



COMISION ESTATAL DE ELECCIONES
ESTADO LIBRE ASOCIADO DE PUERTO RICO

HHS Grant Narrative Report 2003

**2003 Voting Access for Individuals with Disabilities Grant
Report to the Department of Health and Human Services,
Administration of Children and Families**

**Submitted by the Comision Estatal de Elecciones
Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico**

March 28, 2005

In 2003, the Comision Estatal de Elecciones Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (the Commission) received \$104,364 under the Voting Access for Individuals with Disabilities (VOTE) grant program (formerly the Election Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities grant program) to carry out a wide range of activities for improving access to the voting process. (Form 269 detailing the status of the grant funds was submitted prior to the end of calendar year 2004, as required. Please note that some expenditures for activities described in the 2003 grant application were made in later fiscal years and therefore would not have been reflected on that filed Form 269.)

Puerto Rico, and its Elections Commission (CEE), has had a history of services to disabled voters prior to passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). Since 1977 the Puerto Rico Election Law provided a "fácil acceso," or "easy access" polling place, for disabled voters within every unit (Puerto Rico's equivalent of a precinct). Since 1988 CEE has been providing Braille templates for blind voters, and TTY has also been in place for almost a decade. Plans were already underway in 2003, though funding had not been identified, to create a voice activated phone system, which could assist disabled voters with information, as well as the non-disabled voters.

The 2003 HHS grant application was submitted at the beginning of July 2003 and the funding was received in September 2003. Puerto Rico had a primary in November 2003.

In 2003 CEE applied for the HHS grant to do the following:

Category 1: Making Polling Stations Accessible to Voters with a Full Range of Disabilities

- Activity 1: Accessibility Study of non-government facilities
- Activity 2: Accessibility Manual – for local boards who determine accessible polling places

Category 2: Providing the Same Opportunities for Access and Participation (Including Privacy and Independence) to Individuals with a Full Range of Disabilities

- Activity 3: Purchase of Commodities to Improve Accessibility (ramps, magnifiers & other if OPPI group want)
- Activity 4: Improvement of Voting Aids Available to the Blind (audio tapes & sturdy templates)

Category 3: Training Election Officials, Poll Workers and Election Volunteers On How Best to Promote Access and Participation of Individuals with a Full Range of Disabilities in Elections for Federal Office

- Activity 5: Creation of Special Training Component on Communicating with Voters with Disabilities (lesson plans & EO training on templates)

Category 4: Provide Individuals with a Full Range of Disabilities with Information about the Accessibility of Polling Places

- Activity 6: Improvement of Telecommunication and Information Systems (get voice activated phone system)

I. What activities described in your state's EAID plan (application) were carried out to completion?

- Activity 1: not completed in 2003, but completed prior to 2004 general elections
- Activity 2: not completed in 2003, but completed prior to 2004 general elections
- Activity 3: purchased some magnifiers in 2003, rest were deferred until 2004
- Activity 4: audio tapes not completed, but improved templates for the blind
- Activity 5: completed
- Activity 6: not completed, but completed prior to 2004 general elections

II. If activities were listed in your original EAID plan (application) but were not carried out to completion, what were the barriers or the reasons for changing your plans?

- Activity 1: primaries were too close when funding received to be able to do the survey and make changes in advance of the primaries. The money was spent in conjunction with 2004 money to complete the surveys prior to the 2004 general elections.
- Activity 2: primaries were too close when funding received to be able to do the manual in time to train officials in advance of the primaries. The money was spent in 2004 to assist local commissions preparing for the 2004 elections.
- Activity 3: CEE had trouble getting enough magnifiers; CEE had trouble, due to time constraints before the primary, in identifying other aids; CEE had trouble finding ramps in time to purchase for primaries.
- Activity 4: CEE could not get assistance fast enough in advance of the primaries to do audio tapes for 2003; CEE did improved templates for the blind voters.
- Activity 6: CEE had awarded the contract for the voice-activated telephone system, but their decision was challenged by a losing bidder and took up a significant period of time, as a result, the deployment of the voice-activated telephone system was delayed until after the primaries.

III. Describe any activities carried out by your organization that displayed innovation and can be shared with others as "best practices."

