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NEWS

Outreach program to target voters with disabilities

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By Francesca Olsen
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The Board of Elections is gearing up for the election season, with a focus on making sure disabled voters can turn out with ease.

Between now and September, the BOE will conduct an outreach program meant to increase awareness about how to use ballot marking devices (BMDs), hire 21 additional poll site specialists, and get the word out that disabled voter access is a serious issue.

Lee A. Stone, who has been voting since he was 18 and is retired now, is enthusiastic about BMDs. He is a former manager of the Independent Living Center of Columbia County, and he's blind.

"In the past, I've always voted with assistance from my family," he said. "We get behind the curtain, and I stick my pointer finger out, and I say, 'I want to vote for...,' and that's the way I've always done it."

With a BMD, Stone doesn't need the help of his family to vote. He can put on headphones and follow instructions to cast his ballot. "For me it's a 100 percent improvement," he said. "It's important to me as a blind person, but also for any type of disability where someone who is not able to see, or comfortable to use the voting booth as you know it."

There are 52 BMDs in Columbia County now for 42 poll sites and 58 election districts. "They've gotten very little use so far," said Democratic Elections Commissioner Virginia Martin. "It was a very compressed time period in which the BMDs had to be introduced to the process. It just made it difficult for the election workers and for the voters to fully embrace these new machines."

Some aversion among voters regarding BMDs is apparent; only a dozen votes have been logged since the BOE introduced them, Martin said.

Susan Cohen of Voting Access Solutions will act as an educator for this voting season with the BOE. She has years of experience as a disability advocate and has served on the New York State Independent Living Council. The Columbia County Government Committee passed a resolution July 21 to enter into a contract with Cohen for a three month training and awareness program regarding disabled voter access and sensitivity. The cost is \$16,500, and the money will come from funding provided by the Helping America Vote Act (HAVA).

HAVA money also will pay for required changes at polling places across the county to make them compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). According to Republican Election Commissioner Donald R. Kline, most polling places only needed better signage. About \$20,000 in HAVA funds went to make polling places ADA compliant. "All of those materials were distributed to the individual polling places," Kline said.

"The disabled community is huge," Cohen said. "Far bigger than most people would ever realize."

Cohen said she would begin outreach for Columbia County by searching out disability advocacy agencies and working with the community. She'll also work with election inspectors and newly hired specialists. "We're going to be providing them with additional training and much more training than ever before," she said.

"I think last year was terrible. Because of the way that everything went, there was no time for training. I

wouldn't call it a credibly successful year for the state. There really wasn't time to implement the system correctly," Cohen said.

"We're trying to change the attitude. It's more than just making (BMDs) available," Cohen said. "I'm also going to be teaching them why it matters. I'm going to do a little sensitivity training, a variety of innovative things to help people warm up to it."

"What we've been saying all along is that this is something we need to address. It's been my opinion that we need assistance doing this," said Martin. "I'm delighted that we've made the connection and we've got the contract with (Susan Cohen) now, and I think she's going to do a really excellent job."

Kline also looks forward to working with Cohen and implementing an outreach initiative. He said that the resolution "will certainly go a long way in furthering that step."

"I'm hoping that it will encourage people who have disabilities and aren't currently registered to vote -- I hope it will encourage them to register to vote and become active in voting," said Martin. "Encouraging anybody who's eligible to vote to do so is what we ought to be doing here at the BOE. This is one way we'll be accomplishing that."

The BOE is also hiring two HAVA specialists, one Democrat and one Republican. Democrat Rhonda Granger has already been hired. Poll site specialists will each be assigned to two polling sites in the county and will work with election inspectors to increase understanding about BMDs.

"People with varying kinds of disabilities will want to use the machine in different ways. They may need different kinds of assistance. This is something a poll site specialist will be sensitive to and will know how to deal with," Martin said.

"I think what we have to do is make those individuals feel comfortable with the new equipment," said Kline referring to the county's tried-and-true election workers. "I really think we can address that issue and by going the route we proposed with these additional poll workers to help relieve those responsibilities. I think it's going to help us retain a lot of those individuals we might have lost otherwise," he said.

"Most of them do like the job. They're well adapted to it. A lot of them aren't computer literate, so to speak. But they all do a great job. We're grateful they're committed to what they do."

"I think through this program if we can get the word out to many more people with disabilities, we could see the voting numbers change throughout Columbia County," said Stone. "My vote is going to count just as much as your vote. It always has, but people haven't always had that amount of accessibility in individual voting."

"I do hope that Columbia County can become a model county in the state for how we provide voting access to people with disabilities," said Martin. "I'm very delighted that the county is supporting this as well."

Cohen said she's up to the challenge. "That means aggressive outreach, but that doesn't mean it's going to be easy," she said. "I'm expecting a lot of resistance, but that's never stopped me before."

"If you are able to read this, then feel free to read this to someone who may not have that ability," said Stone. "Call a neighbor, call a friend, call a relative, and read that to them. This can make the difference. If it's only 50 or 200 more voters, then that's 50 or 200 more than we had before."

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