

NCD Voting Rights Act Reauthorization Statement

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Lex Frieden, Chairperson
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NCD wishes to express its strong support for reauthorizing the provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) set to expire in 2007. NCD is an independent federal agency charged with making recommendations to the President and Congress to enhance the quality of life for all Americans with disabilities and their families. NCD's overall purpose is to promote policies and practices that guarantee equal opportunity for all individuals with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability; and to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve economic self-sufficiency, independent living, and integration into all aspects of society. NCD is required by its authorizing statute to advise the Administration and Congress regarding laws and issues that affect people with disabilities.

NCD is aware of the April 27, 2006, hearing on Renewing the Temporary Provisions of the VRA in the Senate Judiciary Committee. The foundation of our democratic form of government is the right to vote. Voting is the most important tool Americans have to influence the policies the government adopts that affect every aspect of our lives—from tax policy, to preserving our environment, to protecting equal opportunity in housing and employment. To ensure that all Americans have this important tool, we must make sure that every American has an equal opportunity to cast an effective ballot. Unfortunately, even today, many eligible voters continue to face barriers that inhibit the exercise of this basic right. It is under these circumstances that NCD emphasizes the need for the reauthorization of the VRA.

For nearly a decade, NCD has made specific recommendations and published information with respect to aspects of citizens' voting rights, including election practices and their impacts on people with disabilities. NCD's findings address voting systems, voter registration, polling place access, poll worker training, and other factors aligned with the current need for reauthorization of the VRA. NCD's 1997 publication, *National Disability Policy: A Progress Report* (<http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/1997/policy.htm>), called for new voting systems to be made accessible to all people with disabilities. In its 1999 report, *Implementation of the*

National Voter Registration Act by State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

(<http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/1999/voter.htm>), NCD reported that 75 percent of people with disabilities who received services from state vocational rehabilitation agencies were never asked to register to vote, as the law requires. A 2000 Harris poll indicated that 42 percent of this group still was not offered the opportunity to register. NCD's August 2, 2005, paper, *Enjoyment of the Right to Participation in Political and Public Life by Persons with Disabilities: Illustrations of Implementation from the United States* (<http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/enjoyment.htm>), provides examples of voting accessibility that work in favor of disenfranchised people. The paper discusses the need to prioritize accessibility by including training for poll workers and election officials to ensure that they understand how to make appropriate accommodations for voters with disabilities, a population comprised in part of seniors, people from diverse racial and ethnic groups, and people with alternative language needs.

NCD made four key recommendations in its 2001 paper, *Inclusive Federal Election Reform* (<http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2001/electionreform.htm>), that remain relevant to current deliberations surrounding reauthorization of the VRA: (1) The President and Congress must enact federal legislation that incorporates the use of modern technological concepts and systems capable of ensuring full participation by all citizens; (2) The President and Congress must address complex issues and concerns surrounding existing federal legislation [such as the VRA] and effective ways to improve those laws through amendments or regulatory action while maintaining current rights and protections; (3) Bipartisan national, state, and local voter registration and get-out-the-vote initiatives are encouraged for people with disabilities and other disenfranchised Americans; and (4) The President and Congress must contact key citizens from disenfranchised groups and include them on any commission or similarly named body to investigate the status of the full range of voting accessibility issues in America.

The VRA is still needed to ensure that all citizens, including people with disabilities, as well as seniors, people within the lower socioeconomic levels, people from diverse racial and ethnic groups and people with language needs, are provided an equal opportunity to participate in the political process. The existing VRA paved the way for more Americans to vote and set the stage for initial dialogue that resulted in the enactment of supplementary laws addressing the enfranchisement of people with disabilities. Since the VRA's enactment, the rise in voter registration has brought to the forefront a number of needs that should be considered at reauthorization, such as accessibility enforcement components and the coordination of new technologies, including universal design. In collaboration with other pertinent laws, reauthorization of the VRA can boost full participation in the political process by all citizens.

NCD urges our nation's leaders to respond in a timely manner to these recommendations in order to ensure full participation in the democratic processes. Full participation by all eligible citizens allows our society to harness the knowledge and resources of the community as a whole. Inclusion strengthens and enlivens America's political and public life, and our society at-large will be the ultimate beneficiary.

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