



We Count!

Newsletter of the Disability Voting Coalition of Pennsylvania - Oct., 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).

Voting Freedom Rings in Philadelphia

by Rachel Freund

"When you vote, it makes you feel good. You put things in motion," says self-advocate Lori M. Lori was one of 27 advocates and supporters who, for two days, attended the Project Vote Train-the-Trainer initiative held in mid-August at Vision for Equality in Philadelphia.

The training was co-sponsored by Vision for Equality, the Disability Voting Coalition of PA (DVC), the Disability Rights Network (DRN) and the National Technical Assistance Center for Voting and Cognitive Access (NTAC) – an organization that assists protection and advocacy systems, election officials and people with disabilities to make voting accessible for all citizens. The Center is managed and operated by leaders in the self-advocacy movement.

Pennsylvania was one of



Vision for Equality hosted a voter training initiative for advocates in Philly.

three states selected by NTAC for the training this year; the fact that we have a strong network of grassroots voting advocates across the Commonwealth through DVC will help us to build on the momentum that the training created.

Trainees met at Vision for Equality (VFE) on Arch Street in their beautiful training facilities.

Kathy Foy, from VFE, took care of

every detail and helped everyone feel welcome.

Those who participated in the training represented many organizations, including Self-Advocates United as One, Speaking for Ourselves, Vision for Equality, Ken Crest, Special People in Northeast, COMHAR, the League of Women Voters, the Committee of Seventy and the Aphasia Support Group.

Trainers from NTAC – Nancy Ward, Tia Nellis and

Ruby Moore – told stories, educated, inspired and motivated the group. The training included role playing, discussion and a wealth of information about voting. Participants brainstormed together to address barriers to voting that often keep people with disabilities from casting their ballots on Election Day.

– 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 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.

DVC is supported by generous funding from the PA Development Disabilities Council.

DVC is also supported by Mental Health America Allegheny County.

Training participants Carla, Joni and Brian acted out a situation in which a young woman's parents tell her she isn't allowed to vote because of her disability. "I'm 32 years old," Carla tells her parents in the role play. "Watch me."

Several more participants – Robert R., Robert B. and Colleen – acted out what they would do if they asked a poll worker for help and were told that he or she was "too busy." Robert R., who played Voter #1, asked a poll worker, played by Colleen, for assistance. "I'm too busy," she snapped.

"I will wait," Robert R. patiently told her while confiding to the audience, "Next time, I will bring a friend to help me."

Robert B., who played Voter #2, asked the poll worker if she could help him vote. Just as before, she barked, "I'm too busy for that."

Robert B. gently responded, "Then could you please get someone else who can help me?"

Acting out the issues allowed audience members to think about what they might do if they found themselves in a similar situation. It was a great way to problem solve together and learn from one another.

Attendees to the training also had the opportunity to role play how to participate in a candidate debate, which was quite spirited. Our three trainers, Tia, Nancy and Ruby took on the role of the candidates. Nancy played a candidate who was living with a disability, and seemed to have a good grasp of the issues. Ruby played the part of a candidate who did not seem interested in the experiences of people with disabilities. "I will make sure there are plenty of workshops for 'you people' to work in because I know you like to be around your own kind," she told the crowd.

However, the crowd did not support her ideas. "I do not want to work in a workshop; it's boring," said one audience member.

"But you can earn 59 cents a day," stated candidate Ruby.

"Could you live on 59 cents a day?" asked another irate participant.

Those who attended the training asked the candidates pointed questions and reacted to their responses. When the debate came to an end, a straw vote was taken. Candidate Nancy, who understood disability issues, naturally won the election. At the conclusion of the exercise, the trainers explained to participants that this was an example of why it is so important to learn about the candidates and what they stand for. Television commercials usually don't tell voters enough and politicians make important decisions that affect people's lives, sometimes for years to come.

Those who attended the training also received information on voters' rights, how to get prepared for an election and how to help others get registered to vote. Participants will use the information they are now equipped with to conduct trainings in their own organizations and communities.

