

COUNTY COMMISSIONER VOTER GUIDE



The Independence Center solicited all four of the county commissioner candidates to ask them five questions about their views on issues that impact people with disabilities.



Longinos Gonzalez Jr.
District 4



Electra Johnson
District 3



Liz Rosenbaum
District 4



Stan VanderWerf
District 3

Read their responses below, and find more information about voter registration and election dates at the back of this voter guide from The Independence Center!

QUESTION

Are there barriers to people with disabilities in El Paso County?

LG **Longinos Gonzalez Jr.** - The county has a robust ADA program with compliance and grievance protocols. More, though, can be done to ensure standards are not just met but more effectively support those with disabilities. As renovations are made to buildings and infrastructure or new land use planning is developed I will always ask and follow up on how such projects are taking into account enhancing and incorporating accommodations for those with disabilities. I will ask for community input to how best improve our facilities and services to remove barriers from those who might have mobility, audio, visual and/



or other disabilities. We might not be implementing ergonomic ideas as well as possible, and ideas from these meetings can help us remove barriers over time. Similarly, I will ask questions in transportation services as they are expanded and improved over time. Ideally, we can improve access on curbs and sidewalks and transit locations. Additionally, there remain areas without sidewalks which can be a barrier to those with disabilities. I will work with local municipality and county leaders to ensure we are all addressing these concerns effectively. I will be accessible and ensure concerns and questions by our community are quickly addressed by our county experts, and be a voice for those in need.

EJ **Electra Johnson** - There are barriers to people living with disabilities in every facet of their lives and El Paso County is no exception. There are mobility and access barriers like disconnected and discontinuous sidewalks and inadequate streetscapes. Additionally, there are also very few affordable housing options for the high numbers of both physically and mentally disabled people who are homeless in El Paso County. Alternative transit options are also not provided that would allow a less able bodied person to function independently, for instance commuting to work, getting to a doctors appointment or enjoying the many recreational options offered within our community. More people with disabilities end up under the poverty line as well. There is an isolation barrier as well, and if a person does not already have a strong support network it is difficult to create one. At this time, El Paso County

disproportionally relies on Non-profits and Faith based organizations to provide services for disabled people.

It is unacceptable to me that we do not adequately address the physical and mental health needs of our veterans when they return to our community after they have served our country. We need to do the right thing and protect our veterans who have invested in our country and our community and earned a place at the table, instead of a place under a bridge. Providing housing and wrapping a homeless veteran in continuum of care services costs the taxpayer \$28,000, while doing nothing costs us \$58,000 per homeless veteran. That is not fiscally responsible to our citizens and it is not morally responsible to our veterans or other homeless disabled people.

We deserve better and we can do better. We can only do better however by working together to foster a sense of community, listening to the needs of our community, acknowledging the realities of the situation and collaborating on a solution.

We need to manage our issues in El Paso County instead of our issues managing us. We also need to be honest about the problems and not call a housing crisis a panhandling issue. We must take care of our most vulnerable citizens, and actively design our urban environments so they can universally be used by all citizens, from disabled to able bodied, not only because it is fiscally responsible but also because it is the right thing to do.



LR **Liz Rosenbaum** - Yes. Besides the physical barriers of intersections without curb-cuts, sidewalks too narrow for motorized chairs, and neighborhoods without easy access to bus routes, there are emotional barriers as well. People with disabilities are often stared at, and sometimes mocked, and such public abuse discourages many people with disabilities from even wanting to go outside in the first place. And then when they do go out, sidewalks in disrepair and puddles and ponds in intersections (from poor drainage) make it very difficult for people on crutches, and people in wheelchairs, and people with poor eyesight, to get around. We easily step over cracks and jump over puddles, but they can't, and no one should have to.

And ideological barriers exist, too. When people with disabilities, and the special services they require, are seen as drains on our limited resources, then funding for them is minimized and services are cut – which is bad for everyone. When social services are slashed and help isn't offered, then issues go untreated, leading many good people into jail, which ruins lives and crowds our cells. This pipeline into prison can be closed, with a simple change of view about why social services are needed and how they should be fully funded.

I meet people with disabilities every day. I own and operate the café in Library 21C, and good people come all the time into the library for fun and free time. Their resources are limited – for they can't always get to where they want to go, and even if they can get there they can't always

afford to do what they want to do, for they don't ever have much disposable income – so they repeat doing the same things over and over again, monotonously. So I meet them and greet them and talk with them and their care takers. And these people amaze me constantly with their humor, endurance, and positivity despite the very slow change in society concerning their care.

