

The Strength to **End** Homelessness Lies In The Power of **YOUR** Vote!

There isn't a way that I can encourage America's homeless to vote.

There isn't a way that I can encourage America's homeless.

There isn't a way that I can encourage America.

There isn't a way that I can encourage.

There isn't a way that I can.

There isn't a way.

There is.

Half of all U.S. states require a permanent address to vote. That's a problem when you don't have one. Please become a member of NCH, and join us in *bringing America home*. We've organized the *You Don't Need a Home to Vote Campaign*. To help get the word out in your community, download or order your *NCH Voter Rights Registration Packet* at www.nationalhomeless.org.



NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS We depend on the kindness of strangers. www.nationalhomeless.org info@nationalhomeless.org 202-462-4822

Voter Rights/Registration Packet 2008/2009

You Don't Need a Home to Vote!

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You Don't Need a Home to Vote!

Introduction

Equal access to the right to vote is a crucial part of maintaining a true democracy. Voting allows people to play a part in deciding the direction of their communities by voicing their opinion on issues that are important and relevant to their lives. Each election, low income and homeless individuals vote at a lower rate than people with higher incomes, despite the fact that many policy decisions directly impact people who are economically disadvantaged. Currently, issues such as raising the minimum wage and funding certain social welfare and housing programs are being debated in the U.S. Congress and in communities around the country. In order for our government to truly represent the people, citizens must vote--especially those who are economically disadvantaged.

For years, homeless citizens have had obstacles to registering. In the 1984 case Pitts v. Black, 608 F.Supp. 696 (S.D.N.Y. 1984), a federal court in New York explicitly found that homeless persons could not be denied the right to vote just because they did not live in a traditional residence. Courts deciding subsequent cases from around the country came to similar conclusions. Although it has been established that homeless individuals do not need to live in a traditional residence to register to vote, other obstacles remain. Today, many homeless and low income individuals may not have the appropriate identification documents required by some states to register or to vote. Furthermore, many individuals who are experiencing homelessness may lack the resources to educate themselves about candidates or may not be able to get to the polls on Election Day.

To overcome these obstacles and encourage greater voter participation among low income and homeless citizens, the National Coalition for the Homeless, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and the National Low Income Housing Coalition are collaborating to co-sponsor National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration initiatives such as the National Homeless and Low-Income Voter Registration Week on September 22-27, 2008 . This manual seeks to promote voting access for low income and homeless persons to ensure that people who are economically disadvantaged maintain an active role and voice in shaping their future. The manual is designed to provide ideas to help overcome the many obstacles that prevent people experiencing homelessness from becoming registered, active voters. In the manual we outline multiple strategies to register, educate, and mobilize voters. We also provide information about common legal issues facing homeless voters, a State-by-State Chart of Homeless People's Voting Rights, and selected court decisions that have expressly protected homeless persons' voting rights.

By working together with homeless persons, low income individuals, and advocates around the country, our organizations hope to help homeless and low income persons make their voices heard on Election Day.

You Don't Need a Home to Vote!

The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty do not support or oppose any political candidate or party. Our informational materials are strictly for educational purposes and suggest no endorsement, bias, or preference. Citizens make their electoral decisions based on a broad range of information. Nothing in this guide to organizing a Candidates' Forum is meant to suggest that a person's vote should be cast on the basis of a single issue or event.

NOTE: All voter registration services by 501(c)(3) organizations must be *non-partisan*. Non-partisan means that the activity or program shall not be influenced by, affiliated with, or supportive of the interest or policies of any political party or candidate. Support for candidates of two different parties in an election (“bipartisanship”) is not a non-partisan activity.



Overcoming Agency Resistance

“My agency is not allowed to do voter registration.”

Non-profit, 501(c)(3) organizations can operate voter registration drives if they do so in a non-partisan manner. In fact, the National Voter Registration Act encourages all non-governmental entities to register their clients. As a non-profit, you cannot take a position on candidates, but you can register people to vote.

“My agency does not have the staff, volunteers or the time to do voter registration.”

If you are not in a position to conduct an actual voter registration drive, you can help register voters as part of your regular work. Here are some ideas to conduct voter registration besides a drive:

- Incorporate voter registration into your intake or interview process (see pg. 7 for advice on conducting registration in this manner).
- Have registration forms readily available if not integrating it into your intake process.
- Having a voter registration party after hours or for lunch is easier than conducting an intense voter registration drive throughout an afternoon or an entire day (see pg. 15 for more advice on voter registration parties).
- Combine a voter registration drive with a candidate volunteer day, which will also bring media coverage to your organization. Although this is time intensive, this will possibly bring a lot of publicity (see pg. 19 for advice on having candidates volunteer at your organization).

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“Clients are not interested in the issues.”

Our experience is that clients want to vote and do vote if barriers to exercising this basic right are removed. Studies show that 70% of those registered to vote by volunteer efforts in welfare and food stamp offices actually go to the polls and vote in presidential elections. Our clients are often disconnected from community life. Voting helps them reconnect with their community in a positive way.

“OK, I am convinced. What else can I do?”

Here are a few ideas. Call us if you want more information or assistance.

- Let your clients use your agency as a mailing address for their sample and/or absentee ballots.
- Call your City/County Elections Office and find out if your agency can become a polling site on Election Day.
- Provide transportation to a polling site on Election Day.
- Organize a candidates' forum and ask the candidates to address your issues.
- Help clients to get a candidates' forum in your community.
- Talk to your peers in other non-profits, and encourage them to involve their clients in the democratic process.



Incorporating Voter Registration into the Intake Process

While the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA)—better known as the “Motor Voter” law—allows people to register to vote at drivers’ license and welfare offices, many people still may not have access to these offices to register to vote. For this reason, the NVRA encourages “all nongovernmental entities” to register their clients. This includes homeless shelters, drop-in centers, food pantries, soup kitchens, day care centers, child welfare agencies, and community health centers.

One easy way to register people to vote on a regular basis is to do so during the intake process - when a client first comes to your organization and is already filling out forms or providing necessary information to receive services.

Rules governing voter registration vary from state to state. Please check with your local or state elections office to ensure that your organization’s voter registration process is conducted properly.

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Four Simple Steps to Incorporate Voter Registration into the Intake Process:

1. *Appoint a Voter Registration Coordinator.*

Appoint a staff person to coordinate the incorporation of voter registration into the intake process. The coordinator should:

- Contact the local elections office or the Secretary of State's office to get information on how to conduct voter registration during the intake process. S/he should:
 - obtain voter registration forms;
 - find out voter requirements, such as voter eligibility requirements, address requirements, and identification requirements;
 - find out how often completed forms should be mailed in (each week, every two weeks, etc.) and what the deadlines are for submitting forms before the next election;
 - obtain any voter education information, such as a map of the local precincts and polling places or sample ballots, that would be helpful for newly registered voters; and
 - obtain any other information necessary for the registration process.
- Train the front desk staff on how to register voters and assist in voter registration based on the information you obtain from the local election office or the Secretary of State's office.
- Coordinate the collection of voter registration data from the staff, including the number of voters the staff registered and the contact information for those registered.

2. *Make Voter Registration Part of Your Intake and Publicize It.*

Make sure clients know that being homeless does not exclude them from the democratic process.

- Post signs stating that clients have a right to vote, may register to vote here, and that they may use your organization's address as a mailing address when registering to vote.
- Amend agency intake forms and procedures to include the question, "If you are not registered to vote where you now live, would you like to register here today?"
- Ask whether the person has moved, changed names, been arrested, or done anything that could alter his/her status as a registered voter.

You may also want to hold periodic meetings with staff to discuss any problems that arise out of making registration a part of the intake process or to answer any questions the staff has about registration.

3. *Offer Clients Help in Filling Out Voter Registration Forms*

Based on the voter registration information you receive from your local elections office, train staff to determine eligibility of voters, assist those registering to vote, and address issues that may arise such as problems with identification documents.

Note:

- If a staff person fills out the registration form for someone who cannot read or write, then the staff person must sign the registration form in addition to the person registering to vote.

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- The staff should check over the registration form after the client finishes filling it out to make sure all required information has been provided.
- Your organization should offer to mail the registration forms to the elections office or a staff person may take the forms to the office.

