

Groups Mobilizing Nationwide to Rebuff Assault on Voters' Rights

By Akeya Dickson
Washington Correspondent NNPA
News Service

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — As many as 5 million people could be denied the right to vote in the November presidential election because of a series of regressive actions, including insisting on photo identification at the polls, reducing time allotted for early voting and eliminating Sunday voter registration drives popular among Black churches.

In this year alone, according to the Brennan Center at the New York University School of Law, a non-partisan public policy and law institute, more than 34 states have introduced new restrictions on voting. At least 12 states have introduced bills that would require proof of citizenship, such as a birth certificate, to register or vote. At least 13 states have introduced legislation to terminate Election Day and same-day voter registration and two states — Florida and Iowa — have reversed prior executive orders making it easier for ex-felons to vote.

In addition to complaining about measures they say are aimed at suppressing the Black vote, many civil rights organizations and community groups have been mobilizing to remove potential roadblocks.

"This is one of the most egregious elections we've had since Barack and since Florida in 2000," said Melanie Campbell, president and chief executive officer of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation.

"There is a lot of work to be done with a shortage of funding, but we're out here working hard to do the work. We're working closer in coalition to maximize results."

Campbell rattled off a list of organizations working as a coalition, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Advancement Project, the League of Young Voters, the Hip Hop Caucus, People for the American Way and the National Council of Negro Women.

"We're all working hard to cross-pollinate and partner as much as possible. We don't want to talk on Nov. 6, after the election, about what we should have done," she said. "The key is early information, early action. Election Protection is starting their 1-866-OUR-VOTE hotline earlier. You can call now if you're having issues, you can get a lawyer now. It's better than waiting until October."

The NAACP recently announced its "This is My Vote" campaign and accompanying Web site at Clark-Atlanta University in Georgia to combat the attack on voting. The nation's oldest civil rights group is wedding 21st century technology tools with old-fashioned grassroots organizing. People can obtain registration forms at www.thisismyvote.org or text the word "VOTE" to 62227 (letters that spell NAACP), to stay abreast of the different rules and laws for voting in their state. Voters can also call 1-866-MYVOTE1.

The campaign has more than 500,000 active members and "e-activists" in the 50-state nonpartisan campaign, according to Marvin Randolph, the NAACP's senior vice president for campaigns.

"I think technology is critical," he explained. "Clearly, the way that people communicate has fundamentally changed. We have to communicate with people in the way that they spend their time. If they are tethered to their smart phones or to their computers, that's where we need to be."

The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law is working to provide much-needed guidance to voters who will be



Melanie Campbell

required to produce a photo ID. Its report, titled, "Got ID? Helping Americans Get Voter Identification," highlights successful voter empowerment efforts in Wisconsin, Tennessee and Colorado.

The report suggests crosschecking Department of Motor Vehicles records against current voter registration rolls to notify individuals about the new voter ID requirements early enough to give them an opportunity to obtain new forms of identification.

"The Wisconsin Voices made an open records request with the DMV in Milwaukee and got access to 2.1 million records of people with driver's licenses that was cross-referenced with VAN, a voter contact and management system," according to the report. "The group matched 1.3 million records to help identify people who might need government-issued photo IDs."

"Your grandmother living in a nursing home may not have a driver's license, may not have a utility bill, may not have a passport."

She also explained, "In Texas, you have a legislature that passed laws that say you can use your gun ID to register to vote, but you can't use your student ID."

Voters are required to not only present a driver's license or state-issued ID, but they can also be required to present proof of residence in Kansas, Wisconsin, Alabama, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Georgia and Indiana.

Fortunately, voters can obtain a certified

copy of their birth certificate online, in the mail or in person. But because processing a birth certificate request can take as long as seven months, as was a case cited by the Colorado Collaborative ID Project, it is imperative that the process is initiated early.

Melanie Campbell urges voters to verify that their voter registration record and organize around social media.

The Lawyers Committee report also recommended matching student enrollment lists with voter rolls and then reaching out to students with limited or no past voter participation. It also suggested contacting high school seniors who may turn 18 before the November election.

Organizations can also arrange free or reduced transit to DMV offices that can be far away. For example, some voters in Texas have to travel up to 176 miles roundtrip to get to an office to obtain identification, according to the report.

City officials can follow the lead of the Jackson Transit Authority in Tennessee, which has offered free bus rides to the Department of Motor Vehicles to people needing to get a voter ID. The hourly rides will be available June 25-29, July 2-3 and 5-6, Aug 24 and August 27-31. Organizations may be able to make similar arrangements in their local communities.

In many Black communities, the church remains a rallying point for political empowerment.

"Historically if the church never got involved, there would be no Voting Rights Act of 1964. There would be no Brown vs. Board of Education," Rev. Otis T. Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. "We're not talking about specific candidates. I think that anyone who is of voting age, you need to be registered."

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