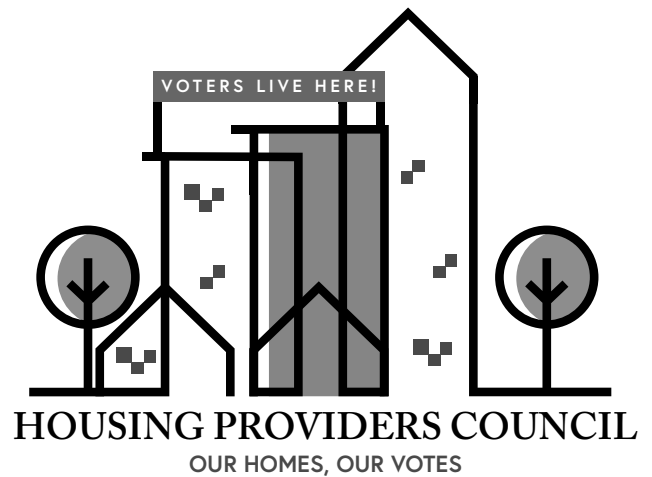


Housing Providers and Nonpartisan Voter Engagement

By Courtney Cooperman, Project Manager of Our Homes, Our Votes Initiative, NLIHC

Low-income renters face many structural barriers to casting their ballots and having their votes counted. When a voter moves into a new home, they must update their voter registration to reflect their current residential address. Because renters move more frequently than homeowners, they must update their voter registration more often. This additional hurdle contributes to the gaps in voter registration and turnout rates between renters and homeowners, and – alongside transportation barriers, less flexible work schedules, strict voter identification laws, language barriers, polling place closures, voter purges, and other restrictive voter laws – even greater disparities between low-income and high-income people. The underrepresentation of renters in the voting population is one reason why housing policy fails to meet the needs of the lowest-income renters and often skews toward wealthy homeowners.

Affordable housing providers are in a strong position to help their residents overcome these obstacles by offering accessible voter registration opportunities and getting out the vote. Many affordable housing developers and property managers, both for-profit and nonprofit, partner with their residents to increase election participation. Boosting voter turnout is a win-win for housing providers and residents. Making voting more accessible and creating a culture of civic engagement can strengthen the fabric of residential communities, ensure that residents have a voice in the democratic process, and even improve resident health and wellbeing. High voter turnout shows that residents of affordable housing are a powerful voting bloc, which galvanizes policymakers to pay greater attention to their concerns and prioritize funding for subsidized housing programs.



In 2020, NLIHC’s nonpartisan *Our Homes, Our Votes* campaign established the Housing Providers Council, a network of owners and operators of affordable housing that are committed to boosting civic participation among their residents. The Housing Providers Council meets regularly to discuss best practices in resident voter engagement, workshop voter outreach plans, and receive trainings from election experts on topics, including: using voter roll data to organize targeted voter registration campaigns, complying with the National Voter Registration Act, facilitating transportation to the polls, and resolving voter ID issues. More than 40 organizations are official members of the Housing Providers Council. A full list of participants is available at: <https://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/housing-providers-council>.

The efforts of the Housing Providers Council offer valuable lessons for affordable housing developers and property managers seeking to engage renters in the political process. Below are some best practices for housing providers to consider as they develop their nonpartisan voter outreach plans.

BEST PRACTICES FOR HOUSING PROVIDERS

1. **Research relevant election laws!** Before planning and implementing any voter

engagement efforts, housing providers should research state-level voting laws. Each state has different rules for conducting voter registration drives, hosting polling places or ballot drop boxes, transporting voters to the polls, and assisting with mail-in ballots. Voter registration deadlines, early voting and mail-in voting opportunities, and voter ID requirements also differ by state. Each state's Board of Elections or Secretary of State's office will offer the most comprehensive, up-to-date list of election rules.

2. **Build engagement efforts into ongoing programs and processes.** Resident services staff can integrate voter registration opportunities into their everyday activities and responsibilities. For example, adding registration forms to a welcome packet for new residents will encourage residents to update their registration when they move into the property. As a creative alternative to paper registration forms, housing providers may consider giveaways, such as refrigerator magnets, with QR codes that link to the state's election office website. Confirming that renters are registered to vote should also be included in checklists for annual income recertification in subsidized properties. Throughout the pandemic, residential services coordinators (RSCs) at many properties have called tenants on a weekly or monthly basis to make sure they are doing well and have necessary medical and other supports; voter registration and get out the vote reminders should be included in these check-in calls.
3. **Host special events and celebrate the act of voting.** Many housing providers offer voter registration tables at block parties, picnics, and other community events. Some providers host events for nonpartisan civic holidays, including National Voter Registration Day. Signing up as a civic holidays partner can increase the visibility of these efforts and even provide access to funding opportunities. Make sure that these events are widely publicized and accessible to all community members.