4. *Keep track of voter registration statistics*

Keeping track of the voters you have registered will help to streamline the registration process during intake and will provide valuable insight into challenges facing homeless voters. The data may identify particular problems or may indicate that registration efforts are amazingly successful. It will help in assessing any changes that need to be made to the registration process. Keep track of how many clients register to vote, are currently registered to vote, or do not want to vote, as well as the contact information for those who register so that your organization may target them in your get out the vote campaign.

You will want to devise a system of data gathering that works for your organization. Perhaps gathering data from the front line staff each week or each month is more efficient for your organization. Otherwise, it may be easier to keep track of those registering to vote based on the registration forms your organization sends to the elections office.



Conducting a Successful Voter Registration Drive

Step 1: Develop a plan for your drive

- Appoint one person or a group of people to head up organization of the drive. This person/group should:
 - Call the local elections office to find out the specifics of conducting a voter registration drive in your area, as requirements vary from state to state.
 - Assign responsibilities to individuals to handle matters such as publicity, obtaining registration materials, and making arrangements pertaining to the site.
- Decide the day, location, and time for your voter registration drive.
- Have a registration table at a large event or conduct the drive on a special day to increase the number of voters you register.

Step 2: Prepare for and publicize the drive

- Obtain necessary registration materials like forms, pens, and clipboards.
- Obtain other materials like stickers, voting brochures, and polling place maps.
- Make arrangements for the drive including, arranging a location and food.
- Recruit some volunteers or other staff to help out with registration. Area college or high school students are a valuable resource to help with registration.

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- Create flyers and posters to publicize the registration drive. Make sure that staff of your organization and the clients the organization serves are aware that a registration drive is coming up. Frequently, individuals experiencing homelessness are unaware that they are able to vote. In the buildup to the registration drive, you can inform people that even though they may not have a physical address they may still vote.

Step 3: Conduct the registration drive

- Have food available to attract passers-by and have stickers and other voting materials on hand to give out.
- Be ready to answer questions that people may have about registering. Refer to the frequently asked questions at the end of this section.
- Do not be shy. Ask everyone who passes by if they are registered to vote, would like to register to vote, or would like to re-register to vote. Try to find ways to overcome any excuses people give for not registering to vote.
- Check to see if the forms are filled out correctly.
- Offer to mail the completed forms.

Step 4: Get out the vote!

- Put flyers up in your organization to remind your clients to vote on Election Day.
- Hand out sample ballots at your organization.
- Help educate newly registered voters about the voting process by inviting elections officials to speak at your organization.
- Hold a candidates forum or invite candidates to volunteer at your organization in order to get clients better acquainted with the issues and the candidates.
- Offer transportation to the polling place.
- Volunteer your organization as a polling site (contact your county elections office to learn more about this).



Overcoming Resistance by Individuals

When people do not wish to register to vote, it is often because they may not understand how voting can affect their lives. It is your job to try to find out why they do not want to register and to help them determine why it is important that they register and vote.

Below are some suggestions for how to do this. It is important, however, for you to use your own words and creativity to express your desire to help others register to vote. You are out there because on some level you believe in the importance of voting. Why is it so important to you? Be yourself and share this honestly with those to whom you are talking.

1. *Find out why she is saying “no.”*

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Remember an excuse may hide a more basic reason. For example, she may say, "I really don't have time," when, in fact, she really means, "I don't want to take the time to register because I don't believe voting matters."

Listen carefully. Is it a real reason or just an excuse? If it is an excuse, what question will you use to uncover the real reason for not wanting to register?

For example:

Volunteer: "Hi, I am concerned about affordable housing and am out here today registering people to vote. Would you like to register?"

Non-Voter: "Thanks anyway, but I don't want to register."

Volunteer: "Why not?"

Non-Voter: "Those politicians are all alike anyway. They don't do anything for us once they get elected."

2. *Agree with her.*

Make yourself her friend, not an opponent. Let her know that you heard what she said and that you share her concern.

What will you say to let her know you heard them and that you understand that they have a valid concern?

Volunteer: "Yeah, I know what you mean. Sometimes it seems like none of the politicians are working for you and me; they're just working for people who have a lot of money."

3. *Use her reason to convince her.*

Explain how her concern is really a reason she should register.

Given her valid concern, what is a great reason for her to register now?

Volunteer: "That is why I am out here registering voters. I am fed up with politicians getting away with that just because people like us are not voting. You know, in the past some elections were decided by just a few hundred votes."

4. *Ask if you can help her fill out the registration form.*

Let her know that you are a trained volunteer and can answer any voter registration questions that she may have.

Volunteer: "It takes just a couple of minutes to fill out the form. Can I give you a hand?"

Final Step: Turn Registered Voters into Volunteers

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If you have made sure that a person really is registered, is your job done? No! People who are already registered are your best prospects to become volunteers. So what do you say once you know someone is already registered? “Great, but do not go away. Listen, it is people like you and me — people who understand how important it is for everyone to vote -- who are the heart of our campaign. You know we have an election coming up, and it could have a big impact on the future of housing, human services, jobs, and all kinds of issues. Do you think you could work with us for a few hours?” Get their name, address, phone number, and email.

At the very least, try to get them to refer their friends or family to the registration event!

Common excuses people give for not wanting to register— and sample responses you can give, using the 4-Step Strategy:

Excuse: “I don’t have time.”

Your response: “I know you are busy. That is why we are out here, to save you the time of going down to the registrar’s office. This way you will not have to give up your right to vote, and it will take less than a minute. Can I help you fill out this form?”

Excuse: “My candidates always lose anyway.”

Your response: “I know what you mean. I have been really frustrated the same way. And then I found out that many people did not vote last time. So people like you and me who are fed up have gotten together and we are going to register 5,000 people right here in town. Can I help you fill out this form?”

Excuse: “I think I’m already registered.”

Lots of people who think they are already registered have actually been taken off the registration rolls — usually because they moved. If someone tells you they have already registered, try “Great, have you moved or changed your name since you last registered?”

Excuse: “I’m homeless.”

A person has the right to vote no matter where they live, provided they meet other voter eligibility requirements. A location of residence must be indicated on the registration form so that officials may verify the precinct in which you live. A mailing address is used to send elections materials and keep the voter registration list current.

Excuse: “I don’t have an ID”

Please see **Common Issues** at the end of this guide.

Excuse: “I have been convicted of a crime.”

Most people think that they cannot vote if they have been convicted of a crime, yet many states allow convicted felons to vote, either automatically after release from prison, parole, or probation or once they

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have applied for restoration of their voting rights. Ask your City/County Elections Office about your state's laws on this topic.

Frequently Asked Questions by Individuals

Am I eligible to register and to vote?

Yes, if you are:

- A citizen of the United States
- A legal resident of your state
- At least 18 years old by Election Day
- Not in prison, not on probation, not on parole, and have not committed a felony (varies from state to state; check with your City/County Elections Office)
- Not declared mentally incompetent by a court (varies, check with your City/County Elections Office)

Do I have to be 18 years old to register?

No. As long as you will be 18 on the day of the upcoming election then you may register to vote.

Must I read or write English in order to register or vote?

No. You may register and vote even if you cannot read or write. You may take to the voting booth a literate and registered individual who can assist you in the voting process, but not actually vote for you.

How can I register?

Although some states allow you to register online, most require that a voter registration form be filled out and mailed to the local county election office. You may also register to vote at your local elections office.

Where can I find the registration form?

Voter registration forms are available at post offices, libraries, fire stations, Departments of Motor Vehicles, welfare departments, Registrars of Voters, and City/County Elections offices. In addition, voter registration forms are available online and at many social service agencies.

When can I register?

You may register anytime, but do it by your state's deadline if you want to vote in the upcoming election. Deadlines vary from state to state though most states' deadlines are no earlier than a month before the upcoming election.

Does it cost anything to register?

No. Registration is free.

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Am I registered once I fill out and mail the registration form?

No. You cannot be sure you are registered until you get a voter notification card from the county. If the notification card does not arrive within three weeks of mailing your registration, call your Registrar of Voters or City/County Elections Office and ask if you are registered.

Do I ever have to re-register?

Yes. If you move, change your name, want to change your political party, or have completed all conditions of a felony charge, you must register again. Please check with your City/County Elections Office as the rules governing re-registration vary from state to state. To re-register, fill out a new registration form with the correct information and send it to the local elections office.

What if I move right before the election?

You may vote by returning to your former precinct or by requesting an absentee ballot.

Will I remain a registered voter even if I fail to vote?

Yes. However, if you move, the state may send you a voter eligibility verification notice by mail to confirm your current eligibility. If you fail to respond to that notice and do not vote in two consecutive federal elections, the state may remove you from the voter list.

