

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

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Get Out the Vote

Make every voice heard on Election Day

Election Day 2008 is quickly approaching with less than two weeks until Tuesday, November 4. As *Mobilizer* readers are well aware, people experiencing homelessness represent a group of voters often disenfranchised by systematic barriers such as lack of a stable residence, lack of proper identification, or confusion over state law relative to voting rights and incarceration. Having worked hard to register new voters over the past several months, many HCH projects and local Consumer Advisory Boards are educating HCH clients about the importance of voting and identifying ways to get folks to the polls on Election Day. Providing homeless voters the opportunity to participate in the electoral process allows them to exercise a basic civil right. The National Council encourages *Mobilizer* readers to engage in “Get-Out-the-Vote” activities in your community.

Tips for Election Season Advocacy *Nonpartisan Politics for Nonprofits*

Particularly during the final potentially heated days of the Election Season, not-for-profit organizations like most Health Care for the Homeless projects must take particular care to avoid even the appearance of candidate endorsement in order to avoid jeopardizing their tax exempt status. According to the Internal Revenue Code, nonprofits are “absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office.”¹ This means nonprofits must remain *neutral* and *objective*. This prohibition does not restrict an organization’s ability to conduct nonpartisan voter registration, certain nonpartisan issue advocacy, and “Get-Out-the-Vote” activities. Nonetheless, the pursuit of these activities often is complicated by differing interpretations of the legalities guiding nonprofit activism and the internal policies of some organizations which may altogether restrict election-related activity in order to avoid the impression of partisanship. In general, HCH projects engaging in election-related activity should be mindful of the following “dos” and “don’ts.”

¹ U.S. Code—Title 26—Internal Revenue Code. United States Department of the Treasury.

Election Season Lists of “Dos” and “Don’ts”

<u>Do</u>	<u>Don’t</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do voter registration. Encourage people to register to vote in a non-partisan manner. You may not convey a bias for or against a particular candidate or target a political party. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t endorse or oppose a candidate or political party. To publicly make a written or oral statement supporting or opposing a particular candidate violates the 501 (c)(3) tax code.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do voter education. Provide non-leading information about public issues, such as health care reform, and the importance of voting. You may also work to educate candidates about the issues important to you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t wear shirts, buttons, etc. for any candidate while representing your agency. Nonprofits cannot endorse candidates or even create the appearance of candidate preference.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do organize get-out-the-vote drives. If available, you may use your HCH clinic’s vehicles or those owned by volunteer registrants to drive voters to the polls. The vehicles may not have partisan literature, such as bumper stickers, or other partisan info attached. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t use nonprofit resources to advocate for or against any candidate or political party. Nonprofits may not use funds, facilities, contact lists, time, etc. in support or opposition of a candidate.

HCH projects are encouraged to seek legal council for specific details about election-related prohibitions within the federal tax code.

The challenges involved in avoiding the appearance of partisanship in the pursuit of election-related activities are minimal when contrasted with the incredible outcome of allowing people experiencing homelessness to participate in the electoral process. Nonpartisan political advocacy is good for nonprofits because it advances our missions and strengthens communities by allowing voices to be heard.

ACTION:

- **For voter education materials,** review the National Council’s *2008 Election Season Guide to Health Care Reform* at <http://www.nhchc.org/2008reform/>
- **For more specific information about acceptable political activities for nonprofit organizations** visit the Alliance for Justice at <http://www.afj.org/>
- **Organize a Get-Out-the-Vote Campaign.** Encourage your board, staff, volunteers, and clients to vote on Election Day, Tuesday, November 4. Provide information about the importance of voting, polling locations, and relevant local law about incarceration and the right to vote. If possible, provide transportation to the polls. For tips on organizing a GOTV drive visit, <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/getinvolved/projects/vote/gotv.html>

- **For more information**, contact the Council's Health Policy Organizer, Adrienne Breidenstine, at abreidenstine@hchmd.org or 443-703-1337.

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