

Housing Providers and Election Participation – Tips and Best Practices

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Renters care deeply about voting, but they face many institutional barriers to doing so successfully. One of the simplest barriers to address is the circumstance of changing addresses and updating voter registrations when moving into new properties. Moving more frequently than homeowners is one of the many reasons that renters are registered and turning out at lower rates. The disproportionate rate of voter participation among renters is at the core of why housing policy often skews toward wealthy homeowners.

Numerous owners and operators of rental housing are working to partner with their residents to increase election participation. In 2020, NLIHC joined with many partners to launch the Housing Providers Council of the *Our Homes, Our Votes* project. The Housing Providers Council is a network created to support affordable housing property managers and owners in their efforts to increase voter registration and turnout among their residents. By the November 2020 elections, the Housing Providers Council included 45 housing providers representing over 700,000 units of rental housing in 46 states and DC. A full list of participants is available at: <https://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/housing-providers-council>.

NLIHC provides technical support, voter registration lists, templates, peer spaces for sharing, and volunteers to help providers' engagement efforts come to fruition. While these efforts continue to grow, 2020 provided numerous insights that inform the following series of recommendations for other developers and property managers to follow when engaging renters in the political process.

1. Research relevant election laws!

Before planning and implementing any voter engagement efforts, developers

and housing providers should research voter regulations. Each state has different rules for registering voters, early voting, absentee voting, voting in person, hosting a polling location, and transporting voters to the polls. NLIHC has basic guidance available at <https://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/voterinformationbystate>. Each state's board of elections or secretary of state's office website will be the best resource for a comprehensive list of election rules.

2. Build engagement efforts into ongoing programs and services already being offered.

It can be simple to provide voter registration opportunities in everyday functions of resident services. For example, adding registration forms to a welcome packet for new residents is a great way to prompt residents to update their registration status. This can also be part of a checklist for annual recertification for renters in subsidized properties. During the coronavirus pandemic, residential services coordinators (RSCs) at many properties called tenants on a weekly or monthly basis to make sure they were doing well and had necessary medical and other supports; voter registration and absentee updates should be part of these check-in calls.

3. Establish partnerships with external organizations to add capacity.

Property managers, developers, RSCs and other property staff are often stretched over too many tasks and struggling with capacity. Asking them to take on voter registration of residents as one more role can seem impossible. One way to decrease staff burden is by coordinating voter engagement activities with external partners such as the local League of

Women Voters. External partners can help by providing voter guides, staffing voter registration tables, or going door-to-door to provide information about election day voting options.

4. Coordinate with tenant associations.

Many developers partnered with tenant associations as part of their 2020 voter engagement efforts. At many properties, tenant leaders coordinate rides to the polls for residents or organize groups walks to nearby polling locations. Tenants' associations can be a trusted voice to provide trainings on civic responsibilities, including voting, and information on how to vote. These updates and trainings can be paired with other tenant events such as barbecues, social events, or volunteer and food drives at the property. Tenant associations and housing providers are sometimes opposed to one another, but increasing tenant participation in elections is an activity where partnership is in the best interest of everyone.

5. Utilize the space you have!

One benefit of having a multifamily residential property at one's disposal is the space! Meeting rooms and common areas can be utilized when organizing voter engagement efforts. Sometimes just having a physical presence and the needed forms is a great reminder for tenants to engage in the civic process. When social gatherings are considered safe again, many housing providers and tenant associations should resume organizing candidate forums with various officials running for local office. Bringing the candidates face-to-face with renters gives the residents a chance to share their concerns, and for the candidates to see the impact affordable housing makes on people's lives.

6. Be the polls. Available community rooms and meeting spaces can easily be turned into polling locations on Election Day. Housing providers should consider registering properties as polling locations.

The first step is to connect with the local board of elections or county clerk to begin the process. Low-income renters will have better turnout if they only have to go to the first floor to vote!

7. Get visual.

Displaying visuals throughout a property is a great way to provide simple reminders to residents about the voting process. Posters don't have to be the only visuals displayed. *Our Homes, Our Votes* provides templates for door hangers, flyers, and posters to housing providers and other organizations to aid in distributing information like polling locations, early voting dates, registration deadlines, etc. Keeping visuals simple and straight forward is a great way to get the message across to people with language and communication barriers.

8. Track the data.

Utilizing voter records is a great way to pinpoint voter and registration outreach and measure success. This information is publicly available and can be obtained for a small fee. Voter lists were provided to housing providers that signed on the Housing Developers Counsel and these lists were utilized in the weeks leading up to the elections to alert potential voters about their registration status and then again to remind them to vote. The records can also be obtained after the elections to determine the success of the outreach efforts. If the number of registered voters and actual voters increased from before the elections and previous years, then its easy to quantify the extent your efforts helped increase registration and voter turnout.

These best practices will guide housing providers working to increase democratic participation and full community engagement among residents. Housing providers can play a key role in addressing low voter turnout among renters, which could lead to the passage of policies that adequately address the shortage of affordable housing and end homelessness.