Ideas for Practitioners and Community Agencies to Empower Clients through Voter Engagement

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In nine weeks, our nation will open its polling doors for what many believe is the most critical election in modern times. Yet data from the 2016 election show that roughly 100 million or 44% of eligible registered voters did not vote (Knight Foundation, n.d). The number one reason for such a low-turnout; a strong dislike for the candidates or their issues (Lopez and Flores, 2017).

As social work practitioners, we should be alarmed by these numbers because we know elections are more than just the presidential race. It about who is influencing our state and local government regarding spending, creating laws, and influencing our professional work. We understand the perspective of people who feel left out or distrust the process.

Here is an opportunity to engage, empower, and dispel these beliefs by participating in nonpartisan voter engagement. Voter engagement supports our clients and communities by registering and voting. It does not involve advocating for a particular candidate or platform.

In 1993, The National Voter Registration Act mandated that organizations, including nonprofits who assist clients with federal public assistance, must provide opportunities for their clients to register to vote (Voting is Social Work, n.d). Yet, there's still fear of engaging in this type of advocacy at the agency level. Nonpartisan voter engagement is legal, ethical, and professional. It aligns with our NASW Core Values of social justice, integrity, and dignity and worth of the person (Code of Ethics, 2018).

Voting is a basic human right and can change the course of an election. For example, in 2016, the presidential election and many local races came down to a few hundred votes. Communities with a higher voter turnout often see their elected officials more involved in their district's health, educational, and economic needs (Hylton et al. (2018); Martin & Claibourn, 2013).

Voting upholds our profession's ideals of self-advocacy and self-determination and can have lasting effects. For example, voting has personal benefits, including an increase in "civic health" or a feeling of self-worth (Kansas Civic Health Index, 2016, p. 6). This includes a sense of purpose, which may promote continued civic participation beyond the election. As a profession, we must view voter engagement as part of our daily practice year-round. Together, we can find simple ways to embed voting engagement in our current practice.

The first step is expanding the knowledge of voting laws, candidate information, and how to vote – in person or by mail. We can link information about felony voting rights, elected officials and their issues, and voting locations in our email signatures. Additional ideas include placing a poster in our office, having a brochure in our waiting room, or holding "coffee talk" webinars.

We must also include information on how to register to vote. A simple question about voter registration can be added to our intake forms with a follow-up question asking if the client would like more information. Clinicians can find support through national campaigns such as Vot-ER, a free, confidential tool to offer voter registration and mail-in ballot requests via all telehealth

platforms (Vot-ER, 2020). For more information, visit https://vot-er.org/socialwork/. We need to encourage clients and community partners to be active and stay on top of important election deadlines and disseminate information about polling locations.

Using applications such as TurboVote.org allows our clients to receive text messages and notification of this information. Most importantly, we need to encourage individuals and communities their vote matters. We can do this by advocating for expanding voting access and dismantling voter suppression tactics such as gerrymandering and felony disenfranchisement.

So I challenge you to be a leader in voter engagement with your clients and within your practice or agency. Help dispel the negative dialogue surrounding voting. Help with registration initiatives at your agency or within your community. Educate at least three clients, colleagues, or community members about candidates, their issues, or registration.

Remember, to change the curve of nonvoting participants, we must come together and tackle this issue head-on. Let us be the profession that inspires civic action and empower change agents across the sunshine state!

<div align="center">References</div>

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