/resize-text> (last updated Jun.7, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Design & Develop: Applicability & Conformance Requirements,* Section 508.gov, <https://www.section508.gov/develop/applicability-conformance/> (last updated May 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Easy Read” and “plain language” are different standards for accessible written content, with Easy Read tending towards lower grade levels than plain language. Our recommendation is based on AUCD’s plain language standard. Consult the guides cited in this footnote for more details. Assoc. of University Ctrs. on Disabilities, AUCD Plain Language 2-3 (May 17, 2021), *available at* <https://www.aucd.org/uploads/urc_filetransfer/resources/AUCD%20Plain%20Language%20Toolkit_Final.pdf>; Autistic Self Advocacy Network, One Idea Per Line: A Guide To Making Easy Read Resources 16, 24 (2021), *available* at <https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/One-Idea-Per-Line.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. American Civil Liberties Union and Demos, Comment Letter on Promoting Access to Voting; Request for Information; Barriers to Private and Independent Voting for People with Disabilities; Docket Number 210608-0123 (Jul. 16, 2021), <https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2021/07/26/rfi-pva-166-attachment.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Design & Develop: Applicability & Conformance Requirements,* Section 508.gov, <https://www.section508.gov/develop/applicability-conformance/> (last updated May 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *See Section 508 ICT Testing Baseline: 2. Focus,* U.S. Access Board, <https://ictbaseline.access-board.gov/02FocusVisible/> (last visited Jul. 5, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *See Modernizing Vote.gov,* Vote.gov, <https://vote.gov/promoting-access-to-voting/> (last visited Jul. 5, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nat’l Disability Rts. Network and Am. Assoc. People with Disabilities, Making Voting Accessible to Voters with Print Disabilities 2 (Jul. 24, 2021), <https://www.aapd.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Making-Voting-Accessible-to-Voters-with-Print-Disabilities-1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Md. State Bd. Elections, *Voter Registration and Mail-in Ballot Request,* <https://voterservices.elections.maryland.gov/OnlineVoterRegistration/InstructionsStep1> (last visited Jul. 1, 2024); Conn. Secretary of State, *Register Online to Vote,* <https://portal.ct.gov/dss/common-elements/register-online-to-vote> (last visited Jul.1, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Accessibility Statement*, Vote.gov, <https://vote.gov/accessibility/> (last updated July 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)