

NYLN's Commitment to Educating Youth with Disabilities on Current Issues Voting & the Election Process: Youth Power in the 2008 Presidential Election!

Introduction

NYLN is committed to empowering youth with disabilities to become our nation's next leaders. In order to effectively implement this initiative, NYLN is comprised of youth with disabilities who participate in the organization's fulfillment of this goal by activities directed at serving to educate other youth with disabilities nationwide on issues that are not only important to young people with disabilities but are current events of critical importance to our nation. An ideal example of NYLN's unique ability to combine educating young people with disabilities and current events is by using all 3 current NYLN Committees—Advocacy, Accessibility, and Public Outreach—to provide different means of reaching youth with disabilities on the importance of voting in light of the upcoming 2008 presidential election. Our aim is to demonstrate the information that NYLN has generated through its work by dedicated young people with disabilities in educating other youth with disabilities around the country to prepare them to actively participate in performing their civic duty of voting. The efforts of NYLN described below were designed to ensure that the voice of youth with disabilities would not go unheard when the next U.S. president is selected in November 2008.

Advocacy Committee: NYLN April 2008 Teleconference on Voter Registration

Among the responsibilities of the Advocacy Committee is to plan for the NYLN teleconference. The first teleconference of this year was held on Tuesday, April 15th 2008. The teleconference was led by members of the Advocacy Committee who engaged in research and preparation of materials to provide valuable information to young people with disabilities nationwide about voter registration. The topics discussed on the teleconference include:

- History of people with disabilities and voting;
- The importance of people with disabilities exercising the right to vote;
- Statistics on voting and people with disabilities;
- The process of voting;
- Ways of registering to vote/voter registration tips;
- Accessibility & voting;
- How to become an informed voter;
- Advocating the importance of voting to other youth with disabilities;
- Legislation & voting.

The NYLN April teleconference featured 3 speakers who were NYLN members (2 on the NYLN Governing Board and 1 NYLN general member all of whom serve as members of the Advocacy Committee) as well as 2 professionals. The first three speakers of the teleconference were members of NYLN who are young people with disabilities. The first speaker described the process of voting to the audience providing information on how and where to go to figure out if you are registered to vote and your

proper polling place. Speaker #1 also educated the audience on what you need to bring with you when you go to the polls on voting day. Speaker #2 spoke on the qualifications necessary to become a registered voter. Speaker #2 also spoke about deadlines for registering to vote as well as how to get information in order to register. A question that was brought up by a participant in the audience was why people could not vote in a primary and speaker #2 explained that a voter must be registered with a particular party because a primary involves selecting a candidate from within the party itself. The topic covered by speaker #3 was the relationship between politics and the voting process and the necessity of becoming an informed voter. Speaker #3 discussed the significance of researching the candidates and their positions on various issues important to the nation and also those issues particular to the lives of people with disabilities. It was emphasized by speaker #3 that a voter must not only become informed about candidates but additionally, any issues that will be placed on the ballot for a vote by the public. Speaker #3 concluded his presentation by providing valuable resources for the audience to use in order to become informed voters. The last two speakers were professionals invited by NYLN to explain their professional experience in working on issues critical to the lives of disabilities in the process of voting. The first professional spoke about an initiative called Project Vote! which is a training on the stages of voting already discussed by the NYLN members (introduction to the process of voting, how to register to vote, becoming an informed voter, etc.) to enable people to learn about voting and contribute to society's development through the power of their voices in their votes including individuals with disabilities. This speaker explained the growth of Project Vote! and answered general questions about how the project generally operates. The second professional speaker continued the discussion on Project Vote! and her role in developing the project that includes reaching out to people with disabilities to involve them in the political process and future of our country.

During the question and answer period of the teleconference, several audience members asked the speakers more specific questions. Some of the issues that were discussed at this time included: common issues of accessibility for people with disabilities, what technologies have developed as far as accessibility for voting for people with disabilities, whether people working at the polling places have to know about the accessibility of voting places, how private voting places are in the event that there are no accessible voting machines, the process for voting by absentee ballot, how people with disabilities can create voter awareness in their local communities, why the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is important to people with disabilities as far as the right to vote, and how young people with disabilities can get involved in the campaign activities.

