

CIDNY Poll Site Surveys 2019 October Early Voting and November 5 General Election Sites

Some improvements, but a disappointing number of barriers remain.

Background

Over the past 40 years, CIDNY has helped to break down barriers that can prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in mainstream life. We have focused on voting rights and voting access by surveying New York City polling sites for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance since 2003. CIDNY encourages voters with disabilities to use their neighborhood polling sites and voting machines to vote independently and privately. Yet, we continue to see barriers that make it difficult if not impossible for people with disabilities to access their poll sites or vote independently.

This October during early voting in New York City and on Election Day, November 5th, 23 CIDNY staff and volunteers performed poll site accessibility surveys in all five boroughs. Since this was the first year that New York City had early voting, we sent a number of surveyors out to assess a selection of early voting sites in each borough. CIDNY teams surveyed 34 Early Voting sites in October and 38 general election day sites for a total of 72 sites. Of the 72 sites surveyed only 26 sites or 36% were barrier free. Of the 18 Early Voting sites surveyed, 53%, were barrier free.

While there have been improvements in the numbers of ADA compliant ramps and more recognition of barriers by poll workers, we still find barriers that discourage or block voters with disabilities from exercising their rights to vote. Placement of the Ballot Marking Devices (BMD) remain a problem. Many poll site coordinators and workers still do not understand how to measure the distance around the BMD's to ensure adequate access for those using wheelchairs, walkers or who need the space to maneuver. Too many sites had chairs or wires that minimized the space or presented tripping hazards. In one case, cables for the scanners were laid across the pathways to the scanners, creating a tripping hazard and a barrier for wheelchair users.

Since the majority of polling sites are housed in schools, many of the barriers we identify are created because the schools themselves (which are also required to be ADA accessible) have not made sufficient changes to become compliant. We often see tables, athletic equipment or other barriers that have not been removed or have not been moved out of the way at voting sites in schools.

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October -November 5, 2019 General Election

	Number of Sites with Barriers	% Barriers
Exterior/ Interior Signage	14	19%
Entryways/Pathways	17	24%
Ramps	7	9%
Interior Access*	8	11%
No. of Sites with Barriers**	46	64%
No. of Sites without Barriers	26	36%
Total No. of Sites Surveyed	72	

**Interior access barriers include insufficient space to access the BMD.*

***Some polling sites have more than one barrier.*

Some Detail

Exterior Pathways

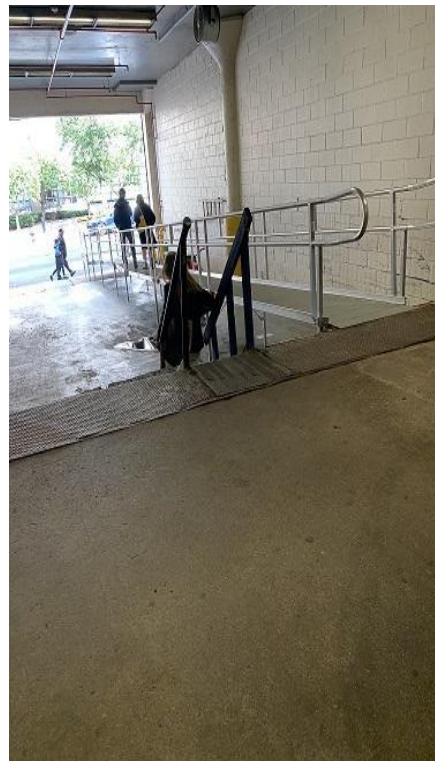
Insufficient directional signage pointing to the accessible entrance continues to be a problem. At eight of the polling sites with insufficient directional signage, poll site workers said they did not get enough signs. In some cases where signage was a problem, the accessible entrance did not have the international symbol of access sign. In other cases, directions to the accessible entrance which is out of sight of the main entrance, are not legible having been handwritten with pens rather than markers. This means that people with low vision or low reading levels may not be able to understand where to go to get to an accessible entrance. At one site the signage leading up to the poll site has two access arrows, one pointing in one direction, the other in the opposite direction, which was confusing to voters.

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Entryways/Pathways

The distance from the main entrance to the accessible entrance posed a problem for people with mobility issues. There were a few sites where people had to walk a long distance to the accessible entrance for example, half of an avenue (from the corner of East 32nd and 3rd Avenue). Although there were no obstructions, the distance to travel poses a problem for those who have difficulty walking, fatigue problems and those who have other mobility-related disabilities. In one case the accessible entrance was not visible, was far from the main entrance and was hard to find.

