

The Legislative Lookout

Issue 2
September 2008

Published and distributed by the Catskill Center for Independence, “The Legislative Lookout” is a newsletter devoted to improving the quality of life for individuals with disabilities by taking action to achieve a barrier free, fully inclusive society.

The vehicle used to accomplish this goal is the Statewide Systems Advocacy Network (SSAN). This newsletter is designed to keep you informed about the goals, actions and accomplishments of the SSAN. It also provides ideas and avenues for interested citizens to get involved.



A Message from Your Systems Advocate

Welcome to the second issue of “The Legislative Lookout,” where an open invitation is always extended to anyone interested in becoming involved in the Statewide Systems Advocacy Network (SSAN). This newsletter is designed to introduce readers to the numerous barriers confronting persons with disabilities and point out the variety of ways individuals can participate in order to bring about positive change in their community, their family, and even improve their own quality of life.



What makes a difference in our advocacy network, is that people don’t work alone, but work in concert with many others.

With the upcoming presidential election being close at hand and of such monumental importance, we are devoting this issue of the Lookout to the significance of your vote by bringing you a number of articles dedicated to the importance of voting and how YOUR vote will shape your future. So, being that you’ll be voting in this election, you’ll need to read on.

Before you do though, remember, the Center is always on the “lookout” for new advocates interested in getting involved in the community by becoming an SSAN volunteer. No previous experience is necessary, just a desire to be

part of an exciting team working together to create a barrier free environment for all New Yorkers.

To learn more about how you can become involved in this exciting process contact:

Charles Reichardt, Systems Advocate
607.432.8000 or ccfi@ccfi.us

So if you haven't already done so, join today. Tell your family and friends about the SSAN and then get ready and let your voice be heard! You'll be glad you did!



“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead (Friends of Women's Rights)



In the News

“In the News” is a regular section of “The Legislative Lookout” and will provide information about hot disability related topics. An “In the News” companion section on the Center’s web site (www.ccfi.us) has several recent news articles, letters to the editor, and other documents dealing with a variety of disability related issues.



As reflected by many of the more recent action alerts distributed through the network, the SSAN has recently been working on a variety of disability issues including:

- Advocating for increased independent living center funding by contacting Governor Paterson and local legislators and requesting their support.
- Advocating with the Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR) about New York’s need for more affordable accessible housing.
- Working to compel the Division of Budget to make affordable accessible housing a priority in New York State in 2008!
- Establishing standards for “Visitability” in state law requiring all newly constructed single-family houses, townhouses and ground-

floor units of duplexes and triplexes built with public funds, be made accessible.

- Assisting Senator Larkin in drafting legislation designed to improve polling site access for voters with disabilities by eliminating all waivers and establishing enforcement provisions.
- Encouraging Senators John McCain and Barack Obama to attend the Presidential Candidates Forum on July 26th in Columbus, Ohio.
- Helping to introduce a bill requiring transportation service providers, such as taxis, limousines and hotel shuttles, to purchase accessible vehicles or otherwise ensure that they have the capacity to serve people with disabilities.
- And most recently, demanding the State Board of Elections approve procedures ensuring ballots created using Ballot Marking Devices (BMD) are counted on Election night at the close of the polls.

None of the above would have been addressed if you as an advocate had not added your voice and challenged the status quo. When you meet those people with a “what’s the use” attitude, do as Euripides, the Greek tragic dramatist, once did. Tell them, “*Your very silence shows you agree.*”



Why Should You Vote?

Consider for a moment the democracy you live in, which means that you really get to have a say in who runs your country. By way of this privilege you also get a say about how your country is run. It is very easy to be blasé about your right to vote and take a "whatever, who cares" kind of attitude about it. However, you shouldn't brush this great honor off so quickly. Sure, registering can be a bit of a chore and you have to head down to the (hopefully accessible) polling site on Election Day to record your choice. This takes some time out of your day and may cost you a few dollars in gas. Whether you know it or not, these are very small prices to pay for the right to vote.