Americans with disabilities are still Americans, deserving all the freedoms, rights, and protections Americans possess. Yet various barriers exist, keeping people with disabilities from enjoying fully the many public services our area offers, and these issues need to be addressed. Infrastructure needs to be repaired. Transportation services need to be expanded. Social services need to be increased. And I will do my best, as your next County Commissioner, to do these things and help make life easier for all of our people.

SV **Stan VanderWerf** - In a word, yes. Fortunately there has been progress recently in the City with the new funding available to fix potholes, repave streets, and install ADA compliant curb corners, something that has been needed for a long time. There is also progress in the County, especially now with the installation of a dedicated ADA Compliance officer. However, we have a long way to go.

I am a 28 year Air Force veteran with a 50% service disability situated around a couple conditions including tinnitus, lower lumbar degenerative disease, and other conditions. These were caused



by my service to the country. While I do NOT need a wheelchair myself, I feel I can empathize with any citizen with any condition and have been an volunteer in the past for events like the Special Olympics. In my 3D printing business, I have volunteered my time and equipment to help design prosthetics.

While ADA has been around for a long time, compliance has been a long-standing concern in our community and across the nation, even with many recently constructed facilities. It is not just a Colorado Springs issue. We most definitely have a need to create an infrastructure that supports all our citizens and according to a Gazette article from last year, up to 11 percent of our local population has one type or another of special needs with hearing, visual, movement, cognitive, or other. But conversely, the ADA has not been without controversy. It was, like many other federal laws, an unfunded mandate requiring local governments and private businesses to pay for their own compliance, and non-compliance was not grandfathered. The provisions of the ADA are also often subject to interpretation regarding what would be considered a reasonable effort.

For the disabled, there are all kinds of barriers and often they are subtle or difficult to see, except from the person who needs them. These range from bathroom and facility access to fair employment. It can range from protecting disabled people from a man-made or natural disaster or from gaining access to a park. The issues can be in ambulatory, hearing, cognitive, vision, and other

issues. While many have concerns about compliance with ADA in our community, I can also tell you in no uncertain terms, in my travels around the world as an Air Force officer, most countries are way behind us in access. Some pay almost no attention to the disabled at all. So while we want to work hard to eliminate our local barriers, we also need to be grateful for the progress that has been made.

As an El Paso County Commissioner, I look forward to working with the County ADA Compliance Coordinator, Rob Martinez, other public agencies in our community, and companies (non-profit and for profit) to make our County the best in the nation. This will specifically include disabled accessibility in innovative and cost effective ways.

QUESTION

Does the Americans with Disabilities Act provide sufficient access for people with disabilities using county services?

LG

Longinos Gonzalez Jr. - In spending time with county leaders as well as with those with disabilities, I believe the county does a good job providing access



but improvements are still needed. I will work for long term improvements in infrastructure and transportation. I will actively seek input from the community on how to improve these areas. As a commissioner, I will be an advocate for these concerns and have regular meetings to receive recommendations and ideas on how to improve county services. I have already started receiving comments and ideas from community members. One such comment highlighted the lack of access to city and county park play areas. The disabled person can access the park itself but the various areas within the park are less ADA friendly. With input and ideas from people like this concerned mother, I anticipate being able to improve access in new projects and during renovations and upgrades to facilities.

EJ **Electra Johnson** - Yes I believe that the ADA access is sufficient or adequate at least. I believe that universal design or the code name for it ADA compliance should be silent and invisible, meaning that accessible and barrier free design does not need to cost more or look different if it is considered thoughtfully. ADA design standards are minimum standards not maximum standards. This is not a new concept, in Hebrew 12:12 it says, "Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame will not be disabled but rather healed" the concept of the built environment meeting people where they are at is an ancient idea. In El Paso county ADA design standards are adequate, if a disabled person has access to private transportation or the ability to use Silver Key (which is primarily for the elderly),

their mobility and access to county services is pretty good. The access in public venues is adequate; most places have restrooms that are accessible. The downtown core is fairly accessible and accessing social services or other county services as far as building go, they are all accessible. Parks and trails are far less accessible. The Downtown core and the streetscape is pretty contiguous and easy to navigate, as a person moves further out into the county, accessibility decreases significantly. The Further out a person travels and the more car centric the environment becomes the less accessible it is for people who are disabled.

