



COMISION ESTATAL DE ELECCIONES
ESTADO LIBRE ASOCIADO DE PUERTO RICO

HHS Grant Narrative Report 2004

**2004 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**

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In 2004, the Comision Estatal de Elecciones Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (the Commission) received \$151,345 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 2004 grant application were made in later fiscal years and therefore would not have been reflected on that filed Form 269.)

The activities proposed in Puerto Rico's 2003 and 2004 HHS grant applications are part of a much broader effort to improve accessibility to voters with disabilities across Puerto Rico. Since Puerto Rico uses a paper ballot voting system, the Commission has worked diligently to ensure that continued use of paper ballots does not prevent voters with disabilities from participating. The Commission believes that not only the voting process itself but also the administration of elections must be open to participation by voters with disabilities. Accordingly, after passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) the Commission formed a strong and effective partnership with the Oficina de Procurador del las Personas con Impedimentos (OPPI) and other advocacy organizations¹ to develop a multi-faceted accessibility effort. Some activities included in this effort are described in the 2004 report on implementation of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. The Commission also believes that simply providing accessibility aids is not enough – outreach to voters with disabilities is key in making these programs effective and they have been proactive with outreach.

In 2004 CEE applied the for HHS grant to do the following:

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

- Activity 1: Accessibility Study
- Activity 2: Making Temporary polling places more accessible

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

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) Convergence, Inc., (7) the Polytechnic University; (8) the University of Puerto Rico; (9) the University of Mayagüez; and (10) the Institute of Democratic Education.

- Activity 3: Purchase of Commodities to Improve Accessibility (ramps, magnifiers & other if OPPI group want)
- Activity 4: Fitting of a Mobile Unit for Voters with Disabilities

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 Information Availability for the Disabled

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

All activities were carried out to completion, though some in slightly different formats than originally contemplated in the grant application. The Commission accomplished the following:

- Completed the accessibility survey of polling places and ensured accessibility of all units (Puerto Rico equivalents of precincts).
- Trained local commission staff on selecting accessible polling places
- Purchased temporary accessibility ramps
- Purchase additional magnifiers for voters with disabilities
- Extended the availability for absentee voting to voters with disabilities (homebound and in-hospital)
- Increased voter registration accessibility to all voters, including disabled voters, by opening voter registration opportunities in eight shopping malls around the island.
- Working with disability advocacy organizations, created training materials covering sensitivity training, awareness and improving communication with voters with disabilities.
- Conducted accessibility training for election officials, party trainers, local Commissions
- Prepared demonstration modules for the use of accessibility aids
- Created poster showing the voting process for deaf voters using sign language
- Improved instructions for voting for blind voters using Braille

- Purchased equipment and software necessary to make voting materials in the election office library accessible to citizens with a variety of disabilities
- Equipped four mobile offices (vans) to provide future voter registration opportunities and voting opportunities to voters with disabilities (homebound and in-hospital) and to voters in remote areas for future elections.

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

The Commission intended to use HHS Grant money to rent temporary floors to ensure that outside polling places set up in tents would be accessible to voters with mobility impairments. Some local commissions opted to use buses, however, rather than tents as temporary polling places. Consequently, the Commission did not need to rent the floors. This experience revealed a problem in the polling place selection process that allowed local commissions to make decisions about polling places that did not increase accessibility. The central Commission has resolved this problem for the future by establishing that the central Commission office will make final approval of all polling places.

The Commission did not produce either the portable flip chart or brochure presenting the election and voting process in sign language. Instead the Commission produced a sign language poster on the voting process (see exhibit sent under separate cover). The change was due to the significant time and administrative challenges of adding new and different voter outreach materials; it was faster and easier to get agreement on an Election Day poster showing the voting process in sign language.

The Commission initiated a project to produce a Braille guide on the voting process. However, the cost of producing such a guide specific to each election, and the time needed to adequately and correctly provide the information, proved to be prohibitive. The Commission, therefore, opted instead to improve instructions for casting a ballot using the Braille templates for the 2004 elections, and to postpone until after the elections the plans to create a generic brochure in Braille that would be relevant to all future elections in Puerto Rico.