Puerto Rico has used templates for blind voters to be able to vote privately and independently since 1988. In advance of the 2003 primaries there was some improvement to the templates,

including adding instructions on each template, and adding non-Braille tactile markings to improve the ability of those with low vision, but who do not use Braille, to make use of the templates. [A sample copy of the templates will be forwarded under separate cover – note the numbering under each candidate's box.]

IV. Describe any significant barriers/roadblocks to carrying out your organization's activities, and, if possible, suggested solutions.

The biggest challenge in 2003 was the lack of time between the award of the grant (September) and the timing of the primaries (November). That has, obviously, improved since then.

In addition, there was not an obvious place to go to find examples of good voting aids, and easily purchase them. It would be helpful for some government agency or non-profit that was not making money from such, to provide a link to the various vendors of accessible elections related products. If it was organized by the types of products, it would be even more helpful.

Also, there was a problem with supply of some items, such as the magnifiers – CEE called around extensively and had real problems getting the relatively small number of magnifiers they were trying to acquire. CEE does not have any suggestions about how to solve the supply problem.

With the audio tapes, for 2003 there was not sufficient time to do them. Then in preparation for 2004, CEE received feedback from the disabled advocates after the original grant application that proposed doing them that, given the cost to do this versus other things that were options CEE was pursuing, audiotapes were not sufficiently helpful to focus on that in Puerto Rico for 2004. The initial grant, unfortunately, had to be put together so quickly, that CEE had not had a good opportunity for full discussions with disabled advocates of their suggestions for their needs; this, like the timing of the grant award, has improved since the initial grant.

V. Describe activities which involved collaboration with other organizations or groups, for example the Protection & Advocacy System within your state, disability advocacy groups, student groups, etc.

The HAVA state plan committee is also the committee of disabled advocates, and now meets on a regular basis. During 2003, it met four (4) times for exchange of ideas, reports on progress, etc. In addition the CEE with the HAVA state plan committee had three (3) public hearings in 2003. In 2004 there were eleven (11) meetings of the HAVA state plan committee.

CEE has been collaborating much more closely with OPPI (Puerto Rico's P&A agency) and disabled advocates groups since beginning the HAVA state plan process, although there had been some pre-existing involvement. In addition, the OPPI has been a close collaborator on training manuals, materials and training meetings. In January 2004 OPPI provided trainers for a day/2 day sensitivity training to local elections officials. Additionally, throughout 2004 there were additional training materials and training segments that OPPI and other advocates¹

¹ The following Puerto Rican government offices and advocacy groups have been very involved with the Commission's efforts on elections accessibility. (1) the Office of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities (OPPI); (2) the office of the Secretary of Education; (3) the Puerto Rico National Guard; (4) the Friends and Family Committee of Prisoners; (5); the Puerto Rico chapter of the National Federation of the Blind; (6) Confergencea, Inc., (7) the Polytechnic University; (8) the University of Puerto Rico; (9) the University of Mayagüez; and (10) the Institute of Democratic Education.

assisted CEE to do. OPPI also has started incorporating CEE staff in its training and meetings; in August 2004 OPPI had a one day seminar for disabled advocates on HAVA that the CEE President and Vice Presidents attended and addressed.

VI. If possible, comment upon continuity. Have your organization's activities been able to build upon earlier "start up" activities in an effective manner?

CEE has very much been able to build on earlier activities. For example, the pre-existing Braille templates allowed for improvements in 2003 and much further improvements in 2004. Having put together the Braille templates, it was easier still to work on Braille materials on the election process, which is now in process. The collaborations and partnerships naturally generate new ideas that build on what is already in place.

VII. Finally, comment upon citizen feed back on voter accessibility issues within your state if such information is available.

Because of the general recount following the 2004 elections, the feedback on accessibility issues has been muted and slow to come in. Based on comments from disabled advocate participants in the HAVA committee, however, generally they have made a point to congratulate the Commission and staff on their excellent actions to improve elections accessibility. The HAVA participants did mention a few examples of the remaining challenges to elections accessibility, most of which suggest that one key focus of future efforts should be on continued pollworker training. The representative of the Ombudsman's office (OPPI – the Puerto Rico P&A agency) noted that only four (4) calls came into their office on Election Day. Two of the calls had nothing to do with Election Day issues, and the other two were polling place accessibility problems that are being researched.