



## 2008 VOTERIZATION PLAN: NARRATIVE

This narrative accompanies the National Low Income Housing Coalition's Voterization Plan, available at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE), and is designed to help you through the steps of planning your agency's Voterization project. Voterization 2008, a project of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, is an effort to engage traditionally underrepresented people in the civic process. By working with nonprofit housing organizations across the country, we seek to encourage greater numbers of low income and homeless people to vote in elections to come. For assistance with your Voterization project at any point, please contact the outreach team at 202-662-1530, or at [outreach@nlihc.org](mailto:outreach@nlihc.org) (include 'Voterization' in the subject line). Thank you for joining us!

**Engaging people in the voting process means more than setting voter registration forms on the front desk.** Our Voterization plan takes you through all of the steps you need to implement a campaign to integrate registration, education, mobilization, and voter protection without overtaxing your staff or resources, and while staying within legal guidelines for nonprofits. Start by printing out the plan template, and then use other resources at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE) to determine your next steps.

Our plan presents a menu of activities for your group to consider. Your organization may or may not be able to undertake a majority of the suggested activities; plan according to available resources. If this is your first voter engagement project, remember to think long-term – it's usually best to start small and build your project over several election cycles.

### WHY BECOME VOTERIZED?

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

However, census data confirm that low income voters are registered and vote at lower rates than higher-income citizens. While 86% of people with incomes over \$100,000 were registered to vote in 2004 and 81% actually voted, just 61% of people with incomes below \$20,000 were registered, and only 48% actually voted.

Low income people face several challenges to voting: less-flexible jobs that may not allow time off for voting, transportation impediments that may make getting to the polls more difficult, and a greater likelihood of misinformation about their rights as voters that may make people shy away from voting. People experiencing homelessness, ex-felons, and survivors of the recent hurricanes may face especially tough barriers to voting.

Nonprofit organizations, which benefit from close ties with their clients, are a natural fit in helping people overcome these challenges. Nonprofits that have implemented Voterization projects have identified several benefits of doing so. Voterization campaigns can help to:

- Engage residents in civic participation and learn how decisions of elected officials affect their lives
- Educate elected officials on low income housing issues and on how their decisions affect residents
- Build power with elected officials
- Develop residents' leadership skills
- Assist residents in meeting community service requirements, if applicable
- Earn positive press for your program or project.

## **LEGALLY SPEAKING**

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

### **The Center for Nonprofits and Voting**

Specifically, read their comprehensive legal guide on what nonprofits can and cannot do: Nonprofits, Voting & Elections.

### **The Alliance for Justice**

AFJ offers monthly web-based training sessions titled, 'Election Rules for Nonprofits Web Workshop.' Find the next scheduled workshop at [www.afj.org/events](http://www.afj.org/events). AFJ also has a one-pager available for review: Permissible Election Activities for 501c3 Nonprofits.

### **The IRS**

The IRS has published Election Year Activities and the Prohibition on Political Campaign Intervention for Section 501(c)(3) Organizations.

### **HUD**

Housing authorities are often under the impression that they are not able to register residents to vote. That is not the case; in fact, in 1996, HUD issued a specific notice encouraging housing authorities to become involved in voter registration activities that is available at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE).

Organizations that have specific legal questions related to their Voterization projects after consulting the above resources are encouraged to contact an attorney who specializes in Election law.

## **REGISTERING VOTERS: BEFORE YOU START**

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

### **1. Set Goals**

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

### **2. Get to Know Your Local Board of Elections**

Your local board of elections can be a wealth of information as you plan to register clients to vote. You'll want to check in with them to learn the registration deadline for the general election in your state; ask whether anyone can register voters in your state, or whether a person must first become deputized or meet other requirements; request the voter rolls for your community (so you'll know who in your target audience is already registered); and request enough voter registration forms to meet your registration goals.

### **3. Offer Registration Trainings**

Residents and staff who plan to register voters will often benefit from a training from someone who is familiar with the process. You may want to bring in someone from the local board of elections who can explain how your state's voter registration forms are filled out, and what state registration requirements are. It can also help to spend a bit of time role playing, so that people who are registering voters are not discouraged when confronted with apathy. The Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness has put together a document that can be used to help with such role-playing, at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE).

