

# Our Homes, Our Votes

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## A GUIDE TO VOTER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES FOR NONPROFIT HOUSING PROVIDERS AND RESIDENT ORGANIZATIONS

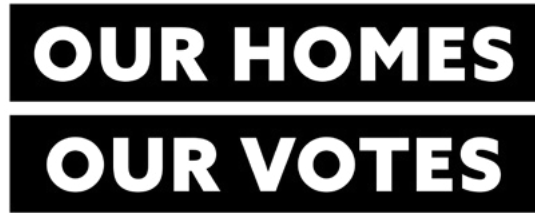
By Joey Lindstrom, Director for Field Organizing, NLIHC

**O**ur Homes, Our Votes is NLIHC's effort to expand election engagement work conducted by community organizations dedicated to expanding affordable housing. This guide is designed to help advocates through the steps of planning your agency's election engagement work. The materials presented here offer resources for organizations seeking to engage traditionally underrepresented people in the civic process. Be sure to visit [www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org](http://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org) for the most updated materials and announcements.

The *Our Homes, Our Votes* Guide provides an overview of the steps necessary to implement a campaign to integrate election engagement work without overtaxing staff or resources and while staying within legal guidelines for nonprofits. This document outlines strategies to engage with voters, your networks and partners, and candidates in the three phases of election engagement – voter registration, education, and mobilization.

The *Our Homes, Our Votes* website includes a complementary set of resources, including an interactive election engagement plan that presents a menu of election activities for your group to consider. Your organization may or may not be able to undertake all the suggested activities, so plan according to available resources. If this is your first election engagement project, remember to think long-term. It is usually best to start small and build your project over several election cycles.

Please contact NLIHC for support and information sharing if you are conducting a voter engagement effort so that we can provide assistance, connect you with helpful resources, and/or spotlight your election-related work on



BECAUSE HOUSING IS BUILT WITH BALLOTS



our blog or in other NLIHC publications such as *Tenant Talk*. Call NLIHC's Field Team at 202-662-1530, or email us at [outreach@nlihc.org](mailto:outreach@nlihc.org).

### WHY ENGAGE IN ELECTION WORK?

Raising housing on the national agenda will happen only when candidates for elected office understand that the issue of affordable housing is important to voters. At the same time, it is vital that low-income voters understand how the decisions made by federal elected officials directly affect their lives, know how to register to vote, and know how to get to the polls on Election Day.

Census data confirm that low-income voters are registered and vote at lower rates than high-income citizens. While 88% of people with incomes over \$150,000 were registered to vote in 2020 and 85% voted, just 66% of people with incomes below \$30,000 were registered, and only 56% actually voted (U.S. Census Bureau. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2020*, April 2021).

Low-income people face several challenges to voting, such as less-flexible work schedules that may not allow time off to vote, more difficulty obtaining legal identification, transportation impediments that may make getting to the polls more difficult, and a greater likelihood of having been given misinformation about their rights as

voters. People experiencing homelessness, ex-offenders, and survivors of a natural disaster may face especially tough barriers to voting.

Nonprofit organizations, which benefit from close ties with their clients, are a natural fit in helping people overcome these challenges. Among the many benefits of election engagement:

- Residents engage in civic life and learn how decisions of elected officials affect their lives.
- The issue of homelessness and housing scarcity is elevated in public debate.
- Elected officials become educated on low-income housing issues and on how their decisions affect residents.
- Influential relationships are built with elected officials.
- Impacted people can develop leadership skills.
- Positive press is earned for the program or project.

## PLANNING ELECTION WORK

Nonprofit organizations can, and should, engage in nonpartisan election-related activity, including voter registration, education, and mobilization.

To help determine a course for election activities, consider engagement with three audiences: voters, networks and partners, and candidates. Depending on your audience, resources, and timeline, you can assess how best to focus your efforts. If you plan to conduct voter engagement, you will want to think of your work in parts – registration, education, and mobilization.

Organizations should be mindful of legal considerations and organizational capacity when exploring election engagement work and deciding where to focus their attention. For example, in designing a plan for engagement, organizations should assess and familiarize themselves with community needs, time constraints, staff and volunteer time, available funding, and potential partnerships.

