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Election Board Enters Settlement Agreement with Justice Department on Accessible Polling Places

The Chicago Election Board has entered a settlement agreement after a 10-month joint effort with the U.S. Justice Department and Chicago-based Equip for Equality to evaluate the physical accessibility of polling places and Early Voting sites. The Board anticipates that several hundred precinct polling sites will need some forms of permanent or temporary modifications or will need to be re-located.

Using newer standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Department of Justice began examining polling places and Early Voting sites during the March 2016 Primary Election. Similar examinations have been launched in other major cities around the country and in downstate Illinois.

Starting in June 2016, the Chicago Election Board staff began meeting with the Justice Department to review preliminary findings from the Primary. The Election Board teamed with a leading local disabilities-advocacy organization, Equip for Equality, to create a plan for a more comprehensive evaluation of the city's 2,069 precincts at the November 2016 General Election. This joint effort averted litigation.

“Equip for Equality worked closely with the Justice Department and the Board, and then recruited hundreds of attorneys from several corporations and law firms across Chicago to work pro bono on this project,” said Election Board Chairwoman Marisel A. Hernandez. “These ‘investigators’ completed training and were supplied with the tools to measure sidewalk cracks, curb cuts, ramp angles, interior and exterior doorway widths, the amount of pressure needed to open doors and other aspects of sites that might have one or more barriers that could impede the access for a blind voter or a voter in a wheelchair.”

Prior to the Settlement Agreement, the Board already had begun to work with public agencies whose sites may have been exempt from the newer rules for their main purposes, such as schools, parks, libraries or other facilities, or because they had an alternate entrance that was not used by voters on Election Day. However, to be used as polling places, some of these sites now will need modifications, such as adjustments to ramps or doors.

Under the terms of the Settlement Agreement, the Board will work with public and private property owners to bring as many polling places as possible into compliance starting with the March 2018 Primary election, with the goal of 100% ADA compliance by the November 2018 General Election.

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