

Disabled man casts 1st ballot on his own

David Madrid

The Arizona Republic

Nov. 4, 2004 12:00 AM

For Phoenix resident Matthew Wangeman, Election Day was his Independence Day.

Tuesday marked the first time that Wangeman, a 39-year-old disabled man, was able to cast his ballot independently. He called it a proud first for both himself and the state.

"My experience today is a story I will tell my grandkids many years from now," Wangeman said, communicating by using a head wand and a letter board.

Arizona is the first state to begin testing voting machines made by Chicago-based AutoMark that allow voters with disabilities and other special needs to cast ballots without assistance, in private and leaving a paper trail. Should the test prove successful, people with major disabilities will find voting an easier task.

The machine marked a traditional optical-scan ballot and then returned it to Wangeman, who deposited the ballot into the collection machine just like everybody else.

The pilot project was spurred by requirements of the Help America Vote Act, passed by Congress in 2002. It mandates that all polling places be equipped with at least one disability-accessible voting machine by the 2006 federal elections.

Arizona Secretary of State Jan Brewer said she didn't know how many disabled people will be using the machines by then. Six polling locations in Arizona had the machines: four in Maricopa County, one in Cochise County and one in Graham County.

Wangeman can't walk or talk due to cerebral palsy and being deprived of oxygen at birth. He uses a power wheelchair, and he communicates using a head pointer to point at letters and words on a letterboard on his wheelchair's lap tray.

Wangeman, with his wife, Tanya, and son, Elijah, wheeled into his polling place in northwest Phoenix. He used his head pointer, mounted on a bicycle helmet, to cast his ballot on a touch screen.

"For the first time, I would say it was pretty cool," he said of his independent voting experience.

Wangeman, a member of the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, wants to help improve the voting experience for future disabled voters. The touch screen was too sensitive, he said.

During his vote, options would appear on the screen. Once Wangeman touched his choice with his head pointer, he had the option of going to the next race or returning to change his vote.

"I had to keep going back because I was scared that I missed something," he said. "It would make sense for the manufacturer to include a dwell feature," which would require holding his pointer on his choice for a short period before it would register.

An advocate for the disabled, Wangeman said people with disabilities are often marginalized and viewed as having to be taken care of. When voting in the past, Wangeman said, he is certain that some people questioned whether he was truly voting or his assistant was making the choices.

"So it is very important to me, as well as the greater disability community, to show the world that I am the one who is making the choices myself," he said.

For most of the 21 years he has been voting, Wangeman couldn't get into the polling places where his neighbors voted. "I really think it is important for people with disabilities to get out and vote because so many politicians stake people with disabilities for granted," he said.

Brewer said 10 to 12 people in each of the six precincts participated in the pilot program.

The machines have Braille markings and audio.

The state will analyze how the machines worked so it can prepare for the 2006 election, Brewer said.