An important first step is understanding legal parameters for nonprofit engagement

in nonpartisan election-related activities and identifying any local guidelines on voter engagement. Your local board of elections, secretary of state, or county clerk's office can offer guidance on important voter engagement details and deadlines specific to your locality.

### Legally Speaking

In approaching voter engagement activities, nonprofit organizations should become familiar with legal parameters concerning election work. The basic rule is that 501(c)(3) organizations cannot in any way support or oppose candidates or political parties. 501(c)(3) organizations can register and educate voters, engage with candidates on issues, host election-related public events, and get voters to the polls. While 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations cannot endorse candidates, they can endorse ballot initiatives that fit within the organization's mission. Engagement on ballot initiatives is thought of as lobbying on a bill, but with the voters acting as the legislators. Finally, if any staff member engages in partisan political activities, they must do so without representing the organization or using organizational resources. For detailed legal guidance, you may want to consult:

Nonprofit VOTE, [www.nonprofitvote.org](http://www.nonprofitvote.org)

- Specifically, Nonprofit VOTE's factsheets, templates, and webinar series can be a great starting point when planning election engagement.

Bolder Advocacy, [www.bolderadvocacy.org](http://www.bolderadvocacy.org).

- Through their Bolder Advocacy campaign, Alliance for Justice (AFJ) works to ensure that nonprofit groups are up to date on rules governing campaign involvement. Review their materials and sign up for upcoming webinars at [www.bolderadvocacy.org](http://www.bolderadvocacy.org).

League of Women Voters, [www.vote411.org](http://www.vote411.org).

- The League offers Vote411.org, an online resource providing nonpartisan information to the public, with both general and state-specific information on all aspects of the election process. An

important component of Vote411.org is the polling place locator, which enables users to type in their address and retrieve the polling location for the voting precinct in which that address is located.

Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, [www.brennancenter.org](http://www.brennancenter.org)

- The Brennan Center for Justice understands that voting is the foundation of our democracy. They fight to preserve and expand the right to vote for every eligible citizen. Through practical policy proposals, litigation, advocacy, and communications, the Brennan Center works to make sure that voting is free, fair, and accessible for all Americans. They track and publish analyses of voting rights policies in every state legislature across the country.

Fair Elections Center, [www.fairelectionscenter.org](http://www.fairelectionscenter.org)

- Fair Elections Center is a national, nonpartisan voting rights, legal support and election reform organization whose mission is to remove barriers to registration and voting for traditionally underrepresented constituencies. Fair Elections Center works to improve overall election administration through reforms. They also provide legal and technical assistance to voter mobilization organizations. Their state-specific resources include information on voter registration deadlines, ID requirements for voting, and how to vote early or by mail in any state. For more information, visit: [www.fairelectionsnetwork.com](http://www.fairelectionsnetwork.com).

HUD, [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov).

- Public housing agencies are often under the impression that they are not able to register residents to vote. That is not the case; in fact, HUD issued a Notice (FR-3968-N-01) in 1996 that encouraged housing agencies, Indian housing authorities, and resident management

companies to become involved in voter registration activities.

Organizations with specific types of federal funding might have additional limitations on electoral engagement. After consulting the above resources, organizations with additional legal questions are encouraged to contact an attorney who specializes in election law. It is important to remember that 501(c)(3) organizations cannot consult with campaign staff or political parties, even on simple technical questions.

### **Get to Know Your Local Election Officials**

It is important to establish relationships with your local election officials. Your local board of elections or county clerk's office can be a wealth of information as you plan to register low-income renters to vote. Because voter registration specifics differ by state, you will want to check with your local officials about voting options (mail-in, absentee, early, and in-person) and important deadlines for the general election in your state. You will also want to inquire about identification requirements for registration and voting. Ask whether anyone can register voters in your state or whether a person must first become deputized or meet other requirements.

If you are planning on voter engagement, you can request the voter rolls for your community so you will know who in your target audience is already registered. There may be a small charge for this, but you can use this list to determine which of your residents and clients are already registered and which need to change their official voting address. Request enough voter registration forms to meet your registration goals.

