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Barriers and Facilitators to Voting for People with Disabilities in Michigan Rural Communities

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## Abstract

### **Objective**

In this study, we sought to investigate and obtain data on the perceived barriers and facilitators that rural Michigan residents with disabilities face throughout the voting process.

### **Method**

We conducted two separate focus groups in two different rural areas of Michigan asking a series of semi-structured questions about the participants' voting experiences. We obtained recorded interviews, qualitative data, of their answers to these prepared questions.

### **Results**

Physical accessibility was limited by poor lighting for people with low vision problems and a lack of accommodations for those who are not able to stand for a prolonged time while waiting in the long lines. Members of these rural communities show great pride for their sense of community support; however, people with disabilities have to rely heavily on community and family members for transportation to the voting polls. The participants in this study expressed an overall positive attitude towards poll workers, yet some participants were not aware that poll workers are responsible for providing accessible, alternative options for people with disabilities, such as Braille forms and auditory aids. Finally, absentee voting was widely discussed as a major facilitator and the preferred method of voting for most. However, absentee ballots remain problematic to individuals with visual deficits due to font size.

### **Conclusion**

The balance between perceived barriers and facilitators does not appear to perpetuate a negative voting experience among people with disabilities in rural Michigan.

*Keywords: Rural, Michigan, Physical Disabilities, Voting, Accessibility*

**Points of Interest**

- People with disabilities living in rural areas of Michigan should have access to every aspect of the democratic voting process, including being able to vote at the polls.
- Previous research has found some facilitators, but also a number of barriers for this population to be able to vote.
- We conducted focus groups and found that our participants discussed four major themes regarding whether they were able to have a positive experience while voting: physical accessibility, community engagement, poll workers, and absentee balloting.
- Further research is needed to understand the full scope of barriers and facilitators to voting for people with disabilities living in rural areas of Michigan. Research should also be conducted to understand this process for different rural areas of the United States.

### **Introduction**

Occupational therapy is a profession based on the “belief that there is a universal and fundamental relationship between people's dignified and meaningful participation in daily life and their experience of health, well-being, and quality of life” (Pollard, Skellariou, & Kronenberg, 2008). Political engagement through the act of voting is not an exception to this vision. In fact, the quality of life and participation in daily living is often negotiated through political action and the power of voting. Occupational therapy views political activities of daily living (pADL) as a human occupation that is fundamental to meaningful participation and therefore health, well-being, and quality of life. pADLs are motivated by personal interests and experiences and involve a person’s capacity to negotiate needs and obtain power over his or her own occupations. Politics exist in the conflict and cooperation that surrounds human occupation in daily life, human interaction, and every level of culture and society, as well as the motivation behind an individual’s actions and behaviors (Pollard et al., 2008). Unfortunately, voting is an occupation in which the needs of people with disabilities may go unnoticed, therefore barriers to political participation are reinforced.

Rural areas across the United States experience marginalization and the absence of coverage of relevant local issues (Stephens, 2016). As more people experiencing poverty and disability move into or remain in rural areas, the more challenges this population faces (Geronimus, Bound, & Ro, 2014). The identity of a rural resident is more about consciousness than geographic boundaries (Walsh, 2012). Rural consciousness varies in its ideas about geographic distinctions of power and resources, values and lifestyles, a sense of injustice from urban groups, and political alienation (Walsh, 2012). What separates rural residents are more symbolic boundaries as shown by social hierarchies that reinforce discrimination (Lichter &

Ziliak, 2017). Rural consciousness perceives deprivation from politicians who lack an understanding of rural life as disregarding rural lifestyles in the decision-making political processes (Walsh, 2012). Institutional forces perpetuate inequalities between rural and social communities, resulting in voices of rural residents becoming increasingly invisible due to spatial inequality and polarizing political views (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

Rural residents and people with disabilities alike face systematic exclusions that deprive them of their right to engage in the political process. While this population's right to vote is protected by law, the conflict lies in the issue of accessibility. Despite efforts and legislation in place to increase accessibility, they feel that their voices remain unheard and do not feel empowered to seek solutions (Pollard et al., 2008). Rural residents with disabilities have unique motives, interests, perceptions, and experiences that differ in the way in which they engage in political occupations. Consequently, there are unique barriers and facilitators they must navigate in order to engage in the occupations they value most.