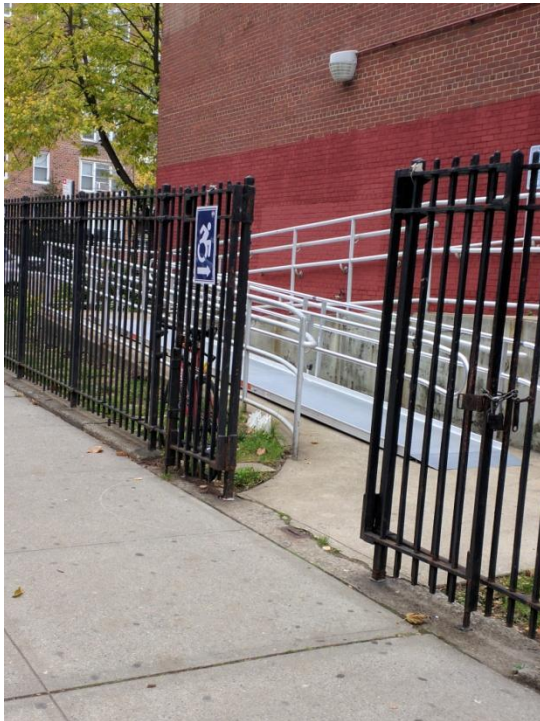


John Jay College Ramp – Manhattan. Entry is dark, ramp looks forbidding for someone using a wheelchair or walker.

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Ramps

There were seven ramps that were not in compliance with the ADA guidelines. The problems included inadequate level landings, steep slopes, no handrails and lack of edge protection. In one case, a ramp at the main entrance of a school in Queens would have been accessible if the railing had been reinforced. The school had not fixed the railing, so the Board of Elections had to place a temporary ramp at a separate entrance where the entryway was narrow and more difficult to navigate, requiring a door monitor and sited at a distance from the voting area.



Joseph Pulitzer School – Queens. Temporary ramp at site a distance from voting area, permanent ramp at main entrance still included accessibility signs although ramp railing was not stable.

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IS 145 Joseph Pulitzer School - Queens

Confusing ramps, unclear which ramp to use; temporary ramp turning radius, while technically compliant, makes entry difficult.

Interior Access

The interior door openings at some sites were less than the thirty-two inches required by the ADA and some interior doors were heavy and hard to open. There were other barriers such as voting machines and furniture placed too closely together creating narrow pathways to machines. An entry to the inside door to the voting area was beveled but 2 inches high, well above ADA standards of 1/2 inch, creating a barrier for wheelchair users and a tripping hazard. In fact, debris and other tripping hazards are still too often seen at voting sites. In addition, some voting areas that were dark or poorly lit, making voting for those with low vision difficult.



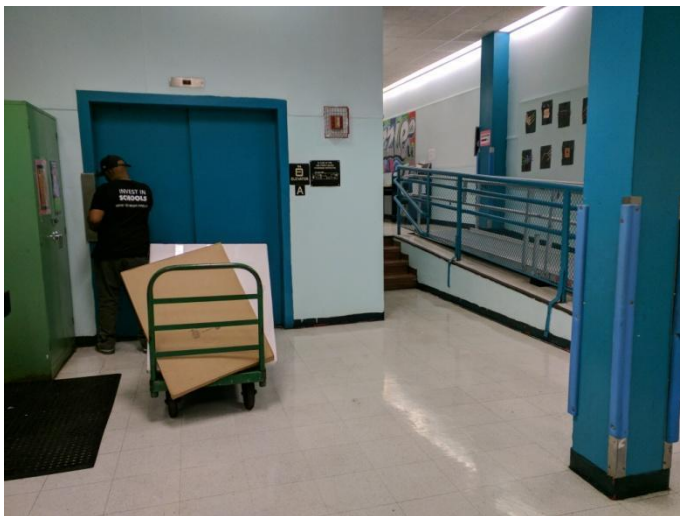
Jackie Robinson College, Manhattan. Cables are tripping hazards.

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Jackie Robinson College, Manhattan. Plastic and cords are tripping hazards on pathway for those with low vision or those who are blind.

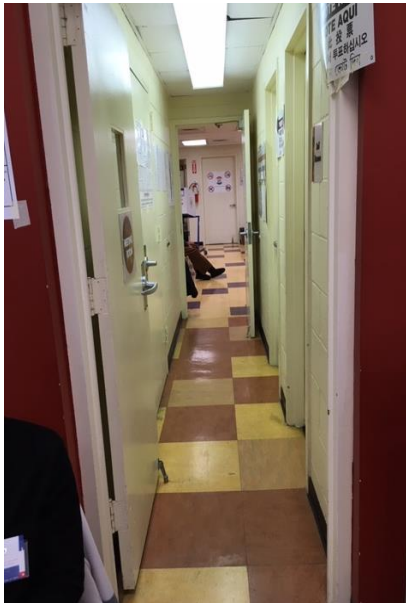
At Renaissance Charter School in Queens, an elevator was needed to access the polling sites, yet there was no directional signage at the elevator to advise voters which floor to go to in order to vote. A sign on a column near the elevator did indicate "2nd floor", but was posted on a pillar and written with red ink that many (including our surveyors) did not see immediately.