In many places, the role of the board of elections will be conducted out of the office of the county or city clerk. Please contact NLIHC if you need help determining who is the best local authority for your organization.

### **Consider Resources**

Whether simple or expansive, all voter engagement projects will include some investment of resources. You should assess your existing resources to determine the scope

of your election involvement. Once you know what you would like to accomplish, plan out how to maximize staff and volunteer capacity. Delegate tasks to ensure that everyone has a role in realizing your election goals. There may be opportunities to leverage partnerships or bolster ongoing efforts. Other organizations may have resources that your organization can access. Student groups may be interested in registering voters as part of a community service project or a civic group may already be providing rides to the polls and could include your clients in its plans. Remember to partner only with nonpartisan organizations.

In allocating resources, identify potential funding sources for your project or in-kind donations. Funding will potentially cover things like voter databases, supplies, transportation, training, and events. Other organizations may have resources that your organization can access such as meeting space, access to volunteers, or machines for printing materials. Take time to gather information on existing election efforts and identifying critical gaps where you could plug in.

## **VOTER ENGAGEMENT: BEFORE YOU START**

Once you understand local voter registration guidelines, you can begin preparing for outreach efforts. You will want to prepare in several ways:

### **Set Goals**

Setting goals for voter registration, education, and mobilization can be an important part of your plan. The staff and volunteers involved in the project will have something to work toward and you will have a way to evaluate your project after the election. In setting goals for voter registration consider the percentage of your clients you would like to engage and if you will also register community members, beyond those served by your programs. When determining the pace at which you need to register voters, consider the amount of time remaining prior to registration deadlines. You will also want to ensure that staff or volunteers conducting registration meet local requirements and have been adequately trained. The *Our Homes, Our Votes* Engagement Plan,

which can be found online at [www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/additional-resources](http://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/additional-resources), provides a framework for setting these goals.

### **Consider Early Vote and Absentee Ballots**

In planning voter registration activities, consider opportunities for early voting and absentee voting, if available in your state. Consider facilitating these options for the people your organization serves. Again, your local Board of Elections can share information on restrictions and requirements in your state. People with low incomes often have more rigid work hours, limited transportation options, and challenging childcare responsibilities. Because so many people will have already cast their votes, early voting usually provides for much shorter lines both at the early voting site and at the polls on Election Day. Long lines are a barrier to voting, and they are more common in voting precincts that are predominantly populated by people of color. Voting early also allows voters more time to address potential registration errors, discrepancies for voters who have recently moved, or additional time for voters that do not have the correct documentation to acquire them.

Much like voter mobilization on Election Day, early voting requires an effective campaign for it to have the highest impact. You may have to explain early voting to new voters, especially because early voting sites may differ from Election Day polling locations. For early voting, consider coordinating rides to early voting sites or holding ballot parties where voters gather to go and vote as a group, perhaps after a discussion of affordable housing issues. Where it is allowed, you might also want to send volunteers to gather early voting ballots and submit them to your local clerk's office.

Another potential voting option is absentee voting. Absentee ballots can be requested by residents in all states who are unable to get to the polls on Election Day. In some states, there is no reason required for absentee voting and all voters have the option to vote by absentee ballot or to vote before Election Day. Providing your clients with absentee ballot request forms or

helping them to take advantage of early voting, if available, is a great way to increase voter turnout. Voting by absentee ballots generally involves two steps. First, voters fill out forms requesting their ballots. Once they receive their ballots, voters fill them out and return them.

### **Offer Registration Trainings**

Residents and staff who plan to register voters will often benefit from receiving training on the process. You may want to bring in someone from the local board of elections or county clerk's office who can explain the state's registration requirements and how voter registration forms must be filled out. It can also help to spend a bit of time role-playing so that people who are registering voters are not discouraged when confronted with apathy.

### **Keep Records**

It is crucial to have a plan for how you will keep a record of who you have registered to vote, as well as who is already registered, so that you will be able to contact these people as part of mobilization activities. You will be able to compile a list of residents who are already registered from the voter rolls maintained by local board of elections or county clerk.

