



November 6, 2006

Get Out the Low-Income Vote

By Alison Brody

Members of low-income communities vote in smaller numbers than their wealthier counterparts. In 2004, the percentage of those in the highest income brackets voted at a rate nearly three times that of those in the lowest. Both political parties and lobbying groups often find targeting this population with voter turn out efforts a waste of time and resources. But getting out the low-income vote is exactly the goal of one organization in Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness has spent the last three months specifically targeting this hard-to-reach voter community. They held workshops in shelters and canvassed the welfare office. Now, the Sunday before Election Day, they have a group of college students hitting the phones to ensure their newly registered voters make it to the polls.

Nancy Berlin heads the organization's effort. She says many in the low-income community are often so preoccupied with daily survival, that democratic participation takes a back seat. "They're worried about having a roof over their head or having enough food to feed their family, so voting can seem pretty abstract," she says.

She says it's her job to make people understand why politics should matter to them.

"You know, maybe you wouldn't have to be sitting in this welfare office if we had better paying jobs, or, you know, maybe you wouldn't have to be in this shelter if we had more affordable housing," she says.

Berlin adds issues like these will never be a priority for government as long as those in low-income communities stay home on Election Day.

"I actually had a legislator tell me recently we don't care about low-income people because they don't vote. I mean he actually said that," she says.

Through the efforts of Berlin, and her colleague Yolanda James, the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness has registered more than 1700 voters in Los Angeles County.

James, a single mother who says she falls under the government's low-income definition sees exercising her right to vote as a matter of self-respect.

"Although we're in this situation, we still hold our heads up high," she says. "Voting is definitely a way of holding our heads up high because it ensures us our rights and it ensures us our voice."

And she's using her voice to take as many low-income voters as she can to the polls along with her come Election Day.