Successful events will have printed materials in multiple languages and onsite translation, which will encourage voter registration among new citizens whose primary language is not English.

4. **Contact residents directly.** Call, text, email, or have in-person conversations with residents in the leadup to Election Day. Confirm that residents are registered to vote at their current address and that they have a voting plan. Voters are more likely to cast their ballots when they have already determined when, where, and how they will vote. *Our Homes, Our Votes* offers template voter registration and mobilization scripts that housing providers can adapt for their calls. Another creative strategy to boost voter registration rates is to make birthday calls to residents when they turn 18 and remind them to register to vote.
5. **Establish partnerships with external organizations to add capacity.** Property managers, developers, RSCs and other property staff are often stretched thin and have limited capacity to register and mobilize voters. Asking staff to add voter engagement to their full plates can seem impossible. To decrease staff burden, housing providers should coordinate 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, going door-to-door to provide information about voting options, or organizing rides to the polls. Some providers also partner with local law schools to help residents resolve barriers to voting, such as voting rights restoration for formerly incarcerated residents.
6. **Coordinate with tenant associations.** Many developers partner with tenant associations as part of their voter engagement efforts. At many properties, tenant leaders coordinate rides to the polls for residents or organize group walks to nearby polling locations. Tenant associations are trusted messengers that can provide training on the logistics

of voting, promote civic engagement, and encourage first-time voters to cast their ballots. These updates and training can be paired with other tenant events such as barbecues, social events, or volunteer opportunities at the property. Although tenant associations and housing providers are sometimes in conflict, increasing tenant participation in elections is an activity where the best interests of tenants and providers align.

7. **Utilize community spaces for civic engagement.** One major asset of multifamily residential properties is the space. Meeting rooms and common areas can be used to host voter engagement activities. A centralized space for civic engagement where voter information is available is a powerful reminder for tenants to engage in the democratic process. Housing providers and tenant associations can also use community spaces to organize nonpartisan forums with candidates for local, state, and federal office. Bringing the candidates face-to-face with renters gives them a chance to share their concerns and ensures that the candidates see the impact of affordable housing on their voters' lives.
8. **Be the polls.** Community rooms and meeting spaces can easily be turned into polling locations on Election Day. Housing providers should consider applying to host polling locations or ballot drop boxes at their properties. To begin the process, reach out to the local Board of Elections or county clerk's office. Low-income renters are more likely to turn out if they only need to travel to the first floor of their building to vote!
9. **Get visual.** Displaying visuals in common spaces throughout a property is a great way to provide simple reminders to residents about upcoming elections. *Our Homes, Our Votes* provides templates for posters, door hangers, and flyers for housing providers to spread the word about voter registration deadlines, mail-in ballots, in-person voting, and other key information. Keeping visuals

accessible, straightforward, and eye-catching is a great way to get the message across to all residents. Materials should also be displayed in multiple languages if some residents' primary language is not English. Some housing providers send voting toolkits directly to their residents with buttons, stickers, and customizable door signs. These materials empower residents to publicly display their commitment to vote and inspire their neighbors to do so, too.

10. **Track the data.** Using voter files is a great way to pinpoint residents' voter registration status, target voter engagement campaigns, and measure success. Voter data is publicly available and can be obtained from the local elections office, often for a small fee. Many organizers use software such as VAN or PDI to sort their data and target their voter outreach. The voter files can also be obtained after the election to track the success of registration and mobilization efforts. By comparing the number of registered voters and actual voters post-election with the numbers before the election and in previous years, housing providers can quantify the extent to which their efforts boosted registration and voter turnout.

WELCOME TO VOTE PLEDGE

To build further momentum for resident civic engagement, the Housing Providers Council launched the Welcome to Vote Pledge in September 2022. The initial list of pledge signers includes 22 organizations that collectively own or manage more than 257,000 units across 41 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Signers of the Welcome to Vote Pledge commit to integrating voter registration into the lease-up and income recertification processes at their properties, encouraging nonpartisan voter education and mobilization activities, and undertaking all voter engagement work in a fully nonpartisan manner and in compliance with all relevant state election laws.

