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DISABILITIES ADVOCACY GROUP AND UNION COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS TO OFFER VOTER EDUCATION AND REGISTRATION

Elizabeth, NJ – Sept. 5, 2014 – In an effort to increase voter registration and participation by people with disabilities, the New American Movement for People With Disabilities (NAMPWD) and the Union County Board of Elections will hold a voter education event Wednesday, Sept. 17, at Community Access Unlimited (CAU) at 80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth NJ, 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Voting registration also will be available. The class is open to the public but reservations are requested by contacting Rebecca Clark, CAU community organizer, at 908.354.3040, ext. 215.

The Board of Election will bring a voting machine to teach attendees how to vote and become comfortable with the equipment, and will register people not yet registered to vote. Members of NAMPWD will speak about the right to and importance of people with disabilities voting.

"We have people with disabilities who don't know why they should vote and who they can vote for," said Annie Sims, NAMPWD self-advocacy field coordinator and a person with disabilities. "We educate them about voting and its importance to the community.

"When I first voted I was scared because I did not know why I had to vote and I was afraid I was going to mess up on the voting machine. One day a person showed me how to use the voting machine and I gave it a try. Now I vote because that's how I speak up for myself and share my voice and what I believe in. When you vote you have power – not just over who you want to see elected but also over where you want to live, how to control your money and where you want to work."

This is the latest effort of NAMPWD to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, according to Clark. NAMPWD was formed in 2012 as a movement committed to changing the social, political and economic structure of society so that all people can live with pride, as equals regardless of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, income or disability status, Clark said.

The movement's efforts include annual get-out-the-vote drives and voter education efforts in coordination with the Union County Board of Elections. The Sept. 17 event will be followed by an Oct. 29 panel discussion about the importance of voting, featuring a person with disabilities, a youth member of CAU, a senior staff member and an elected office holder, according to Clark.

"Community Access has the mission of enabling our members to live full and fulfilling lives as independent members of the community," Clark said. "That includes exercising their rights to vote and, by voting, to shape their communities. Helping them overcome whatever hesitations or difficulties they may have about voting is an important part of that."

Nationally, voter registration for the 2012 general election was 71.2 percent, according to the Census Bureau. Voter registration among people with disabilities lagged that national number by 2.3 percent, according to a report issued by the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations. Nationally, 57.5 percent of registered voters participated in the 2012 general election, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center, while voter turnout among people with disabilities lagged that by 5.7 percent less, according to the Rutgers report.

In addition, the Rutgers review found that 30.1 percent of voters with disabilities reported difficulty voting at polling stations, compared with just 8.4 percent of voters without disabilities. The most common problems reported were difficulties in reading or seeing the ballot or understanding how to vote or use voting equipment, the report said.

By comparison, in the 2013 general election, of CAU's 225 members who are registered to vote, 171, or 76 percent, exercised that right, according to Clark.

CAU is an Elizabeth-based nonprofit providing support programs and services to adults with disabilities as well as youth served under the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to enable them to live independently in the community, in areas including housing, vocational and life-skills training, education, advocacy and recreation.

Photo caption below

About CAU

Community Access Unlimited (CAU), celebrating its 35th anniversary, supports people with special needs in achieving real lives in the community. CAU provides support and gives a voice to adults and youth who traditionally have little support and no voice in society. CAU helps people with housing, life skills, employment, money management, socialization and civic activities. CAU also supports opportunities for advocacy through training in assertiveness, decision-making and civil rights. CAU serves more than 5,000 individuals each year. For more information about CAU and its services, contact us by phone at 908.354.3040, online at www.caunj.org or by mail at 80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202.

[Clenston Voting for First Time]



Clenston Bazile, a member of Community Access Unlimited living within the community, prepares to vote in the 2013 general election, the first time he voted since turning 18.