For new registrants, there are two ways to collect this information. One easy way, if allowed by the laws in your state, is to collect voter registration forms from new registrants, then photocopy the forms before submitting. Note that some states require forms to be returned within a specific number of days after they have been completed. This also allows you to review and catch mistakes before a form is submitted. You may also ask registrants to fill out two-part pledge cards. They will keep the half of the card that reminds them of their pledge to vote and you will keep the half with their contact information.

Once you have collected voters' information, it is important to enter it into a database so the data can be easily accessed for mobilization purposes.

## **REGISTERING VOTERS**

Once you know the voting guidelines for your state, have set registration goals for your agency, and provided trainings, you are ready to begin registering voters. In registering low-income voters, you may be faced with voter apathy and frustration. To overcome these challenges, use positive messaging, turn frustrations into a reason to vote, and remind renters that they have something at stake. There have been numerous studies that indicate low-income people are more likely to register to vote and turnout on Election Day if they are engaged with a positive message. Remind low-income renters that their vote is about a new future for their neighborhood, community, or family. If you encounter frustrated voters, pivot to discuss solutions to the problems they are describing.

There are several ways, that vary in the level of involvement required, to approach voter registration.

### **Fit Voter Registration into Your Agency's Regular Contact with Residents**

The first option is to incorporate registration into day-to-day activities that already take place at your agency. Registration can usually be incorporated with few resources and little hassle into the intake process, training sessions, tenant association meetings, and social events.

### **Plan Specific Voter Registration Activities**

A second way to think about registration at your agency is to plan special registration activities or campaigns. Many organizations have had success holding social or other events at which residents are encouraged to register to vote. Consider hosting an event for National Voter Registration Day, September 20, 2022.

### **Organize a Door-To-Door Campaign**

The third and most effective way for larger organizations to systematically register clients is through a door-to-door campaign. If your agency is a housing provider or a resident council, such a campaign can be especially effective. In particular, resident leaders can volunteer to receive training and serve as 'building

captains’ or ‘floor captains.’ Captains can take on responsibility for registering, keeping registration records, and then turning out the people in their building or on their floor, etc. Such a system can be a great way to get residents or clients involved while ensuring that staff does not become overwhelmed with additional responsibilities. The key is to have personal and organized contact with potential voters by people they know or trust. Especially in this type of campaign, you will want to use the voter list from your county to see who in your buildings is already registered or whose registration needs updating. Also, consider offering public recognition to those who register the most voters or highest percentage in their area.

### **Go into the Community**

Finally, especially if you have a smaller membership or client base, you may also want to think about having your volunteers reach out into the community to register other low-income, homeless, or underrepresented people. Consider staffing voter registration and information tables at community events. Also, make sure to promote your voter registration efforts through your website and other social media platforms. Do not forget to make sure that everyone on the staff and board is also registered!

## **EDUCATING VOTERS**

Once voters are registered, they need to be familiar with voting logistics, their rights as voters, and candidate positions on issues.

### **Educate Renters on Voting Logistics**

The date of the election, options for early voting, the hours that polls are open, and the polling locations are all basic elements to voting successfully. These logistics are easy to overlook but remember that many potential voters might be new to voting and need to be reminded. Clients should be informed of options for early or mail-in voting, where their polling place is, and what documentation they will need to have with them to vote. Many states have new requirements for showing identification during the registration process or at the voting booth. The League of

Women Voters has updated information about the rules in each state at [www.Vote411.org](http://www.Vote411.org). This resource also includes a polling place lookup tool where voters can find the address and hours of their polling location.

You can obtain sample ballots from your board of elections or county clerk’s office and distribute to residents. This is especially helpful if you are working with many first-time voters. Arranging for local election officials to demonstrate how voting machines work can be helpful in easing fears about voting for the first time. You may also want to coordinate with a group like the Election Protection coalition, a national, nonpartisan coalition that provides a range of tools and activities with comprehensive information on all stages of voting. This organization also hosts the election protection hotline. More information can be found at: [www.866ourvote.org](http://www.866ourvote.org).