Can I register for someone else?

No. You can only register for yourself. However, you may help others fill out a form, but they must sign the form.

Do I have to choose a political party in order to register and to vote?

No. You may check the “decline to state” or independent box on the form if you do not wish to belong to a political party.

What is a political party?

A political party is a group of individuals who try to determine public policy by organizing to win elections and operate government.

How do I join a political party?

It is as simple as checking the box for the political party of your choice on the registration form. There are no requirements to join a political party.

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If I declare a party of preference when I register, can I change later?

Yes, you just have to re-register.

Am I required to work for the party or contribute money to it?

No.

What is a Sample Ballot?

In some states, before each election, each registered voter receives a packet of information including a Sample Ballot, which is a replica of the ballot the voter will see at the polls. The packet also gives the time and date of the election, the location of your polling place, and an application to vote-by-mail.

What if I do not receive a Sample Ballot?

If it does not arrive two weeks before the election, call and request one from the Registrar of Voters or your City/County Elections Office.

Where will I vote?

Your polling place will be in your neighborhood. If you receive a Sample Ballot, the exact address will be shown on the back. Otherwise, the address will be on your registration card. Both should show whether the polling location is accessible to people with disabilities. Polling places may change from one election to another. It is important to go to the correct polling place because your name will not be on the roster of voters anywhere else.

What if my polling place is not accessible to the people with disabilities?

The Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act requires polling places to be accessible to persons with disabilities whenever possible for federal elections. Where no accessible locations are available as polling places, states must provide other means for persons with disabilities to vote. In most states, you may vote by absentee ballot, and many states provide voting aids such as telecommunications devices for the deaf (TDD's). Check with your local City/County Elections office to learn what you should do. If you prefer to vote in person, find out if curbside voting is available. If it is, get as close to your polling place as you can and a precinct board member will bring you a ballot for you to cast.

When are the polls open?

The hours that polling places are open on Election Day varies by state. However, usual hours are from 7:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m.

Can I vote by mail?

Contact your City/County Elections Office for information on obtaining an absentee ballot and about deadlines.

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Do I need identification documents when I go to vote or register?

When registering by mail, a driver's license number or the last four digits of your social security number will be needed. If you are unable to supply either, you will be given a voter ID number and will be required to show some sort of ID when you go to vote on Election Day (the form of ID varies from state to state). Many states have further identification requirements so it is important to check with your local elections offices.

What if I need help in marking my ballot?

Ask Elections Officials at the polling place.

How long may I stay in the polling booth?

Take your time. Some states limit voting to ten minutes, but will extend that time if no other voters are waiting. You may take your pre-marked Sample Ballot into the polling place with you.

What if I make a mistake on my ballot?

You may request another one.

Can someone help me when I go to vote?

Yes, you may bring a friend, a relative, a teacher, a parent or anyone else. This person can help you read the ballot or use the voting booth to vote.

What will I be voting on?

You will either be voting on propositions, which are ballot measures that change local or state laws, or on candidates running for elective office. You do not have to vote on everything; you can just vote on the things you care about.

How do I vote?

- Sign your name on a list of all the voters in your area.
- A ballot will be given to you and you will then enter the voting booth.
- You will put the ballot in the voting machine and mark your choices.
- Officials at the polling place will provide directions on voting procedures.

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Registering Tenants to Vote

Community housing and tenant groups can help people make their voice heard by offering voter registration and voter education. As with other registration efforts, it is best to have a point person in charge of organizing the voter registration drive and obtaining all the necessary registration forms. Voter registration methods include going door-to-door to talk to each tenant, registering tenants when they pay their rent, and offering registration during tenant meetings. Staff, board members, property managers, and tenants can all help. Remember to keep records on those you register to vote so you can include them in your voter education and get out the vote efforts.



Conducting a Voter Registration Party

A very simple and fun way to register voters is to throw a voter registration party. Simply put, hosting a voter registration party involves inviting clients, candidates, and staff (as well as anyone else) to a party such as an ice cream social or a cookout. During this party, impress upon the crowd the importance of voting and offer registration to those who are currently not registered to vote. You cannot offer anything in exchange for registering to vote (such as money or gifts). The party must be open to everyone whether or not they are registered to vote or are going to register to vote.

Organizationally, a voter registration party requires people to plan not only the registration but also the party. Appoint one individual or group to coordinate the registration effort and appoint another individual or group to plan the party. Those in charge of coordinating the registration aspect should be responsible for obtaining registration forms and turning in completed forms as well as checking with the local elections office to determine the local rules for voter registration. Reference the above section “Conducting a Successful Voter Registration Drive” for more tips on organizing the registration aspect of the party. Below are some helpful guidelines for how to run your voter registration party.

• **PLANNING:**

- Contact other service providers and enlist their support and assistance.
- Identify a central location to hold your event, where both clients and residents in your community congregate.
- Be inventive and creative with your party ideas. Perhaps target the mothers at the shelter by having a party for the kids so that the mothers can take that time to register.
- Write a leaflet that is not too wordy, but talks about all of the elements of the event. Emphasize the fun or upbeat aspects. List the menu, entertainment, etc. Then deliver what you promise!

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• FOOD:

- Plan on serving food. Ice cream socials are fun in the hot weather months. Hot dogs, chips, and sodas are nice when the weather is cooler. Whatever you serve, it will be crucial to attract lots of people.
- Invite local food distributors to participate. (e.g., ice cream usually has a “pull date” long before the food becomes unsafe to eat. Ask dairies for their leftovers.) Give donors plenty of positive publicity in your news release and during the program to promote a good and potentially ongoing relationship.
- Provide more food than you think you will need. You can always use the leftovers at another time.
- Have more than one food line so there is less time to wait and more time for enjoyment. Plenty of food and shorter lines will help to avoid the “shortage mentality” that can lead to unpleasant situations that might ruin your event.

• LOCAL PERSONALITIES AND ENTERTAINMENT:

- Politicians want to meet registered voters. Invite candidates to attend and “say a few words.”
- Provide entertainment— either a disc jockey or live music. There are usually local bands looking for exposure. An adequate sound system will be important to accommodate them in either case.
- Invite one or more local celebrities (*e.g.* radio or television personalities, athletes) to serve as the moderator for the event, sign autographs, or just speak.

• VOTER REGISTRATION:

- Although this is a party, try not to make it too loud or crowded so that registration cannot be conducted.
- Make sure that the registration forms are easily accessible and noticeable since this is the most critical part of the voter registration party. Some ideas are:
 - Put registration forms at each seat so that when people get their food and sit there is a registration form ready to be filled out.
 - Hand registration forms out as people enter the party or have a pile set up near the food lines for people to pick up.
 - Have a registration table at the entrance to the party.

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Questions Frequently Asked by Organizations About Conducting Voter Registration

Can my 501(c)(3) organization work in conjunction with other groups that conduct voter registration, education, and "Get Out the Vote" programs?

Yes, so long as the effort is non-partisan. Participating organizations and individuals cannot make any statements in support of or in opposition to any particular candidate or party, nor carry on any other activity designed to reflect a preference or recommendation for any political candidate or party.

How much time after the drive do I have to send in the completed forms?

Usually, states require the completed forms to be sent in no later than a few days after completion of the forms.

May I send photocopies of voter registration forms to the elections office?

No. For the purposes of a voter registration drive, the actual form received from the elections office must be filled out and mailed. However, an individual may print a voter registration form off the Internet and mail it to the county election office.

May I refuse to give any eligible voter a registration form?

No. You must give a registration form to any person eligible to vote.

May I attach any flyers or other information to the registration forms?

No. You may not attach anything to the voter registration forms when you are handing them out.

Can vehicles owned by nonprofit organizations be used to transport voters to the polls? Can drivers employed by the organization transport voters to the polls?

Yes, to both questions. You can even affix non-partisan messages to vehicles encouraging voters to go to the polls. However, make certain that the vehicles and the drivers do not have any partisan literature, buttons, posters, flyers, bumper stickers or other political propaganda endorsing a particular candidate or party.

Can a staff person registering voters in a 501 (c) (3) agency wear a button or put a bumper sticker on his/her car that has the name of a favored candidate?

No, not while registering voters.

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Can rewards like balloons or pens be given out after a person registers?

Many states have laws against such “rewards.” Check with the office of the Secretary of State in your state or other state or local elections office.

