



We Count!

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

Feature Story: Because of My Mental Illness

During the run-up to the 2008 general election, Tim Maurice – coordinator for Our Friends' Place, a drop-in center for mental health consumers in Sharon – would casually ask people if they were registered to vote.

He found that few were. Perplexed as to why so few mental health consumers were not registered to vote, Tim had a brief encounter that would change everything.

Approaching a man at Our Friends' Place, he asked, "Are you registered to vote?"

"No."

"Would you like to register?"

"I can't."

"Why not?" Tim asked.

"Because of my mental illness," was his reply.

Because of my mental illness. His response stunned Tim, and he thought, *There must be others who feel the same. But how many?* Concerned, Tim thought about the need to educate his community, to start a voter registration drive

and let people know that they were allowed to register, that they counted, that they needed to be heard.



The winning T-shirt slogan: "Stand Up, Speak Out – Make Your Voice Count"

These thoughts stayed in the back of Tim's mind until he attended a government relations course taught by Anne Leisure, Director of Legislative Affairs at the Pennsylvania Community Providers Association (PCPA). After learning about how the legislative processes worked in Pennsylvania, Tim thought, *We need to do something formal in Mercer County. We need to get people involved and registered.*

Staff at the Community Counseling Center (CCC) and Mercer County Behavioral Health were immediately

supportive of Tim's idea for a voter registration drive (including Angelo Stamoolis, Chief Executive Officer of CCC). Amanda Kokoski and Kelly Burke helped Tim put up fliers, write articles, and place ads to promote his efforts. He quickly assembled eight consumers, and with the help of Rachel Freund and the Disability Voting Coalition of PA, trained them to become Voter Educators. (DVCPA also provided resources to help with stipends for the trained Voter Educators.) Then came the T-shirt idea. Tim wanted an incentive for people to register, something fun and useful. *T-shirts would be perfect*, he thought to himself.

With help from support staff, Tim received a \$1,000 grant from Western Region Community Support Program to buy and print T-shirts. He held a slogan contest for the shirts to generate excitement. (The winning slogan: Stand Up, Speak Out – Make Your Vote Count.)

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How Can I Register to Vote?

Following these simple steps will allow you to vote in the upcoming General Election in November, 2010:

1. Visit the DVCPA website at www.dvcpa.org;
2. Scroll to the bottom, find the box entitled "Register to Vote" and click the link in the box;
3. Click PA on the map (or your state of residence), fill out the online information and follow the directions;
4. Download your completed application generated by Congress.org;
5. Print out your completed application and mail it to the address provided.

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!"

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Today, with T-shirts, voter registration forms and the desire to help mental health consumers have their political voices heard by Pennsylvania politicians, Tim and the Voter Educators travel throughout Mercer County, looking for consumers who haven't registered to vote. "We've already registered around 40 consumers," says Tim, who is trying to make a push before the coming general primary on May 18. "But our goal is 100. That's where we'd like to get."

Recently, a consumer who registered to vote found Tim at Our Friends' Place, reached into a pocket and pulled out his voter registration card. "The look of happiness, of pride on his face was special," says Tim. And it's images like this – of people feeling empowered, of feeling like they count – which continues to motivate Tim and his staff.

The work is never done. In the near future, Tim will be bringing various state representatives in to speak with consumers, and the League of Women Voters has volunteered to bring in electronic voting booths so consumers can practice on the equipment before the next election.

Tim still remembers that first moment when he realized there were consumers who thought that they weren't allowed to vote. *Because of my mental illness*, the man had said. Thanks to his efforts, and support from staff both in Sharon and throughout the State of Pennsylvania, more and more consumers are realizing that not only can their voices be heard, but that their voices must be heard.

2010 Pennsylvania General Primary Tuesday, May 18

On May 18, the polls will be open for the primary election. But what is a primary? And how is it different than a regular election?

