



POSITION PAPER No. 9/213th Legislature (2008-09)

ISSUE:

Allows persons on parole and probation to vote; provides voter registration assistance to persons on probation, parolees, and persons completing sentences.

BILL NO.

S-1970 (Cunningham)

A-3198 (Spencer)

NCADD-NJ POSITION:

NCADD-New Jersey strongly supports S-1970/A-3198. Alcoholism and drug addiction are treatable medical conditions from which people recover. NCADD-NJ believes that it is important to hold alcoholics and drug addicted people reasonably accountable for their alcohol- and drug-affected behavior. However, the denial of voting rights to these individuals is not a reasonable, rational, or productive sanction.

A person on probation or on parole whose crime stemmed from an addiction and who is in recovery from that addiction, or who is participating in a drug program and not using illegal drugs has a disability. Such individuals should not be discriminated against by having imposed on them collateral sanctions such as being denied the right to vote.

Voting has been shown to promote public safety because people who vote are more likely to feel connected to their communities and therefore are less inclined to commit crimes. Research shows consistent differences between voters and non-voters in rates of arrest, incarceration, and self-reported criminal behavior. In a study published in the Columbia Human Rights Law Review in 2005, it was found that between 1997 and 2000 16 percent of non-vot-

ers were arrested, compared to 5 percent of voters. Voting was also linked to reduced recidivism: For persons with a prior arrest, the analysis of the data indicates that 27 percent of non-voters were rearrested, compared to 12 percent of voters.

Restoring the right to vote of people on probation or parole is an issue of great importance to the recovery community. The “war on drugs” has disenfranchised a significant portion of citizens in recovery from the disease of addiction. In 2006, 32 percent of prisoners were incarcerated due to a drug offense, while 80 percent had extensive substance use histories. New Jersey is number one among the states in proportion of new prison admissions who are drug offenders.

Furthermore, the “war on drugs” has had a disproportionate impact on minorities. While African Americans account for 15 percent of the population of New Jersey, they account for 81 percent of admissions to prisons for drug offenses. About 80 percent of parolees and some 60 percent of probationers in New Jersey are of African-American or Hispanic origin.

The number of people released from New Jersey prisons in 2002 was nearly four times the number released two decades ago. Of the nearly 100,000 disenfranchised probationers and parolees currently denied the vote in New Jersey, many have a substance use history from which they have been rehabilitated. These individuals are in recovery and productively contribute to their communities, pay taxes, and are law-abiding. People on probation and parole for an indictable offense who live in and contribute to their communities deserve the right to vote. In restoring their right to vote, this bill will eliminate one manifestation of the stigma that people in recovery have had to endure.

Providing assistance in registering to vote for individuals on probation, parole or completing their sentence is an important component of this bill.



PUBLIC POLICY & INFORMATION

Promoting Addiction Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Through Advocacy and Education

NCADD-NJ and Friends of Addiction Recovery - New Jersey (FOAR-NJ) recently led New Jersey as one of 10 states selected by Faces and Voices of Recovery (FAVOR) in its non-partisan Recovery Voices Counts Campaign. NCADD-NJ and FOAR-NJ focused on three civic engagement activities as part of this campaign: voter registration, education, and participation. Through its participation in this project, NCADD-NJ discovered that many people with a criminal history were unaware of their rights as to voting and did not know how or where to register.

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