Activism and advocacy are necessary to protect the rights of people living in rural areas, especially those marginalized due to disability. The systemic injustice is reflected in the lack of rural perspectives in political studies. While there is an abundance of political research in urban and metropolitan areas, it is lacking in rural populations. The purpose of this research study is to identify the barriers and facilitators to voting for people with disabilities in rural Michigan. This will bridge the research gap by exploring the voting experience of people with disabilities in rural areas of Michigan. Research must view the two geographical groups as socially, politically, and economically interdependent. Due to advanced technology, transportation, and communication, urban and rural communities are tightly integrated and boundaries must be viewed as dynamic and permeable (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

## **Background**

### *The Social Model of Disability*

The traditional medical model of disability focuses on people's impairments, conditions, and illnesses rather than the person themselves. Instead of looking at what people cannot do, the social model of disability focuses on the structure and barriers that people experience. This model suggests that the existing barriers which stop or hinder a person's actions are barriers that society has put in place or chosen to ignore (Hughes, 2010).

The barriers to voting that people with disabilities experience make it challenging for them to pursue their voting rights as citizens of the United States. The social model of disability aims to identify individuals' needs and respond in ways that put people first rather than their disabilities, such as making polling places more accessible to them and ultimately promoting independence and freedom of choice (Hughes, 2010). Additionally, there are attitudinal barriers, such as prevailing stereotypes, that lead the public and political officials to believe that people with disabilities cannot or do not want to participate in voting. People with disabilities tend to be excluded from political processes, such as voter education and public outreach (Lord, Stein, & Fiala-Butora, 2014). As a result, they are not adequately represented or included in the target population for many projects involving voter observation, response, and participation. People with disabilities need assistance to become more visible throughout elections and other political processes.

The social model calls for equality and a focus on solutions to the disadvantages that many people with disabilities experience. The solutions to the disadvantages include access to and accessibility of alternative voting methods, such as absentee ballots, polling places, and the equipment and software presented within polling places without an issue. All areas should be

accessible for individuals with disabilities, from the physical environment to the formatting of information presented to them (Hughes, 2010). Accessibility allows individuals with disabilities to be independent, removing barriers that may inhibit their ability to express their right to vote.

For too much of our country's existence, people with disabilities have been excluded from the voting process because of a lack of laws protecting their fundamental American right to voting in a democratic election. Those who use wheelchairs or other mobility aids have been unable to use polling places due to the lack of a ramp. Those with low vision or other sensory issues could not cast their vote because of the ballot not being accessible to them (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014b). As a result, important civil rights laws were created to protect the rights of these citizens with disabilities.

### ***Legislation***

The first of these laws enacted to serve those with disabilities is the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). This act requires election officials to allow a voter who is blind or has another disability to gain assistance from a person of the voter's choice. It also prohibits conditioning voting rights on whether a person can read or write, which helps protect those who are blind or have other disabilities affecting this ability (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a). In 1982, Congress amended this law to include that a person with a disability may be provided assistance from the person of their choice, as long as that person is not the person's employee or an agent of the voter's employer or union (Ward, Baker, & Moon, 2009).

In 1984, Congress also passed the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a). This required that all federal election polling places must be accessible for the elderly and persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, there were a number of difficulties implementing this law. Money was never appropriated by Congress to



enact the legislation. Therefore, states never took seriously the new mandate for accessible polling places. This act also did not deal with the serious issue of allowing private and independent voting for people with disabilities (Ward et al., 2009).

