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2014 Professional Practices Program

Kitsap County Accessible Voting Committee

Kitsap County, Washington

Submitted by:

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Kitsap County Auditor Elections Division

Accessible voting committee drives innovation in Kitsap County

Imagine receiving a ballot in the mail that you must vote and return without the use of your eyes. Your constitutional right to vote independently and in private would not exist under these circumstances. That was one of the challenges created for blind voters when the Washington State Legislature approved a vote-by-mail system for state elections in 2005.

To mitigate these challenges, the state legislature directed each county to establish a **Voter Access Advisory Committee**. Kitsap's committee is comprised of a diverse group of accessibility advocates, community leaders, and elected officials. Collaboration with the committee has led to numerous innovations that are helping voters overcome ballot accessibility barriers. As a result, Kitsap County is recognized nationally as a leader in accessible voting.

In the weeks leading up to Primary and General Elections we transport Accessible Voting Units, and ballot drop boxes to locations throughout the county. When the **Mobile Voting Program** was launched in 2009, it focused primarily on retirement homes and assisted living facilities. At the request of our advisory committee the program was expanded to include branches of Kitsap Regional Library and Olympic College in 2012. Expanding the mobile voting program enables us to reach a broader range of voters who may benefit from the availability of accessible voting services.

We continue to provide this service even though HAVA grant funding for the program expired in 2013.

"If we are able to help even one voter, the program is worth continuing," said Kitsap County Auditor Walt Washington.

The Mobile Voting Program is just one of the many accessible voting services we provide.

In 2010, Kitsap was one of the first counties in the nation to implement an accessible online ballot delivery system. These systems replace paper ballots which are inaccessible to blind voters. They utilize modern computing devices and software that are more economical than widely used Direct-Recording Electronic (DRE) voting devices that rely on expensive hardware and can be intimidating to use.

Kitsap's online ballot delivery system, known as **Online Ballot Access**, allows voters to securely access their ballot and voters' pamphlet using the internet. Online Ballot Access provides a host of accessibility features such as compatibility with screen readers and screen magnifiers, text to Braille conversion, large text formats, navigation without using a mouse, and audio.

Kitsap County served as the test county for software developer Democracy Live. Members of Kitsap's Voter Access Advisory Committee pilot tested the system providing invaluable feedback on its usability.

One of the most unique features of Online Ballot Access is candidate video statements, which are accessible to voters while marking their ballots.

Blind voters listen to inflection in the candidates' voices which aids them in making their selections. Deaf voters read the captions and watch the body language and gestures made by candidates.



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Since 2011 we have installed six **Accessible Ballot Drop Boxes** in locations throughout the county. Each is designed to comply with accessibility standards for height and readability. One accessibility feature missing from our ballot drop boxes was **Braille Signage**. This was pointed out by members of our committee who visited one of the locations. We worked with them to create Braille signs that were installed on each ballot drop box. Through this experience with the committee we learned of the different sizes and types of Braille, and used this knowledge to design Braille signage standards for our ballot drop boxes.

In 2013, we led a coalition of 16 Washington counties that received a \$750,000 federal grant to implement and maintain online accessible ballot delivery systems. Kitsap County Elections was asked to lead the coalition because of our experience and leadership in the area of accessible online ballot delivery.

As the **Federal Grant Administrator** we are responsible for coordinating with partner counties and reporting back to the federal government. Thanks to this partnership, counties throughout the state are improving ballot access by implementing systems similar to the one developed by Kitsap County and Democracy Live in 2010.

We participate in the national **Federation of the Blind Mobile Voting Work Group** that is conducting a nationwide survey to gauge the effectiveness of accessible voting programs. Several survey questions are based questions that were developed by Kitsap's Voter Access Advisory Committee and provided to everyone who uses Online Ballot Access. One of the

goals of the Federation of the Blind's survey is to promote the implementation of accessible online ballot delivery systems like the one used in Kitsap County.

Kitsap County Elections is committed to promoting the importance of accessible voting through **Public Speaking Engagements**, guest editorials, newsletters and social media. In May we testified at the National Commission of Voting Rights Pacific Northwest Hearing. We were joined by committee member Cindy Van Winkle. Cindy is the President of the Washington State Council of the Blind. Cindy is a vocal advocate who has been a member of the committee since its creation in 2007. She was named an Outstanding County Volunteer by the Kitsap County Board of County Commissioners earlier this year.

In 2013 we were invited by Cindy to speak at the Washington Council of the Blind annual state conference. We also participated in the National Federation of the Blind regional conference. Additionally, we have published articles in Washington Council of the Blind, and Hearing Loss Association of Washington newsletters.