LR **Liz Rosenbaum** - Public buildings all have wheelchair ramps leading in and elevators going up. Government and Justice services also have translators available for ESL citizens, as well as sign-language interpreters and hearing aid devices available for hearing-limited people. So yes, County services are in compliance with ADA requirements.

But we can also do better than meeting the bare minimum requirements.

For example, State and County funds do go to Day Center services, which help care for people with disabilities by providing them with transportation and all-day entertainments throughout the County. But such funding can only be used for events and areas inside the County. Which I get – we want to keep local money in the local area – but sometimes these Day Center services want to take people up to Denver for museum trips, or into the



mountains for field trips, or go to the Pueblo River Walk, and they can't because the funds they get limit the activities they can provide.

I would change that. I would change the limitation, to have most funds used for local events, yet some funds allowed for day-trips and travels. This follows not only the letter but also the spirit of the ADA law, by letting people with disabilities enjoy all of the many public events available.

SV **Stan VanderWerf** - ADA doesn't provide access, it only provides the national-level definition of access. Companies and public agencies provide access. I know the County is committed to the tenets of the Act including employment, public accommodation, transportation, and communications.

While some of this commitment might have been only recently realized, it is still progress. The County hired Robert Hernandez in 2014 to serve as an ADA compliance coordinator. Rob, working with the current County Commissioners, has published County policies that apply to the disabled for employment and, upon request, the County now provides the services needed for effective communications. Rob has committed to the Commissioners efforts to improve County facility access and he has published on the County website the request form for barrier removal and grievance procedures. As El Paso County Commissioner I will support these and other efforts.

Under Rob's efforts, the County has started

identifying additional improvements ranging from replacement of old drinking fountains, lowering customer service counters, and much more. In January 2016, he reported several new projects to the County Commissioners. El Paso County was the first to implement a statewide campaign for accessible parking spaces, and accessibility improvements were installed in 2015 at the El Paso County Fairgrounds among others.

The County has also agreed to work with land developers for disabled access and I am honored to say the Housing and Building Association has endorsed me. I intend on working with them to ensure private efforts are also supportive.

QUESTION

Are current transportation options and infrastructure sufficient to meet the needs of people with disabilities in the region?

LG **Longinos Gonzalez Jr.** - I believe this is an area that needs some emphasis and improvement. Although a good job is being done overall, improvements should be sought and implemented. Sidewalk, curb access, and pedestrian ramps must be improved and planned and placed properly on new community projects, infrastructure, and development. Transportation plays a vital role



in providing freedom of movement and access to those with disabilities. Working with regional partners and the RTA to expand access and routes over time will be important in meeting the needs of the county and those with disabilities. I will also fight to ensure funding for specialized transportation is maintained. A long term regional Consolidated Transportation Plan has been in the works for years but has not yet been completed. I will work with our community and municipal partners to ensure the ideas being developed in this plan are fully integrated with the needs of those with disabilities and address their concerns.

EJ **Electra Johnson** - Silver Key works for the elderly but there are not a lot of options for others who need transportation and do not have access to a private car or need to go somewhere that is not on a route. The City of Colorado Springs also has Metro Mobility that is an on call service that provides for people who cannot use regular bus service. Lack of access to transportation is a real barrier to meeting the needs of disabled people in our community. It is a problem that should be approached collectively and collaboratively with transit authorities, the city and the county.

It has been 20 years since the American Disability Act passed. The lack of transportation options limits employment options for many people living with disabilities. It also limits their social connections, their healthcare options, their ability to engage in the electoral process and their basic civil right to

participate in our community fully. Our transportation systems in El Paso county to serve and provide for disabled citizens are in a word; inadequate.

LR **Liz Rosenbaum**- In certain areas, yes. Downtown has curb-cuts and bus routes. The major roads around the Chapel Hills and Citadel Malls are also fine. But in large parts of the city's southeast area, and in county lands outside Widefield/Security, and inside neighborhoods everywhere, problems exist. Public transportation doesn't go everywhere it's needed, and too many sidewalks and streets are crumbling in disrepair. Several times a week I see people with disabilities riding on the roads (with vehicles driving around them) going places in their motorized chairs, and they have to drive on neighborhood streets and down HWY 85/87 before getting to a sidewalk wide enough for them to travel on.

This is dangerous, not just for the people with disabilities, but also for the drivers and everyone on the road.

Private companies and the transportation services they provide fill most of the gaps, and that's wonderful. But they don't fix infrastructure. It's our job, as a County, to do that. Roads must be repaired. Sidewalks expanded, with curb-cuts added. And public transportation services must be increased. These are the basic services our County must provide, along with security – for disabled people are disproportionately targets for crime.