Can you give me some examples of what I am allowed to say while offering information to voters?

You can say:

- “Public policy is decided at the polls. Take a position on health care, nutrition, and other issues affecting our families. Register to vote here today.”
- “You can have an impact on the decisions affecting your life. Register to vote now.”
- “Budget cuts are reducing services provided by this agency and many others. If you care about housing and day care, register to vote today.”

But, you cannot say:

- “Support family values. Joe Smith in 2008. Register now,”
- “Stop the reactionary Congress. Elect John Arnold. Register here.”
- “Budget cuts are reducing services provided by this agency. Register to vote here, and let the candidates know you will not take it anymore!”

Remember not to say anything partisan in any way during the drive! It is illegal.

Does my organization have to become a deputy registrar to conduct a voter registration drive?

Many states do not require any sort of registration or official representation. However, some states (Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Nebraska, and Texas) do require voter registration drives to be registered or require the presence of a deputy registrar at the drive. States requiring a deputy registrar or some other official allow anyone to be trained, usually in a short, one-time session, to conduct a proper registration drive. Other states may also require voter registration forms to be notarized. Please check with your Secretary of State’s office or other state or local elections office.

When registering voters currently experiencing homelessness, what address should they provide on the registration form?

Most states allow a shelter address, a description of a general location at which the individual usually spends the night, or even a drawn map to be recorded as an address. An address is needed primarily for assigning people precincts and mailing election information. **CONFIRM WHAT MAY BE USED AS AN ADDRESS WITH YOUR LOCAL ELECTIONS OFFICE.**

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Registering people to vote is an important way to get people involved in the democratic process. Just as important is ensuring that community members and candidates for office have an opportunity to engage in dialogue about issues facing a community or the country. The following ideas are examples of ways to engage the community and candidates around homelessness and housing issues.

Having Candidates Volunteer at Your Agency

One of the best methods to help candidates understand the needs of people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness is through service learning. Service learning gives candidates an opportunity to better understand the need for such services by engaging the issue of homelessness. It also provides an opportunity for individual citizens, service providers, and advocates to speak directly with their representatives and to educate the candidates on issues important to those citizens, service providers, and advocates.

The following is a brief guide to help make candidate volunteering worthwhile.

1. Select a Project

The first step is to select a community service project that will interest the candidate. For example, if the candidate is interested in housing issues, you may want to set up a project to renovate low-income housing. Perhaps the candidate would be interested in volunteering in the day-to-day operations of your organization like serving food.

2. Contact the Candidate

Call the candidate's campaign headquarters and ask to speak with the person in charge of the candidate's scheduling. Let them know who you are, whom you are affiliated with, and what you have in mind.

Helpful hints:

- Let the scheduler know that you do not want to make more work for them. This is an opportunity for the candidate to visit a great project and gain some media exposure.
- Be flexible with the dates and times so that you can accommodate the candidate's schedule.
- Make sure that you put something in writing to the campaign office. Send them a letter right after your phone conversation.
- Request and obtain a written confirmation.
- Once you have received a verbal or written confirmation, you can begin to plan the logistical details of the project.

3. Plan the Project

Contact the location where the service project is going to take place, gather all of the necessary materials, and organize a group of individuals to take part in the service project.

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Helpful hints:

- Start the event between 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. to get maximum media coverage.
- Make sure to let the site know that the media may be attending. Often homeless shelters or soup kitchens do not want their guests on camera without advance notice. Discuss the appropriateness of having the guests on television or interviewed by a newspaper reporter.

4. Notify the Media

Any media coverage of the candidate's volunteerism serves both your organization and the candidate. For this reason, it is a good idea to coordinate with the campaign's media people to publicize the event since they will have many different media contacts and resources.

Whether or not you are working with the candidate's campaign, write a news advisory or media release that can be faxed or emailed out two to three days before the event. Include brief directions to the service location for the public wanting to attend.

Helpful hints:

- Asking the name of the reporter who will be covering the story is both a way to confirm coverage and obtain the media contact so that you may contact him/her before the event.

5. Finalize Details

Make sure that you call the candidate's office the day before the event to remind her or him of the commitment. It is also a good idea to contact the location in order to remind them of the activity planned for the next day and to contact and remind those who will be helping you out as well.

6. Hold the Event

Arrive early and have everything set up and ready to go. Once the candidate has arrived, greet him or her, orient the candidate as to the plan for the service project, and then begin. Enjoy the day!

Follow-up

At the end of the day it is important to debrief with all participants about the success of the day. One idea is to have a written evaluation form already prepared ahead of time. This is important to give closure to the experience and to find out what you can do better next time. Finally, it is important to send a thank you letter to the candidates for participating. The letter should also include a recap of the day, sample news clippings of the event, quick facts about homelessness in your community, and an encouragement to support pending anti-poverty legislation.

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Holding a Candidate Forum on Housing and Homelessness

Why Hold a Public Forum on Housing and Homelessness?

- **EDUCATE:** Few educational techniques are more effective than personal testimony. Those who attend the forum and those candidates who participate will long remember the moving stories of people struggling to make ends meet and the success stories of community groups beating the odds.
- **ORGANIZE:** A lot of people think you have to be a social worker, builder, or an architect to get involved in solving America's housing crisis. By de-mystifying the subject of housing; helping people understand local, state and/or federal programs; and explaining to them what is happening in your community, you make it easy for them to get involved.
- **EFFECT CHANGE:** You can send a forceful message to those in power and those who aspire to power by organizing a forum that displays how many people are knowledgeable and concerned about the issue.

Complying With the Law

Community Candidates' Forums are a legitimate activity for 501(c)(3) organizations and are an important vehicle for informing your community. Should you decide to organize one, however, you must pay close attention to the law.

If, as a nonprofit organization that receives tax-deductible donations, you are planning to educate the public about candidates or issues near election time, you may want to get legal advice. You need to make sure that no one -- either a candidate or a member of the public -- has any reason to believe that you have departed from your nonprofit mission and gone into partisan politics. Whether you lose the respect of the community, or whether you lose your nonprofit status, the cost to your primary mission will be too high. If you are concerned about any aspect of the approach we are recommending, visit www.irs.gov/charities/index.html to find out more about the guidelines for nonprofits participating in election activities, or consult an attorney.

The how-to approach that we offer you in this packet describes a way to educate citizens about homelessness, housing issues, and candidates' positions without getting into partisan activity. We do not guarantee it will work for everyone, but we believe it offers one legitimate model for nonprofits that want to educate the community in the midst of an election year.

The most important principle for 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations to observe is nonpartisanship! It is a principle that people expect us to uphold since the people who share our community service goals come from many different political backgrounds. People want to know that we are fair, we are evenhanded, and that we do not play favorites or turn anyone away because of their political beliefs. It is

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also a principle embodied in the tax law that governs nonprofit organizations. Few possessions are more precious to your nonprofit organization than your 501(c)(3) status given by the Internal Revenue Service. If the IRS finds that your organization is acting to support a particular party or candidate, they will take that status away.

Elections are an integral part of a healthy, functioning democracy. Helping voters become better informed about the candidates running for office and about the issues vying for attention is a legitimate activity for a nonprofit. However, trying to influence how people vote or helping or harming the interests of a candidate or party is not a legal activity for a tax-exempt nonprofit.

It is not enough to avoid putting up signs or passing out fliers in support of one candidate or another. If you set up an event trying to make one candidate look good, or one party look bad, that could be interpreted as partisan activity. You must avoid packing the crowd at an event with one candidate's supporters, or asking loaded questions to make one party's positions look bad. Even the appearance of having done these things can hurt your reputation and take away your nonprofit tax-exempt status. To avoid jeopardizing your 501(c)(3) tax status, we suggest you follow these guidelines:

- **Which candidates to invite and how to invite them:**

The forum can be limited to candidates representing major parties and significant and serious third party candidates. During a primary season, the forum can be limited to those candidates of one party who are running in the primary. *Just sending out an invitation is not enough.* Be reasonably certain that, through preliminary contact with their campaigns, at least the major party candidates will show up. You may want to make the invitations to the candidates contingent on all of them accepting. Use a phone log for each call made to candidates' offices.

- **What to do if a candidate cancels:** If a candidate cancels at the last minute, strongly urge his or her office to send a staff person or other representative. If a candidate or his or her representative fails to show up, make it clear to the audience that you did everything possible to ensure equal representation. **DO NOT** use the empty chair tactic trying to evoke negative sentiment for a candidate unwilling or unable to appear; it may be viewed as a partisan setup.