In my opinion, party analysts sadly underestimate the voting potential of the disabled community. Yes, it is true; the trend analysts who tell party spin-

doctors where to target their advertising dollars and public relations efforts traditionally overlook persons with disabilities. Why? Because, the sad reality is that election year after election year the percentage of eligible persons with disabilities who actually register and vote has been small when compared with other demographics. This doesn't mean that the disability market isn't a force, just that it isn't a main motivator in the drafting of campaign platforms and pre-election advertising. In reality though, with 53 million people, the disability community can be a tremendous force. It represents the largest voter block group in the country. The biggest election issues directly effect people with and without disabilities alike.

The wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places, the economy, the housing market, the energy crisis and employment issues are just a few of the current hot topics that directly effect the quality of life of our nation NOW. Think about the future and the world you and your children will one day "inherit" from the so called "power generation." Add additional environmental concerns, fossil fuel consumption, farming, livestock funding (the food supply is shrinking with every farm that can't sustain itself) and the list gets longer. Add any issues that are near and dear to your heart on a personal level and the list becomes a little overwhelming. Don't vote and you effectively throw away your ability to have any influence on how these issues play out in your world!

The only way democracy works is if citizens, young and old, disabled or not, are active participants in the voting process. A government by the people, for the people, just can't work without the people. This is a simple fact. Like a car without an engine, or a computer without a hard drive, a democracy without voters is just a shell and has no power. While it is easy to say, "one vote doesn't make a difference" the reality is that every vote counts... have you heard of Florida? Also you have to remember that as an individual, your vote may seem to be little more than a whisper, but when your vote is combined with the votes of others who share your views it becomes a loud voice and the more like-voters there are, the louder that voice grows. So get out there and make your vote be heard.

Voting is a tremendous gift. Believe it or not, people just like you in other countries actually fight and even die for this right, a right that so many in democratic nations take for granted. Vote because you can, and if you don't you may one day wake up in a country where you can't. It can (and has) happened...so keep reading and then register to vote.



“America is the greatest, freest and most decent society in existence. It is an oasis of goodness in a desert of cynicism and barbarism. This country, once an experiment unique in the world, is now the last best hope for the world.”

Dinesh D'Souza

“What’s So Great About America” 2002

Our Right to Vote

At a time in our history when so much is at stake in the upcoming presidential election, many have come to view voting as an increasingly important and complicated philosophical issue, as much as it is a mechanical one, especially for people with disabilities in New York State.

The right to vote is one of the most cherished rights that we have as United States citizens. One of the major reasons our system of government has remained strong throughout our history is because it is based on the fair and democratic election of our representatives.

Universal suffrage is not a new concept. In fact, in early colonial America, the basic principle governing voting was that voters should have a “stake” in society and votes should be restricted to those who owned property or paid taxes, only these people were deemed committed members of the community and were sufficiently independent to vote. Each of the thirteen colonies required voters either to own a certain amount of land or personal property, or to pay a specified amount in taxes.

Since then, we have fought an uphill battle to see the right to vote extended. In 1919, for example, we finally came to our senses and made sure that women had the right to vote. As late as 1964, the Voting Rights Act was passed because there were systematic efforts being carried out in several states to make sure that many African-Americans would not vote. There are still millions of Americans who are not registered to vote and in spite of various pieces of legislation, many of these millions are people with disabilities.

With more than 53 million people with disabilities, we are part of the largest single minority in the country. This should make us a powerful voting group that both political parties should want to win over.

As citizens of the United States with disabilities, all we want is for all people, including those with disabilities to be able to exercise their fundamental constitutionally guaranteed civil right to vote by fully and meaningfully participating in the election process. It is clear that all issues of accessibility must be addressed to make our right to vote independently a reality. Most important of all, is that we are registered to vote.

Remember... voting is our voice. Those we elect are responsible for making numerous decisions affecting the rest of our lives. Even though we may not realize it right away, down the road our lives could be changed in many ways. If we do not vote, there is no reason to complain about the way government is spending our tax dollars, whether we should or shouldn't be at war or being "told" what we can and cannot do in many situations. Voting is our opportunity to tell the "powers that be" how we feel. If we want change-we VOTE!