Next, there is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This is a federal civil rights act that gives protections to people with disabilities, similar to protections given for issues of race, sex, age, or religion. Title II of this law requires full and equal access to voting for people with disabilities. It applies to all aspects of voting, including voter registration, the casting of ballots, and site selection. This holds true for election day, as well as an early voting option. One significant aspect of the ADA is that officials must provide communication to voters with disabilities that is equally effective as communication provided to others. Appropriate auxiliary aids or other communication services must be provided at each stage of the voting process, from registering to vote to casting one's ballot. The ADA also requires that election staff and volunteers be adequately trained to interact with people with disabilities prior to election day or at the beginning of the early voting process. These staff and volunteers need to understand the auxiliary aids and services available to them and to the voters. They must understand that service animals are allowed to accompany voters inside the polling site, that accessibility features are properly operating, that citizens with disabilities are allowed assistance from a person of their choice, and that other modifications may be necessary to help those with disabilities enjoy their right to vote (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a).

Another act that helps to encourage voting among those who have a disability is the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA). The goal of this act was to increase registration rates of citizens with disabilities. It requires all offices which offer state-funded programs for persons with disabilities or public assistance, to provide the opportunity to register

to vote in federal elections (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a). They must supply applicants with voter registration forms, assist them in completing the forms, and transmit completed forms to the appropriate state official. By 2000, Congress and the Supreme Court had taken significant measures to derail discrimination efforts because of race, class, and sex. However, they had only taken beginning steps to do so for voters with disabilities. This law assumed that once people are registered to vote, they will vote (Ward et al., 2009). This did not solve all of the problems people with disabilities face when trying to exercise their right to vote.

Lastly, the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) was passed (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a). HAVA was believed to be passed in response to voting controversies in the 2000 Presidential election. During this election, voting counts and the standard for accepting or rejecting contested ballots may have varied from one recount team to another. HAVA was then designed to provide uniform, nondiscriminatory election technologies, and administration. This was done by replacing lever voting systems with electronic means of voting (Ward et al., 2009). This act protects those with disabilities by requiring jurisdictions responsible for conducting federal elections to provide at least one accessible voting system for persons with disabilities at each polling place. In addition to HAVA, the ADA requires that officials maintain and ensure the proper functioning of these accessible voting systems. These officials must also be properly trained to operate them (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a).

Despite these many laws being enacted to help protect the voting rights of all citizens, including those with disabilities, there are still unaddressed barriers to voting and electoral participation. These laws were enacted because of increased political activism by people with disabilities fighting for employment opportunities and increased social inclusion. This hard work continues today based on some aspects of voting practices not yet being addressed in

legislation and also the unwillingness or inability of local governments to carry out federal mandates. The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that although provisions are put in place in all states which specifically address voting by people with disabilities, these provisions vary and there is significant work to be done to ensure voting equity for people with disabilities (Ward et al., 2009).

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

The proposed study is part of a broader line of research efforts to investigate the voting barriers and facilitators for people with disabilities in Michigan. Prior research developed a qualitative research study, designed to gather data exclusively in major urban areas of Michigan. This methodology was accepted and validated by the Internal Review Board (IRB) and the assigned research committee board. In order to maintain consistency across this series of studies, the authors followed a similar methodology and research design.

Data was collected through focus groups using a semi-structured interview format. The questions utilized for discussion were developed from previous research on disability and voting experiences conducted in 2017 and 2018 by former students from the Occupational Science and Therapy program. Participants met in a centralized location in each county where the student researchers held focus groups and were provided with any necessary accommodations. Participants signed consent forms informing them of what to expect during the focus group, how their responses will be audio-recorded, and how confidentiality is maintained throughout the research process. Participants answered 11 demographic questions including their previous experiences using assistive voting devices. Researchers used semi-structured questions and asked

follow-up questions when appropriate for clarity. The same original questions were used across focus groups.

### *Participants and Sampling*

Participant characteristics and sampling methodology were selected to obtain the most representative sample of our target population. Participants self-identified as having a physical and/or sensory disability. This research defines physical disability as any self-identified condition of the body that inhibits functional performance. Physical disabilities include but are not limited to limb amputation, spasticity of extremities, or limited range of motion. Sensory disabilities include self-identified irregularities in vision and/or hearing that may inhibit functional performance. Our inclusion criteria also included permanent residency in a rural community within the state of Michigan and in-person voting participation in the 2012 or more recent election. People with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities were excluded from this study due to the complexity and compounding variables this may add to the research.