#### **4. Consider Resources**

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

Other organizations may have resources that your organization can access. Student groups may be interested in registering voters as part of a community service project, or a civic group may already be providing rides to the polls, and could include your clients in their plans. Remember to partner only with nonpartisan organizations.

### **REGISTERING VOTERS**

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

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

The first option is to incorporate registration into day-to-day activities that are already taking place at your agency. Registration can usually be incorporated with few resources and little hassle into the intake process, training sessions, resident association meetings, and any other meetings of clients.

#### **2. Plan Specific Voter Registration Activities**

A second way to think about registration at your agency is to plan special registration activities or campaigns. Many organizations have had success holding social or other events at which residents are encouraged to vote. Consider hosting an event for National Homeless and Low Income Voter Registration Week (September 21-27, 2008).

#### **3. Organize a Door-to-Door Campaign**

The third, and most effective, way for larger organizations to systematically register clients is through a door-to-door campaign. If yours is a residential agency, such a campaign can be particularly effective. In particular, resident leaders can volunteer to serve as 'building captains' or 'floor captains' and be given responsibility for registering and keeping records of—and then turning out—all of the people in their building, on their floor, etc. Such a system can be a great way to get residents or clients involved while ensuring that staff does not become overwhelmed with additional responsibilities. The key is to have personal and organized contact with potential voters by people they know or trust. Especially in this type of campaign, you will want to use the voter list from your county to see who in your buildings is already registered.

#### **4. Go into the Community**

Finally, especially if you have a smaller client base, you may also want to think about having your volunteers reach out into the community to register other low income, homeless, or underrepresented people. And don't forget to make sure everyone on the staff and board is registered!

### **KEEPING RECORDS**

It is crucial to have a plan for how you will keep a record of who you have registered to vote—as well as who is already registered—so that you'll be able to contact these people as part of your mobilization activities. You'll be able to compile a list of which of your residents are already registered from the voter rolls you picked up at your local board of elections.

## **1. Collect Information**

For new registrants, there are two ways to collect this information. One easy way is to collect voter registration forms from new registrants, then photocopy the forms before mailing them in. (Note: Some states have a specific number of days after the form was filled out by which it must be turned in to the elections office.) This also allows you to review and catch mistakes before a form is submitted.

You can also have voters fill out a two-part Pledge Card or a Get Out The Vote (GOTV) postcard, both at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE).

On the pledge card, voters will keep the half of the card that reminds them of their pledge to vote on November 4; you'll keep the half with their contact information and use it to contact them during your Get Out The Vote phase. Feel free to add your logo or other information to the sample card shown.

For the GOTV postcard, voters fill this out with their return address at the same time they register; you'll then mail it to them the week before the election.

## **2. Enter the Information into a Database**

Once you have collected voters' information, it's important to enter it into a database so the data can be easily accessed for mobilization purposes. Database suggestions available at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE).

## **EDUCATING CLIENTS & ELECTED OFFICIALS**

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

### **1. Educate clients on voting and their rights as voters**

Clients should be informed of where their polling place is, what documentation they will need with them to vote, and their rights if election officials attempt to restrict them from voting. Arranging for local election officials to demonstrate how voting machines work can be helpful in easing fears about voting for the first time.

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty has information on protecting rights at the polling place. Check out their fact sheet on voting rights and their pocket-sized rights cards. See the Voter Protection section for more information on voting rights.

### **2. Educate clients on the issues**

Nonprofits can best assist clients in becoming versed on the issues by providing opportunities for people to hear the direct views of candidates. Distribution of candidate questionnaires or the hosting of debate watch parties or candidate forums are examples of such opportunities.

This is an area in which you must be especially vigilant about ensuring that your agency follows IRS requirements. Please refer to the guide Nonprofits, Voting & Elections before you send questionnaires to your candidates or invite candidates to speak to clients.

A sample questionnaire on housing and community development issues that has been approved by attorneys versed in election law will be posted at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE).

### **3. Educate candidates**

Asking candidates to fill out a questionnaire or inviting them to your agency can be a way to learn more about them while making them aware of your organization and the issues that are important to residents. Candidates also learn what issues are important to voters by reading the letters to the editor page of the newspaper. Consider having clients write letters about issues that are important to them.

