



*Building the Power of the Disability Vote*

**Kate Larose, S,298 Testimony**

House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs

Friday, April 24, 2026

Good morning. My name is Kate Larose. Before I begin, I just want to share my gratitude that your committee has made it possible for us to testify today by offering hybrid participation. As a person with a disability who cannot tolerate lights, movement, sounds, and sitting upright for extended periods of time, I would not be able to be here today without Zoom participation. Often thought of as a mere convenience, for many disabled people it's our only access to civic participation. Thank you Chair Birong for making your committee accessible so that our voices can be heard, too!

I know that your committee has already received hours of testimony about S.298 from lobbyists, government workers, political parties, and lawyers. And I know that you're hoping to pass this bill out of committee later today. Thank you for making time this morning before you do to hear directly from those who have been deterred and denied the right to vote.

I am here today as a member of [REV UP Vermont](#), a volunteer-led coalition we started because disabled people around the state are being shut out of democracy.

I am here today as a staff member with the Vermont Center for Independent Living, who has organized [passport events for our community](#) as they are scared about what will happen to them in the years ahead if they don't have a federal ID.

I am here today as the former Vermont Human Rights Commission designee on the Act 133 Working Group, where half the members [made clear recommendations](#) for increasing voter access which failed to make the overall report.

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And I am here today as someone who has been [denied the right to vote](#) in my municipal elections for four years running.

But perhaps most importantly, I'm here today as someone who believes—through and through—in the power of democracy and civic engagement.

At a time when federal protections are vanishing (or worse, being weaponized to harm those who have already been hurt), we need our communities.

And our communities need *us*.

This includes access to voting and local government.

I want to share a piece of my story today, as well as the stories of others. Sharing these stories can be exhausting and painful. But we do it anyways because those of us without power need you—our elected officials—to hear us.

To see us.

To care about us enough to fix things for us.

We can't walk through the halls of power. We don't have a team of lawyers on staff. And you won't see us hosting legislative dinner parties.

All we have is right now, this moment, with you, to not be made invisible. We invite you to honor this by listening deeply with curiosity and gentleness to what we have to share about the truth of our lived experience.

Vermont likes to [tell the story](#) that we have voter turnout and public meeting engagement levels to be proud of. And that's true, but only for a certain demographic. What's top in the nation rankings for white, non-disabled people looks very different for other demographics.

[Vermont is 49th](#) nationally for disability access in voting, and we are [dead last](#) in the nation when it comes to the turnout gap between disabled and nondisabled voters.

Sadly, we are not much better when it comes to the turnout gap for Black, Asian, and Hispanic voters, with some of the [worst rates in the country](#), all significantly

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lower than the national averages, most especially for Black Vermonters. These are not disparities to be proud of.

As a state, we like to pretend that voter education and outreach is the answer. As if—somehow—these abysmal data points are an indictment of individuals' actions, and not the sum of decades and lifetimes of systemic barriers and discrimination.

And we also like to pretend that when systemic problems exist, that the systems themselves will solve them.

It's a comforting diversion, while the stories of those fighting for their rights around our state goes untold. Stories like,

- [Dawn](#), who's active on a town committee, but has only been able to vote once in nine years.
- Josh, who was raised to cherish the right to vote, but who has been denied that right since becoming mostly bed confined.
- [Allison](#) in Plainfield, who strongly believes in doing her civic duty but left town meeting in tears after having to navigate an inaccessible building and parking lot
- [Andrea](#) in Shaftsbury who is the chair of a State of Vermont disability council, but was told she could only watch her neighbors vote on town meeting day because current state law lacks the specificity needed for hybrid participation
- And a decorated WWII vet in Northfield, who spent years begging to vote on his town budget to no avail, leaving him wondering what he had fought for if not for these most basic of freedoms

As disabled people, we are often told that we can simply just ask for accommodations. But if you've never had to repeatedly ask for permission in order to have access to a basic freedom, you need to understand what that process is like.

Here are just a few of my experiences from the past several years:

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- Each time I ask for an accommodation for civic participation, it's discussed in an open public session and recorded in meeting minutes for all to read.
- One time—when I requested access to a selectboard meeting—I was told that I had to submit a medical provider's letter. I did, but it cost me over \$100, hours out of work, and delayed my meeting access by three months.
- Every time I asked for access, no matter how politely, I started to be treated as an outcast more and more by my community—I became painted as a problem and an annoyance for my elected officials to have to deal with as it required yet another agenda item, another letter to write, another special meeting for them. (And no one ever bothered asking me, an exhausted disabled person just trying to get by, how I felt about any of this extra workload just to try and vote, get an accessible copy of a town meeting report or meeting minutes, or participate in public comment)
- And this even happens in cases where state and federal law is very clear, like curbside voting access. Though I cannot vote for municipal matters, I can vote for my school budget. Last year I emailed my clerk to ask for a curbside ballot. I was told that wasn't possible on the day of elections, they were too busy. So I showed up and stood outside, and asked everyone who walked past me if they could have the clerk bring me my ballot. At one point, the door opened and someone screamed at me, "You don't look too disabled to me!". And slammed the door back shut again. It was my selectboard member. Who I couldn't vote for. Eventually, after standing outside in the cold and snow for over an hour, I was able to vote thanks to the help of the Secretary of State's Office and Disability Rights Vermont. But after they collected my ballot, I was chided by the clerk and the JP for not planning better. Because, they told me, they were "very busy with elections".

You've heard a lot from us over the last 30 minutes. And we know that now, in the 11th hour of this biennium, there's only so much that can be done. Protecting universal mail-in ballots, further expanding (not limiting) the classes of voters who

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are protected, and ensuring hybrid access to town meetings and Australian ballot for local elections are all equally important. And if you take nothing else from what we shared today, please let it be this:

1. Disabled Vermonters must be included as a protected class in this bill in order to meet the spirit and intent of the federal Voting Rights Act (and the [four federal voting rights acts](#) that followed). Disabled people are not one demographic. We are present and a large part of all demographics. Thank you for including us.
2. Because systems cannot fix themselves, even if they had the infinite time and resources to do so, private right of action must be reinstated into this bill. This [was a cornerstone](#) of the federal VRA. Without it, voters are powerless and have no recourse. And no recourse, means no protections.

I have so much hope for a future in which every member of the community is embraced and allowed to participate. I truly believe that this is the way forward to protecting and honoring everyone in all that comes next.

These two small, but mighty actions in this bill will help to make that possible. Thank you for your time.

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