### **Educate Renters on Their Rights as Voters**

It is also critical that voters are aware of their rights because many misinformation campaigns are designed to intentionally confuse people with limited resources. Producing a “What to Bring with You” sheet for voters can be helpful. This sheet should include the voter protection hotline 866-OUR-VOTE for voters to call if they are facing voter intimidation or if their vote is being challenged.

There are also common misconceptions that are important to address. Firstly, **all** registered voters should know that all voters who show up to the polls should cast a ballot. If voters are in line at the time the polls close, they must be allowed to vote. Encourage voters to bring a charged phone, water, or snacks to ensure they are prepared to wait in line.

If there is a question about any person’s identification or residency in the ward where they are voting that voter should cast a provisional ballot that will be counted after the initial run of results. Provisional ballots should always be completed, especially as protection from “voter caging.” Voter caging is defined by The Brennan Center as, “the practice of sending mail to addresses on the voter rolls, compiling a list of

the mail that is returned undelivered, and using that list to purge or challenge voters' registrations on the grounds that the voters on the list do not legally reside at their registered addresses." This practice largely targets low-income renters as they change addresses at higher rates than homeowners.

People who are experiencing homelessness, including those who do not reside in a shelter, still have the right to vote. In most cases, the address is really needed to determine what districts a voter should be voting in for local office or state legislature. Different states approach this in different ways, so this is another instance where getting more information from your local board of elections or county clerk is a best practice. The National Coalition for the Homeless' "You Don't Need A Home to Vote" voting rights campaign seeks to protect and promote the rights of homeless people to vote. It offers materials on all aspects of a voter engagement campaign, including specific, state-by-state information on the legal issues affecting the rights of people experiencing homelessness to vote. Find the campaign at [www.nationalhomeless.org/campaigns/voting](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/campaigns/voting). NLIHC also produced state-by-state voter information pages that include state requirements for voting without an address, which can be found at [www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/voterinformationbystate](http://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/voterinformationbystate).

Another common misconception is that people who have been convicted of a felony are permanently barred from voting. This is only true in the states of Kentucky and Virginia. In most states, people who have been incarcerated have their voting rights restored when their sentence is completed or when they are released. In the states of Vermont and Maine, people convicted of felonies never lose the right to vote and can vote while incarcerated. For a state-by-state breakdown of these voting rights, see the map on felony disenfranchisement that the ACLU maintains at [www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/voter-restoration/felony-disenfranchisement-laws-map](http://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/voter-restoration/felony-disenfranchisement-laws-map).

## Educate Renters on the Issues

It is important you provide voters with opportunities to hear from candidates. You can organize events that clarify who your community's elected officials are and the connection between what those officials do and the lives of renters. One potential example is hosting a debate watch party to bring voters together to hear candidate perspectives and discuss the issues. If candidates are participating in events, consider encouraging voters to attend, raise concerns, and ask questions. The *Our Homes, Our Votes* toolkit includes example questions and tips for getting questions heard by candidates.

## Strategies for Voter Education

Nonprofits can use a variety of strategies to assist low-income voters in becoming familiar with upcoming election information, campaign issues, and candidates. You can disseminate information through both printed and digital media. Displaying information such as posters, flyers, and bulletins at your organization or within your community can help raise the visibility of the upcoming election. You may also want to send out regular newsletters and mailings with relevant information. Creating and sharing information through social media or email can help expand your reach and allows voters to share information more widely with their networks.

One strategy is to create voter guides to share with voters. Voter guides seek to provide voters with general information on Election Day details, voters' rights, and each of the candidates. For a sample voter guide, visit [www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/additional-resources](http://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/additional-resources).

## MOBILIZING VOTERS

Your voter mobilization, or Get Out the Vote (GOTV) plan, can be the most important and rewarding piece of your project. Just registering voters is not enough; it has been consistently shown that voters are much more likely to go to the polls if they are contacted on several occasions and reminded to vote by someone they trust. Further, once someone has voted,

they are more likely to vote in future elections. Considerable attention should be paid to mobilizing the people you have registered.