Renaissance Charter School – Queens
No signage at elevator identifying voting on 2nd floor.

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Briarwood Library, Queens
28" door opening and narrow hallway into polling site makes this voting area inaccessible for those using wheelchairs or scooters.

Ballot Marking Devices

The placement of the Ballot Marking Device (BMD) lacking the required spacing around it for ease of access and turning in a wheelchair or while using a walker continues to be a problem. In some cases this was addressed by most coordinators after CIDNY surveyors informed them of the requirements. However, there was not always enough remaining space in the facility to move the equipment or place it in close proximity to electrical outlets. The electric cords also impeded access to the BMD.

While not specifically non-compliant, placement of the BMDs away from other voting booths, in the back of the voting area or behind pillars often made them difficult to spot. This kind of placement also sends a message to voters that using the BMD is not part of 'regular' voting. The effect is to discourage voters from using the BMD unless they cannot vote privately and independently any other way. Since any voter can use the BMD, placing it away from the voting area keeps it from being a well-known option for voters.

There were issues with BMD placement at some sites that were too small to position the machine where voters could vote privately because people could pass behind the machine and see the screen. Poll workers still sometimes hover over voters using the BMD - most in an effort to help even if they had not been asked or because they may be curious about how the machine's accommodations work. They seem not to understand that this can make people using the machine uncomfortable and fearing that their vote is being watched.

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CIDNY Poll Site Survey Summary from 2003-2019

October/November 2019	72 Sites Visited, 46 sites or 64% with Barriers
November 6, 2018	72 Sites Visited, 50 sites or 69% with Barriers
November 7, 2017	59 Sites Visited, 35 sites or 59% with Barriers
November 8, 2016	64 Sites Visited, 50 sites or 78% with Barriers
April 19, 2016	58 Sites Visited, 45 sites or 78% with Barriers
November 2015	43* Sites Visited, 37 sites or 88% with Barriers
November 2014	62 Sites Visited, 43 Sites or 69% with Barriers
September 2014	46 Sites Visited, 33 Sites or 72% with Barriers
November 2013	80 Sites Visited, 27 Sites or 66.6% with Barriers
November 2012	132 Sites Visited, 108 Sites or 81.8% with Barriers
September 2012	43 Sites Visited, 37 Sites or 86% with Barriers
September 2010	53 Sites Visited, 42 Sites or 80% with Barriers
November 2009	51 Sites Visited, 43 Sites or 84% with Barriers
November 2008	65 Sites Visited, 54 Sites or 83% with Barriers
September 2008	24 Sites Visited, 21 Sites or 87% with Barriers
November 2007	50 Sites Visited, 42 Sites or 84% with Barriers
November 2006	15 Sites Visited, 15 Sites or 100% with Barriers
November 2005	77 Sites Visited, 57 Sites or 74% with Barriers
November 2004	85 Sites Visited, 52 Sites or 61% with Barriers
September 2004	35 Sites Visited, 15 Sites or 43% with Barriers
March 2004	44 Sites Visited, 30 Sites or 68% with Barriers
November 2003	31 Sites Visited, 14 Sites or 42% with Barriers

Since 2003, CIDNY has surveyed 1,335 polling sites; with an average of 71.4% with barriers.

Conclusion

While we have seen some improvements in signage and ramps over the years, there is still a long way to go to ensure that people with disabilities can get into their polling sites and vote independently and privately like anyone else. Too often, BMD's are not given enough space and are placed a distance from other voting booths making them more difficult to get to and use. We still see problems with ramps that do not have adequate landings or lead to narrow entrances.

Too often poor signage or confusing signage can make getting to the voting area confusing and or difficult for voters with disabilities, and too often barriers like chairs, equipment and cables/wires make voting hazardous for people with low vision, mobility and/or balance disabilities.

The Department of Education (DOE) as well as the New York City Board of Elections (NYCBOE) need to stop delays in remedying these problems. In less than a year, a presidential election is expected to bring out large numbers of voters. The DOE and the NYCBOE must work to ensure that all voters can get into their polling sites and vote privately, independently and safely. At 29 years since the signing of the ADA into law and 16 years after the Federal Government provided money for states to make polling sites accessible for people with disabilities, it's time to get it right.