## **MOBILIZING VOTERS**

Your mobilization – or Get Out The Vote (GOTV) – plan can be the most important and rewarding piece of your project. Just registering someone is not enough; it has been consistently shown that voters are much more likely to go to the polls if they are contacted on several occasions and reminded to vote by someone they trust. Further, once someone has been mobilized to vote, he or she is more likely to vote in future elections. Considerable attention should be paid to mobilizing the people you have registered.

### **1. Aim for at Least Three Contacts with Each Registered Resident**

If possible, contact the each potential voter three times between the day she registers and Election Day: once a few weeks before the election, once a few days before the election, and once (or more) on Election Day. On Election Day, you may contact voters until they have affirmed that they have indeed voted. For example, if someone tells you at noon that he has not yet voted, call back at 4 pm to see whether he has been able to vote. Use your database of registered residents to make your contacts.

Over the course of your contacts, you should make sure that the voter commits to voting, knows when Election Day is, and knows where her polling place is. Ideally these contacts should be in person (a knock at the door), but phone calls and postcards may also be used. Not everyone will be home when you knock, so NLIHC has GOTV doorhangers available at [www.nlihc.org/VOTE](http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE) that you can download, print, and leave on people's doors on Election Day.

The suggested activities on pages 4-5 of the Voterization plan provide ideas for making these contacts. Recruit volunteers – whether staff, residents, or community members--to assist in making these contacts. If you have had building or floor captains who have been in regular contact with their voters, they should do this mobilization to the extent possible.

Again, it is personal contact from someone residents know or trust that will make an impact. Recent research shows that door-to-door visits increases voting rates by 10% among those contacted, while phone calls made by volunteers increases turnout by 2.5%. Further, simply providing people with their polling location has been shown to raise turnout rates by nearly 2% (*The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management: Winning Young Voters. 2006.*)

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

Early voting (if available in your state) and absentee voting can each facilitate voting by the people your agency serves. Again, your local board of elections can provide information on laws in your state.

### **3. Work the Polls**

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

### **4. Host a Polling Location**

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

## **PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO VOTE**

Nonprofits can play an important role in making sure that people's rights are protected when they get to the polls. To that end, you may want to ask a local attorney who is versed in voting rights to volunteer with your group. He or she can help identify potential issues in your community, and also be on call on Election Day to be notified if anyone experiences problems voting.

Other resources include:

### **The Voter Protection Program**

A project of the Advancement Project, the Voter Protection Program has a team of attorneys, on-the-ground Local Voter Protection Advocates, and communications specialists who can provide vital services, including legal analysis, advice, and trainings, to local voter protection coalitions and civic participation groups. Learn more at [www.advancementproject.org/ourwork/index.php](http://www.advancementproject.org/ourwork/index.php).

### **HAVA**

In 2002, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). HAVA has promised significant improvements in the administration of American elections but also opens the door to significant threats to voters' rights. Since HAVA was passed into law, every state has undergone substantial changes in its election laws and procedures. The Brennan Center has provided legal and legislative counseling to officials and advocates in many states concerning HAVA implementation. The Center also works in coalition with other organizations seeking to expand access to the franchise and ensure the integrity of elections. Learn more at [www.brennancenter.org/content/section/category/voting\\_rights\\_elections](http://www.brennancenter.org/content/section/category/voting_rights_elections).

### **Provisional Ballots**

Of special note are provisional ballots. If someone's registration or eligibility is questioned, every attempt should be made to straighten out the problem so that he or she can vote that day. If that is not possible, however, people should be reminded that no one who believes he or she is legally entitled to vote should ever leave the polling place without voting. As a last resort, a voter should fill out a provisional ballot, which will be counted in the weeks after the election if it can be determined that he or she was indeed eligible to vote. More information on provisional ballots is at [www.npaction.org](http://www.npaction.org).

## **CAPITALIZING ON YOUR PROJECT**

Once Election Day is over, take a few days to rest – you deserve it! Then, it's time to do a few things: Celebrate your accomplishments and honor your volunteers. Evaluate your project and your results, and plan what you'll do differently next year.

Next, set up appointments with elected officials and residents to discuss housing issues important to your organization (and armed with statistics showing the increased voting rates in your community!). And now that residents and staff have been energized by being involved in the election process, talk to them about who might be interested in running for local office themselves.

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