"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882)



Our Vote Counts

Do you wonder if voting really makes a difference? Well yes, it certainly does. Listed below are but a few examples of elections where the results were determined by a minimal margin. Any one of us could have voted in one of these or we could have decided to just sit it out and fail to make a difference!

According to the official website of the Alaska Division of Election, below are several examples throughout our history where one vote has truly made a difference.

- In 1845 - ONE vote brought Texas into the Union

- In 1868 - ONE vote saved President Andrew Johnson from impeachment
- In 1876 - ONE vote gave Rutherford Hayes the presidency of the United States
- In 1939 - ONE vote passed the Selective Service Act
- In 1960 - ONE vote per precinct elected John F. Kennedy President
- In 1978 - in Fullerton, California, a Democratic candidate for the State of California's legislature lost by TEN votes in a primary election where 32,000 votes were cast

In addition, one vote:

- Kept Aaron Burr, later charged with treason, from becoming President when the U.S. House of Representatives broke a tie vote of the Electoral College (1800)
- Admitted California, Idaho, Washington and Oregon to the Union (1850, 1890, 1889 and 1859 respectively)

Consider for a moment how a few votes or in some cases just a single vote could have rewritten history. Think of how that vote might have belonged to you!



Voter Registration

In order for our voice to be heard, we must be registered to vote. You may register if you are or will be 18 years old by December 31 of the year in which you register and are a citizen of the United States. You can vote if you are 18 by Election Day.

You can register or re-register to vote if:

- You are not registered.
- You haven't voted in the past five years.
- You have moved to a new address since your last vote (If you move within your county, you can re-register with a short form).

If you are not registered with your local Board of Elections, I urge you to do so. You can obtain voter registration forms and more information by contacting your local County Board of Elections or you may contact us here at the Catskill Center for Independence, where we will assist you with all your voting related concerns. You can also go online and visit www.beavoter.org where you can obtain voter registration information, a voter registration packet and find information regarding federal, state and local officials.

If you are not certain whether you are already registered to vote or where your local polling site is located you can visit www.canivote.org to obtain that information.

Younger voters may want to visit <http://www.Rockthevote.com>. This is a site where younger persons can be mobilized to create positive social and political change in their lives and communities.

Project Vote Smart provides biographical voting records and other information of candidates, public officials and legislators in general and much more. Every candidate and elected official from president to local government can be easily and instantly accessed through the Vote Smart's website located at: www.votesmart.org.

The American Association of Persons with Disabilities (AAPD) is the largest national nonprofit cross-disability member organization in the United States, dedicated to ensuring economic self-sufficiency and political empowerment for the more than 53 million Americans with disabilities. Their website at www.aapd.com offers a wealth of information pertaining to voting and people with disabilities.

The National Technical Assistance Center web site found at: <http://www.Govoter.org> is designed to assist protection and advocacy systems, election officials and people with disabilities to make voting accessible for citizens with cognitive disabilities and visual disabilities. The Assistance Center is managed and operated by self-advocacy leaders.

You may also contact any of us here at the Catskill Center for Independence where we are happy to discuss any aspect of the voting process with you and assist you in registering to vote or with any other voting concern.

Remember, by exercising your right to vote, you help shape the future of your country, your state and your community. Yes, you really do shape the rest of your life with your vote.



“There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.”

- Former President Bill Clinton
First inaugural address



Get the word out about accessible voting!

Project HAVA at the Catskill Center for Independence has created an audio Public Service Announcement (PSA) encouraging folks to go to the polls and cast their ballots using accessible voting machines.

For a small materials and postage fee we can send you a copy of the PSA on a disc for you to distribute to your local radio and public access stations.

Contact Systems Advocate Charles Reichardt at 607.432.8000 or Project HAVA Coordinator Helen Benlisa at 1.888.NYS.HAVA (1.888.697.4282) to get your copy today.

Help remind people everywhere that... we all HAVA vote!



WE WANT YOU!!

Get involved! Come join us and become part of a team making a real difference in our community and in our state!

To learn more about how you can become involved in this exciting process contact: Charles Reichardt, Systems Advocate @ 607.432.8000 or ccfi@ccfi.us.