

## **Comments From National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico on Accessible Ballot Marking**

Greetings:

The National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico is an organization of blind and sighted men and women dedicated to the advancement of the blind or visually impaired citizens in our state on terms of equality. We serve as a vehicle for collective action for citizens of New Mexico who are blind or visually impaired. Although we are not able to attend the public hearing to be held on Monday, March 19 at the State Capitol Building, we welcome the opportunity to express by email our support of the proposed repeal and replace of 01.10.12 NMAC – Absentee Voting.

This proposed rule, implemented pursuant to the passage of HB98, is a significant advancement for our state—in particular, those provisions which make the printed absentee ballot accessible to voters who are blind or visually impaired. It does this by enabling blind voters to use the speech or low-vision technology with which they are familiar to independently mark the printed absentee ballot.

In previous years, New Mexicans who are blind or visually impaired have been able to use talking voting machines at the polls to mark their ballots in secret. However, we have never been able to vote using a printed absentee ballot without having to rely on the help of someone who can see, thus negating the principle of the secret ballot—a fundamental right of our democracy.

The proposed rule enables a voter who is blind or visually impaired to receive an absentee ballot through electronic transmission. This will enable the blind or visually impaired voter to independently mark the ballot using the nonvisual or low vision access technology with which he or she is familiar. In addition, instructions for marking the ballot and returning it along with the required voter certificate will also be provided electronically, thus enabling the blind/visually impaired voter to independently execute all aspects of the voting process.

We appreciate the provision in the proposed rule which states,

"The secretary of state shall prescribe an official return envelope such that the blind or visually impaired voter can distinguish it for the purposes of returning the absentee ballot."

This seemingly trivial provision will provide a way for the voter who is blind or visually impaired to know, without help from anyone, that the envelope he or she is holding is especially intended for the return of the absentee ballot, which the voter has been able to mark with no help from anyone.

We in the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico look forward to a speedy implementation of the new 01.10.12 NMAC – Absentee Voting, and we pledge to do whatever we can to work closely with the Office of the Secretary of State to bring about this historic achievement for New Mexicans who are blind or visually impaired.

Yours sincerely,

Curtis Chong, Representative

National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico