



# We Count!

Newsletter of the Disability Voting Coalition of Pennsylvania - August, 2010

Welcome to "We Count," a monthly newsletter representing one of Pennsylvania's largest potential voting blocs: Pennsylvanians with disabilities. It's produced by DVC of PA, a cross-disability organization focused on improving voting experiences and educating about voting rights for the nearly 2 million Pennsylvanians with disabilities (who make up 20% of potential voters).

## The "We Count" Movement is Blooming in SWPA

The "We Count" disability voter engagement project, which currently has voter registration efforts in five SWPA counties, was responsible for **over 50 percent** of all new disability voter registrations in the entire State of Pennsylvania in 2008.

As amazing as that statistic is, what's even more incredible is the personal impact "We Count" has had (and is having) on the lives of consumers, many of whom have been inspired by the project to become politically active for the first time.

This issue tells the story of how the "We Count" project began. It also takes a close look at how it is increasing the voting power of the Pennsylvania disability community.

In 2003, Rachel Freund and Paul O'Hanlon, along with several

other advocates, started *Let Our Voices Be Heard* in the Pittsburgh area. This advocacy initiative, supported by Mental Health America – Allegheny County (MHAAC),

voter registration campaigns, trained consumers to become Voter Educators and developed a systematized voter education process developed with a central goal in



**We Count!**  
Disability Voting Coalition of PA

"We Count" is a disability voter engagement project focused on building a strong political power base in the disability community.

began as a grassroots, cross-disability advocacy project that concentrated on increasing disability voting and political involvement amongst consumers.

*Let Our Voices Be Heard* focused on educating voters in the disability community through on-the-ground organizing. They initiated

mind: *to increase the voting power of the disability community.*

The efforts of *Let Our Voices Be Heard* were extremely successful in Allegheny County. Not only were new voters being registered, but consumers were organizing talks with their legislators to both learn

– continued on page 2

### Join the DVC

You have the power to strengthen our community – help us create a loud political voice!  
Membership is free.  
Simply visit [www.dvcpa.org](http://www.dvcpa.org) and scroll down to "Join the DVC!"

**The mission of the Disability Voting Coalition of PA is to increase the power of Pennsylvanians with disabilities by establishing the disability community as a strong and mobilized voter bloc.**

The DVC newsletter is designed, written and edited by David Harris-Gershon.

If you have a story from your community that you'd like to see covered or someone you'd like to see profiled in the newsletter, send suggestions to Rachel Freund, DVC Project Coordinator, at [rfreund@mhaac.net](mailto:rfreund@mhaac.net).

*DVC is supported by generous funding from the PA Development Disabilities Council. DVC is also supported by Mental Health America - Allegheny County.*

– continued from page 1

about and fight for policies important to the disability community.

In 2008, members of *Let Our Voices Be Heard* thought, *We should expand this outside of Allegheny County*. After securing a grant from the FISA Foundation, “We Count,” was initiated as an expanded disability voter project that was co-sponsored by the DVCPA covering the counties of Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler and Westmoreland.

The first time members of the Phoenix Center – a drop-in center in Beaver County – approached a consumer named Shawn and asked if he was registered to vote, his response was a quick “No.” And when they followed up with the next question – *Would you like to register?* – the second “no” came even quicker.

This was during the run-up to the 2008 Presidential election, and the Phoenix Center had become abuzz with activity. Rachel had trained fifteen members, including Julie Bogdan and Mary Ann Bezuk, to become Voter Educators, and throughout September a voter education station (supported by center director Tiffany Smith) filled with information on how to register was set up and staffed daily, with members asking consumers to register and sign a pledge to vote.

Soon, Shawn began asking questions: “What’s the point of voting?” “How hard is it to do?” It was clear his original defensive posture was beginning to soften. And it’s no surprise, really, for every day he saw passionate people who cared about helping him have a political voice.

Maybe Shawn also witnessed many of the other efforts going on simultaneously. Outside of the center, consumers were registering people in Beaver County’s hospitals and other facilities, handing out candy, pins, T-shirts, and a copy of the Voter Bill of Rights at each location. Meanwhile, thanks to Phoenix Center member Bob Boyer, local House Representative Jim Marshall (who introduced a bill proposing to raise the \$60 monthly allowance for personal care home residents to \$120) was becoming active with the center, a real point of pride for everyone.

With the deadline to register approaching, engaged educators like Veronica Ruby finally convinced Shawn that it was really easy to register, and that if he registered he didn’t have to vote on Election Day. And so Shawn decided to register, but made sure everyone knew that he didn’t want to actually “bother with voting.”

On November 4, as members of the center made preparations for a voting returns viewing and sleepover party, Shawn decided to accompany several members to the polls and voted, casting a historic vote in an historic election.

– continued on page 3



“Vote” cookies helped tempt consumers with sugary fun.

### On the Road with DVC

The DVC attends conferences, community events, and conducts special projects all over the Commonwealth. Here are some events in which we’ve participated and where we’ll be in the coming months. If you plan to attend any of these events, be sure to look for the DVC table. Stop by and say hello!

July:

- PA Community on Transition Conference – July 21-23 in State College – [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net)

August:

- Project Vote training sponsored by DVC in collaboration with the National Technical Assistance Center for Voting and Cognitive Access – August 10-11 at Vision for Equality, Philadelphia
- Voter Educator training co-sponsored by DVC – August 16 (10 am - 12 pm) at Allegheny County Department of Human Services, One Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh

September:

- Patriot Day Picnic – September 9 at Keystone Community Mental Health Services in Harrisburg
- Voices for Independence Voter Awareness Event – September 15 in Erie
- Walk to Washington – September 22 in Washington, PA

*If you have an event you’d like DVC to attend or would like more information on an event listed above, please contact Rachel Freund at [rfreund@mhaac.net](mailto:rfreund@mhaac.net) or 1-877-391-3820.*

– continued from page 2

The Phoenix Center’s impact during the 2008 Presidential Election is just one example from Beaver County of the amazing work that is being done across SWPA as a result of the “We Count” project, which has not only inspired hundreds of consumers to become new voters, but has broadened the political power of the disability community.

According to Rachel, “the link between voting and political involvement is inexorable.” As proof, she points to the project’s simultaneous work on obtaining a raise in the personal needs allowance for low income residents of personal care homes. Through the leadership of advocates in SW PA, people in the disability community across the Commonwealth were inspired to get involved in the campaign to get the raise passed at the PA Dept of Welfare. And during this process, consumers saw first-hand that politicians (such as Rep. Jim Marshall) listen to people who vote.

In those counties where the “We Count” project is active, Rachel notes that participants aren’t just registering to vote. They are “inviting their legislators to events, attending Town Hall meetings and candidate forums, volunteering for campaigns, writing letters to, visiting and calling decision makers, writing letters to the editor, following



On April 1, 2008, Rachel Freund helped to organize a rally Harrisburg to raise the personal needs allowance

the news and getting civically involved in many other ways.”

With one of the largest voter turnouts in history and with the passing of the personal needs allowance raise in 2008, those in the disability community who participated had the opportunity to see that getting involved really does make a difference. And this involvement continues today, as participants in SWPA have become increasingly involved politically. In 2009, grassroots advocates from the “We Count” project mobilized to express their concerns regarding the stalled PA Budget. And just this year, “We Count” participants marshaled resources to protest the cuts to the State Supplemental Payment to SSI that took affect in February.

Tom, a Voter Educator from Butler, elegantly sums up this increased political activity: “Many times as people with disabilities we feel like the word invalid – in-valid. Like we don’t count and our voices aren’t part of the conversation.

“[But] being involved in this voting project gave a lot of us an opportunity to be part of the community in a meaningful way. We all want meaning in our lives – this [is] a way for many of us to have it!”

### **Simple Steps to Organize a Voter Registration Drive**

1. Develop an organizing committee with one person as the lead coordinator for the drive.
2. Contact the local elections office in your county and tell them you want to hold a voter registration drive. They can give you information about voter registration requirements and the materials you will need
3. Contact registration outreach programs, like the Disability Voting Coalition of PA and the League of Women Voters, to obtain voter education information.
4. Make up a list of possible locations for your voter registration drive and contact the appropriate organizations for permission to register voters on their premises. Be sure to stress the non-partisan aspect of your drive.
6. Set the date and time(s) for your drive. Pick dates that gives you enough time to register voters and return their completed registration cards before the deadline of **October 4, 2010**.
7. Figure out how many people you will need to staff the drive. Then, sign up and train volunteers. You will need a team of at least two people to staff the registration table. Set up time-slots and make your assignments.
8. Partner with others in the community to maximize your campaign.
9. Gather all of the necessary equipment and supplies several days before the drive. Be sure to publicize your voter registration drive!
10. Keep track of those you have registered to vote. If you have contact information for the people you register, you can create phone-bank lists to call these new voters before Election Day to remind them to vote.
11. On the day of the drive set up the table. Make sure you have plenty of pens, voter registration applications and instructions, voter’s guides and your organization’s literature.
12. Turn in completed voter registration applications to the local elections official in a timely manner.

***Thanks to Faces and Voices of Recovery for their great tips! Download their fabulous Voter Outreach Manual “Recovery Voices Count Guide” at [www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org](http://www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org).***

## Voting Rights for All Pennsylvanians

- ☑ All persons with disabilities have the right to register and vote. Pennsylvania does not have any laws that restrict the right to vote for individuals with developmental, mental health or physical disabilities.
- ☑ If you cannot read or you are disabled, you have the right to receive assistance from anyone you choose (except the judge of election, your employer or a union officer).
- ☑ Each polling place is open from 7:00 am to 8:00 pm. If you are in line before 8:00 pm, you have the right to vote.
- ☑ If you are voting in your district for the first time, you have the right to vote by regular ballot if you have a photo ID or qualifying document.
- ☑ If you do not have any form of ID, or your name doesn't appear on the registration roll, you have the right to vote by provisional ballot.
- ☑ If you have moved, you still have the right to vote in your old precinct after signing a written affirmation of your new address.
- ☑ If you damage your ballot, you have the right to receive a replacement ballot.

**\* If you are prevented from exercising your right to vote on Election Day, contact the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania at 1-877-375-7139**

**\* If you have any problems or questions when voting, call the PA Voter Hotline at 1-877-868-3772**

Non-Profit Org  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Pittsburgh, PA  
Permit No. 2230

100 Sheridan Square, 3rd floor • Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
c/o Mental Health America-Allegheny County

Disability Voting Coalition of PA

