



February 7, 2017

Representative Gregg Harper  
Chairman  
Committee on House Administration  
1309 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Robert Brady  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Administration  
1309 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Re: United Spinal Association Opposition To H.R. 634 The Election Assistance Commission Termination Act of 2017 (EACTA)

Dear Chairman Harper and Ranking Member Brady:

United Spinal Association is writing to urge you to oppose H.R. 634, the Election Assistance Commission Termination Act of 2017 (EACTA). Voting is a fundamental right and the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has played an important role since its creation to ensuring that polling places and the voting process are accessible to people with disabilities. The EACTA would hinder this progress toward accessibility of polling places and the voting process by abolishing the EAC.

United Spinal Association is the largest disability-led national non-profit organization founded by paralyzed veterans in 1946 and has since provided service programs and advocacy to improve the quality of life of those across the life span living with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D) such as multiple sclerosis, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), post-polio syndrome and spina bifida. United Spinal represents over one million individuals with spinal cord injuries and disorders, over 50 chapters, 103 rehabilitation hospital members and close to 200 support groups nationwide. Throughout its history, United Spinal Association has devoted its energies, talents and programs to improving the quality of life for these Americans and for advancing their independence. United Spinal Association is also a VA-recognized veterans service organization (VSO) serving veterans with disabilities of all kinds.

We strongly oppose this bill as barriers still remain in the area of accessibility of polling sites, including during the early voting process. A 2001 GAO report on the 2000 Presidential election found that 84 percent of polling places had impediments to accessibility for people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> A similar report based on the 2008 Presidential elections found that accessibility for people with disabilities had improved, but there were still significant problems – 73 percent of all

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-02-107, Voters with Disabilities: Access to Polling Places and Alternative Voting Methods (2001).

polling places studied still had impediments to accessibility.<sup>2</sup> Although 2013 Census data shows that 15.6 million people with disabilities voted in the 2012 presidential election, research by Rutgers University shows that the voter turnout rate of people with disabilities was 5.7 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

There remains much work to be done not only relating to physical accessibility, but also relating to other barriers to voting, such as a lack of voting and registration materials in accessible formats for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, blind or low vision, or intellectual or other cognitive disabilities. In some instances, there have been outright denials of the right to register and vote based on false assumptions that many individuals with mental disabilities lack the legal capacity to vote.

In the two years since the EAC has had a quorum again, it has voted to accredit a new voting system test laboratory after a recommendation by the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The lab will test new voting equipment against the voluntary voting system guidelines, which are themselves in need of attention. The EAC has provided best practices on voting and election administration to countless jurisdictions around the country. It is an invaluable agency that serves a critical function to strengthen our democracy.

The four-year absence of a quorum at the EAC hindered the agency when Americans needed it most. The EAC could not hold public meetings, adopt new policies, or issue advisory opinions. It adopted its most recent voting system guidelines in 2005 – several lifetimes ago when it comes to technology. That’s why so many local jurisdictions ran the 2012 election with outdated, broken voting machines and why so many voters waited in line for hours to cast their ballots.

The bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration, co-chaired by the general counsels of the Obama and Romney 2012 campaigns, wrote in their report last year that “the standard-setting process for new voting machines has broken down ... due to a lack of [EAC] commissioners. ... Without a fully functioning EAC to adopt new standards, many new technologies that might better serve local election administrators are not being brought to the marketplace.”<sup>4</sup>

Now that it has a quorum, the Commission has gotten back to work evaluating and endorsing standards and guidelines that reflect the newest and best methods of election administration. In 2016 CCD Rights TF worked with coalition partners and the EAC to ensure that some of these meetings were about issues and concerns with voter registration and voting for persons with

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Gov’t Accountability Office, GAO-09-685, *Voters With Disabilities: More Polling Places Had No Potential Impediments Than In 2000, But Challenges Remain* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Schur, Rutgers University. *Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION ON ELECTION ADMINISTRATION, *THE AMERICAN VOTING EXPERIENCE: REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION ON ELECTION ADMINISTRATION*, p. 11-12 (2014), *available at* <https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf>.

disabilities. The meetings were accessible and held both in-person and via the web. The CCD Rights TF advertised and encouraged members to send their networks and chapters to participate.

In light of the many challenges faced by our state and local election administrators and the serious procedural problems that weaken voter access and participation, we believe that this is a time to reaffirm our commitment to voting rights and fair elections by strengthening the EAC and providing it with the staff it requires to function effectively.

While a national election just occurred, many state and local elections will be held throughout 2017 and the EAC must continue to do its important work to ensure fairness in our voting systems. Rather than abolishing the agency, Congress should strengthen the EAC to ensure that persons with disabilities fully enjoy the right to vote privately and independently.

We ask that you oppose The Election Assistance Commission Termination Act (EACTA), H.R. 634 as it is presented for mark up in the House of Representatives Committee on Administration on Tuesday February, 7, 2017. Please contact Jasey Cárdenas, Senior Policy Associate, at [jcardenas@unitedspinal.org](mailto:jcardenas@unitedspinal.org) or 202-556-2076 ext. 7104 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alexandra Bennewith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alexandra Bennewith, MPA  
Vice President, Government Relations  
United Spinal Association