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"Empowering New Yorkers with disabilities"

PRESS RELEASE

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Legislators & Election Commissioners Join with Disability & Voting Advocates to Demand Equal Voting Access for All New Yorkers

ALBANY, NY – At a press conference today at the Capitol, legislators and election commissioners joined Disability Rights New York (DRNY), the League of Women Voters of NYS (LWVNYS), and Independent Living Center representatives from across the state to call for equal voting access for all eligible voters and an end to the use of lever voting machines in local elections.

While lever voting machines were phased out of use in most of the state's elections after the implementation of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) several years ago, the legislature has repeatedly granted extensions for their use in village, school district, and other local elections. Advocates say that the legislature's continued reprieve for the lever machines both discriminates against voters with visual, mobility, and cognitive disabilities who cannot use the machines privately and independently and creates confusion for the general public.

"The New York State Legislature has delayed the sunset on the lever machines for over three years now. Enough is enough. We begin this legislative session with a clear message that the sunset must not be extended again," said Cliff Perez, Systems Advocate for The Independent Living Center of the Hudson Valley. "Any vote to do so is a vote to maintain discriminatory voting practices against voters with disabilities and seriously undermines our democracy."

Aimee Allaud, LWVNYS Election Specialist, said, "The use of different voting machines for different classes of elections is confusing to the electorate. The League of Women Voters of NYS believes that the goals of the Help America Vote Act to ensure equal access to voting for all eligible Americans, and accurate, secure, recountable ballots, are best achieved when a single statewide voting system is used for all classes of elections."

Legislators expressed support for accessible voting and for ending the use of lever voting machines. "Our disabled community struggles to overcome barriers everyday of their lives; casting their vote at election time should not be one of them. We must not marginalize the disabled community with out of date lever machines that are difficult to use. Their presence inside the voting booth is important and forcing them to use absentee ballots is not the answer.

All voting booths should be made more accessible and easier to use for the independent disabled community,” said Assembly Member Felix W. Ortiz.

Assembly Member Sandy Galef, a long standing supporter of accessible voting, also spoke at the press conference. "I voted against the legislation to extend the sunset. I fought long and hard for the unconditional right to an accessible vote."

"Equal access to the ballot box is essential to ensuring all New Yorkers have a voice in the democratic process," said State Senator Daniel Squadron. "I join Disability Rights New York, the League of Women Voters of NYS, Independent Living Council, disability advocates, and my colleagues in urging adoption of modern and accessible voting, and moving past the generations-old lever machines once and for all."

"New Yorkers with disabilities deserve protections to ensure they are able to exercise their fundamental right to vote," said Senator Brad Hoylman. "It's essential that we once and for all adopt measures that allow all of our state's eligible voters, including those living with disabilities, the ability to exercise their right to vote and participate in the political process free of hassle."

The most recent lever voting machine legislation passed last spring included a new provision mandating that the State Board of Elections (SBOE) submit a report to the governor and legislature by January 31, 2015. That report is required to include recommendations and guidance on transitioning all local elections to electronic voting systems. Advocates are urging the SBOE to make the report public and to include a truly comprehensive and timely plan to end the use of lever voting machines.

“Individuals with disabilities have the right to vote the same way that everybody else does: independently and privately. The continued use of lever voting machines in local elections denies that fundamental right,” said DRNY Executive Director, Tim Clune. “It is long past time for a unified accessible voting system in New York. The Board of Elections must provide a statewide plan to make voting accessible to every single eligible voter.”

The press conference today coincided with the 100th Annual Election Commissioners Association Winter Conference, which began a few blocks away at the Hilton on Monday. Several county election commissioners issued statements expressing support for transitioning all elections to accessible voting machines.

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