

Podcast 102 – Local Voter Accessibility Concerns

Host: Tania Anderson, CEO ARISE

Guests: Josh Solazzo, Local Systems Advocate/Disability Rights Advocate

Jim Cronk, Independent Living Advocate

TRANSCRIPTION

Tania Anderson 0:08

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO at ARISE, and with me today is Josh Solazzo, who is a local systems advocate and disability rights advocate in our Oswego office. Welcome Josh.

Josh Solazzo 0:20

Thanks for having me

Tania Anderson 0:21

And Jim Cronk, who is an independent living advocate also in our Oswego office. Welcome Jim.

Jim Cronk 0:26

Thank you.

Tania Anderson 0:27

So, we are talking the day after Election Day, November 2024 and we're going to talk about accessible voting. And both of you identify as people with disabilities, correct?

Josh Solazzo 0:42

Yes.

Jim Cronk 0:42

Yes.

Tania Anderson 0:43

And both of you voted in this election, different times, different places, in Oswego County. And I really just want to hear about your experience with accessible voting. And just as background, you know, it's, it's a requirement that voting be accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act, it's absolutely important that all of us exercise that right to vote, and people with disabilities absolutely should exercise their right to vote, and just depending on our situation, there might be different things that we need to achieve that vote, but we still have the right to not just access but privacy, all of the things that all of us expect with a vote, and I know ARISE, has been super active for many years in educating the people who run the polls about what will work best for accessible voting, how to be flexible and responsive to different people's needs, and it's a really important project. So would you add anything to that preamble before we talk about your stories? Josh, what would you add?

Josh Solazzo 1:53

It's definitely like I said, it's very important. In my experience is definitely a little bit different than Jim's. I did the early vote, so he did the day of. So, it's a little bit different, but, yeah, it's definitely, like I said, it's, it's important that everyone gets out and votes and makes it as easy and accessible as possible.

Tania Anderson 2:14

And, and Jim, you've been doing this for a long time. Do you find it the education process in terms of educating people that run the polls has gotten easier, that people seem to get it now.

Jim Cronk 2:26

I think that people are trying. They really are. But I think one of the things that happens is that the very what you actually refer to them as the vote, the people are there all day, the polls. I think that they're they change. And so when change comes in, then you've got to look at doing some reeducation. And so I think that's a point that we happen to be at right now.

Tania Anderson 2:47

Okay, yeah, that's a great point. And and those, those poll workers are there for a long time.

Josh Solazzo 2:52

And they're all volunteers

Tania Anderson 2:52

And they're all volunteers, right?

Josh Solazzo 2:55

Changes every year. Yeah, it could be different people every year.

Tania Anderson 2:58

Good point. So, Jim, I'm going to start with you in terms of just telling me how your voting experience went yesterday. And you might want to start by describing a little bit about how your disability impacts how you how you vote.

Jim Cronk 3:17

Well, I am quadriplegic, for those who are really familiar with that, I have paralysis that affects all four extremities of my body and my hand. My fingers don't work. So, I need to use an accessible machine in order for me to vote. So, they have a touch screen machine, which works very well, very easy to operate, and that's what I utilize when I go to vote. The problem that I ran into was that the machine was set up and there was no, if you want to call it, a blinder barrier around it.

Tania Anderson 3:49

So just to interrupt. So, like when my polling place, they had little cards around every person filling out their ballot for privacy reasons.

Jim Cronk 4:00

And they had that where I was.

Tania Anderson 4:02

And, but the accessible, accessible machine that you were going to use yesterday didn't have any screening.

Jim Cronk 4:09

That's correct.

Tania Anderson 4:10

And where was it?

Jim Cronk 4:11

It was in Oswego.

Tania Anderson 4:12

And, but it was like, in the middle of a room,

Jim Cronk 4:14

oh, in the middle of a room? Yeah, there's a middle is middle of a more of a gymnasium type thing, a war memorial.

Tania Anderson 4:20

So there's a big room people casting their ballots. The accessible voting machine is plopped in the middle of it without any privacy screens.

Jim Cronk 4:28

Yes. I was literally facing the screen when I first pulled up to it. To my right is where all the voters were coming in, probably not more than 10 feet.

Tania Anderson 4:36

And these are the people coming into the polling place.

Jim Cronk 4:39

The tables were there that you had to register at. To my left, probably five, six feet to my left was the actual machine where you put the ballot in the scanner. The scanner, we're, uh, it's counted. So that's where that was. And here's this machine with no blinder barrier, whatever you wish to call it, around it, and people walking back and forth behind me. I did have them turn the machine to help with the situation, but it still wasn't as good as it needed to be.

Tania Anderson 5:08

Okay. And I'm sure when the people set that up, didn't really think about privacy screens. Is that your impression?

Jim Cronk 5:16

Yeah, that's pretty obvious. They didn't, and it's where it comes down to, you know, I mentioned the education part of it again, and I really some of the poll workers, like I said, they look new. They weren't familiar to me. So, I think that there's needs to be a little reeducation, and how things need to be set up.

Tania Anderson 5:33

So, so you got the machine turned around, so it was a little more private than it had been. And then what happened?

Jim Cronk 5:41

Well, I went through into the process, and I printed the ballot, and the ballot came out, and it was a little bit curled like, like a piece of paper, whether that came off a roll, get that little curl to it, and I was trying to feed it into the machine and,

Tania Anderson 5:56

That's the scanner machine. So, we all, I think pretty much all of us, we fill out that card. However, we fill it out, and then we bring it over the scanner, feed it into the scanner, and that's how our vote is tabulated. That was the situation at your polling places. So you got the printout from the accessible machine, and it's curled and it's curls. And then what happened?

