

Making Civic Involvement a Reality for All: SLO County Clerk & Access for All

San Luis Obispo is fortunate that Julie Rodewald, the County Clerk-Recorder, has always tried to make voting services accessible to all citizens. While numerous laws have required election officials to increase the accessibility of polling places, Ms. Rodewald did this because of her commitment to full participation of the citizenry. In 2002, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) required that voting systems be accessible for the disabled “in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation as for other voters.” Despite fearing that HAVA’s additional requirement would be prohibitive, the Clerk-Recorder used it as an opportunity for a public-nonprofit partnership that brings full participation in elections to the disabled community.

Access for All (AFA) is a coalition of groups representing the range of disabilities who advocate for “an accessible community where persons with disabilities are provided with equal opportunities in all aspects of life.” AFA serves as a clearinghouse for all things related to accessibility in the community reflective of its diverse membership. Having collaborated with AFA previously, when the Clerk-Recorder learned of grant opportunities to increase accessibility, a joint venture partnership seemed a natural fit. Thus sprang the Election Accessibility Project and for the next year the Recorder’s office and AFA will be collaborating to improve accessibility to and participation in the elections process for individuals with the full range of disabilities. The goal is to make the approximately 80 polling places accessible and offer appropriate voter outreach and educational opportunities aimed at the full participation of the elderly and voters with disabilities in the election process.

One of the biggest challenges for the Recorder was understanding just what should be done to increase accessibility. They called on AFA early in the process for assistance. While polling places had been the main focus in the elections world, other opportunities to increase accessibility that might not have been recognized surfaced through this early collaboration. AFA helped identify the most significant problems, and helped guide the proposed activities.

In planning for the 2010 elections, AFA has acted as a consultant on the preparation of poll worker training material so that it includes accessibility awareness and sensitivity to voters with a variety of disabilities. Members of AFA will participate in staff and poll worker training leading up to Election 2010. They bring their vast knowledge and expertise to complement the Recorder’s technical expertise. Having structured the project with AFA as consultants, the funding it receives assists AFA in pursuing its own projects in serving the community.

The Election Accessibility project is just beginning to implement many of the proposed activities and much bodes well for a win-win outcome. Clerk-Recorder staff periodically attend Access for All meetings. Not waiting for 2010, during the May 2009 Special Statewide Election the Clerk-Recorder staffed an early voting site with accessible ballot marking machines during AFA’s Paul Wolff Accessibility Advocacy Awards program. Coupled with the history and familiarity between both organizations these early activities are setting a strong base of mutual trust. The Clerk-Recorder’s office benefits from AFA’s role as a clearinghouse for the entire disabled community. With a single point of contact the Recorder can be more confident that its accessibility activities will be consistent and responsive to the multi-faceted disabled community. Lastly, structuring the collaboration with AFA as a consultant assists them in furthering their mission and helping the community overall.