Often times committees such as the **Voter Access Advisory Committee** are considered an afterthought, convened because state law requires us to do so. That is not the case in Kitsap County. All of these programs and opportunities are a direct result of ideas that were generated through collaboration with our Voter Access Advisory Committee. Barriers that once existed are being stripped away thanks to a commitment to innovation and a willingness to share ideas and explore new opportunities.



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Supporting Documents – Mobile Voting



Members of the Voter Access Advisory Committee vote using an Accessible Voting Unit at Kitsap Regional Library in Bremerton, WA

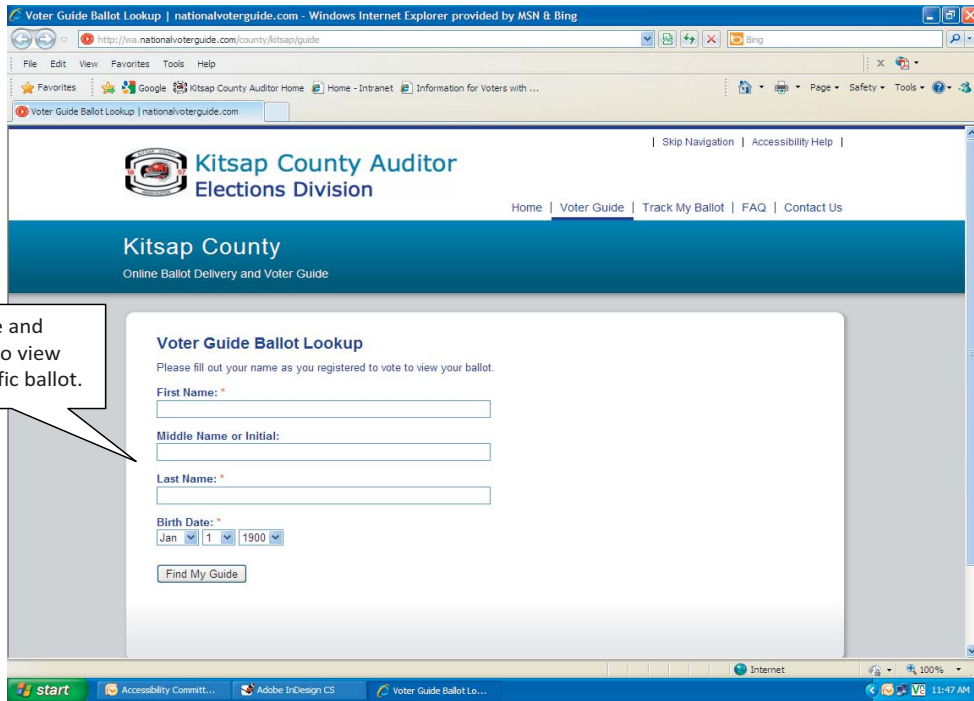


An Olympic College student votes on campus using and Accessible Voting Unit.

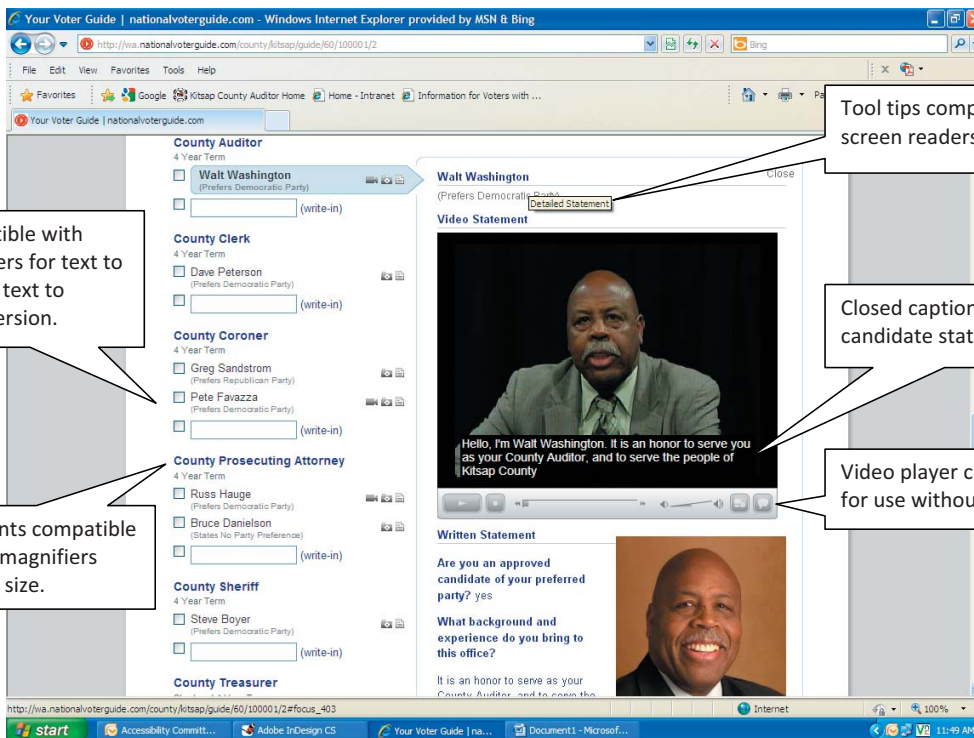


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Supporting Documents – Online Ballot Access



Enter name and birth date to view voter specific ballot.