### **Aim for at Least Three Contacts with Each Registered Voter**

If possible, contact each potential voter three times between the day they register and Election Day: a few weeks before the election, a few days before the election, and at least once on Election Day. On Election Day, you may want to contact voters until they have affirmed that they have voted. For example, if someone tells you at noon that they have not yet had a chance to vote, call back at 4:00pm to see whether they have been able to get to their local polling location.

You can also coordinate transportation or childcare services to reduce potential barriers to voting. Make sure to coordinate rides for voters so that they can get to the polls; offering a ride is not offering an illegal incentive to vote, though some states are changing these rules, and you should be sure to check with election officials. Recruit volunteers, or perhaps fundraise to rent vans for Election Day so that low-income residents with disabilities or mobility concerns can access the polls. Volunteers can also provide childcare at subsidized properties for residents who need flexibility to get to polls and cast their ballot.

You should make sure that the voter commits to voting, knows when Election Day is, and knows where the polling place is. One strategy is to ask voters to fill out a voter pledge card where they commit to voting and identify a date and polling location. When a voter envisions their steps to vote, they are more likely to act on that plan. Asking voters to express this plan can also allow organizers to verify the polling location and hours with the voter and learn if there are transportation issues that need to be addressed. A sample fillable voter pledge card can be found on the *Our Homes, Our Votes* website at [www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/additional-resources](http://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/additional-resources). Ideally, contacts should be made in person through a knock at the door, but phone calls, emails, and postcards can also work. Not everyone will be home when your canvassers

visit, so you may want to create a pre-printed note that can be left on people's doors on Election Day.

Recruit volunteers from staff, residents, or community members and assign them to assist in making GOTV contacts. If you have had building or floor captains who have been in regular contact with their voters, they should conduct these mobilization activities to the greatest extent possible. They can also support group voting. Many voters are more likely to make it to the polls if they are joined by their neighbors. Resident councils and other low-income peer organizing efforts should consider selecting times when groups of residents can walk or ride to the polls altogether, making it a community activity.

Again, it is personal contact from a known and trusted partner or neighbor that will make an impact. Research shows that nonprofit agencies can have an impact on voter turnout in their communities by incorporating engagement efforts such as active tabling and voter pledge cards, which have shown to increase the turnout of low propensity voters by 29%. See *Engaging New Voters: The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach on Client and Community Turnout* for further reading.

### **Work the Polls**

In addition to recruiting volunteers for your Election Day GOTV efforts, you may also want to encourage other residents to sign up with the county as poll workers. This provides an additional, and often paid, way for low-income renters to participate in the election process.

### **Host a Polling Location**

Some nonprofits or housing providers have increased their turnout rates by asking the county to use their organization's location as a polling place. It is much easier to vote when you only need to go to the lobby! This arrangement also offers community members an opportunity to visit your agency.

### **Protect the Right to Vote**

Nonprofits can play an important role in making sure that people's rights are protected when



they get to the polls. You may want to designate leaders in your voter engagement effort to be poll watchers who spend their day at the polls to record and report instances of voter harassment or unlawful suppression. Poll watchers can help identify potential issues in your community and can also be on call on Election Day if anyone experiences problems voting.

## **NETWORK AND PARTNER ENGAGEMENT**

The strongest election engagement exists in the context of other efforts taking place throughout the community. Your election engagement should work to bolster overall impact with voters and reduce unnecessary duplication of work. Begin by surveying your existing partners to learn about their plans for election engagement, or their willingness to support efforts your organization is leading.

Consider formalizing a coalition devoted to increasing voter participation among low-income renters, people experiencing homelessness, and other underrepresented communities. A coalition can bring a greater diversity of resources, volunteers, and audiences into your efforts. Some of the benefits of an election engagement include the following:

- Social media – Have your messages about the election, issues, and candidates seen by more people by cross-posting with other organizations.
- Spotlights – By featuring the efforts of key partners on your website in your newsletter, you can direct your members, renters, or clients to other resources that might be beyond your capacity to provide such as attending a candidate forum or accessing rides to the polls.
- Website – Joining with other community organizations to house all relevant and important election information on one website can prevent confusion and provide greater clarity.
- Pooling volunteers – Different coalition partners will have varying support from

volunteers willing to help with the election. Sharing volunteers across coalition partners can maximize impact.