Convenient sampling procedures were used by targeting rural communities that are most accessible for the recruitment capabilities of the current study design. This allowed the researchers to overcome recruitment barriers imposed by financial limitations and time constraints. Participants were recruited by collaborating with the PACE program in Newaygo County and Milan Seniors for Healthy Living in Monroe County.

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 13 participants from rural areas with ages ranging from 52 to 89 years old. Eleven of the participants self-identified as having a physical disability, one had a sensory disability, and one had both a physical and sensory disability. Three participants indicated as having voted absentee in the latest election at the time the focus group was conducted. Four participants had experience with using a voting machine.

### *Analysis*

Undergraduate students were recruited to facilitate data transcription. The transcribed information excluded specific participant identifiers and demographic information. The transcribed data was uploaded to MAXQDA, a protected network data analysis software. The data set was coded by each individual member of the research team. A secondary data review was performed in a group effort with all four researchers present at the same time. During the group analysis, all individual codes and code memos were reviewed and organized into major themes.

### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is an important measure to determine the value of its findings. The four parameters that comprise the trustworthiness of qualitative research are credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The credibility of this research study was achieved by sampling, collecting, and analyzing data under the advice of qualified consultants. Transferability of the results was established by recruiting a representative sample of the target population. Inclusion and exclusion criteria in the sampling strategies ensured the proper representation of voters with disabilities in rural communities of Michigan. Confirmability ensured that our conclusions and interpretations were objective and derived from the collected data. This was done by providing a theoretical foundation for our research question that served as a reference during the interpretation process. Additionally, thorough memorandums were attached to major codes during data analysis to ensure the transparency, and honest interpretation of the data set. Finally, the authors aimed to offer a clear explanation and encourage scrutiny of every action step in the research process.

Dependability was achieved by proposing a logical research process that is consistent with the methodology used by prior research efforts and can be replicated by future ones.

### **Results**

Within semi-structured focus groups, research participants had the opportunity to voice their experiences as active voters with disabilities in their rural communities. The researchers moderated each focus group with 14 leading questions regarding experiences and attitudes towards several aspects of the voting process. Follow-up questions were asked as needed to fully understand individual contexts and situations. The topics discussed during each focus group included; satisfaction with their voting experience, poll workers, accessibility, and areas for improvement. The transcribed data were analyzed and coded into four major themes: Physical accessibility, community engagement, poll workers, and absentee voting. Suspected facilitators and/or barriers were identified under each major theme.

#### ***Physical Accessibility***

Physical accessibility was one of the major themes that emerged from our focus group data. The participants discussed both facilitators and barriers to their experience voting at the polls.

#### ***Facilitators***

The physical landscape was brought up by many participants as a facilitator in their voting process. None of our participants noted any accessibility issues with ramp access. In response to why voting has been easy one individual responded:

It has been easy for me because if, well I have never had to use the ramp,  
but they have a ramp to go in and it is just easy to do.

Another comment on the ramp access was very positive as well:

Oh yeah, they have a ramp that you can go up. I think there might be steps too, but when we go there for meetings and stuff, I always go up the ramp.

In regard to the physical makeup inside the polling place, one participant was very happy with access to seating if there is a long line:

In my place, usually, there are chairs around the perimeter. If you feel that you have to sit down or whatever, you do.

Another facilitator brought up by the participants was having wide enough doors at the polling places for people with wheelchairs or walkers to proceed through:

My walkway is about as wide as they get because I have a wide load and I can get through any standard door, and 36-inch door.

In our research, parking was discussed as a potential barrier to voting. We will give an example of this in the next section. Some in our focus groups, however, had the opposite experience.

When discussing the polling location, one participant noted:

There is plenty of parking there.

Many of the participants discussed their comfort level at the polling place. It was noticeable that some of these rural residents felt at ease because the polling place is a familiar place close to their home:

Well, the polling place is our township hall and I am familiar with it, so it is not hard for me to go in there. I have done it enough where I am ok with it.