- ☑ In a primary election, voters choose which candidates they want to represent each political party in the coming general election.
- ☑ Pennsylvania holds what is called a "closed" primary, which means only those registered as Republicans can cast votes on the Republican primary ballot, and only those registered as Democrats can cast votes on the Democratic primary ballot. Basically, if you've chosen a political "team," you can only vote for candidates on your team in a primary election in Pennsylvania.
- ☑ In a primary election, voters choose the candidates who will move on to the general election, where they run against each other. Think in terms of *American Idol* – the primary election is the finals, and the general election is the finale.
- ☑ In the general election, only one candidate from each political party is on the ballot for each office. The voting is completely open, which means voters can cast their vote for whoever they want, regardless of their political affiliation.



Pennsylvania General Primary Election May 18, 2010

Partial list of candidates for PA and U.S. offices

United States Senator

Joe Sestak (D)
Arlen Specter (D)
Joseph Vodvarka (D)
Peg Luksik (R)
Pat Toomey (R)

Governor

Dan Onorato (D)
Jack Wagner (D)
Anthony H. Williams (D)
Joseph M. Hoeffel (D)
Tom Corbett (R)
Samuel E. Rohrer (R)

For a full list of candidates, including those for lieutenant governor, state senators & state representatives in your district, visit the Pennsylvania Department of State at www.dos.state.pa.us, click on the "Voting and Elections" tab on the left, and then click "2010 Candidate List."

Five State Politicians Join the DVCPA

by Carol Kirk

Our coalition continues to grow as we welcome five new members from the Pennsylvania Senate, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and the City Councils of Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

Senator Jim Ferlo is a State Senator from Western PA; a constituent of his and DVC member, Verna Johnson, invited him to join DVC. Ferlo told us, "Elections are the keystone of our democracy. I believe it must be a priority of state government to protect the rights of all citizens to free and fair access to our election process. It is particularly important that we remove barriers which prevent citizens from going to the polls, including those in our community with obstacles to mobility. I joined DVC to better educate myself on the best practices available to state governments for achieving this goal and to be a leader in advocating for those ideas in Harrisburg."

Senator Wayne D. Fontana is committed to making Western Pennsylvania and the state as a whole a better place to live and work. When asked why he joined the DVC, this was his response: "I joined the Disability Voting Coalition after a constituent of mine, Dawn Miller, asked me to consider it. I have been an advocate for individuals with disabilities since my election and believe that voting rights, access and education are an important part of that advocacy. I look forward to working with the coalition to address the issues that are of interest and importance to them."



Senator Jim Ferlo, one of 5 state officials who recently joined DVC

Rep. Joseph Preston, Jr. has been a member of the PA House of Representatives since 1983. Rep. Preston was invited by DVC member Verna Johnson to join. He reports that he has always been a strong advocate of voting, access and education. As a former Chairman of the House Committee on State Government (which has jurisdiction over elections and voting in Pennsylvania), Rep. Preston learned firsthand that not only does every vote count, but so too does every voter's access to the polls.

Gloria Martin-Roberts took her oath of office in January of 2004 to become a Harrisburg City Councilwoman. This is how she describes her level of dedication to her community: "I desire to serve honestly and fervently the people of our city. My spirit is impassioned over serving the people."

Councilwoman Donna Reed Miller has served as Eighth District Councilwoman in Philadelphia since January 1, 1996. As a leader in economic development, her efforts have led to a large number of affordable housing units and economic development projects that have had a positive economic impact on blighted neighborhoods.

These public servants have demonstrated their concern for our issues simply by becoming a part of our coalition. Although it takes little effort to join, it delivers a powerful statement. Thank you to the new members of the DVCPA. Voting provides choice and choice empowers – choose to join!

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. If you are not already a member, we invite you to join DVCPA. Membership is free. For information, contact Rachel Freund – DVCPA Project Coordinator – at 1-877-391-3820 or rfreund@mhaac.net.

The Disability Voting Coalition of PA is supported by generous funding from the PA Developmental Disabilities Council. DVCPA is also supported by Mental Health America - Allegheny County.

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**

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