- **Whom to choose as a moderator:** Choose a moderator who is perceived by the community as neutral and who will not favor any particular point of view. A good choice would be an academic or media personality.

- **How to structure the forum:** We suggest that you have experts on homelessness/housing (including people currently and formerly experiencing homelessness) talk about the homelessness/housing situation instead of having audience members ask specific questions. They may describe what needs to be done, but should not ask for any response from the candidates or put any specific questions to them.

After the panelists speak, give the candidates time to respond to what they have heard. Of course, all candidates must get equal time and should be treated identically and fairly by the moderator. Remember, your purpose is to educate, not to promote the interests of any candidate or party.

The moderator should be instructed to introduce and close the forum with a statement explaining that the forum has been a nonpartisan community education project and is not designed to favor any candidate or party.

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We understand that we are recommending a type of forum in which the community at large is not going to have a chance to ask questions or respond from the floor to the candidates. This requires a prepared and tough moderator. It also means that the experts on your panel should be knowledgeable enough so that people in the audience who care about homelessness and housing issues will feel represented by them. We suggest that you plan a reception to follow the event and that you encourage community members to talk one-on-one with the candidates there.

Ensuring a Successful Forum

To host a successful forum, pay special attention to:

- Assembling a representative panel that can talk about local housing and homelessness facts and concerns;
- Taking the time to prepare panelist(s) and the moderator;
- Getting candidates of both parties to attend and participate;
- Generating interest among the media about the event;
- Getting the word out to the community; and
- Getting commitments from fellow organizers to conduct follow-up to the event.

To get these tasks done, we suggest that you set up a coordinating committee to be responsible for the important decisions and a number of subcommittees to handle the details.

The Coordinating Committee

The coordinating committee should be comprised of representatives from a wide range of local constituencies including: low income people, people who are currently and were formerly homeless, local/statewide housing and homeless coalitions, social worker/provider networks, religious groups, labor unions, low income and consumer groups, and senior citizens groups. In order to ensure broad community support, incorporate into the coordinating committee as many diverse groups as possible.

REMEMBER: Make it clear to all the groups invited that the Candidates' Forum is for the discussion of housing and homelessness issues only, not for all of the problems facing the community. This is necessary because no single forum can do justice to more than one issue at a time. It will also help focus the comments of panelists and candidates, which in turn will help hold the audience's attention. The committee's responsibilities can include:

- a) Establishing the procedures that will guide the ad-hoc coalition sponsoring the forum.
- b) Establishing a time frame in which to accomplish the event (sample enclosed).
- c) Confirming the availability of candidates.
- d) Selecting the site, date, and time.
- e) Drawing up a budget (suggestion sheet enclosed).
- f) Authorizing the work of subcommittees.
- g) Choosing community panelists, such as:

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- People who are currently or formerly experiencing homelessness
 - Community leaders working to end the housing/homelessness crisis
 - Members of social service organizations stretched too thin
 - Union members who are unable to find affordable housing
 - Tenants fighting to preserve their homes
 - Interfaith groups building homes.
- h) Choosing a moderator responsible for:
- Explaining the ground rules to panelists, invited guests, and the audience
 - Being the timekeeper and maintaining order to ensure that the forum runs smoothly
- i) Choosing which candidates to invite.
- j) Developing and evaluating and follow up plans.

Subcommittees

The subcommittees you create might include a) public relations/media, b) community outreach, c) liaison with candidates, d) finance, and e) site coordination. Subcommittees allow you to both delegate responsibility and involve a wide range of groups in the planning process.

Public Relations /Media Subcommittee:

This subcommittee could be responsible for coordinating media coverage for the event and developing media packets. The subcommittee may want to designate a member to act as a resource for the media and general public.

Community Outreach Subcommittee:

This subcommittee could be responsible for turning out the community for the event. Remember, the more people who actively participate in planning the event, the easier it will be to turn out a lot of people. Some of the ways this can be accomplished are:

- Requesting promotion from the broadcast community;
- Contacting appropriate individuals and organizations by mail, phone, or in person;
- Developing and distributing flyers and leaflets; and
- Developing small display ads and submitting them to community newspapers in the hope of getting free advertising.

The subcommittee may want to establish a phone tree/email list or tap into the coordinating committee's phone trees/email lists. In addition, this subcommittee might want to take responsibility for setting up transportation networks to help people get to and from the event.

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Candidate Liaison Subcommittee:

This subcommittee could be responsible for communication with all candidates, including making the initial phone calls to all of the candidates chosen by the Coordinating Committee, keeping a candidates phone log, writing confirmation letters, and being the main contact for the candidates prior to and during the event. Sample letters and phone scripts are enclosed at the end of this guide. Please see pg. 38.

Finance Subcommittee:

This subcommittee could be responsible for working with the Coordinating Committee to develop a budget and raise funds for the event. Even though you will want to maximize in-kind contributions to cover educational and publicity materials, reception costs, postage and other costs, you may find that the act of making some people solely responsible for finances will help generate in-kind contributions.

Site Coordination Subcommittee:

This subcommittee could be responsible for securing the room, setting up the room prior to the event (arranging furniture, checking microphones/lighting, and hanging banners), and returning the room to its original state after the event. The site should be centrally located and/or near well-traveled streets/highways and/or public transportation. Do not commit to a space you cannot fill. It is better to have people standing along the walls than to have dozens of empty seats.

Planning a Budget

One of the main topics of conversation at your first organizing meeting should be the budget: who is willing to pay for what and who can make in-kind donations. Remember to look to social service networks, unions, low-income housing and tenant groups, and the community-at-large (banks, large and small businesses, civic groups, and interfaith networks) to seek funding (in-kind or cash) for the event. As committee members place calls to the community to solicit support, they will also be spreading the word about the event.

Here is a checklist of some of the items necessary for the forum that may end up costing you money:

Site. One of the coordinating committee members may have access to an appropriate site that you can get for free or for a nominal charge. Meeting rooms in churches, shelters, soup kitchens, libraries, or local government buildings are a good bet. Perhaps a local school or college will donate space to you. But if none of these is available, you may have to rent private space, such as a movie theater or banquet hall, in which case you might have to pay a fee.

Publicity. You should expect to print at least 1,000 flyers/handbills to publicize the forum. You should expect to spend about five cents a copy. If you do not want to pay for this service, consider making up a master flyer on a computer, distributing master originals to participating groups, and asking them to photocopy them on their in-house machines. If your publicity committee makes up small newspaper ads and radio announcements, send copies of them around to community newspapers and local radio stations. You may be surprised at how much free advertising you can get.

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Reception. People will remain to discuss the issues if you present them with a nice spread of food and drink. It is generally not a good idea to serve alcohol (and restrictions on the room you are renting may prevent it). Consider asking every member of your various committees to bring some item of food or drink. Ask local businesses to donate items. You will probably have to pay for things like plates, cups, utensils, and napkins. Consider drawing up a modest budget for these essentials and then splitting the cost among the participating groups.

Educational Materials. Remember, the forum provides you with an excellent opportunity to distribute educational materials to the participants and the audience. You may want to allow each group to handle its own development and production costs or you might consider producing a joint packet of materials, with the production costs borne equally.

Postage and Mailing Costs. Do not spend a lot of money doing large mailings to publicize the forum. We suggest you rely as heavily as possible on free advertising — but do not discourage the desire of individual groups to publicize the forum to their own members. If they choose to do this, however, they should be prepared to pick up the tab.

Remember, weigh financial questions early and avoid unpleasant surprises. Putting on a community forum will take more time and effort than cash, but the participating groups should be prepared to spend some money in order to host a successful forum.