The "National Voter Registration Act of 1993," commonly known as the Motor Voter Law, is an

instructive model for these activities. The law requires that motor vehicle authorities treat drivers' license applications and renewals as simultaneous voter registration applications, which seamlessly ties voter registration into the process of filling out other forms. Similarly, integrating voter registration into lease-up and income recertification will make voter registration less burdensome for residents of subsidized housing. Because voters must update their registration when they move to a new address, lease-up is an especially well-timed moment for residents to access voter registration. Housing providers are encouraged to sign onto the Welcome to Vote pledge. The full text of the pledge can be found at: [2022-Welcome-to-Vote-Pledge.pdf \(nlihc.org\)](https://www.nlihc.org/2022-Welcome-to-Vote-Pledge.pdf).

A NOTE ON NONPARTISAN VOTER ENGAGEMENT IN HUD-ASSISTED PROPERTIES

Some owners of HUD-assisted properties worry that federal funding prohibits them from doing voter engagement work. Fortunately, this is not the case! President Biden's Executive Order on Promoting Access to Voting (March 2021) affirms that the right to vote is fundamental to American democracy and that it is the obligation of the federal government to ensure that American citizens can exercise that right. In response to the executive order, HUD circulated announcements to its email lists on February 9, 2022, clarifying that Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) and recipients of HUD funding are permitted – and actively encouraged! – to facilitate nonpartisan voter engagement activities. The announcements specifically state that PHAs and owners of HUD-assisted properties can pursue the following nonpartisan engagement activities:

- Permit the use of community space on an incidental basis to hold meetings, candidate forums, or voter registration, provided that all parties and organizations have access to the facility on an equal basis and are assessed equal rent or use charges.
- Collaborate with local election administrators

to permit the use of space for voter drop boxes and voting sites, including for early voting. All voter engagement activities – including voter registration, voting sites, and ballot drop boxes – must be accessible for people with disabilities. Visit https://www.ada.gov/ada_voting/ada_voting_ta.htm for additional information.

The Public and Indian Housing (PIH) announcement lists additional ways that PHAs can support voter participation for residents of public housing and Section 8 voucher holders:

- Provide documentation of residence (e.g., address verification, leases, etc.) to public housing residents when requested to ensure that residents can register and vote.
- Apply to states to operate as a voter registration agency under the National Voter Registration Act. States are allowed to designate state, federal, and nongovernmental offices as voter registration agencies.
- Make voter registration resources available to residents. A PHA that is not designated by the state as a voter registration agency can still facilitate residents' access to voter registration. Such permissible actions include:
 - Making voter registration forms available to residents.
 - Accepting completed voter registration application forms and transmitting these forms to the appropriate state election official, where permissible by state law.
 - Running PHA-initiated voter registration drives, where permissible by state law. PHAs should consult with their legal counsel and state election director to identify the rules and laws around voter registration drives in each state.

The PIH announcement clarifies that PHAs may use Section 8 administrative fees and public housing operating subsidies to fund permissible nonpartisan voter engagement activities. Where PHAs fund Resident Councils, the Resident

Councils may use their funds to provide transportation to the polls as a resident service. Resident Councils should consult with their PHAs to determine whether tenant participation funds can be used for additional voter engagement activities.

Congress has also indicated its intent for recipients of HUD funding to encourage nonpartisan civic engagement. In the fiscal year 2023 (FY23) THUD joint explanatory statement, Congress explicitly named “civic engagement activities” among its allowable uses of tenant participation funds for Resident Councils. Echoing this sentiment, the FY24 THUD draft report directs HUD to provide technical assistance that would increase HUD grantees’ capacity to connect program participants to civic engagement opportunities.

HUD funding cannot finance the use of facilities or equipment for partisan political purposes or partisan political activities that favor one candidate, party, or political position over another. Voter registration activities must be nonpartisan. Voter engagement activities must not give the impression that benefits are tied to a resident’s voting activity or suggest that voter registration and voting are not voluntary processes. For example, the residence cannot host an Election Night party and offer rewards only to community members who voted – they must be available to all who choose to attend.

Many voting laws are set at the state level. PHAs and private owners of HUD-assisted housing should always check with their legal counsel to ensure that their voter engagement activities comply with state and local laws.

For more information, visit: <https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/The-Dos-and-Donts-of-Voter-Engagement-in-HUD-Assisted-Properties.pdf>.