A government which cannot care for all of its citizens is weak, and failing. And we should not need to rely upon the charity of others to take care of our own people. We must do better for all the members of our community.

SV **Stan VanderWerf** - Again, in a word, no. There is not sufficient transportation or infrastructure to meet many needs in the region, whether the person is disabled or not. But I am happy to say, I believe we have improved immensely on these issues in the last two years, not the least of which includes the City's recent efforts to rebuild our roads and sidewalks.

Again, Rob Hernandez reported to the County Commissioners the addition of 178,000 feet of new sidewalks and 849 pedestrian ramps over the last 10 years representing \$3M of investment. While this is excellent, there are many projects in planning or execution to do more. One example in District 3 is the revitalization of West Colorado Avenue between Old Colorado City and Manitou. Not only is there no ADA compliance in this area, there are no curbs, sidewalks, or sufficient lighting for a safe environment for anyone. Fortunately the project is funded.

I also like that Rob has worked with the Independence Center and other non-profits to secure funding for disabled services like systems for the hearing impaired to address emergency response for evacuations. Rightly so, this is a community effort, not just a public effort.

As El Paso County Commissioner, I believe I can assist in solving several problems regarding access in our Community and look forward to doing so. With a 20+ year background in public budgeting, disaster planning and recovery, and public policy development, I know I'll be able to contribute to solving disabled access needs.

QUESTION

What is the role of the County in the provision of affordable and accessible housing for people with disabilities?

LG **Longinos Gonzalez Jr.** - During the land use and planning approval process, having input from the community will be very important. Providing leadership in highlighting the importance of integrating affordability and accessibility to project developments from the start will also be key. As a commissioner, asking the right questions throughout the process will be important to address these issues. Additionally, an emphasis on these topics in these early stages ensures builders and the county are implementing ADA provisions more efficiently. Ergonomic aspects are often overlooked because they are not properly understood. To counter this, I recommend and will support increasing the



participation and membership of those with disabilities on various boards and committees. They will have better insight on issues and ideas that may be overlooked by a person who has never personally had to cope with ADA barriers.

EJ **Electra Johnson** - Through social services, the county should provide access to affordable housing options for disabled people in our community when needed. However, many disabled people end up homeless because of long wait lists for too few affordable, accessible housing units. The backlog for this type of housing is 2-8 years, a time period that almost guarantees that people in need will fall through the cracks of our service system. While there is little affordable housing in our community, there is even less affordable and accessible housing available. We have many struggling/homeless veterans with traumatic brain injuries sustained while they were serving our country. We have a rise in the number of homeless elderly women who are frequently disabled though many are also caring for grandchildren. We must provide treatment and housing options for these disabled members of our community.

LR **Liz Rosenbaum** - It's a moral role. We should absolutely be providing affordable and accessible housing for people with disabilities. For people with disabilities tend to have limited incomes, which disqualifies them from owning their own homes or renting decent apartments – which forces them into a desperate situation of either being dependent upon

someone else, living in a bad place, or becoming homeless. And we should all be working together, using our combined resources, to ensure disabilities and poverty doesn't ruin lives. So yes, we should be building affordable and accessible housing – like small homes and low-cost apartment complexes. Yes, we should be caring for the weakest amongst us. Anything less is morally intolerable.

SV **Stan VanderWerf** - The County does have a role. But it is important to ensure the County limits itself to a proper public role. The County can build and enforce local codes that support disabled access, but should not construct or fund public housing. The County can also offer tax incentives and/or efficient permitting to encourage private investing in affordable housing.

For example, the Springs Rescue Mission has a privately funded project designed for very low threshold housing. While predominantly to stabilize the homeless, several of the projected tenants will be disabled for one reason or another. The County's role in a project like this is to make sure it doesn't get in the way, while ensuring the overall needs of the community are supported.

Additionally, Rob Hernandez is working to provide facility assessments to make recommendations to improve disabled access. An emphasis on low income housing/apartments could help. As El Paso County Commissioner, I would like to see if we can help Rob accelerate his assessments. I believe that once a



requirement is identified, the other tasks to resolve the requirement, like funding, can move forward.

While there is much to cover on this topic, I know members of the Housing and Building Association have expressed interest in developing affordable housing in places like Old Colorado City and downtown Colorado Springs. So another appropriate role would be for the County to work with developers and builders to ensure disabled access either directly or via code development.

QUESTION

What opportunities are you aware of for people with disabilities to become more integrated into the El Paso County community?