Overall, the experience by many of our participants was very positive. When asked to rank their polling place accessibility on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not accessible at all and 10 being completely accessible, a few participants answered:

Ten for me.

I would say ten.

One participant was very pleased with how they are considered in the polling process:

I think accessibility is pretty good. I do not- in most cases, I do not see how they could make it much better. There are exceptions to everything. But most cases I think accessibility is pretty good the way it is today. I mean they go out of the way for their handicapped people.

### *Barriers*

In our focus groups, participants brought up a number of physical accessibility barriers to the voting process as well. One of the first physical barriers discussed was a lack of adequate lighting:

I mean, I can do it. I just... going to the poll most of the time I have trouble... the lighting will not be good enough for me and it just takes forever for me to do my thing and you got people waiting. I get nervous.

Another barrier discussed was the issues with long lines. Multiple participants commented on this, talking about the lack of seating if there is a long line or even a lack of restrooms nearby:

I'll tell you what they ought to do is have more potties..more pots to go to.

There is no place to go when you have got to go, you know! You are



standing out there doing the Indian war dance waiting to get in there. I mean that is an inconvenience there.

Another participant commented:

Yeah, but here is the problem. Some people have prostate problems and they have got to go to the bathroom more often than others. You get in line, my God, if you have got short term memory, that is even worse yet. Because you get out of line, you forget where the heck you were when you come back.

A third responded to a lack of seating saying:

With my bad knees, I can't stand very long at a time and if I stand any place, a lot of stores don't have benches around, and I need that if I don't have my walker around.

Another accessibility barrier which was discussed by some participants was the issue of parking:

If I was going to complain, the only thing I could complain about is the parking in my location-precinct. There is no parking. You have got to park on the side of the road, walk a quarter of a mile to get to the poll there. Then I will be complaining because it was raining, I have to go around mud puddles and stuff.

Continuing in our focus group discussions we noticed a theme of visual issues concerning the ballot size:

I think if this is the ballot here, I think, it would not hurt; when you walk in they ask you 'Do you need large print ballot?' and have a large print ballot there for people like me with bad eyesight. I think that would make things go along a lot quicker in the precinct. At home, I can vote because, like I said, I can take my time. And in the precinct, you always feel rushed. But large print on them, it would help...It would help a lot.

Another comment which was made regarded the height of the polling booths not being a suitable height for people in wheelchairs or seated on walkers:

The levels of the ballots need to be at a height for those that are in wheelchairs.

### *Community Engagement*

An important aspect of this study was to explore the voting experience in a rural community for individuals with disabilities. Community engagement was a theme that was brought up several times during our focus groups.

### *Facilitators*

The participants exhibited a sense of pride in their rural communities that served as a major facilitator in the voting process. Community identification was noted by some participants as a factor that enhances their voting experience. When asked to describe their voting experience, one participant explicitly described his attitude towards the voting process in a rural community as follows:

I would say pleasant. The atmosphere is pleasant. We are rural, so we are neighbors and know the people that are there around us.

This sense of social support among community members was further demonstrated by another participant. When the group was asked about availability to receive help from others during the voting process, she explained:

I have sons and I have people in the area that would help me. So, I don't worry for myself. There are probably people in my area that are less fortunate. I am blessed.

Another participant also noted when the group was asked about the level of assistance they received from poll workers:

Because of my eye, my balance is not good. In a physical sense, I need help. My family or whomever I am with sees to that, so I don't need their help for that.

Community engagement and support surfaced as a major facilitator in the voting process for persons with disabilities in rural communities. However, the dependence among community members to successfully engage in the voting process may impose significant barriers when that help is not available.

### *Barriers*

Although community engagement in rural areas was identified as a prominent facilitator, there can be attached barriers in some circumstances. A major issue discussed was transportation to the voting precinct. Most people rely on family or community members to be able to get to the voting precinct. When this help is not available, there are no other transportation options. There seems to be a lack of socially funded transportation services in these rural communities. This leaves community members with disabilities without a stable and reliable transportation option

during election day. When the group was asked if anyone has any issues getting to the voting place, someone answered:

I don't have to have anybody take me now.

