

Voting: Supporting Safe, Accessible, and Inclusive Elections for Older Wisconsin Voters

WAAN's Position: *WAAN supports improvements to the voting process to ensure every eligible older adult (and adult with disabilities) who wants to vote, can vote, no matter where they live.*

Core Member Organizations

- Aging and Disability Professionals Association of Wisconsin (ADPAW)
- Alzheimer's Association Wisconsin Chapter
- Wisconsin Adult Day Services Association (WADSA)
- Wisconsin Association of Area Agencies on Aging (W4A)
- Wisconsin Association of Benefit Specialists (WABS)
- Wisconsin Association of Nutrition Directors (WAND)
- Wisconsin Association of Senior Centers (WASC)
- Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA)
- Wisconsin Senior Corps Association (WISCA)
- Wisconsin Tribal Aging Unit Association

The Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network is a collaborative group of individuals and associations working with and for Wisconsin's older adults to shape public policy to improve their quality of life.

WAAN State Issue Brief
August 2020

Wisconsin's April 2020 Election

Elections have a special place in our Wisconsin history. Talk of elections used to generate anticipation about our role in democracy. Today's elections still generate anticipation, but for this year's April Presidential Primary anticipation was overshadowed by apprehension. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic there were fewer poll workers and polling places than usual and polling places were moved. It became unsafe and scary for many people to vote in person.

Voting became more difficult for people who couldn't drive, didn't have safe public transit or a friend or family member to drive them. Masked voters lined up for blocks in some areas; this was very difficult for those who couldn't stand for long periods of time, needed to return to work, and/or were caregivers who were anxious to return home to care for loved ones. Some voters using curbside voting faced lines, and some even ran out of gas while waiting.

Absentee voting – generally more heavily utilized by older voters¹ – became the most popular way for voters of all ages to cast their ballot. More than 80% of participating voters cast an absentee ballot by mail, including 80% of the majority party (GOP) of the state legislature². This compares to less than 10% absentee ballots cast in past elections. Less than one in five people voted in-person. Older adults and others at high-risk of severe illness from COVID-19 stayed at home for their health and safety. For some, the absentee voting requirements posed challenges, including:

- not knowing how to request an absentee ballot application by mail
- not having the necessary identification (even people who lived in the same communities all their lives!)
- getting copies/downloading photo IDs
- obtaining the necessary witness signature on their ballots (especially difficult for those who live alone)
- getting their ballots returned before the deadline.



These voters, most of whom previously voted in-person at the polls, found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Their options were to leave home and risk their health (or the health of a loved one) to comply with absentee voting requirements or to vote in-person at the polls, or not vote at all.



Voters in Residential Care Facilities and Qualified Retirement Homes

COVID-19 was especially challenging for people living in residential care facilities and qualified retirement homes*. The pandemic prevented the use of Special Voting Deputies (SVDs) during the April Spring Election and Presidential Preference Primary and May Special Election for Congressional District 7.

Because of heightened concern about the spread of COVID-19, these facilities implemented restrictions essentially prohibiting access to all outside visitors, including SVDs. For individuals living in nursing homes, community-based residential facilities (CBRFs), residential care apartment complexes (RCACs), adult family homes (AFHs), and qualified retirement homes, SVDs have been the exclusive method for conducting absentee voting.

Local clerks, in partnership with facility staff, mailed absentee ballots to registered voters with a request on file. For voters who needed to register and/or did not have an absentee voter request on file, it wasn't so simple. Without outside help and with limited computer access and internet service, these individuals were dependent upon facility staff for help. Some of the staff were untrained, did not know where to access the forms needed, and were too busy addressing COVID-19 challenges to provide needed voter assistance.

SVDs will not be available to assist voters in nursing homes and care facilities for the remainder of the 2020 elections. Support and training will be needed for designated staff in these facilities to ensure all eligible individuals wishing to vote are able to do so.

What's the Takeaway?

Our leaders should take the necessary steps to ensure safe, accessible voting is available to all eligible voters. Voting is a privilege, a responsibility and a right expressly guaranteed in our state constitution. In the 2016 presidential and congressional elections Wisconsin ranked fifth in the nation, with a voting rate of 68.33%.³ Older adults and people with disabilities contribute to our high participation rate. Wisconsinites take voting seriously, not only to impact our world today, but to shape the future.

The following recommendations are based upon lessons learned this spring.

- A. Voter registration — Increase access and provide training assistance
- B. Absentee voting — Increase access and improve options
- C. In-person voting at the polls — Improve options and expand recruitment, training, and safety efforts, and
- D. Voting in residential care facilities — Improve access and provide training

Find detailed information on the recommendations for both the November 2020 and subsequent elections in WAAN's [Voting and Older Adults White Paper](#) and [Recommendations Summary](#).

**A qualified retirement home is a facility occupied as a primary place of abode by 10 or more unrelated individuals and in which the municipal clerk or board of election commissioners has determined that SVDs will be sent due to the presence of a significant number of occupants lacking adequate transportation to the appropriate polling place, needing assistance in voting, aged 60 or over, or declared as indefinitely confined electors.*



Contact WAAN

Janet L. Zander, CSW, MPA
Advocacy & Public Policy
Coordinator
Greater Wisconsin Agency on
Aging Resources, Inc.
Elder Law & Advocacy Center
1414 MacArthur Rd., Ste. 306
Madison, WI 53714
Office: (715) 677-6723
Cell: (608) 228-7253
janet.zander@gwaar.org

**Find this and other WAAN
materials at:**

<http://gwaar.org/waan>

Footnotes:

¹ <https://electionupdates.caltech.edu/2020/03/20/some-demographics-on-voting-by-mail/>

² https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/80-of-wisconsin-republican-legislators-voted-absentee-in-april/article_68baa320-3eaf-5d83-9717-f9a798dbdcba.html

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/632113/2016-us-presidential-election-voter-turnout-by-state/>