Sample Timeline

Week 1

Full committee holds initial meeting

- Establish tentative date and time for event
- Choose type of person(s) for the panelists/moderator
- Agree on ground rules
- Form subcommittees
- Develop Budget

Week 2

Subcommittees hold first meetings

- *Site Committee:* solicits ideas for place
- *Finance Committee:* develops draft budget and solicits ideas on how to fund event
- *Outreach Committee:* prepares list of all endorsing groups to date and develops list of other groups to ask for endorsement and develops draft flyers/leaflets
- *PR/Media Committee:* drafts news release/public service announcements
- *Candidate Liaison Committee:* Makes first round of calls

Week 3

Subcommittees continue work

- *Site Committee:* visits possible sites and finalizes time, date, site

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- *Finance Committee*: begins calls to identified groups
- *Outreach Committee*: begins calls to panelists
- *PR/Media Committee*: finalizes news releases/public service announcements and begins media strategy
- *Candidate Liaison Committee*: continues to contact candidates

Week 4

Full committee meets

- Subcommittees report on progress

Subcommittees continue work

- *Site committee*: finalizes site for event, holds meeting for volunteer recruitment
- *Finance Committee*: continues outreach for funding
- *Outreach Committee*: continues phone calls for advance outreach, confirms panelists/moderator, continues to mail/email out notices to community
- *PR/Media Committee*: sends out PSAs
- *Candidate Liaison Committee*: meets with staff members

Week 5

Full committee meets

- Subcommittee report on progress-to-date
- Develop evaluation tool and plan for follow up actions

Subcommittees continue work

- *Site Committee*: finalizes all logistical plans
- *Outreach Committee*: develops and prints event program

Week 6

Full committee meets to review final details

Week 7

Hold event

Full committee meets to evaluate event and implement follow-up actions

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Media Tips

It is best to have a group of people or one person focusing solely only on media and publicity. Here are some tips that should help in producing widespread publicity.

Media Team/Committee

- A solid media team includes a media coordinator, a writer, and a spokesperson as well as other individuals to aid in publicity efforts.
- The media coordinator should coordinate the efforts of the writer and spokesperson in addition to the media committee and its other publicity efforts. The coordinator should also organize the publicity aspect of the event, arrange for local celebrities, or other photo opportunities at the event.
- The spokesperson should handle media calls, maintain media contacts, and cultivate greater relationships with assignment desk personnel, news producers, and camera people.
- The writer should be responsible for news releases to the various local, state, or national news agencies.

The Event

- Find a way to make visible what you are trying to communicate. Choose a location for your event that delivers a message in line with your efforts. For example, choose a location central to the community you serve like a church or community center.
- The best visual is the one that requires the fewest words to explain. The more words that are required, the more obscure the message. Also, make sure that people who drive by or walk past know what event is going on.
- Publicize the event in advance. This may include holding smaller events to increase focus on the main event. For example, have registration days, voter training sessions, and candidate volunteer days, in the buildup to a candidate forum.
- Interesting people, places, and subjects greatly increase the likelihood of good media coverage. Local or national celebrities and individuals affected by the policy you are out to change (the human interest story) attract a lot of media coverage. Again, choose a visible location that is central to the community, reflects your message, and is conveniently located.
- Timing of the event is critical. Be mindful of other events in the area.
- As a general rule, the best times for a news conference are Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. until noon. Morning hours guarantee that deadlines are met and allow further development of the story.

The Media Contact List

- It is helpful to maintain two media lists: a mailing list and a phone call list.
- The mailing list should contain the name of the publication, station, network, the publication's address, email address, and the names of people whom you know at each location.

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- The phone call list will be considerably smaller but is essential. Always keep it handy. A call list should include the agency name, phone number, fax number, email, assignment desk names, reporters' names, special news areas the reporters cover, and individual cell and home phone numbers when available.
- Always keep the mailing and phone call list up to date. Add new names as you meet new people. The media coordinator should take names of producers and reporters at media events and make sure those names get added to your lists.
- While it is important to mail releases to the assignment desk, it is also important to target reporters with whom you already have a relationship. Phone calls are much more successful in attracting media coverage.

The News Release

- Before you write your release, sit down and list the points you wish to make. Do not ramble. While you need to include enough background information to educate, you do not need to say everything in the news release.
- The first paragraph should include the five W's – who, what, when, where, and why. The news release should be concise.
- All releases should be followed up with a phone call. If you do not do a follow-up phone call, the reporters may not take notice of the press release.
- It is good to mail/email/fax the news release out at least a week ahead of time to ensure its inclusion on calendars. Target the reporters and news people most likely to be interested in the event since it may be difficult to reach everyone on your list.
- A sample media advisory and sample press release are included at the end of this guide. Please see pg. 40.

The Media Call

- Be thorough with your calls. Do not assume any member of the media is a “lost cause”. In many ways the media calls you make are more important than the news release. Although you must have a written news statement that can be delivered, emailed or faxed upon request, you have the special opportunity during a media call to really sell your story and yourself.
- Start with the wire services like your local Associated Press and United Press International offices since they can rapidly get the news out to other news organizations. Then call television stations since they have more staff to try to get to the location of your news event. Newspapers and radio stations should be called next.

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Letter Writing Power Hour

Another way for homeless and low income people to become involved in the democratic process is to organize a letter writing event, during which they will have the opportunity to voice their opinion on an issue by writing a letter to their representatives. A “power hour” is a one-hour activity where you and a group of your peers will become educated on an issue and then hold a letter writing campaign to have your voices heard on the selected issue.

1) Choose an Issue

The first thing that you must decide is what issue to write about. You may decide to select a topic of interest or of concern. You may choose to write about a recent event in the community, a general topic such as homelessness, or a specific topic or piece of legislation such as one concerning livable wages. Selecting an issue will also help you decide which officials you are going to target. If it is regarding a local issue, you will want to address your local and state officials. If your issue is a national one or broader in scope, you will want to address your federal officials.

2) Get Educated

Once you have selected an issue, it is a good idea to research background information on the topic. You can go to the local library, watch the news or browse the Internet to research current information for the topic. The Internet is perhaps the most helpful when researching an issue because many organizations who concentrate on a certain issue area have websites with all of their publications, resources, and research documents available for the public. Large organizations may also have specialized fact sheets or even sample letters to aid in letter writing campaigns.

3) Be Prepared

Make sure you have the necessary materials to conduct the power hour. Since most public officials now have email addresses, you might want to ask a few people to bring lap top computers with Internet access. Have the laptops set up and ready for the participants to draft and send email. If this is not feasible, get paper, pens, stamps, and envelopes and make sure that you have all of the addresses of your local, state and national officials with you. By being prepared it will be easier to mail the letters immediately after the power hour.

4) Hold the “Power Hour”

When you hold the power hour first give a brief presentation on the issue so that everyone has some information on the subject. Offering a sample letter will help provide crucial information on the issue and make the letter writing considerably easier. Also, you may want to pass out a brief information sheet so people will have enough information to write an effective letter. Besides the facts, a critical part of a letter to an elected official, whether a local or national official, is a personal connection the letter writer has to a given issue. Encourage letter writers to include personal stories and the reasons housing issues and homelessness are important to them. Remember, however, that you should not take a position for or against a candidate or party. The letter writers may express their political opinions, but you may not.

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As people are writing or finishing writing their letters, record the letter writer's name and the recipient of his or her letter. In addition, pass around a sign-in sheet so that you can record who was in attendance. This makes it easier to follow-up on the status of a letter and to hold future political functions. Finally, mail the letters and remind the letter writers to forward any responses they receive to the event coordinator.



“Get Out the Vote”

Once clients/shelter residents are registered, they face the difficulty of actually getting to the polls on Election Day. “Get Out the Vote” drives are critical for high levels of participation. There are many ways to encourage people to vote on Election Day and ways to give them the means of getting to the polling site. The following is a list of suggestions that can be tailored to your specific needs and should provide a good starting point for developing a successful “Get Out the Vote” drive at your agency.

Educating Voters:

- Hang signs in shelters telling the open hours and location (with a map) of the designated polling place if registered at the shelter.
- Provide information about absentee ballot requirements and deadlines for your state.
- Print newsletters or fliers about the candidates and issues and distribute them in shelters shortly before Election Day.
- Hold a candidate forum so that people can become more familiar with candidates and their positions.

Getting People to the Polling Sites:

- Have a shelter designated as a polling place.
- Have volunteers on call to walk or drive clients or shelter residents to the polling places.
- Arrange for a church or school bus to shuttle people to the election site throughout the day.
- Encourage taxi companies and other forms of public transportation to provide free rides to the polling places.
- Hold a rally, complete with food and music, and then march to the polling place(s) together.

Facilitate Voter Comfort at the Polling Site:

- Invite local elections officials to bring voting machines to your organization to familiarize people with the process of voting. Alternatively, have a mock voting booth at your agency beforehand with sample ballots so people feel more comfortable when voting.
- Staff the election site with poll watchers who will assist homeless persons if they encounter any voting problems with local election officials.

