



## Voting as a Form of Empowerment

### A Technical Assistance Bulletin for Sexual Assault Counselors and Advocates

#### *Why Vote?*

"Be heard, make a difference, vote." We've all heard variations of these words, but does voting really make a difference? It's easy to feel that it may not. In fact, even if we do believe that voting does matter, it may be difficult to convince our clients that it does, especially when they are in crisis and dealing with more pressing issues. The most oppressed groups are often the least heard. Yet, oppressed groups are often impacted the most by voting results and policy decisions. Advocates can help bridge this gap. Registering to vote and voting can be empowering for survivors of sexual violence, connecting them to a larger community and giving them a voice in the decisions that impact their lives.

Voting really can make a difference. Consider how close presidential elections can be. Local elections also show how a single vote can impact community decisions related to education, land, services, and other local issues. Additionally, state and federal legislators listen more attentively to constituents who vote. By registering to vote and voting, individuals can have a greater voice in the policy-making process and in their communities.

Women and people of color fought tirelessly for the right to vote in the United States. Women did not have the right to vote until 1920. Women were jailed for protesting the denial of suffrage to ensure that future generations of women would have this important right. People of color have experienced and currently experience discrimination when registering to vote and voting. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a civil rights attempt to remedy this oppression. Some might take their right to vote for granted, but people, such as suffragists and civil rights activists, dedicated their life's work to expanding the right to vote to all persons.

Because survivors of sexual violence are often struggling to heal, to get through their daily lives, and to navigate the criminal justice, medical, and social service systems, voting may not be on their radar of "things to do." However, there are reasons to introduce voting as a form of empowerment, at a time that is appropriate and useful to the survivor:

- ♦ Voting is a form of self-determination, which almost anyone can easily incorporate into their lives.
- ♦ Voting can connect individual victims and survivors to a larger community, breaking their isolation.
- ♦ Voting is a simpler process than most people think. A little advocacy can go a long way in increasing voting knowledge and skills.



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**"The vote is a power,  
a weapon of offense  
and defense, a  
prayer.**

**Understand what it  
means and what it  
can do for your  
country. Use it..."**

Carrie Chapman Catt  
(1859 -1947)

Suffragist, founder of the  
League of Women Voters

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***Who can register to vote?***

Anyone who is at least 18 and a US citizen may vote. You also must be a resident in your election district for at least 30 days.

***What if my client does not have a permanent residence?***

A person may still be able to register to vote. To advocate for clients in specific circumstances, contact the Department of State at 717-787-5280.

***What if safety and address confidentiality is an issue for the survivor?***

Clients registered with the PA Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) will need to register to vote in person at the counter in the county voter registration offices. In order to limit the exposure of the confidential information, the participant must ask to speak directly to the Voter Registration/Election Director or someone designated by the Director. Clients should be strongly encouraged to call in advance and make an appointment with the Director or designee to ensure that they will be seen.

Participants will fill out a Voter Registration Mail Application (VRMA) where they will include their residential address. This form, along with any other document the participant files with the office, shall be kept in a locked, confidential file. The original VRMA form will not be available in the open records requests unless directed under the supervision of a judge or in a judge's chambers. For more information on voting when participating in the ACP, contact the PA Office of the Victim Advocate at 1-800-563-6399.

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**Your choice matters as much as the choice of your spouse, or your boss, or your partner, or a millionaire CEO, or a homeless person - unless you make no choice at all.**

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***Is it legal for my center to run a voter registration drive in Pennsylvania?***

A voter registration drive can be held by a 501c3 as long as the center does not accept any financial compensation for registering individuals to vote AND does not try to influence how a person registers or votes along party lines. Voter registration applications can be obtained through:

- ♦ your local county voter registration office
- ♦ the League of Women Voters Pennsylvania, 1-800-692-7281 ext. 10
- ♦ the Pennsylvania State Voter Registration office, 1-800-552-VOTE

***How can I integrate voter registration activities into my existing (and very busy) schedule?***

- ♦ Use your judgment to assess the timeliness, relevance, and usefulness of information to victims and survivors. Not everyone will be ready for this information.
- ♦ Consider discussing towards the end of counseling work with an individual, depending on the interest/needs of client.
- ♦ Consider discussing as a part of an "empowerment," "self-determination," or "social activism" discussion in support group settings.
- ♦ Consider discussing with significant others when they express a desire to take action on a broader scale
- ♦ Post information such as posters, brochures, and voter registration cards in waiting rooms and common areas. Offer to help fill out and mail the voter registration forms.
- ♦ Follow up with victims and survivors regarding above mentioned resources, i.e., do you need help filling out the card, do you have questions, etc.
- ♦ Integrate voter registration into prevention education, collaborations, health and safety fairs, etc. Ask collaborative partners to consider running voter registration drives in their respective agencies, etc.

## Resources

### **Pennsylvania Department of State**

This state government Web site is chock-full of information including voter registration applications, tips for first time voters, information on how to actually use the voting machines, absentee ballots and lots more!  
<http://www.votespa.com/>

### **The League of Women Voters Pennsylvania**

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. The LWV can provide voter registration forms, voting guides, and other useful information.

<http://www.palwv.org>  
800-692-7281

### **Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York**

This Web site provides helpful dos and don'ts for keeping your voter registration drive non-partisan.  
<http://www.npcny.org/info/adv8.htm>

### **Office of the Victim Advocate Address Confidentiality Program**

The Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) is administered by the Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) and provides an important service to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. The program has two basic parts. First, the ACP provides a substitute address for victims who have moved to a new location unknown to their perpetrator. The second part of the program provides participants with a free first-class confidential mail forwarding service.

Detailed information on the ACP can be found on this Web site.  
<http://www.pbpp.state.pa.us/ova/site/default.asp>