Over the course of the two days, people got to know each other, relationships deepened and teams were developed. "We got something here," said Donna from COMHAR. "Working together, we'll make sure that everyone in our organization is ready for November 2."

DVC will follow up the Project Vote training with a shorter version of the training to be held in various parts of the state. If you have a group of 15 to 20 people who are interested in learning more about voting and building our voting bloc, contact DVC Project Coordinator Rachel Freund to talk about setting up a training. She can be reached at 1-877-391-3820 (extension2002) or rfreund@mhaac.net.

For more information on the National Technical Assistance Center for Voting and Cognitive Access go to www.govoter.org.

Don't forget to vote on November 2, 2010!

- **For more information of finding your polling place, who's running and more go to: www.votespa.com**
- **Also check out the Organizer's Guide to Election Administration at <http://elections.neworganizing.com/guide/>**

Federal Government Working to Enforce NVRA

by David Harris-Gershon

According to the United States Department of Justice, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 was passed by Congress “to enhance voting opportunities for every American.” The law is sometimes referred to as the “Motor Voter Act” because it mandates that all Americans be given the opportunity to register to vote when they apply for a driver's license. However, the law goes far beyond just giving drivers the opportunity to register. It also requires that every state provide voter registration opportunities for citizens using state-funded service agencies. This includes individuals seeking:

- Disability assistance
- Medicaid
- Food stamps
- Welfare assistance
- Low-income child health care assistance

The importance of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) cannot be emphasized enough, particularly for those in the disability community. Take the case of Gary John, whose story was recently told by Marie Wilson in her *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* story titled “Disabilities Can be Overcome When it Comes to Casting Ballots.” Wilson writes:

Gary John voted for the first time in the 2008 presidential election by nodding his head and saying “yes” as poll workers marked his choices on a voting machine.

“I really felt free when I voted,” John, who has cerebral palsy, said in an e-mail interview through an interpreter. “I felt like a real citizen.”

Gary John registered to vote at an independent living facility supported by the State of Pennsylvania, which is required by the NVRA to provide voter registration opportunities to those seeking or changing services. Without the NVRA, would John have ever registered and had the experience of voting? Perhaps not.

While there is nothing inherently political about the NVRA – its goal is to give access to voting for *all* Americans – politics have sometimes hampered its en-

forcement. The NVRA has not been rigorously enforced over the past ten years. According to a report submitted to Congress by the nonpartisan voter engagement organization, Project Vote, research shows that “it is clear that many problems the NVRA sought to address remain uncured and its full promise remains unfulfilled.” (*The National Voter Registration Act at Fifteen*, Estelle Rogers)



The U.S. Department of Justice is working to make sure everyone has voting access.

However, there is good news: the Federal government is stepping up to the plate and making sure that states know the NVRA is going to be enforced. Recently, the U.S. Department of Justice sent clear guidelines to all 50 states, reminding them exactly which agencies are federally-required to provide voter registration opportunities

and how exactly they are to go about doing so. The Justice Department emphasized this very important point for anyone in the disability community: **not only must service organizations provide voter registration forms, they must offer help to everyone who needs assistance in filling out their forms and mail the forms to the local elections division.**

If states do not comply with the NVRA, the Justice Department will likely begin filing lawsuits against them. This has already happened in two states – Ohio and Missouri – where independent groups, upset about the lack of NVRA enforcement, went to court and forced service organizations to comply with NVRA. And the results have been amazing. Almost 300,000 new voters were immediately put on the voting rolls in these two states once NVRA was being implemented.

The bottom line for anyone in the disability community is this: you have the right, as a U.S. Citizen, to not only receive voter registration information from state-funded service agencies, but the right to receive help in filling out your forms. And it appears that the federal government is going to be working hard to make sure that the State of Pennsylvania gives all of its residents the rights afforded by NVRA.

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

Disability Voting Coalition of PA
c/o Mental Health America-Allegheny County
100 Sheridan Square, 2nd floor • Pittsburgh, PA 15206

