

**TESTIMONY**

Presented by

**Louisa Hackett**  
**COMMUNITY *Votes***

on

**Nonprofit Voter Engagement**

before the

**Voter Assistance Advisory Committee's Annual Public Meeting and Hearing**

on

**Tuesday, December, 15 2015**  
**5:00 P.M.**

at

**Department of Youth and Community Development**  
2 Lafayette Street, 14<sup>th</sup> Floor Auditorium.

Hello. My name is Louisa Hackett. Thank you for inviting me to talk about Community Votes, a new initiative to help nonprofits take up voter work.

## **BACKGROUND**

For over twenty years I have worked at Community Resource Exchange – where I primarily do strategic planning with community based nonprofits. Five years ago in the middle of the economic downturn much of that planning was focused on figuring out how each organization could address rising needs in the face of declining resources, how each organization could do more with less.

It was frustrating and hard work especially in a city in which the gap between the haves and the have nots is so very wide

At the same time I learned about NonProfit VOTE – a national organization based in Boston that was promoting the approach that Nonprofits are an untapped and powerful resource for expanding the number of voters participating in our elections.

I said AHA – how might the situation of the nonprofits I worked with be different if their staff, their participants and their surrounding community voted? Would it be easier, for example, to succeed in getting more funding for day care and afterschool programs, to stop cuts to the local libraries? To get NYS's minimum wage increased? To have more financial aid for college?

## **APPROACH**

So I started Community Votes to help social service nonprofits here in New York City learn how to integrate nonpartisan voter mobilization within their existing programs.

I want to share a few facts that explain how we approach this work.

**FACT #1:** Nonprofits are allowed to do voter related activities AS LONG As they are 100% nonpartisan – we can't endorse or recommend a candidate or a political party – even when we are asked to do so.

**FACT #2:** Many nonprofits that interact with the public and have funding from NYC are required to provide the opportunity to register their participants to vote. New York City Directive #1 issued in July 2014 requires 19 city agencies and their subcontractors to provide and distribute voter registration forms.

FACT #3: voter research has shown:

- one on one conversations with a trusted person is the single most effective way to get someone to vote –
- voting is contagious – you convince one person and it is likely that they will convince another person –

FACT #4: Community based organizations

- work in communities with low voter turnout and
- are trusted messengers to their staff and the communities they serve

## **SUCCESS**

So how do we take these facts and create a voter engagement program that works?

Share an example from one of our partners – Jacob Riis Neighborhood Settlement House. As an article in Sunday's New York Times explained, Jacob Riis Neighborhood Settlement House operates programs in the largest public housing complex in the country

Their executive director, Chris Hanway, sees that encouraging their stakeholders to vote is one way to achieve their mission of acting as catalyst for change.

Their Community votes committee has staff members and members of their senior center who are political nerds – people who are passionate about democracy and voting.

Together they have done this vote work for three different elections – 2012 Presidential, 2013 Mayoral and most recently 2014 for the mid-term election.

The work began by understanding their local neighborhoods voting statistics which are:

- Roughly 11,000 eligible voters
- 79% of them are registered to vote.

While the registration rates are pretty high, the turnout rates are not. For the 2012 Presidential election turnout was 54% and for the Mayoral election it was half that.

Knowing this information, the Community Votes committee at Riis realized they needed to do more than just register people to vote. So they asked people who were registered to signed pledges to vote. They kept track of everyone they contacted and sent out reminders.

As a result of their work, in 2014 the people they contacted turned out to vote at almost double the rate of average turnout in the city. Their turnout out rate was 40% compared to 22% citywide.

My favorite story working at Riis happened at an intergenerational get out the vote mailing party. We had hundreds of voting reminder post cards to send out. Two seniors from the Senior Center attended along with 8 students from Info Tech High School.

Ms. Maud – shared that when she was young in the south her parents were too scared to vote and ever since she moved to NYC she has not missed one election.

Mr. Smith – asked if the youth knew what the NAACP was, whether they had heard of the quote ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country AND then he said I'm old now, you young people need to carry on this work. The young people were riveted

## **CONCLUSION**

The nonprofit voter engagement model works, not only at Riis but across the country. Community Votes joined with Nonprofit Vote in a 2014 study that was recently released. The 29 partners (including three here in the city) reached unlikely voters. And, reaching these unlikely voters helped to narrow the troubling gaps in voter participation – between low and high-income and between young and old.

In conclusion, this work can help address voter participation gaps that distort our democracy. Not only is this work important but I must also say it is fun too.

Thank you.