

Our Homes, Our Votes: A Guide to Voter Engagement Activities for Nonprofit Housing Providers and Resident Organizations

By Joey Lindstrom, Manager for Field
Organizing, National Low Income Housing
Coalition

Our Homes, Our Votes is NLIHC's effort to expand voter engagement work conducted by community organizations dedicated to expanding affordable housing. This guide is designed to help you through the steps of planning your agency's voter engagement work. These materials offer resources for organizations seeking to engage traditionally underrepresented people in the civic process. Beyond this guide, NLIHC will offer trainings and additional tools through the 2018 election. Be sure to visit nlihc.org/library/voter-engagement for the most updated materials and announcements.

This voter engagement plan provides all of the steps you need to implement a campaign to integrate registration, education, mobilization, and voter protection without overtaxing your staff or resources, while staying within legal guidelines for nonprofits. Our plan presents a menu of activities for your group to consider. Your organization may or may not be able to undertake all of the suggested activities; plan according to available resources. If this is your first voter engagement project, remember to think long-term. It is usually best to start small and build your project over several election cycles.

Please let us know if you are conducting a voter engagement effort so that we can provide assistance, connect you with helpful resources, and spotlight your election-related work on 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.

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 higher income citizens. While 85% of people with incomes over \$100,000 were registered to vote in 2016 and 74% voted, just 60% of people with incomes below \$20,000 were registered, and only 38% actually voted. (U.S. Census Bureau. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2016*. May 2017.)

People in low income communities 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 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 members, are a natural fit in helping people overcome these challenges. Nonprofits that have implemented voter engagement projects have identified several benefits of doing so:

- 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.
- Residents develop leadership skills.
- Assists residents in meeting community service requirements, if applicable.
- Press is earned for the program or project.

LEGALLY SPEAKING

Nonprofit organizations can, and should, engage in nonpartisan election-related activity, including voter registration, education, and mobilization. The basic rule is that 501(c)(3) organizations cannot in any way support or oppose particular candidates. For detailed legal guidance, you may want to consult:

- **Nonprofit VOTE**, www.nonprofitvote.org
Specifically, read their comprehensive legal guide on what nonprofits can and cannot do: *Nonprofits, Voting & Elections*.
- **Alliance for Justice**, www.afj.org
Through their Bolder Advocacy campaign, AFJ works to ensure nonprofit groups are up to date on rules governing campaign involvement. Review their materials and sign up for upcoming webinars at www.bolderadvocacy.org
- **League of Women Voters**, 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 This site 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.
- **HUD**, 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 legal questions related to their voter engagement projects after consulting the above resources 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.

REGISTERING VOTERS: BEFORE YOU START

Before your organization begins to register voters, you will want to prepare in several ways:

Set Goals

Setting goals for both registration and mobilization can be an important part of your plan. The staff and volunteers involved in the project will have something to work towards, and you will have a way to evaluate your project after the election. The plan provides a framework for setting these goals.

Get to Know Your Local Board of Elections

Your local Board of Elections can be a wealth of information as you plan to register low income renters to vote. You will want to check in with them to learn the registration deadline for the general election in your state. Ask whether anyone can register voters in your state, or whether a person must first become deputized or meet other requirements. Request the voter rolls for your community, so you will know who in your target audience is already registered. Learn about identification requirements for registration and voting. 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 the best local authority is for your organization.

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 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. It is also helpful to practice voter registration updates for renters who have recently moved.

Consider Resources

Whether simple or more involved, all voter engagement projects will involve some investment of resources. Once you know what you would like to accomplish, you should consider potential funding sources for your project, and how you might work with other organizations to maximize resources.

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.

REGISTERING VOTERS

Once you know the voting guidelines for your state and have set registration goals for your agency, you are ready to begin registering voters. As described in the sample plan, there are four ways to approach voter registration.

1. 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, resident association meetings, and any other meetings of clients.

2. 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 on September 25, 2018.

3. 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, all of 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. Voter lists may cost a small fee, but they are essential for tracking who is already registered.

4. 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. And do not forget to make sure everyone on the staff and board is registered!

KEEPING 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 your mobilization activities. You will be able to compile a list of which of your residents are already registered from the voter rolls you acquire from your local Board of Elections.

Collect Information

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 mailing them in. (Note: 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; you will keep the half with their contact information.

Enter the Information into a Database

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.

EDUCATING CLIENTS AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

There can be as many as three components to the education piece of your plan.

Educate Low Income Renters on Voting and Their Rights as Voters

Clients should be informed of where their polling place is, what documentation they will need to

have with them in order to vote, and their rights if election officials attempt to prevent them from voting. Arranging for local election officials to demonstrate how voting machines work can be helpful in easing fears about voting for the first time.

The National Coalition for the Homeless' *You Don't Need A Home to Vote* Voting Rights Campaign seeks to protect and promote the right 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

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.

Educate Your Network and Clients on the Issues

Nonprofits can best assist low income voters in becoming familiar with the issues by providing opportunities for people to hear the direct views of candidates. Distribution of candidate questionnaires, hosting debate watch parties, or holding candidate forums are examples of such opportunities. It can often be very powerful when candidates are asked about housing issues or homelessness in public forums or town hall meetings. Please contact NLIHC if you would like help putting together a candidate questionnaire that includes federal policy. This is an activity in which you must be especially vigilant about ensuring that your agency follows IRS requirements. Please refer to the guide *Nonprofits, Voting & Elections* before you send questionnaires to your candidates or invite candidates to speak to clients.

Educate Candidates

Asking candidates to fill out a questionnaire or inviting them to your agency can be a way to learn more about them while making them aware of your organization and the issues that are important to renters. You may also want to report the number of new voters your organization has been able to register. Candidates also learn what issues are important to voters by reading the letters to the editor page of the newspaper. Consider

having clients 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.

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, he or she is 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 she registers and Election Day: once a few weeks before the election, once 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 she has not yet had a chance to vote, call back at 4pm to see whether she has been able to get to her local polling location. 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. Use your database of registered voters to make your contacts.

Over the course of your contacts, you should make sure that the voter commits to voting, knows when Election Day is, and knows where her polling place is. Ideally these contacts should be 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, whether staff, residents, or community members, 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.

Again, it is personal contact from someone residents know or trust that will make an impact. Research shows 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%. *Engaging New Voters: The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach on Client and Community Turnout*. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.nonprofitvote.org/engaging-new-voters>.

Consider Early Vote and Absentee Ballots

Early voting, if available in your state, and absentee voting can each facilitate voting by the people your agency serves. Again, your local Board of Elections can provide information on laws in your state. For early voting, consider 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.

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 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.

Protecting 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.

Capitalizing On Your Project

Once Election Day is over, take a few days to rest. You deserve it! Then, it's 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 next year.

Next, set up appointments for elected officials to meet with renters or clients you serve to discuss housing issues important to your organization; 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.