

# LowVision ALERT

by Joyce Render Cohen and Evelyn Render Katz, OTR/L

## Low vision in the voting booth

For someone with low vision, Election Day entails more than deciding who to cast your ballot for. The act of voting presents challenges in and of itself.

When I vote, I go with my husband. He casts his ballot, then helps me. Sometimes we've been able to sit at a table out of view and earshot of other voters so he can read the ballot to me. Other times we have both had to squeeze into a booth together and stand while he read me the ballot and helped me mark it. Anyone with a disability

is allowed to bring a helper to do what my husband does. An election volunteer might help, but you'll be better off if you bring your own assistant.

If you've never been to your designated polling place, or if it has changed, call your state board of elections for information or visit [vote411.org](http://vote411.org). Ask about the most

direct route and if there is an accessible entrance. If you plan to go by yourself, alert the workers that you may need assistance. On Election

Day, bring a pen light or an illuminated hand-held magnifier. A typoscope or signature guide may help you if your state uses paper ballots.

In 2002, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was passed, intended to modernize the election process. It provides money for states to purchase electronic voting systems with the requirement that they be accessible to people who are blind or have low vision. But if your state uses them, you may still encounter problems. According to a study of five types of voting machines by the American Foundation for the Blind, most users were able to easily use the voting machines; however, some expressed difficulty with its synthetic speech and computer keyboard interface.

Even so, don't let low vision stop you from casting your vote! As a last resort, consider the absentee ballot, which is available in every state. Ask your state board of elections.

Be part of Election Day on November 4. Preparation can compensate for vision problems.



## Election Day ideas for everyone

- Contact your board of elections for a sample ballot before Election Day. There may be propositions you know little about—and many local or state races in addition to the vote for U.S. president.
- Get information about ID requirements in your state.
- Vote during off-peak hours. Avoid voting just before work, after work, lunch time, and, if your polling place is in a school, drop-off and pick-up times.
- Anticipate lines. If you're not sitting in a scooter or wheelchair, bring a portable stool or seat, a bottle of water, and determination. And remember—vote on November 4, 2008!



## Low Vision Reading Tips

● **Task lamps.** Use high-wattage or high-intensity bulbs and aim light directly on the page you want to see.

● **Magnifying devices.** Consult an occupational therapist to help you match devices to tasks. You may be surprised at the many shapes and sizes of magnifiers available. A prescription from your physician for an OT visit may make it easier to get insurance coverage.

● **Make the print on your computer really big.** Many Web sites and search engines have functions to increase letter size. Look for a set of small, medium and larger boxes or a plus and minus sign on the page.

Better still, select PDF documents whenever possible. Click the magnifying glass icon to make everything, including the illustrations, as large as you want. (You will need Adobe Reader, which can be downloaded free from [adobe.com](http://adobe.com).)

● **Consider listening instead of reading.** The Internet offers thousands of audio files on every topic imaginable. Audio books are a popular download. Many audio books are released at the same time the print edition is published.

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Con-

gress provides many services to people with visual or physical disabilities, who may borrow audio books, magazines, and equipment free. Go to [loc.gov/nls](http://loc.gov/nls) or call 888-NLS-READ.

● **Explore text-to-speech software.** Technology seems to advance almost weekly. The Nokia N82 cell phone can download software from K-NFB Reading Technologies, a joint venture of Kurzweil Technologies and the National

Federation of the Blind. The K-NFB Reader mobile offers the smallest text-to-speech reading device so far. It weighs 4.2 ounces. Users point this little phone at print material and push a button to activate the text-to-speech software.

The phone and software together cost between \$2,100 and \$2,200. To learn more, visit [knfbreader.com](http://knfbreader.com) or call 1-877-547-1500.

If you have impaired vision and no access to a computer with Internet, call your chapter at 1-800-344-4867. Give your name and mailing address. Your information is confidential, but we need it to address this issue. Thank you.

● **Listen to Momentum!** It's free. Just go to [nationalmssociety.org/Magazine](http://nationalmssociety.org/Magazine), select the issue that you want to read, then click on **Listen**, and follow instructions on the screen. These files can be heard on your computer, downloaded to your MP3 player, or converted to a CD.

Joyce Render Cohen has been living with low vision for 20 some years. She and her co-author and sister, Evelyn Render Katz, OTR/L, often give talks on meeting the challenges of vision loss.