

CAU in the News



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Community Access Unlimited's mission is to provide community access through effective and comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and at-risk youth, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives in the community.

VOTER TURNOUT BY LOCAL PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES FAR EXCEEDS NATIONAL LEVELS

Community Access Unlimited survey shows its members are much more politically active than general public despite continued obstacles to voting

On the eve of the 2013 presidential inauguration Community Access Unlimited (CAU) released information that showed its members with disabilities participated in the 2012 presidential election at a level that far exceeded the overall national level of voting.

More than 84 percent of CAU members with disabilities cast a vote in the Nov. 6 election, according to results of a survey issued by the National Council on Disability and conducted by CAU staff and members following the November elections. That compares with about 57.5 percent of registered Americans voted in the 2012 national elections, according to the Center for the Study of the American Electorate.

In addition, people with disabilities historically have voted at a level that lags that of voters without disabilities. In the 2008 presidential election, 64 percent of eligible people without disabilities voted while just 57 percent of people with disabilities cast ballots, according to a study by Rutgers University.

"That makes the turnout of our members for this election even more impressive," said Gillian Speiser, community organizer at CAU. "People with disabilities are a significant voting constituency and it is important that they make sure their concerns are heard. Our members do that."

The Election Day turnout by CAU members followed a get-out-the-vote campaign held at the agency. The campaign was spearheaded by the New American Movement for People with Disabilities (NAMPWD), an advocacy group within CAU that promotes social, political and economic equality for all citizens.

CAU held information meetings and invited representatives from the Union County Board of Elections to speak about registering and voting. NAMPWD created a voting booklet for members covering such topics as how to register, poll locations, challenges members might encounter voting and the importance of voting. Members received email alerts about the registration deadline and members called fellow members to remind them to vote on Election Day.

Sid Katz is one of the leaders of NAMPWD. He voted for the first time in 1968 at the age of 18. A person with disabilities, Katz paid close attention to the presidential campaign in 1964 and noted that neither candidate talked about issues of concern to people with disabilities.

"In 1968 I watched both conventions and sat through days of speeches, listening to the platforms," he said, remembering congressional candidate Shirley Chisholm speaking at 4:00 a.m.

Since then Katz has advocated for people with disabilities to become politically aware and active, often driving fellow members to the polls on Election Day.

"We have a voice and we have a right to choose who we want to represent us," Katz said. "It's important we get friendly with the politicians. It's our life. You can't walk in my shoes but you also can't step on my feet. We have to educate people about people with disabilities and our issues."

Among those issues are difficulties people with disabilities continue to face in casting their vote. Over the last 10 years 8 percent of people with disabilities have encountered difficulties voting, according to the Center for an Accountable Society. A 2009 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found 73 percent of polling places had potential impediments for people with disabilities.

Challenges CAU members faced Nov. 6 included a lack of wheel chair-accessible entrances, having their eligibility questioned or being treated harshly by poll workers, CAU staff assisting members in voting having to fill out forms and general disorganization, Speiser said.

On the up side, survey results showed that 7 percent of CAU members with disabilities voted for the first time in the past elections. Denise DeRoy is a 50-year-old member who cast her first ballot Nov. 6, spurred on by the get-out-the-vote campaign, she said.

"It felt good," she said. "I never voted before. I wanted to try it for the first time."

Now DeRoy is hooked. She plans to vote in many elections going forward, including those for governor and local offices.

NAMPWD hosted a party on Election Day to gather voting experiences and allow members to watch the results of the election. Many CAU members also will pay close attention to next week's inauguration, knowing they played a role in the election, according to Speiser.

"There are 54 million people with disabilities in this nation, accounting for 19 percent of the population," she said. "More than 45 percent of them work, meaning they pay taxes. Twelve percent of people with non-severe disabilities and 27 percent of people with severe disabilities live beneath the poverty line. While they have issues that are unique to them, they share many of the same issues that concern people without disabilities, such as government spending and services and the economy."

"It's wonderful that our members turned out to vote at such a significant level. Now our goal is for all people with disabilities to exercise that same right and help make a difference."