

VOTE'S MISSION:

VOICE OF THE EX-OFFENDER (VOTE) is an organization dedicated to building the political power of people most impacted by the criminal justice system, especially formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs,) their families and loved ones. Through leadership development, community education and voter mobilization, VOTE will ensure that our constituents are at the center of transforming the criminal justice system.

Contact VOTE:

(888) 552-VOTE
Or
(504) 894-8099

Norris@vote-nola.org

Rosana@vote-nola.org

www.vote-nola.org

3301 Chartres Street,
New Orleans, LA
70117



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Voter Registration Update

This month, VOTE members expanded upon their previous voter registration efforts with a new initiative. The intention is to have new voters registered for the upcoming October elections. The majority of these new voter registration efforts are faith based. Teams of VOTE members have been tabling after services and bible study groups at a number of area churches, such as Greater St. Stephens, Fisher Community Church, and Sixth Baptist Church. Holding voter registration drives at churches allows VOTE members to frame voting as a community issue, not just a personal choice.

Diana Banks has been canvassing at churches on a team with fellow VOTE members Eugene Dean and Vernon Bolds. "I'm not only into educating FIPs about voting, but anyone who isn't registered," She said, "I tell people that they should know who they are voting for."

In addition to their new faith-based efforts, VOTE members are looking to encourage incarcerated people waiting trial to exercise their right to vote. Incarcerated individuals who have not been convicted, in other words, pre-trial detainees, are still eligible to VOTE in Louisiana. This is a fact that is not widely known and therefore results in de facto disenfranchisement of many incarcerated people. In order to raise awareness of their civic rights, VOTE members will travel to the East Baton Rouge Parish Jail with members of the voter registration office to ensure that incarcerated voters know about their rights.

Member Profile & VOTE Update

Member Profile: Vernon Bolds

Like many others, Vernon Bolds was introduced to VOTE by an existing member.

“Post Katrina I was trying to work on my case, and someone gave me Norris’ address,” Bolds said, “Norris told me about VOTE and I was immediately interested.”

Bolds appreciates both VOTE’s practical contribution to alleviating the hardships of FIPS as well as its overall framework of positivity and civic engagement. Due to the negative societal perception of FIPS when they are released from prison and must rejoin the workforce, Vernon thinks that VOTE’s CEED campaign (Campaign to End Employment Discrimination) should be the organization’s focal point.

“The FIPS that do get jobs, their employers fall in love with them because they appreciate the job,” Bolds said.

Though access to gainful employment is a key issue that draws Vernon to participate in VOTE, the overall mission of the organization is what inspires him the most.

“Their aim is to wake up a sleeping giant so we can make a positive difference in society,” Bolds said, referring to the power of the formerly incarcerated vote. The civic education that VOTE provides gives Bolds motivation to engage in other social issues outside of the organization. He is especially interested in youth empowerment.

“I’d like to be a big brother,” Bolds said, “It’s everyone’s responsibility to save at least one youngster.”

The civic lessons and resources that Bold has accessed through VOTE have opened his eyes to the structural problems of the criminal justice system.

“VOTE takes you behind the scenes. You see the subterranean criminal justice system.”

Bolds believes that the resources that VOTE provides to FIPs should be widely distributed in the community, through the VOTE website, in order to inform members and non-members alike about their legal options and their civic responsibilities.

“I’d like to set up a FAQ on the website as it pertains to the law,” Bolds explained.



Vernon at the VOTE office.

Earthworks Services Update

VOTE collaborating with a number of community partners to start a company, Earthworks, Services that will provide job opportunities for FIPs. Similarly to the way that RAE started its silk screening shop, Beacon Industries, VOTE is using a similar framework and value system off of which to model its green landscaping company, namely a drive to combat the employment obstacles that FIPs face after being released.



New AVODAH Staff Profile: Danielle Unger

Though she will always love her home state, Virginia, Danielle is thrilled to be living in New Orleans and working at V.O.T.E! She found out about V.O.T.E through Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps, an organization that places young people interested in social justice work with anti-poverty organizations in several cities. Last fall, Danielle took part in a college course about the U.S. prison system that took place inside a correctional facility in upstate New York, where she attended college. This experience sparked her interest in learning about issues of mass incarceration, and working with people that have been affected by the criminal justice system. Additionally, her experience registering voters in Virginia, where voting rights for FIPs are very restrictive, drew her to work for V.O.T.E's mission of re-enfranchisement and community engagement. She loves to read and write poetry, and is very impressed by the memoirs, poetry, and letters that come from the experiences of incarcerated people. As the Program Communications Fellow, Danielle is looking forward to getting to know V.O.T.E members and learning about the way organizing operates in New Orleans. Feel free to email her anytime with V.O.T.E business or just good New Orleans food suggestions! Danielle@vote-nola.org.

LA Fundraising Update

During the first week in November, thirteen VOTE members will travel to Los Angeles to take part in both The International Drug Policy Reform Conference and the National Gathering of Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted Persons. The Reform Conference is an event to gather and voice ones opposition to the war on drugs and the situation it has created in America, while the gathering of formerly incarcerated and convicted people focuses on restoring the civil and human rights of the populations impacted by the criminal justice system. Traveling to these conferences will expose VOTE members to like-minded people from remote areas, providing an opportunity for wider community building and networking.

In order to raise enough money for each of the 13 members to travel to Los Angeles, VOTE members are in the process of providing enough fundraising options, so that there is a fun way for everyone to contribute to the conference effort.

VOTE members Betty, Peggy, and Tara are helping to coordinate a bus ride to the Angola Rodeo, complete with entertainment and snacks, on October 9th and 16th. Tickets for the entire event are \$50. The bus leaves from the RAE house at 1212 St. Bernard Avenue. VOTE member Diana, who is a certified Zumba instructor, is organizing a series of Zumba courses that will benefit the fundraising effort, and I <3 Zumba t-shirts designed and manufactured by RAE's Beacon Industries silk-screening shop. In addition, Diana is hosting two food-related fundraisers at her house, a fish-fry on Friday, September 30th, and a chicken dinner on October 1st.

VOTE members are also going to raffle off a new ipad, and have a car wash sometime before the November conference week. Please join us for these fundraisers to hear about the upcoming conferences and other ways to get involved.



New Staff member Danielle Unger (above).

T-shirts (bellow) created by Beacon Industries for Diana's classes.



LA FUNDRAISING REMINDER

As we work towards our goals for justice in the community, we know that we must also have a strong voice and presence in national movement building efforts. **The International Drug Policy Reform Conference and the National Gathering of Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted Persons** are two such efforts. We are trying to raise funds to bring 13 VOTE members to these events.

Support us to amplify OUR voice, unique to the FIPs of the Gulf Coast, in envisioning a world where formerly incarcerated persons are using their leadership to improve their circumstances and the whole community.

With your tax deductible donation, we can send our members to represent at this very important national event! Please go to <http://vote-nola.org/donate> to donate!

Or you can MAIL your contribution to our fiscal sponsor: **The Innocence Project New Orleans.**

(Please write VOTE-TRAVEL in the memo line)

3301 Chartres Street
New Orleans, LA 70117

vote Issue 16 September 2011



**JOIN US FOR THE NEXT MEMBERSHIP MEETING
WEDNESDAY October 5th AT 7PM AT THE RAE HOUSE
1212 St. Bernard Avenue, NO, LA 70117**