Additionally, the Advocacy Committee has prepared an information sheet to serve as a resource to young people with disabilities on voting and people with disabilities that covers many of the same topics discussed on the teleconference.

The ability of youth with disabilities around the nation to learn about voting and people with disabilities from this NYLN teleconference and information sheet will help prepare them to vote in the upcoming 2008 presidential election. It will also be beneficial in helping those who attend the teleconference to use the information they acquire to

educate other youth with disabilities about voting to increase the voice of young people with disabilities in making critical decisions that impact the lives of youth with disabilities and issues important to people with disabilities as a whole in the future. The transcript of the NYLN teleconference on voter registration is also made available on the NYLN website for youth with disabilities unable to attend the teleconference.

NYLN will share the information provided at this teleconference that can be used as a continual process to educate youth with disabilities on these significant matters on voting in order to aid young people with disabilities in ensuring that the voice of people with disabilities is heard for generations to come.

Accessibility Committee: Public Document on Voting

The Accessibility Committee produced a public document and PowerPoint on voting. These resources were prepared by youth with disabilities and will provide valuable information on voting to young people with disabilities nationwide. The public document and PowerPoint will be available for youth with disabilities to review on NYLN's website and will be created in a way that is accessible to youth with various disabilities.

Public Outreach Committee: Hot Issues about Voting & People with Disabilities

The Public Outreach Committee prepares a quarterly newsletter that is distributed to NYLN members and numerous disability communities around the nation. This serves as a vehicle to spread current events and issues of significance that impact the lives of youth with disabilities. Because of the importance of the 2008 presidential election, the Public Outreach Committee members are preparing to do features in the June edition of the NYLN newsletter to increase knowledge of issues related to voting and people with disabilities. The Public Outreach Committee is preparing articles on: 1) the history of people with disabilities voting—how people have not voted (facts, statistics) and encouraging the need to give a voice to people with disabilities in voting, 2) the presidential candidates and their positions on disability issues/policies, and 3) issues of accessibility at the polls for people with disabilities. Youth with disabilities must understand that this trend in voting of people with disabilities must be eliminated in order for people with disabilities to use the influence they have in selecting a leader who is conscious of important issues to people with disabilities and is supportive of efforts to improve the lives of the disabled.

NYLN will elaborate on the work of the Public Outreach Committee on these hot issues about voting and people with disabilities. When youth with disabilities learn the importance of their voice and the extraordinary impact they can have on the political history of our nation, they will have the ability to destroy the disturbing trend of the significant voice that goes unheard—that of people with disabilities. Furthermore, by being exposed to what to look for to become an informed voter on candidates with regard to issues with people with disabilities, NYLN equips youth with disabilities to not simply

vote but to make educated and informed decisions, especially when it comes to benefiting people with disabilities and their full integration into society.

**The Role of Technology:
NYLN's Modern Approach to Reaching Youth with Disabilities on Voting**

NYLN embraces a modern approach to reaching youth with disabilities on issues that matter to them and that are relevant to their active participation as members in society such as preparing them to be responsible citizens in voting. The strength of NYLN lies in its ability to reach members and youth with disabilities nationwide by the use of technology. NYLN hosts teleconferences like the one on voter registration that unites young people with disabilities at one time to learn the importance of voting as people with disabilities. NYLN also utilizes the Internet to provide information on voting through its public document, PowerPoint, and the distribution of its newsletter featuring matters relating to voting and people with disabilities. The role of technology in NYLN has allowed youth with disabilities to be not only connected but to become informed in ways that weren't available to youth with disabilities just a few decades ago. More youth with disabilities will become knowledgeable about the voting process and making informed decisions to lead to the creation of a loud voice for people with disabilities in the future of our nation and the strengthening of support of the full integration of people with disabilities into society.