According to this participant, her son would help her with her transportation needs but that is not the case anymore. Several people rely on their family members for transportation. Often, sons and daughters help with transportation, as stated by one participant:

My children will take me up there because I can't drive anymore.

When the group was asked if they knew of someone who was not able to vote because they couldn't get there some else replied:

My husband. He couldn't drive there.

Transportation can be a major barrier when community or family support is not available for any reason. While community engagement is strong in rural areas, it appears that transportation issues are being left to be solved by the community members themselves.

### ***Poll Workers***

The participants discussed how their voting experiences were affected by the presence, familiarity, and information provided by poll workers throughout the voting process.

### ***Facilitators***

Overall, the participants had a positive attitude toward poll workers, describing them as "nice," "efficient," and "helpful." From personal experiences and observations from others, participants felt that polling places were adequately staffed and that the poll workers were well-trained and knowledgeable. Participants felt comfortable asking for assistance when they needed it.

Some participants described that, upon entering the polling place, they were greeted by poll workers whom they found to be welcoming, efficient, and brought ease to the registration process:

All you got to do is go in there and tell them where you're from, show your driver's license, and then just walk right on through, they give you the thing. There is no problem.

A participant expressed that poll workers make the voting experience less stressful:

That people are pleasant and they're not making me feel rushed.

Sometimes I make myself feel rushed because I know there are people out there waiting. They don't make you feel that way, though. That is the one thing I probably would have trouble with if I felt that way.

One participant appreciated that poll workers place a sample ballot to view prior to casting an official ballot:

In our precinct, they actually put the ballot up so that you can look at it before you go in to vote too.

One participant recalled his experience with asking a poll worker about how to use a voting machine for the first time:

She came over and I said, 'Now just show me exactly how to do this after I start the process'. She showed me and after that, I did not have any trouble with it.

Some of the participants felt that they benefited from belonging in a small, tight-knit community where they knew poll workers personally or were familiar with them. This fostered a sense of

trust that made them feel comfortable with interacting with poll workers while voting in their precinct:

They knew me and they knew I had eye problems and they would ask me if I need any help, just hold your hand up and somebody will come and help you. I always managed, like I said. But it was nice to know that they were...somebody was there to help you and that if you did need it. I never had a bad experience of any kind at a polling place like that.

One participant drew comfort in feeling like they can relate to the poll workers since they belong in the same community:

It makes me feel more comfortable. You know because they are just like us.

There was an understanding that poll workers are available if assistance is needed, awareness of what they may be able to provide, and that one must ask for assistance. One participant acknowledged that she may have to seek assistance as her vision worsens:

Up until the last time I voted, I was able to do it on my own other than maybe asking a question. This time I will definitely have to have help. I can't see out of this eye at all and the other one – they tell me I have macular degeneration.

This participant went on to explain that although they have not asked for assistance from poll workers, he feels comfortable asking and are confident in their knowledge and ability to assist voters:

You know, I know they will be helpful to me. I know some of the people in the voting that work in there. I know they will help me.

*Barriers*

Barriers with poll workers arise when participants are not educated on what accommodations are available at the polling place. Some participants were not aware that poll workers are responsible for providing accessible, alternative options for people with disabilities, such as Braille forms and auditory aids.

Some participants voiced feeling intimidated by new electronic voting machines, yet did not seek assistance nor indicate that they would have. They felt overwhelmed and unsure of what to do due to the unfamiliarity of the machines:

I am not what you call computer-friendly and that is why I felt like I was somewhat intimidated by it you could say.

One participant recalled a time when a poll worker was not present when assistance was needed, causing some stress to the voting experience:

When I have gone to the polls, I always felt intimidated. I thought I had to hurry. When I wanted to ask a question, there was nobody there.

### ***The Absentee Ballot***

One main theme that was identified was the absentee ballot. This theme was directed in impromptu conversation through our participants and not directed in any way by the questions facilitators asked, or demographic information questionnaire participants filled out.

