

Addendum to the Act 133 Working Group Executive Summary Report and Best Practices Guide

As the Act 133 working group activities come to an end, DRVT thinks it is important to say that we have been disappointed with this process, and with the outcomes.

Act 133 asked us to study and make recommendations to improve the accessibility of and participation in meetings of local public bodies, annual municipal meetings, and local elections, and to increase transparency, accountability, and trust in government. DRVT believed that we were all coming together in good faith to do just that. And up until recently, DRVT still had faith that was what we were all trying to do.

But on March 2nd, Mother Jones magazine published an article titled, **New England Cherishes Its Local Elections. Many Disabled Voters Are Locked Out.** In that article there is a quote from Secretary of State (SOS), Sarah Copeland Hanzas, that says, "We can't burn the place down because we don't like what they do in terms of accessibility with their local elections, but we can offer them best practices."


That quote was beyond shocking. Suddenly, DRVT had reason to believe the SOS's office and representatives did not enter this Act 133 process in good faith. If that was their position all along, and they had no intention of making recommendations for significant changes, they should have led with that, instead of wasting all our time and energy.

DRVT believed that this Act 133 working group was going to make robust, fully conceived recommendations for real change that would guarantee inclusiveness. DRVT believed that the result of all of this effort would be that disabled people would no longer be having their Constitutional, and ADA rights violated, and that at a very minimum we would be ensuring that from now on, all Vermonters with disabilities would be able to participate in meetings of local public bodies, annual municipal meetings, and local elections. But we are concluding this process with weak recommendations, vague best practices, and no assurances that Vermont will stop violating the rights of people with disabilities. This process fell far short to ensure universal access for all disenfranchised voters.

A substantial number of people and organizations who have been part of this working group have offered addenda for the Executive Summary, as well as recommendations for the Best Practices Guide. Although some of our suggestions have been incorporated, the important and impactful aspects of our recommendations that would ensure inclusiveness have been excluded. For example, it was recommended that all public votes in Vermont must be able to be cast by Australian ballot. The unwillingness of this group to demand that with absolute conviction is unacceptable. As is the pervasive othering of people with disabilities, with implications that the ability to request reasonable accommodation should be good enough. How would you feel if for every opportunity to vote you needed to ask for permission?


DRVT's experience in this process tells us that the SOS just wanted to appease the legislative body that created the working group; that it wanted to get an Executive Summary Report and Best Practices Guide completed, and there was little, if any, interest or compassion for the people who are being excluded. This process was all performative and not substantive.

DRVT hopes that the final submissions of the Act 133 Working Group will be transparent, and include all our input, even if it is contradictory to the Executive Summary Report and demands that we do burn down parts of our current discriminatory system.

X 

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