



# Your Right to Vote in New York State: Homeless Individuals

## *Do homeless people have the right to vote?*

**YES.** In 1984 a federal court in New York explicitly found that homeless persons could not be denied the right to vote just because they did not live in a traditional residence.

The Coalition for the Homeless filed a lawsuit that guaranteed the right to vote to homeless New Yorkers, whether they are living in shelters, in welfare hotels, or on the streets. All you need to do is list the address of the homeless shelter or drop-in center as your residential address. Otherwise, to be eligible to vote, you must:

- be a United States citizen
- be 18 years old by December 31 of the year in which you register (note: you must be 18 years old by the date of the general, primary or other election in which you want to vote)
- live at your present address at least 30 days before an election
- not be in jail or on parole for a felony conviction
- not claim the right to vote elsewhere
- have registered to vote.

## *Why Should I Vote?*

In order for our government to truly represent the people, citizens must vote.

- Voting defines our democracy.
- It is an expression of equality.
- It is your right.
- It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor.
- It gives you a voice in your community.
- When you don't vote, you allow others to speak for you.

## *Why do people not vote?*

Many potential voters say, "My vote doesn't count, and it doesn't directly affect my life." Others say that they do not vote because those with money can influence the government. Still others say that their own vote will not make a difference.

## *What are some reasons I should vote?*

Each election, low income and homeless individuals vote at a lower rate than people with higher incomes, despite the fact that many policy decisions directly impact people who are economically disadvantaged. Currently, issues such as raising the minimum wage and funding certain social welfare and housing programs are being debated in the U.S. Congress and in communities around the country.

**It is your tax money.** The winning candidate will decide how much of your money to allocate for public services, defense and taxes.

**It is your health care.** His or her decisions on healthcare issues, Medicaid and Medicare determine your health care benefits.

**It is your job.** The winning candidate may affect what job training is available, what health insurance is available through your employer, and fair hiring practices.

**It is your housing.** He or she may make decisions that influence housing subsidies and, most importantly, affordable housing.

**It is your social programs and services.** The candidate who wins the election makes decisions that affect how much money is given to public assistance and services such as substance abuse, counseling, HIV and others.

## *What should I say is my home/mailling address on the registration form?*

You should enter the location of where you stay at night, which can be a street corner, a park, a shelter, a bus station, or any other location. This address will be used by the board of elections to assign you to the appropriate polling location. In addition, you must provide a mailing address so that voter notification cards and other election materials may be sent to you. Having your mailing address also helps the boards of elections maintain current and accurate voter registration lists. The address you give as your mailing address

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*\*\*The League of Women Voters of New York State is a unique, multi-issue, nonpartisan, political organization. It encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy. \*\**

may be that of a local advocacy organization, shelter, outreach center, or anywhere else willing to accept mail on your behalf. Your mailing address does not have to be your residential address.

***What if I don't have the required identification?***

If you register by mail, in order for the board of elections to verify your identity in advance of voting, you must provide a driver's license number or the last four digits of your Social Security number on your voter registration form. If you don't have these numbers or they can't be verified, first-time mail-in registrants must provide another identification document, and should bring it with them to the polls. Acceptable identification for first-time mail-in registrants includes a current and valid photo ID, or a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter. *Since first-time mail-in registrants may have to provide some sort of identifying documentation at the polls, homeless registrants without any of the documents listed above may want to register to vote in person at their local board of elections or other registration location, such as a state agency office (the Department of Motor Vehicles for example).*

***What if I am not on the rolls at the polling place?***

Ask the poll worker for an affidavit ballot, and ask them how to follow up to make sure that your registration information is correctly on file.

***How do I register to vote?***

You need to fill out and submit a Voter Registration form. You may register in person at your local board of elections or at any state agency participating in the National Voter Registration Act, on any business day throughout the year. You may also register by mail. Forms are available from your county board of elections, town and city halls, post offices, political parties, various state offices, and the League of Women Voters. Contact the League of Women Voters of New York State - 1-866-LWVNY1, the New York State Board of Elections - 1-800-FOR-VOTE, or your county board of elections to have a voter registration form sent to you. You may also download a voter registration form in New York State from <http://www.elections.state.ny.us/>. Complete, sign, and submit the form, either in person or by mail.

***If I register to vote, will I be called for jury duty?***

The rolls of prospective jurors are compiled from a number of sources, so registering to vote does not necessarily mean that you will be called. Similarly, *not* registering to vote does not necessarily mean that you will *not* be called for jury duty. If you are called and feel that you cannot serve, jurors can often be excused for a valid health reason.

***To obtain a Voter Registration form or Absentee Ballot Application form, or to find out dates for the elections, for registering, for filing absentee ballot applications and submitting ballots:***

- Call the NYS Board of Elections at 1-800-367-8683, or download the forms/calendar from the web site for the New York State Board of Elections (<http://www.elections.state.ny.us/>).
- Call, write to, or download forms/calendar from the web site for your local county board of elections. You can get their contact information from the NYS Board of Elections.
- Call your local League of Women Voters, or the League of Women Voters of New York State at 518-465-4162 or toll free at 1-866-598-6971, or go to our web site at <http://www.lwvny.org/>.

***To check your voter registration status:***

You should receive in the mail before the election a card that informs you of your polling place. If you do not receive such a card, call your local board of elections and ask them:

1. Am I registered to vote?
2. Is my registration status set to "Active"? If not, to what is it set?
3. Will my name appear in the polling place roll book on Election Day?

***If you are not on the rolls at your polling place:***

If you believe you are registered to vote and are not on the rolls, ask for an "affidavit" (paper) ballot, and ask the poll worker for advisement about following up on your status. You are legally entitled to an affidavit (paper) ballot and must be given one.

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