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- Match volunteers with registered voters a week before the election. The volunteer will contact the registered voter a week before the election to talk about Election Day, the polling site, and ask if any assistance is needed to get to the polls. The volunteer can then call or visit the registered voter the day before the election to remind him or her. On Election Day the volunteer can accompany the registered voter to the polling site.



Legal Issues and Rights

Legal and Practical Barriers to Voting for Homeless People

While federal and state laws have eliminated some of the barriers to voting for homeless people, other obstacles remain. Those obstacles can be overcome if people experiencing homelessness know their rights and learn ways to overcome the barriers.

Residency and Mailing Address Requirements

Some states had previously required registrants to live in a “traditional dwelling” in order to register to vote. Judicial decisions in court cases and the enactment of federal and state laws have eliminated that requirement. Today, homeless individuals in all states--including those people who are living on the streets--have the right to register and vote. When registering to vote, homeless voters only need to designate their place of residence, which can be a street corner, a park, a shelter, or any other location where an individual stays at night. Designation of a residential address or location of residence is required to ensure the voter lives within the district in which she/he wishes to register and to assign the voter to the appropriate polling location. Usually, the location of a residence may be indicated by drawing a map or by providing a general descriptive location, if not the address of a shelter.

In addition, most states require registrants to provide a mailing address so that voter ID cards and other election materials may be sent to registered voters. Having registrants' mailing addresses also helps state boards of elections maintain current and accurate voter registration lists. The address provided may be that of a local advocacy organization, shelter, outreach center, or anywhere else willing to accept mail on behalf of a person registering to vote. Some states, like Arizona and Nebraska, allow homeless people to use county courthouses or county clerks' offices as their mailing address. Some states will not allow registrants to use a P.O. Box as a mailing address. A registrant's mailing address does not have to be the person's residential address.

Identification Issues

Pursuant to federal law, namely the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), first-time registrants in all states who register by mail must provide a driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number on their voter registration form. If a registrant has neither a current driver's license number nor Social Security number, then the registrant will be assigned a voter ID number once her or his registration

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is approved. In addition, first-time mail-in registrants must provide an identification document at the polls, unless a registrant submits either his or her driver's license number or the last four digits of his or her Social Security number when registering and the accuracy of the information has been verified by election officials. Acceptable identification for first-time mail-in registrants includes a current and valid photo identification, or a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter. Since first-time mail-in registrants may have to provide some sort of identifying documentation at the polls, homeless registrants without any of the documents listed above may want to register to vote in person at their local registration office.

Some states have stricter identification requirements than HAVA, such as requiring all voters to present a photo ID to register or to vote. However, identification requirements vary from state to state. Please check with your local elections office or the Secretary of State's office for your state to find out more about your state's identification requirements. Even if voters do not have the necessary identification at the polls, HAVA requires states to provide provisional ballots to those voters. Election officials will count the provisional ballot later, if the voter meets voter eligibility and other requirements for that district or state.

The following chart provides state-by-state information regarding homeless people's voting rights and requirements related to voter registration.

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State-by-State Chart of Homeless People's Voting Rights

	Individuals Living on the Street or In a Shelter Have the Right to Vote	A Mailing Address is Required to Register	State Has Enacted Homeless Voting Rights Statute	Voter Registration Drives Must be Registered or a Deputy Registrar's Presence is Required at a Drive
Alabama	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Alaska	Yes	No	No	No
Arizona	Yes	No	Yes	No
Arkansas	Yes	Yes	No	No
California	Yes	Yes	No	No
Colorado	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Connecticut	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Delaware	Yes	Yes	No*	Yes
Florida	Yes	No	No*	Yes
Georgia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Hawaii	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Idaho	Yes	No	No	No
Illinois	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes
Indiana	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Iowa	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Kansas	Yes	Yes	No	No
Kentucky	Yes	Yes	No	No
Louisiana	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Maine	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Maryland	Yes	No	No*	No
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	No	No
Michigan	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Minnesota	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Mississippi	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Missouri	Yes	Yes	No	No
Montana	Yes	Yes	No	No
Nebraska	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nevada	Yes	Yes	No	No
New Hampshire	Yes	Yes	No*	No
New Jersey	Yes	Yes	No*	No
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

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New York	Yes	Yes	No	No
North Carolina	Yes	Yes	No*	No
North Dakota†	Yes	N/A	No	N/A
Ohio	Yes	Yes	Yes*	No
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	No	No
Oregon	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Pennsylvania	Yes	Yes	No	No
Puerto Rico	Yes	Yes	No	No
Rhode Island	Yes	Yes	No	No
South Carolina	Yes	Yes	No*	No
South Dakota	Yes	Yes	No	No
Tennessee	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Texas	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Utah	Yes	Yes	No	No
Vermont	Yes	No	No	No
Virginia	Yes	Yes	No*	No
Washington	Yes	Yes	Yes*	No
Washington, D.C.	Yes	Yes	No	No
West Virginia	Yes	No	Yes	No
Wisconsin	Yes	No	No	Yes
Wyoming	Yes	No	No	No

†North Dakota does not require voters to register to vote.

*There is a written Attorney General's opinion or other written statement from the State Elections office or Secretary of State's office in these states concerning the registration of people experiencing homelessness.



Court Decisions on Homeless People's Voting Rights

Prior to the 1980's when homelessness grew into the national problem we know today, state election laws did not adequately address the issue of voter registration by people without a home. Listed below are selected court cases in which courts have addressed the ambiguities in state election laws and found that homeless people cannot be denied the right to vote. Courts in some of the cases below found the following principles.

- A requirement that people live in a traditional dwelling in order to vote placed an unconstitutional constraint on the voting rights of homeless persons. Coalition for the Homeless v. Jensen, 187 A.D.2d 582 (N.Y. App. Div. 1992).

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- States should use a broad interpretation of the term “residence” to include any place, including a non-traditional dwelling, that an individual inhabits with the intent to remain for an indefinite period. Pitts v. Black, 608 F.Supp. 696 (S.D.N.Y. 1984); In re-Application for Voter Registration of Willie R. Jenkins, D.C. Bd. of Elections and Ethics (June 7, 1984).
- When registering to vote, homeless people may designate a shelter, park, or street corner as their residence. Fischer v. Stout, 741 P.2d 217 (Alaska 1987).

Remember, each case is unique. This information is intended to describe principles from key cases in specific jurisdictions, not to act as legal advice. If you or your clients need help with a specific problem, contact a local lawyer. NLCHP has expertise in these issues and may be able to help you or your lawyer with additional information.

Bd. of Election Comm'rs v. Chicago/Gray Area Union of the Homeless, Circ. Ct. of Cook County, Illinois, County Dept., County Div., Misc. No. 86-24 (1986).

Addressing a challenge to Chicago's residency requirements for voter registration, the Circuit Court of Cook County held that a person lacking a permanent abode may register by stating under oath that she lacks a permanent abode and by presenting two pieces of identification. The person who is experiencing homelessness must also provide a description of the location where he or she resides that is specific enough that election officials can assign him or her to a voter precinct. Prior to an election, mail will be sent to the mailing address listed on the registration card and will include a postage prepaid return postcard which must be mailed back to the Board of Elections.

Coalition for the Homeless v. Jensen, 187 A.D.2d 582 (N.Y. App. Div. 1992).

Several homeless plaintiffs challenged New York election officials' application of a provision of the New York Election Law. The provision at issue allows election officials to subject “groups likely to include transients” (such as students or people living at a “welfare institution”) to a more searching inquiry than usual order to determine whether they are eligible to register to vote. Based on the provision, the election officials rejected the applications of 240 Camp La Guardia residents and required that they give testimony in court to prove their residence. One hundred and seven of the applicants appeared in court and were accepted as voters, but the trial court rejected the applications of those who did not appear in court.

The Supreme Court, Appellate Division, overturning the trial court's decision, held that due to time constraints placed on people who were experiencing homelessness, election officials violated the individuals' constitutional right to vote by failing to take reasonable, good-faith steps to determine the true residency of the individuals who were homeless. All 240 votes were subsequently counted.

Collier v. Menzel, 221 CalRptr. 110 (Ct. App. 1985).

Three plaintiffs experiencing homelessness challenged the Santa Barbara county clerk's rejection of their registration applications, in which they had listed a public park as their residence. The court found that the residence was sufficient for registration purposes because the applicants had a fixed habitation in the park and intended to remain there. The court held that denying voter registration because applicants listed a city park as their residence violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The opinion further stated that people who were experiencing homelessness should be encouraged to register and vote in order to provide them with some greatly needed political influence and electoral power. Election officials must now use the specific spot within the park where the persons regularly sleep in order to determine their election district.