- Calendar for engagement efforts and events – A calendar can provide crucial guidance for collaboration within a coalition. For example, it's never wise for two different organizations to knock on the same doors on the same afternoon or to host two competing "Know Your Rights" seminars simultaneously. A calendar can help to prevent overlap.

## **CANDIDATE ENGAGEMENT**

Engaging with candidates during the election cycle can be important to communicating your affordable housing priorities and laying the groundwork for future relationships with newly elected officials. Raising housing on the political agenda will happen only when candidates for elected office understand that the issue of affordable housing is important to voters, so it is important to educate and engage candidates early and often. Candidate engagement can take many forms: candidate forums, town hall meetings, candidate surveys, and candidate fact sheets. There are also opportunities to invite candidates to interact with residents or community members through meetings and site visits.

### **Educate Candidates**

Election engagement can help educate candidates on affordable housing and raise the profile of your organization as a critical voice in their district. When educating candidates, it is important to stay nonpartisan and to not endorse, rank, rate, or score candidates. While your organization cannot criticize candidate statements, you can add perspective or correct misinformation. In engaging with candidates, you may also want to report the number of new voters your organization has been able to register to emphasize your commitment to election activities.

Asking candidates to fill out a questionnaire can be a way to learn more about their positions while making them aware of your organization and the issues that are important to renters.

Candidate questionnaires should go to all candidates, provide clear guidance, and give a reasonable amount of time for response. Once a questionnaire is completed, you can distribute to voters to help inform them of candidate positions. NLIHC produced a sample candidate questionnaire, which can be found in the *Our Homes, Our Votes* toolkit. Please contact NLIHC if you would like help putting together a candidate questionnaire that includes federal policy.

Candidates also learn what issues are important to voters by reading the letters to the editor page of the newspaper. Consider having impacted renters write letters about issues that are important to them; letters can often be published as a response to a story in which candidates have discussed poverty issues.

### **Host Candidate Events**

The best way to get candidates to acknowledge the importance of low-income renters as part of the electorate is to provide opportunities for them to interact with people who have lived experience in the housing crisis. A later section of the *Advocates Guide* will detail how housing providers can organize candidate events.

There are several types of candidate events – visits, forums, and town halls – that can be effective tools for candidate engagement. If you are inviting candidates to visit your organization, consider including a tour or provide a chance to hear directly from residents or clients. It can often be very powerful when candidates are asked about housing issues or homelessness in public forums or town hall meetings. While both public events allow candidates to have open discussion of topics and issues, forums tend to be more moderator-led discussions and town halls encourage larger audience participation. Hosting an effective candidate event requires sufficient planning time. You will want to ensure that both candidates and attendees know about the event in advance. To increase attendance, consider involving multiple groups in hosting the event and minimizing barriers to participation, like offering food, childcare services, or transportation.

In hosting events with candidates in attendance, be sure not to show support or endorsements. Candidates can visit your organization as public figures (elected officials or field experts), as a candidate, or of their own initiative. If a candidate is visiting your organization as a public official, there should be no mention of their candidacy, however, they can discuss their legislative accomplishments. It is also fully legal and acceptable for an elected official to receive an award from your organization for work on housing. If candidates are visiting as part of a campaign, then they should not be fundraising. An important best practice is to invite all candidates to events equally lest you be perceived as favoring one candidate.

## **CAPITALIZING ON YOUR PROJECT**

Once Election Day is over, take a few days to rest. You deserve it! Then, it is time to do a few things: celebrate your accomplishments and honor your volunteers. Evaluate your project and your results and plan what you will do differently in the next election cycle.

Next, set up appointments for elected officials to meet with the renters or clients you serve to discuss housing issues important to your organization and be prepared with statistics showing the increased voting rates in your community. Now that renters and staff have been energized by being involved in the election process, talk to them about who might be interested in running for local office themselves.

Most importantly, consider your voter engagement project to be an ongoing effort; continue to make registration, education, and mobilization a part of your agency's day-to-day activities.