

Alternative Ways to Vote Available for Those Eligible

By Wesley E. Wright and Molly Dear Abshire, as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on October 17, 2012.

In this presidential election year, older voters are expected to be the decisive segment of voters, and therefore their votes are highly prized. Of all eligible voters, nearly a quarter are aged 60 plus.

Elder voters understand that issues such as Social Security and Medicare reform directly affect them and are concerned about the issues of health care and economy.

There are still numerous challenges for eligible older voters and voters with disabilities, including difficulty moving or driving, inability to sign one's name or to read a ballot. These issues have always presented problems for the exercise of their civil right to vote.

For these reasons, voting by mail and early voting is an alternative to pulling a lever or pushing a button in the ballot box.

In order to be eligible to vote early by mail, you must be at least one of the following: 65 years or older, disabled, out of the county on Election Day or confined in jail but otherwise eligible. Print a ballot from the Secretary of State's website www.votetexas.gov or request one to be mailed to you. Once completed, mail it to the voting clerk of the county in which you live.

If an elderly or disabled person has someone help them vote, their name and address must be written next to the voter's signature and they must also sign it. An early ballot can be mailed to the Early Voting Clerk 60 days prior to Election Day.

In-person early voting begins 17 days before Election Day and ends four days before Election Day.

Eligible voters with disabilities can receive assistance with voting by anyone that they choose other than an election worker, by their employer or an agent of the employer, nor an officer of their union.

Anyone assisting a voter must take an oath that he or she won't try to influence the voter's choice, will not mark the ballot in a way other than the way in which the voter has directed or tell anyone about the voter's choice. The assistant must read him or her the entire ballot, unless the voter prefers to have only parts of the ballot read.

Curbside voting is allowed if a voter is physically unable to enter the polling place. An election officer will bring a ballot to either the door of the polling place or a parked car. The voter will mark the ballot and give it back to the election officer, or their assistant, to put in the ballot box.

Calling ahead for curbside voting will save time as the election officials will know to expect you.

Alternatives to in-person voting have been offered in Texas for decades. Polling places in most counties have accessible voting systems. If you meet the requirements for early voting by mail, contact the

Secretary of State for your ballot. If you have someone assist you with early voting at the polling place or on Election Day, know your rights to access and privacy.