Jim Cronk 6:15

I was trying to feed it in the machine, and I was having a little trouble getting it in there, and the poll worker came over and trying to be helpful. Grabbed a hold of it and flipped it over and put it in. There was nothing covering up what I had voted, my vote, you know, my voting, whatever you want to call it was that was within view,

Tania Anderson 6:35

So, your ballot is basically there for her to see, anyone to see. And it happened pretty quickly?

Jim Cronk 6:42

Pretty quickly, and it was just her trying to help, not realizing what she was doing so but, and then, but the ballot was cast, and it was nothing I could do at that point, other than now I'm free educate.

Tania Anderson 6:57

And did you take the opportunity to explain to her what had just happened?

Jim Cronk 7:01

I started to mention it to her, but she turned around and was distracted by somebody else who had a question about something that was going on. So, I figured at this point, I'll let it go, and we'll do a reeducation thing.

Tania Anderson 7:12

And so you've been a disability rights advocate for many years. How did and you know, this is obviously impacting you personally, this experience, how did you feel in that moment?

Jim Cronk 7:23

I was definitely frustrated. But, you know, losing your cool basically doesn't get you anywhere, so, but I was extremely frustrated with the situation, and I felt like, you know, that they should have been a little bit more understanding the situation and been like, asked first, you know, they should have asked me, Can I help you with this? Rather than just reach right in there and do that? It's never right to reach in and just assist somebody with a disability. Always ask first.

Tania Anderson 7:52

And that's exactly the point I was going to make. That not just on election day, many, many times, people with disabilities or people want to, quote, unquote, help them when we're just fine. We're just moving along, living our life. We don't need help, but if you're trying to be kind and but ask,

Jim Cronk 8:12

yeah, yeah, the reason why I tell everybody to ask is because even though you're willing to help someone, which is fantastic if you are, you can actually knock somebody off balance, cause them to fall you know, anything along that line could happen, even though you don't realize you know that that could happen, it actually can. So, you need to be careful and always ask a person with a disability if you can assist them before you attempt to do anything.

Tania Anderson 8:40

And just respectful of boundaries, exactly,

Jim Cronk 8:43

Right, right.

Tania Anderson 8:45

So, Josh, you also voted in Oswego County. Tell us a little bit about your experience.

Josh Solazzo 8:51

I did the early voting, and I when I got there, I have Spina Bifida. I use a chair for longer distances, but I didn't use my chair when I went in to vote. They did have a sign outside says for accessible voting. Hit this button, I went in, and there was a long hallway, and there was a room to the left where it said to go vote. Well, I went down and voted. I was there five minutes, no issues, but when I was walking back out someone that was needed an accessible space to vote. They went into the room out in the front to the it would have been to the right when you walked in. And I noticed that, and I I did. I was talking with him about it, with Jim about it. But other than that, mine was a pretty easy, pretty smooth, quick way of voting. But like I said, it's just that room to the right where they had the accessible seemed to me that maybe it should have been all in the same room.

Tania Anderson 9:52

So, it felt a little bit secluded,

Josh Solazzo 9:55

Secluded.

Tania Anderson 9:56

Yeah, the disabled people can go over here, kind of thing, right?

Josh Solazzo 9:59

Yeah?

Tania Anderson 10:00

And it's so interesting that if you think you know Jim, your experience the accessible machine is machine is plop in the middle of everything. So, it's included with all the other ballot stations,

Jim Cronk 10:13

Yes.

Tania Anderson 10:13

But not private. And then Josh, you have a situation where it's private but it's segregated,

Josh Solazzo 10:21

right?

Tania Anderson 10:21

So there's got to be a happy medium,

Josh Solazzo 10:24

Right, right.

Tania Anderson 10:26

And so, for both of you, what sort of follow up do you anticipate you'll do to help educate folks who are trying to do the right thing?

Josh Solazzo 10:36

Right. Absolutely, yeah, we definitely will contact Board of Elections for Oswego County and just see if we can meet with them. I prefer to do it in person, then talk to somebody over the phone so that we can see each other and sit down and just go over, maybe doing some education, especially now that with Jim, it was in a different area, so we're going to have to be able to reach out to those other areas for next year when they do it, and maybe set up a little class where we can go in just 20 minutes and talk with each place and just say, these are kind of things you just have to look for,

Tania Anderson 11:13

Right. And I would say, with so many things, with accessibility, it's not a big deal, and it's not hard to do. It's relatively simple things that we can put in place that benefit not just people with disabilities, but everybody. Correct. It's just thinking about it.

Jim Cronk 11:32

I agree education is the key to that whole thing. And I said I definitely would like to be involved from this point forward to the board of elections. If we can arrange that to do, I would like to do a pre poll site inspection to be sure that things are where they should be.

Tania Anderson 11:47

Sort of troubleshoot.

Jim Cronk 11:48

Yes.

Tania Anderson 11:49

Yeah, great. Well, thank you both for sharing your experiences, which is super interesting. And if anyone's listening to this podcast and you're a person with a disability who had a different sort of experience, positive, negative, everything in between. Contact our Oswego office, because the more we educate each other and share our experiences, the better off we'll all be. Well, thank you both.

Josh Solazzo 12:19

Thank you

Jim Cronk

Thank you