### ***Facilitators***

When discussing the process of voting in person at polling places, various participants brought to light the facilitators of voting absentee in comparison to voting in person. Many discussed the convenience of absentee voting with comments as follows:

I like to process and vote the absentee ballot because I have vision problems so I can take my time reading it over.

The convenience of the absentee was further emphasized through the explanation of how they can take their time to ensure they are putting ample amount of thought and time into casting their ballot:

If I am sitting at home with it; I can read it over today, think about it. I can read it again tomorrow and vote a week from today if I want to. And then take it up and turn it in.

The convenience of the length of time one has an absentee ballot for was discussed, with a participant stating:

So, when we got our absentee votes, we have them home for a month. We have time to think about it and talk about it together. I was so happy.

Participants also mentioned that the absentee ballot was convenient and comfortable for them due to feeling rushed at the polling place. Aiding their decision to vote absentee, one participant who feels constant pressure and rushed when casting their ballot at their polling place mentioned the following:

People waiting for me to get out of the way, I feel rushed and I am more comfortable at home doing my absentee ballot.

Another participant had a similar experience stating:

Sometimes I make myself feel rushed because I know there are people out there waiting. They don't make you feel that way though. That is the one thing I would probably have trouble with if I felt that way. I have even



thought about getting an absentee ballot. I have thought about it but I haven't done that yet.

When participants initiated discussion, various participants went into detail of how voting at the polling place can be physically taxing, guiding their preference for voting absentee.

The absentee ballot was identified as a convenient alternative to voting in person, brought on by conversation amongst participants in the focus groups. The ballot offered many participants the opportunity to feel they were ensuring they were fully understanding and participating actively in casting their ballot. However, participants did identify barriers to the absentee ballot including the process of getting one, and the absentee ballot itself.

### *Barriers*

With the absentee ballot being a prominent topic for many participants, this did not come without various barriers. Participants identified barriers with the process of applying for the absentee ballot, as well as the physical characteristics of the absentee ballot. These barriers could prevent individuals from applying for and submitting their absentee ballot, as well as accurately marking and casting their ballot based on their personal views.

When the topic of the absentee ballot arose among participants, a chief complaint was the process of applying and submitting their absentee ballot. One participant explained:

Well, my problem with the absentee ballots is you have to go up- every election- you have to go up and apply here in Monroe.

Another participant followed up in agreeance with:

Yep, that is it too!

The process and difficulty were further explained by another participant who is frustrated with the process of having to apply for their absentee ballot each year, stating:

But if you sign up for an absentee ballot- if I am blind today, I am going to be blind tomorrow- you know. And they ask you the reason you are going to be out of town, whatever, and I put down my eyesight and I do not think I ought to have to go up there every time they have an election and do that. I think they ought to just automatically send me an absentee ballot.

Another participant followed up with the frustration of the process of applying for absentee stating:

If I have got to come up here every time and register to get a ballot sent to me, or to pick a ballot up; I might as well just wait and come in and vote on voter's day. But then that makes me uncomfortable.

The accessibility of the absentee ballot was also discussed among participants. One participant had a suggestion for making the ballots more accessible for individuals with visual deficits including:

I think large print on the ballot would be one thing.

A fellow participant chimed in with a similar comment, identifying their biggest complaint with the physical characteristics of the ballot:

My big complaint would be print size.

### **Discussion and Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice**

The physical environment plays such a vital role in the voting process for people with disabilities. Some of our participants reported many areas where the landscape was suitable for their many needs, such as needing access to a ramp or finding a chair to sit in if they get fatigued in line. However, some noted the need for further accommodations to make the voting process easier. Among these were more bathroom access, more seating, better lighting, and better parking near the voting site. It is clear that the physical environment was adequate on a site by site basis. Some participants only discussed ways in which their voting was facilitated, while others made us aware of some locations which needed improvements. The goal of a polling place should be to make it physically accessible to everyone. Some polling sites clearly do a better job than others in this regard.

