Dear Editor,

My name is Melissa Carney. I am a recent graduate of Mount Holyoke College, and live in the small town of Deep River, Connecticut. I currently serve as Secretary of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, as well as President of the Connecticut Association of Blind Students. In the past, I served as a Fall Policy Intern for the National Council on Independent Living, and a Visiting Scholar at IBM, researching best practice standards for accessibility.

The threat posed by COVID-19 still looms ahead for persons with disabilities, many of whom are extremely vulnerable to complications of the virus. While certain quarantine restrictions may be lifted in the next few months, many disabled Connecticut residents will have to self-isolate for longer due to the high risk of exposure. In short, not only will persons with disabilities struggle to arrange transportation to the polls, as per usual, but many will be forced to avoid the polls altogether for safety reasons. Several states have already adopted a 100% vote by mail system to help eliminate traffic at the polls. As of this week, Governor Lamont has signed an executive order allowing all eligible Connecticut residents to vote absentee. However, the current vote by mail system is not accessible to those with visual impairments or other severe physical disabilities, as they have no way of seeing, holding, or marking a physical paper ballot independently. To ask for assistance in doing so does not only infringe on one’s privacy, but is also degrading, and simply impossible for those who live on their own both before and during quarantine. As such, disabled Connecticut residents are left with two impossible, and inadequate, options: risking their safety by utilizing public transportation to travel to the polls in order to use accessible voting machines, or trying to reconcile exclusion from the absentee process. Despite reaching out to multiple elections officials on a regular basis, I have not received a single response regarding a solution for the prominent issue at hand.

Many of our neighbors, such as Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont, have implemented fully accessible and user-friendly digital absentee ballots, along with larger states such as California, Colorado, and West Virginia. Voting should be accessible to all Connecticut residents, regardless of ability. Every opinion matters. Access to at home voting privately and independently is a right that ALL deserve. Accessible voting should not end at the polling place. The ADA, section 508, and Title 2 all speak to government infrastructure, which voting is a significant component. I hope that Connecticut can uphold its progressive ideals and support safe, secure, and accessible voting for all.

If you have any further questions or comments, I can be reached at (860) 391-9319 or carne23m@mtholyoke.edu.

Regards,

Melissa Carney