



## **LET OUR VOICES BE HEARD: THE ROLE OF NON-PROFITS IN VOTER REGISTRATION AND VOTER EDUCATION**

### **Complying with the law**

It is a common misconception that tax-exempt 501 (c) (3) organizations cannot get involved in political campaigns. In fact, there are a great many things that 501 (c) (3) organizations can do, and only a few that they cannot. As a tax-exempt organization, you are legally allowed to participate in voter registration, education, and mobilization projects, and to educate elected officials and people who want to be elected about your concerns. **Organizations that profess empowerment and self-determination as values have an ethical obligation to engage the people they serve in exercising their rights as American citizens.**

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, also known as the "**Motor Voter Act**," makes it easier for all Americans to exercise their fundamental right to vote. One of the basic purposes of the Act is to increase the historically low registration rates of persons with disabilities that have resulted from discrimination. The Motor Voter Act ***requires*** all State-funded programs that are primarily engaged in providing services to persons with disabilities to:

- provide all program applicants with voter registration forms,
- to assist them in completing the forms, and
- to send completed forms to the appropriate State official.

For more information, contact U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Voting Section - 1800 G, Washington, D.C. 20530; [www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting); (800) 253-3931 (voice/TTY).

### **The most important principle for 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations to observe is**

**nonpartisanship!** This principle makes sense. After all, our community service goals are shared by people who belong to various political parties or no party at all. It's a principle that people expect us to uphold. People want to know that we are fair and evenhanded, and don't play favorites or turn away anyone because of their political beliefs. It's also a principle embodied in the tax law that governs nonprofit organizations.

Elections are an important part of how our society runs. Helping voters become better informed on the candidates running for office and on the issues vying for attention is a legitimate activity for a nonprofit. Trying to influence how people vote or helping or harming the interests of a candidate or party are not, however, legal activities for a tax-exempt nonprofit.

### **Here are some examples of activities that can be conducted:**

- **Educate Candidates.** Make sure that all candidates benefit from your knowledge of mental health and disability issues and the impact that federal, state and local policies have on your community. Share fact sheets, issue briefs, impact statements and other research that will raise candidates' awareness of your issues.

- **Distribute Candidate Questionnaires.** An effective way to get candidates to state their positions for the record is to submit questions on a range of relevant issues to which they can respond. Such statements may be useful if a candidate is elected and has to act on proposed legislation or another policy proposal.
- **Sponsor Candidate Forums or Debates.** Host a nonpartisan forum that allows candidates to hear community concerns and share their perspectives on issues. You may also wish to consider collaborating with other community organizations to sponsor a forum or debate.
- **Publish a Legislative Scorecard or a Voter Guide as a Coalition.** The distribution of legislator and candidate voting records is permitted if such activities fairly reflect the positions and actions of all major candidates in the race. Voter guides on multiple issues are most effective when their publication and distribution is sponsored by a broad coalition of community organizations.
- **Offer your facility as a meeting hall.** Organizations can offer this resource to all interested candidates.
- **Organize Voter Registration and Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) Activities.** You can sponsor a nonpartisan voter registration and education drive to help people fill out registration cards. It is important to note, however, that organizations cannot use federal funds to conduct this activity. Whether GOTV activities are conducted by a single organization or as a coalition, they can be effective in encouraging people to focus on issues when they vote.
- **Conduct public education and training activities.** Hold public education activities and trainings to inform the public about individual participation in the political process. Staff members of your organization may work for candidates as volunteers on their personal time but cannot do so as a representative of the organization.

For more information and ideas check out these resources:

- National Low Income Housing Coalition Voterization Project: <http://www.nlihc.org/VOTE/> or 202/662-1530
- Alliance for Justice [www.allianceforjustice.org](http://www.allianceforjustice.org) /202.822.6070