Text compatible with screen readers for text to speech, and text to Braille conversion.

Ballot contents compatible with screen magnifiers that enlarge size.

Tool tips compatible with screen readers.

Closed captioning on all candidate statements.

Video player customized for use without a mouse.



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Supporting Documents – Braille Signage

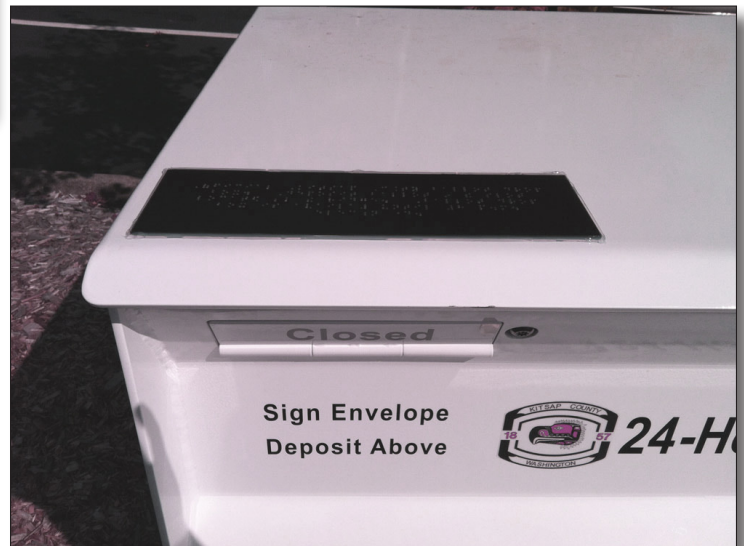
Kitsap County Elections installed six accessible ballot drop boxes in convenient locations throughout the county. However, a key accessibility feature was missing, Braille signage informing blind voters where to deposit their ballots.

The committee's guidance and experience was critical to developing effective signage because Braille is available in different types and sizes. Braille signage standards and wording were developed that are now installed on every ballot drop box. Braille signage reads:

Official Kitsap County Ballot drop box. Deposit ballot in the slot located below the ridge. Ballot drop box is available until 8 p.m. election day.



When ballot drop boxes were installed they lacked Braille signage informing voters where to deposit their ballots.



Braille signage was installed on each ballot drop box after Voter Access Advisory Committee members visited a location.



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Supporting Documents – Awards



Cindy Van Winkle (third from the left) was recognized by county commissioners in May as an Outstanding County Volunteer for her participation on Kitsap's Voter Access Advisory Committee



Congressman Norm Dicks presented Kitsap County Elections with the 'Preserving Military Voting Rights Award' in 2010 for implementing Online Ballot Access which provides ballots electronically to military personnel, overseas voters and voters with disabilities.



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Supporting Documents – Testimonials

Kitsap County Elections is always proactive in addressing voter access for people with disabilities. Olympic College has the 5th largest population of students with disabilities among Washington Community and Technical Colleges, and our students, faculty, and staff have benefited from accessible mobile voting units on campus for the last four elections. The county's partnership with Olympic College and others speaks to a commitment at the highest level to ensure convenient, independent voting options for all of our eligible citizens.

**Karen Fusco – Voter Access Advisory Committee Member
Director, Access Services, Olympic College**

Kitsap's Online Ballot Access allows me to access my ballot from home using assistive technology that I am comfortable with. The entire voters' pamphlet, including candidate videos, are available so a blind voter can read the amendments, initiatives, and statements while voting.

I am proud to be a part of my county's Voter Access Advisory Committee, working to provide opportunities for all people, regardless of disability, to vote as required by HAVA!

**Cindy Van Winkle – Voter Access Advisory Committee Member
President, Washington Council of the Blind**

Kitsap County is both a state and national leader in the use of and promotion of accessible online ballot marking systems so that all citizens, including those with disabilities, can vote privately and independently. In Washington state, which utilizes a vote-by-mail system, Kitsap was the first county to provide an online ballot marking tool as an accessible method for voters with disabilities to mark their ballot. On a national level, Elections Division manager Dolores Gilmore is an active member of the National Federation of the Blind's (NFB) Mobile Voting Work Group, assembled under the NFB's HAVA grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to promote the use of accessible online ballot marking systems.

**Lou Ann Blake – HAVA Project Manager
National Federation of the Blind**