

“Reenter-Register-Vote” (RRV) Partnership

OVERVIEW

“Reenter-Register-Vote” (RRV) is an ongoing partnership between LWVSMC and organizations serving the formerly incarcerated (returning citizens). In late 2018, our League approached the local NJ Reentry office, offering to register its clients to vote. In February 2019, League volunteers began holding weekly sessions for returning citizens at its facility. By the end of the year, the program had expanded to six other NJ Reentry offices across the state. Based on the success of the NJ Reentry collaboration, we’re extending RRV to GEO Reentry Services (a for-profit organization supporting those on parole/probation) and Fresh Start (a new state library initiative for returning citizens).

Our RRV lead volunteer, Annette Scott, designed the program. She trains other League volunteers, partner-organization staff, and university interns across the state. She keeps them up to date on election laws and schedules. Volunteers and staff observe her in conversation with clients before delivering the program themselves. They’re trained to discuss where, when, and how to register and vote. They address issues of direct concern to the returning citizens, issues they can influence at the ballot box.

RRV is getting vital voting-rights information to both returning citizens and our partner organizations themselves. Several of the organizations were unaware former felons have their voting rights restored—and that, as of March 17, these rights extend to those on probation and parole. Most returning citizens believe they forfeited their voting rights forever.

This information gap is especially disempowering to people of color. New Jersey’s incarcerated population has the greatest racial disparity of any state in the nation. Blacks make up just 15% of our overall population, but close to 62% of those incarcerated. People of color are disproportionately disadvantaged by inequities in the state’s criminal justice system and this disadvantage leads in practice, if not in law, to their disenfranchisement.

GOAL

The goal of the RRV partnerships is to *strengthen the political voice and sense of civic responsibility of returning citizens by encouraging them to register and vote*. We measure success by: 1) growth in partnerships; 2) the number of volunteers in the program; 3) the number of returning citizens reached; 4) the number registered.

NOTE: In-person sessions with returning citizens are suspended by the COVID-19 shutdown; our volunteers are participating in weekly conference calls where they continue to instruct clients on registering and voting. The numbers given here are estimates based on pre-COVID in-person sessions.

- 1) The growth of the program from one NJ Reentry office in February 2019 to seven NJ Reentry offices statewide (Passaic, Bergen, Essex, Union, Middlesex, Monmouth, and Ocean) and its expansion to two other agencies (GEO Reentry and, soon, Fresh Start) are testimony to its effectiveness, as perceived by the partner organizations. In the words of the Director of the local NJ Reentry office: *“The nonprofit New Jersey Reentry Corporation is proud to have developed this relationship with the League of Women Voters. We feel that it is imperative that our clients understand the importance of voting as well as the significance in their own communities. We have 8 sites across New Jersey, all but one of which are blessed to have LWV members volunteer their time to educate our clients. All too often following incarceration, our clients believe that they are no longer eligible to vote. Through the League of Women Voters, this notion is dispelled. The clients we serve . . . deserve to have their vote counted in national, state and local elections. They have paid their debt to society and deserve to be a part of it on all fronts. The NJRC is truly appreciative . . . to begin such a fruitful partnership for all of our clients and we look ahead with great excitement to the future.”*
- 2) Number of volunteers: The RRV partnership began when two members of LWVSMC approached NJ Reentry. Today, we have approximately 24 volunteers, including League members and university interns working directly with partner organizations.
- 3) Number of citizens reached: The organizations with whom we’re collaborating receive new citizens each week and schedule them to attend the registration and voting class. As the program has grown to include all NJ Reentry offices, GEO Reentry, and (soon) Fresh Start, we are reaching between 70 and 100 formerly-incarcerated a week. All clients engage in a respectful and encouraging dialogue about their role in the democracy.
- 4) Number of citizens registered: New Jersey law enfranchises former felons, including those on parole or probation, but they must (re-) register. Our volunteers engage clients in a conversation designed to ensure they understand their voting rights and appreciate the power of their vote. Even when a returning citizen declines to register, we believe the conversation creates an opening for that possibility in the future. Before COVID-19 restrictions, we were registering up between 15 and 25 returning citizens a week.

SUPPORT OF LEAGUE PRINCIPLES AND PROGRAMS

The RRV partnerships advance the League’s reason for being: “Empower Voters- Defend Democracy”—and it does so for a population that is at risk and historically marginalized. The program supports a principle that has been basic to League since its founding: the right of every citizen to vote.

Specifically, RRV addresses the following League priorities:

- 1) Voting Reform

The League of Women Voters of New Jersey had long championed extending voting rights to parolee and probationers. That goal is now secured by legislation and was signed into law in NJ in late 2019. With the new law in effect, many more returning citizens are in need of assistance

and encouragement to understand their rights and become registered voters. The RRV partnerships address this need directly. (During the COVID-19 pandemic, NJ is working to reduce its prison population based on their increased vulnerability to the spread of the disease. As this policy takes effect, the number of returning citizens will grow and with it, the need to support them in registering and voting.)

(See television news coverage of LWV/NJ Reentry News Conference on law re-enfranchising parolees and probationers-- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X23Db-dnEbM&app=desktop>)

2) Voter Turnout

Studies show that voter turnout among former felons eligible to vote is well below the national average (62% in 2016)—ranging in various studies from single digits [Haselswerdt, “Con Job: An Estimate of Ex-Felon Voter Turnout,” *Social Science Journal*, June 2009] to 16 % [Meredith and Morse, “Why letting ex-felons vote probably won’t swing Florida,” *VOX*, Nov. 2, 2018]. The RRV partnerships target this underrepresented population and provide respectful, encouraging, and practical support for registering and voting.

3) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The League has set out to strengthen its diversity, equity, and inclusion. The RRV partnerships target a population made up disproportionately of people of color and exclusively of people who have been marginalized. The program sets out to give political voice to this population and encourage their intention to become contributing members of their communities. It is led by a League member of color who is a role model, not just for the returning citizens, but for all our volunteers.

WHAT WE’VE LEARNED

1. Charismatic, credible leadership—The leader of the RRV partnership is a dynamic, talented, and dedicated woman of color. Much of the success of the program results from her tireless initiative. Her integrity and expertise built the program’s credibility with our partner agencies and with returning citizens. She is a retired registered nurse who has worked in a psychiatric institution and correction facility—experience that gives her understanding of and empathy for the RRV population. Her initiative and outgoing personality were the forces behind its expansion. We don’t know how to clone her, but clearly, having the right leadership has been the critical success factor of this program.
2. Member engagement—in the current political environment, members are joining League to DO SOMETHING to defend democracy. Since 2016, LWVSMC has grown from 21 to 89 members, and many of those members want to be engaged in something with direct and visible impact. Giving them a specific, structured, meaningful responsibility (one that has clear and limited demands on their time) and providing the training they need to build competence and

confidence allows them to play a role. The RRV partnerships are tapping this potential and offering members (and others) a way to make manageable and meaningful contributions.

3. Simplification of Registration/Voting Process

A known impediment to registering and voting is the complexity of the electoral system. For the marginalized and underserved, these impediments loom large. The potential situations of the formerly incarcerated (homelessness, inaccessibility to information, lack of driver's license, challenges/distractions of everyday life, etc.) present complications and disincentives to registration and voting. As we work to support this population, the consequences of the complexities of NJ's system are evident; lack of online registration (to be implemented in July), convoluted party declaration rules, complicated Vote by Mail rules, etc. suppress participation. We will support the efforts of the LWVNJ as it continues to advocate for voting simplification and reforms like same-day registration and early voting.