Participants reported significant support from community and family members throughout the voting process. They are grateful for the help that they receive from friends and relatives which facilitates their active participation in voting. Significant barriers arise when this help is not available. Specifically, transportation is a major concern for those who are not able to drive or don't have any other reliable means of functional mobility in the community. These rural communities lack a public transportation system for people with disabilities, leaving the burden of transportation to community and family members. If caretakers have other life commitments such as children or work, it is difficult to assume their certain disposition to aid in transportation needs on election day.

Overall, positive perceptions of poll workers led to positive experiences and attitudes toward them. Participants felt comfortable with asking them questions and were confident in their ability to help throughout the voting process. The poll workers added to the sense of community surrounding the polling place. Although participants had a general understanding that

poll workers were there to assist voters, it is not clear to what extent they understood their roles and responsibilities. The ADA requires that poll workers are trained to accommodate people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014a). Some participants did not indicate knowledge of accommodations available at their polling place. It is not clear whether or not these accommodations were unavailable or if they were simply unaware of them. Others who felt confused or intimidated by voting machines did not indicate going to poll workers for help. Participants viewed staff and volunteers at the polling place to be knowledgeable and adequately trained. However, there could have been clearer communication to educate voters on available assistance and voting options, such as auxiliary aids and alternative forms.

The absentee ballot was directed in impromptu conversation through our participants and was identified as a major theme throughout both focus groups. Among voters, nearly one-fourth of people with disabilities cast their vote using an absentee ballot, compared to one-sixth of individuals without a disability (Schur, Ameri & Adya, 2017). Rural voters are more likely to vote absentee than the general public (Oliver, 1996). With rural voters more likely to vote absentee than the general public, it is important that the barriers to voting absentee are overcome. The study identified the convenience the absentee ballot offers for individuals with disabilities in rural areas but continues to bring to light various barriers that encapsulate the process of voting absentee. Limiting these barriers will allow individuals to fully participate in the act of voting absentee if they choose and allow them to optimally participate in political activities of daily living as is their right as a citizen of the United States.

This research work has significant implications at the societal and professional level. The research question of this project was inspired by the need to analyze the equity of accessibility at the voting polls for people with disabilities in rural Michigan. With this work, the authors hope

to advocate for a vulnerable sector of our society and the occupational therapy profession. Advocacy is done by initiating a conversation among professionals, the general public and lawmakers. By educating ourselves on this issue we can then educate our clients on the best ways to advocate for themselves throughout the entire voting process. This conversation has not been empirically addressed in the state of Michigan as evidenced by the lack of research. Furthermore, this work will demonstrate not only the value of occupational therapy practitioners in this conversation but also their qualifications to lead these conversations.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Throughout our focus groups, we noticed that fewer barriers were discussed by the participants than we were expecting. A worker at one of the sites of our focus group suggested that we may get more feedback if we were to widen the scope of our research. One limitation of our study is that we chose to only hear from voters who have voted in person in an election since 2012. After further evaluation and discussion, we would agree that we may have heard a wider array of thoughts and opinions if we were to allow people into our study who either chose to vote absentee or did not vote at all.

### **Conclusion**

Political activities of daily living are a human occupation that is fundamental to meaningful participation and therefore health, well-being, and quality of life (Pollard et al., 2008). Voting is an occupation in which the needs of people with disabilities may go unnoticed, therefore barriers to political participation are reinforced. Rural areas across the United States experience marginalization and the absence of coverage of relevant local issues (Stephens, 2016). As more people experiencing poverty and disability move into or remain in rural areas, the more challenges this population faces (Geronimus et al., 2014). The purpose of this research

study was to identify the barriers and facilitators to voting for people with disabilities in rural Michigan, and bridging the current research gap in this issue.

Presented in our research are perceived barriers and facilitators that rural Michigan residents with disabilities face throughout the voting process. Two separate focus groups in two different rural areas of Michigan were conducted to attain the experiences of the voters. Interviews were recorded and qualitative data were collected on their experiences. Throughout the study, we found evidence of barriers and facilitators for each identifying theme. We have attempted to bring to light the barriers of voting for rural Michigan voters to assist in changing the voting experiences for those with disabilities in rural areas. Despite our efforts, more research is needed to further identify barriers in rural Michigan communities and other rural communities throughout the United States.

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