

Justin Radstake, Manager of Quality Assurance with Ray Ellis of the Our Voices Matter Advisory Council

“We promote full citizenship.”

One of our *Service Principles* is all about promoting full citizenship and supporting people to know and use their rights and responsibilities. People living in Ontario have another election coming up soon! Our theme of “Growing Together” relates to what we have learned about supporting people through elections. We have been growing and learning with people who use our services about the importance of voting and how Christian Horizons can best support people to be involved.

One might wonder if voting is important to everyone. In the last provincial elections in Saskatchewan and Ontario, only 46% and 58% of registered voters actually voted. In our last Canadian election, only 62% of voters turned out to vote. It might not be important to everyone in the same way. Voting may have been important to different degrees or at different times. Everyone should be able to decide whether voting is important for them. Too often, people assume that voting isn't important to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

We're also growing in how we support people to vote. In 2019, we heard from people who use Christian Horizons' services about their voting experiences. We learned how important support is through this process. Direct support professionals do not just help people to vote on election day, but often help people to know more about what voting *is*, its importance, who the candidates are, and what the parties stand for. Direct support professionals can also help advocate for more accessible voting options. Almost everyone we heard from was supported to share their experiences with us, and many people who have voted did so with the help of their support teams. Especially when family or friends are not available to help, support teams play a key role in supporting people through the voting process.

People with disabilities still face barriers. Accessible voting options have improved in recent years, but people are not always aware of the options available. Someone who hasn't voted before may not understand elections and so may not show interest in voting. Some people with intellectual or developmental disabilities have been told they *cannot* or are *not allowed* to vote. People may even challenge their ability to vote! As a society, we have so much more to learn. Much advocacy is needed as we work for a more equitable society.

I have invited Ray Ellis to share his story with us. I first met Ray in our *Voting Matters* campaign in 2019. Ray is a member of the *Our Voices Matter* advisory group and an active electorate living in Ottawa, Ontario. Ray was born with Cerebral Palsy and relies on assistive devices and direct professional support. Ray shares his story with help from Jasmine Duckworth, Community Development Manager. I want to leave us with Ray's story, because he captures not only the importance of voting, but also some of the issues around it and the continued need for advocacy and accessibility in promoting full citizenship:

Voting has always been important to me. I wanted to vote since I was 12. I saw my siblings vote. And I wanted to vote, but I knew that I had to wait. Growing up, my family had conversations about voting all of the time. So when I turned 18 and was able to vote, my family asked me to vote, and took me to vote, because it was important. I have not missed an opportunity to vote since.

Voting is important to me because I have a chance to make a choice about what direction the country takes. It is important to me to keep learning about issues that are important to me, and about the different parties and leaders, and what they believe. The economy, health, environment, social programs spending are all things that are important to me. I have also been tracking bill C-7 [about medical assistance in dying]. I communicate regularly with my MPP, and he knows me by name, and he knows some of my story. When I email him, he takes me seriously. And I like to bring up issues and invite guest speakers to our *Our Voices Matter* group to help people to know about these issues.

When I moved from home and started to need more support from direct support professionals, it was different. They had to learn about how I communicate. But they also had to learn about how important voting is to me. But I have voted, and I know that there are people to help me. Mostly, it's important that staff can take me to vote. And sometimes I still face questions about whether I can vote. Sometimes volunteers and staff at the voting stations talk to my support staff, and not to me. And it makes me feel angry and disrespected. But I know that I can vote, and I know that I can have support to vote. I can get help with checking in, handing in my identification, and writing my vote on the ballot.

If I could give advice to someone who wants to vote, but who is experiencing barriers, I would tell them to contact Elections Canada, Elections Ontario, or the polling station. Find an option that is accessible and know what options you have to get help with voting. Voting is important.

Making the Connection

- Thinking about the people you know, how might you have meaningful conversations about why the rights and responsibilities of citizenship *matters*?
- For direct support teams, what are some ways you can support someone to vote in the upcoming Ontario election, or in another voting opportunity?