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Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless v. Tartaglione, No. 84-3447 (E.D.Pa. Sept. 14, 1984).

Ruling on a challenge to Philadelphia's residency requirements, the District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania held that a homeless voter may satisfy the residency requirements set forth in the Pennsylvania Election Code by "declaring on the Voter Registration Application the address of a shelter with which the applicant has an established relationship, and which will accept first-class non-forwardable mail for the applicant." The person must then vote in the district where the shelter is located, even if the person resides in a different precinct. This ruling provided the basis for Philadelphia's current policy regarding registration and voting by homeless peoples.

Fischer v. Stout, 741 P.2d 217 (Alaska 1987).

A candidate who lost an election appealed for a recount, alleging that election officials had illegally rejected ballots of voters who claimed to reside at a military base. The Supreme Court of Alaska held that persons could list a military base generally as their residence, stating that a residence is a fixed place of habitation to which the individual intends to return, and it need not be a house or an apartment, or have mail service. It need only be a specific locale within the district. The court acknowledged that a homeless shelter or even a park bench would be sufficient.

Hartman v. Kenyon, 277 Cal.Rptr. 765 (Ct. App. 6 Dist. 1991).

Based on the Walters v. Weed court decision (see below), a citizen contended that individuals who had moved from a precinct could legally vote at their former precinct. The California Supreme Court distinguished Walters, holding that a voter is only entitled to vote at the precinct of his or her former residence if he or she has not moved to a new residence with intent to stay. In other words, if a voter has moved but has not acquired a new place of residence, he or she is considered to be residing at his former residence until acquiring a new place of residence. Otherwise, he or she must vote in the precinct of his or her new domicile.

In re-Application for Voter Registration of Willie R. Jenkins, D.C. Bd. of Elections and Ethics (June 7, 1984).

In an administrative hearing, the D.C. Board of Elections ruled that an intent to reside in a place can constitute a place of residence for voting purposes. This ruling established the homeless voting policy for Washington, D.C., which allows a voter to name the location where he/she sleeps as a residence even if the place is a nontraditional home. The voter must also provide a mailing address of a place to which the person has sufficient ties. The person will vote in the district of his/her place of residence.

Pitts v. Black, 608 F.Supp. 696 (S.D.N.Y. 1984).

Plaintiffs challenged a New York State Election Law provision forbidding people living on the streets from registering to vote. The District Court held that the New York City Board of Election's application of the residency requirement disenfranchised an entire group of people, which is forbidden by the Equal Protection Clause. The court found that a person's "residence" is the place at the center of the individual's life and the place where he/she presently intends to remain. The court reasoned that people need only have a specific location that they consider their "home base" — the place where one returns regularly, manifests an intent to remain, and can receive messages and be contacted.

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Walters v. Weed, 752 P.2d 443 (Cal. 1988).

Individuals whose votes were uncounted in a city council election challenged the rejection of their ballots. These individuals had abandoned their domiciles within the precinct and were thus not considered residents of the precinct, rendering their votes invalid. However, many of the plaintiffs had not yet met the requirements to establish new domiciles, as they did not live at new locations where they intended to stay. The California Supreme Court ruled in favor of those voters who had not yet established new domiciles, holding that when a person leaves his or her domicile with no intention of returning to live there, and when that person currently resides in a place in which he or she does not intend to remain, that person may vote in the precinct of his or her former domicile until a new domicile has been acquired.



Sample Phone Script for Call to (Candidate to be Invited to Forum)

Hello, my name is (YOUR NAME). I'm working with the (COORDINATING COMMITTEE NAME) planning the Community Candidates' Forum on Homelessness and Housing, to be held on (DATE) at the (PLACE) beginning at (TIME).

The purpose of the event is to bring together a broad range of people who are concerned about the lack of affordable housing and increasing homelessness in our community. We are calling to invite (MEMBER/CANDIDATE NAME) to be part of the event. The Community Forum will begin with citizen testimony from (MENTION A FEW OF THE COMMUNITY PANELISTS). We have asked (MEMBER/CANDIDATE NAMES) to attend. Following the panel presentation each candidate will have an opportunity to respond to the panelists' concerns. While we won't entertain questions from the audience, the (MEMBERS/CANDIDATES) will have an opportunity to meet and talk with the community following the event at a reception hosted by the (COORDINATING COMMITTEE NAME). Can I send you a letter listing these details for your consideration?

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Sample Invitation Letter

DATE

The Hon. _____
US House of Representatives
_____ House Office Building
Washington, DC 20015

Dear Representative _____:

Thank you for considering participating in the (COORDINATION COMMITTEE NAME) educational public forum and reception on housing and homelessness issues, which will be held on (DATE). As I discussed with (NAME OF PHONE CONTACT) of your staff on (DATE), both you and (OTHER MEMBERS/CANDIDATES NAMES) have been invited to respond to a panel of community experts on housing and homelessness issues facing (COMMUNITY NAME).

I have enclosed a copy of the agenda and ground rules for the event.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to call me at (YOUR PHONE NUMBER). If I do not hear from you by (ONE WEEK AFTER THE DATE OF THE LETTER), I will give your office a call.

We are looking forward to your participation in our event.

Sincerely,

(YOUR NAME)
(COORDINATING COMMITTEE NAME)

You Don't Need a Home to Vote!

Sample Media Advisory

(The name of your organization) to participate in National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration Week, September 22-27

What: *Short description of your event*

When: *Time*

Where: *Location*

Who: *Name of your organization and homeless citizens/residents of low-income housing*

September 22-27 is National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration Week. The event sponsored by *(name of organization)* is part of a national effort that seeks to engage homeless individuals and low-income voters in civic participation—particularly concerning voting rights. It also seeks to educate candidates locally and statewide about issues of concern to the lowest income individuals.

The event is also part of continuing efforts by the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) and *your organization* to register and mobilize low income and homeless people to vote. NCH has sponsored the “You Don’t Need a Home to Vote” campaign since 1992. More than 50 organizations held events in 2007.

(Insert a quote from staff/volunteers/guests about the importance of mobilizing new and infrequent voters to the polls)

Local Contact:

(Insert local contact information)

National Contacts:

Michael Stoops at mstoops@nationalhomeless.org or 202-462-4822.

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Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release: *date*

Contact: *name, email, phone #*

(Your organization) to hold (event) as part of National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration Week, Sept. 22-27

(Insert a brief, catchy description of your event including date, time and place).

Nonpartisan voter registration events like the one being organized by *(insert the name of your organization)* will take place across the country during the week of September 22-27 to mark the National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration Week.

The National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration Week has been held since 1992. The Week has been co-sponsored by the National Low-Income Housing Coalition and the National Coalition for the Homeless for the past two years in order to encourage housing and homeless advocates to emphasize voter registration, education, and mobilization as a means of empowering clients. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and the National Health Care for the Homeless Council have joined with NLIHC and NCH this year to increase participation in this important campaign.

(Insert your organization here) (has been/will continue) to register, educate and mobilize low income and homeless people. *(Tenants/Clients/Residents/Guests)* must show up to vote on November 4 if they want the candidates to address the issues they are concerned about.

(Insert a quote from an organization spokesman about the importance of low income and homeless individuals having their voices heard)

The *(residents/volunteers/staff)* at *(insert organization name here)* are excited to be a part of national and local voter participation efforts among homeless and low income citizens. *(Insert a quote from resident/volunteers/staff about the empowerment voting offers).*

For more information about the event, please contact *(full name, email address, phone number of press contact)*.

Full name of organization

Address

Phone number

Web site

You Don't Need a Home to Vote!

You Don't Need a Home to Vote!

There isn't a way that I can encourage America's homeless to vote.

There isn't a way that I can encourage America's homeless.

There isn't a way that I can encourage America.

There isn't a way that I can encourage.

There isn't a way that I can.

There isn't a way.

There is.

Half of all U.S. states require a permanent address to vote. That's a problem when you don't have one. Please become a member of NCH, and join us in bringing America home. We've organized the *You Don't Need a Home to Vote Campaign*. To help get the word out in your community, download or order your *NCH Voter Rights Registration Packet* at www.nationalhomeless.org.



NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS We depend on the kindness of strangers. www.nationalhomeless.org info@nationalhomeless.org 202-462-4822