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

- The Commission made a concerted effort to make the voting process more accessible to deaf voters. Three projects deserve notice: first, the Commission produced a sign language poster explaining the voting process; second, the Commission included closed captioning on all its public service announcements; third, one of the voter outreach advertisements produced by the Commission was focused principally in sign language, with closed captioning underneath so it could be understood by all other voters.
- In Puerto Rico each voter is required to produce his Commission issued electoral photo ID prior to voting. This requirement can pose a difficulty for blind voters. Therefore the Commission produced a Braille sticker that can be attached to the Voter ID card facilitating easy retrieval of the card.

- The Commission worked in close partnership with disability advocacy groups in implementing HAVA and carrying out the HHS grant. In doing so, the Commission devoted time and resources to making the election administration process itself more accessible. To this end, the Commission undertook the following:
 - (1) Provided sign language interpretation at HAVA public hearings;
 - (2) Made the Commission website fully accessible (the Commission was the first government agency in Puerto Rico whose website was certified as accessible);
 - (3) The Commission purchased equipment and software to translate all the materials in its library into an accessible format.

- The Commission conducted a massive training that included training local election officials and the parties on improving accessibility. This training focused on improving all facets of the interaction between the voter and the voting process and included sensitivity training and simulations of potential situations. This training, which was very well received, was greatly helped by the following:
 - (1) Involving the disability groups and individuals in developing and conducting all accessibility training;
 - (2) Involving the highest level of election officials in accessibility training;
 - (3) Providing an opportunity for training participants to evaluate the training.

- The emphasis on accessible polling places had a positive effect on a perpetual problem of temporary polling places; the number of temporary polling places was reduced from eleven (11) in the 2000 General Elections, to six (6) in 2004. As noted above, the Commission discovered that in order to ensure that polling places are accessible, it was necessary to establish a new protocol and require final approval of polling places by the central Commission. This change strengthened accountability and quality control over the polling place selection process.

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

- The equipment necessary for producing voter registration cards could not be used in the mobile units. The Commission, therefore, will modify the process so that the voter's information— including the voter's photo – would be stored on a disk and the card produced later.

- The local commissions were opting to use buses as temporary polling places rather than tents, which could be made more accessible. The Commission, on discovering this problem, changed the polling place selection process to require final approval by the central Commission office.

- In making decisions on the purchase and deployment of accessibility aids – magnifying pages, Braille templates, etc. – the Commission was hampered by a lack of information on the relative numbers of voters needing assistance at each polling place. To correct this problem, the Commission, in conjunction with OPPI (the Puerto Rico P&A agency) will conduct a demographic analysis to determine the numbers of disabled voters in various regions.

- In order to evaluate the effectiveness of accessibility aids, the Commission is trying to develop a mechanism to determine how many disabled voters use the materials.

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

The Commission worked very closely with its P&A – OPPI – in all facets of activities carried out not only as a part of the HHS grant but in the implementation of HAVA in general. OPPI approved the procurement of all accessibility aids. In addition, OPPI not only assisted the Commission in producing the accessibility training materials, the agency participated in conducting the training.

The Puerto Rico HAVA State Plan committee established a sub-committee dedicated exclusively to improving accessibility.

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

- The survey begun in 2003 was refined and completed in 2004. Moreover, the survey used to evaluate existing polling places has been transformed into a checklist for evaluating potential polling places.
- The HAVA state plan committee created a collaborative foundation that was integral to nearly every project described in this report, and earlier work on Braille templates has continued to improve over time.
- In purchasing accessibility aids, the Commission built on the research conducted in 2003 to develop a pool of suppliers for magnifying pages, temporary ramps and other aids.

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

The accessibility training was well-received. As mentioned in the 2003 HHS Grant Narrative Report, 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 a 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.