LG Longinos Gonzalez Jr. - There are numerous county committees and commissions that would benefit from the participation of those with disabilities on their membership. Their ideas and recommendations on how to improve projects and services can best be implemented when they are taken into account from the earliest stages. Additionally, I will take these concerns very seriously and ensure I meet with these community leaders to ensure their voice and recommendations are heard. I continue to hear from the community how

efficient transit and improved curb and ramp access is vital to freedom of movement, and how parks and building facilities access might be improved. Improvements to these areas will allow for greater integration of people with disabilities within our county community.

EJ Electra Johnson - One great opportunity would be to develop better and more diverse housing options throughout our community. In Denver, HUD was a big proponent of mixed-use, mixed income, mixed ability housing. The market rate housing and commercial space funds the affordable and increased streetscape for a walk-able mixed use neighborhood with community gathering spaces that are accessible. Also co-housing solutions can be used to address the issues of housing and integration into the community. Accessible tiny home villages similar to the Community first, tiny home master planned community in Austin Texas is a great example of design with integrity and dignity that pulled together 90 faith based organizations to take care of their least fortunate and least able bodied. This is just smart design that ultimately benefits everyone, smart universal design that is invisible and simple and beautiful and efficient and works for all people of all abilities, levels the playing field and creates a more integrated society and community.


LR Liz Rosenbaum - I'd like to see more of a community support system for people with disabilities, with local businesses inviting people in to learn



about and experience different jobs. This gives disabled people opportunities for adventure, and gives businesses opportunities for new customers. For example, I know the Copperhead Bar once opened up to a group of people, for a minimal charge, for a dance party. And they loved it! Everyone benefits.

We have wonderful neighbors and business community members, and I'd like to see an outreach program which connects all of us together.

The Board of County Commissioners, which every day interacts with businesses from all around the County, could help find businesses which could open up to people with disabilities, and connect them to the groups which work with people with disabilities. We can be the center of the network, connecting people together, and helping everyone have fun.

 **Stan VanderWerf** - I believe all people in our community ARE welcome to the extent they want to participate. A better question is whether our local infrastructure allows participation. So for any community event, disabled access gives those opportunities. It's important to know some opportunities can be delivered via physical access, but technology (e.g. telecons and webinars) can also be used to engage the talents of a disabled person serving on a board, for example, without forcing them to get into a meeting room with difficult access.

I would like to offer a specific opportunity as well. People with disabilities are the

perfect evaluators to help the County identify real risk areas. While this has been ongoing, I think we could formalize it. While many areas are not compliant, some locations might be rarely used and others might be daily or hourly barriers.

I have more ideas like fixing our bike trails for all-citizen use and making sure we can evacuate, transport, shelter, communicate with, and return disabled people during/after a natural or manmade disaster. As such, I am especially pleased to see an Independence Center / RM ADA Center report on the Waldo Canyon fire with a set of specific findings. I will work to implement these.

As YOUR County Commissioner, and as a disabled vet myself, I will use my background to maximize public safety and access regardless of the person and their condition. And I look forward to developing community partnerships with the private sector to enhance ADA efficiencies.



VOTE AT THE INDEPENDENCE CENTER

729 S. Tejon Street
Colorado Springs, CO 80903

NOVEMBER 7-8

For other polling locations visit,
epcvotes.com

IMPORTANT DATES

Monday, October 17th

Mail-in ballots sent to all registered voters can be returned by mail or at a ballot drop off location

Monday, October 24th

Some local in-person polling places open early

Thursday, November 3rd

Final day to send mail-in ballots through the mail

Monday, November 7th

All polling places, including The IC, are open from 8AM-5PM

ELECTION DAY

Tuesday, November 8th

Final day to vote in person or drop your ballot at a drop box from 7AM- 7 PM

If you are voting the day of the election, you must drop off your ballot at a drop off location or vote in person at a Voter Service Polling Center (VSPC). You may visit any VSPC to vote or receive a replacement ballot. Visit www.epcvotes.com for more information about VSPC and drop off locations.

To register or update your registration, visit govotecolorado.com

To contact the County Clerk, call 719-575-VOTE or email elections@elpasoco.com

VOTE
BY NOV. 8



The Independence Center is a local non-profit organization that provides home health care, independent living, and advocacy services for people with disabilities. These programs are complimented by advocacy and transition assistance, peer support, skills classes, and numerous other services. The IC's goal is to empower and provide the resources needed to people with disabilities so they can live independent lives.

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