

Hearing on National Voter Registration Act, Section 7:  
The Challenges that Public Assistance Agencies Face  
Committee on House Administration  
Subcommittee on Elections  
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Chairwoman Lofgren, Congressman McCarthy and members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of Director Ismael Ahmed regarding the Michigan Department of Human Services' experience implementing the National Voter Registration Act.

The mission of the Michigan Department of Human Services is to assist children, families and vulnerable adults to be safe, stable and self-supporting. Among other things, we implement the federal Food Stamps Program, Michigan's TANF grant, and our caseworkers perform eligibility for Medicaid. In addition, we are Michigan's public child welfare agency. We are an engine for good yet this is a daunting task in our state because so many Michigan residents receive some service from us. More than 1.2 million residents in Michigan receive Food Stamp benefits and more than 1.5 million are receiving Medicaid benefits. Nearly two million people in Michigan live in or near poverty and almost one-third can't survive on what they earn, resulting in demand for some service from us.

We provide the basic safety net for families who are in a one-time crisis, those that need occasional help, and those who are in chronic need. Most are working families who contribute to their communities and provide for their children. However, many are not engaged in their communities nor do they participate in civic events. Many people who come to our department for assistance are ashamed of needing help, and some are frustrated because they feel they are not valued by society.

We believe that feeling as if your vote does not count or that your opinion does not matter is a significant barrier to self-sufficiency. As part our mission to assist families to be safe, stable, and self-supporting, we believe it is essential that families are empowered to act toward their own best interests and be active participants in decisions that affect their lives – with one of the most important activities being to cast a vote. All people, including our millions of clients, have the right to be heard and to be a part of public debates about what services they need and which policies would be most helpful to them.

Compliance with the National Voter Registration Act is not just another federal mandate; it is a key component for families to act on their own behalf and become part of the public debate. Not only is this an essential component of a family's movement toward self-sufficiency, it is also absolutely essential if we hope to further our democracy. We share the values expressed in the preamble to the act: that the right of citizens to vote is a fundamental right, and it is the duty of federal, state, and local governments to promote the exercise of that right.

The Michigan Department of Human Services' Civic Engagement Initiative approaches voter registration activity within a larger framework of removing barriers to self-sufficiency and empowerment for our customers. We recognize that it is the right of all eligible citizens of Michigan to vote, and that Section 7 of the National Voter Registration Act, charges the Michigan Department of Human Services with the responsibility of offering voter registration opportunities in all of our offices that provide public assistance.

Currently Michigan has 107 financial assistance offices and 3,239 case specialists devoted to serving financial assistance clients. The department has complied with NVRA, Section 7 by including access to voter registration at strategic points in the public assistance process. Voter registration forms are included as part of public assistance applications. In addition, our workers are responsible for offering voter registration to Michigan Department of Human Services clients concurrent with application for benefits, redetermination of benefit eligibility, and whenever a change of address is completed. Voter registration activities have been part of official department policy since October 2004.

When Ismael Ahmed was appointed director of the department in August 2007 he brought with him a long history of human services experience and extensive work designing strategies to empower low-income and underrepresented individuals. As part of a broader set of initiatives to move clients toward greater self-sufficiency, he made voter registration a priority.

Since September 2007, a strategic and focused effort – the Civic Engagement Initiative – has strengthened the department's approach and made better use of limited resources, including tracking results locally and statewide. The Civic Engagement Initiative is aimed at approaching voter registration on multiple fronts while at the same time minimizing the impact to local office staff.

**Goals of the Civic Engagement Initiative:**

The Civic Engagement Initiative has several goals:

- The primary goal is to further the intent of Congress by providing voter registration for low-income individuals.
- The reduction of perceived or real barriers to the voter registration process is another goal of this initiative.
- Empowering our clients and assisting them in making decisions for themselves is a goal and charge we take very seriously.

Offering voter registration and assisting in the process is one way we can empower our clients and assist them in becoming engaged in the decisions that impact their lives and their families.

- Another goal of the Civic Engagement Initiative has been to ensure accountability through creating mechanisms for local offices to report on voter registration activities.

Historically, this activity has been tracked locally and not reported to a central repository. By collecting local office data on voter registrations, declinations, and office traffic we will be able to determine trends and best practices that will help us identify strategies for moving forward.

- Public education and community partnering are two other very important goals of this initiative.

Through provision of “marketing” materials like posters and DVDs and creation of public service announcements, we hope to increase awareness of voter registration activities. Partnering with community organizations, local and statewide media, and other groups will also help us raise awareness of our efforts and assist in engaging and empowering low income individuals.

### **Civic Engagement Initiative Implementation:**

The Michigan Department of Human Services is a statewide department that works with local county offices to administer programs. When we began the process of developing the Civic Engagement Initiative we recognized that we needed to create a team of individuals from both the local offices and central office. The team was fortunate to benefit from the guidance of Demos, a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization, throughout the process of project development and as the pieces of the initiative came together. In addition, each local office identified a voter registration coordinator and alternate contact to work with the team and ensure local oversight and support. The team was given the charge of creating a plan for addressing voter registration on several fronts:

- Policy revision.
- Results-oriented project management.
- Training and technical assistance.
- Public education.
- Community partnering.

#### *Policy Revision*

The Civic Engagement Team analyzed existing department voter registration policy and identified revisions that would help local office staff better understand their responsibilities and execute those responsibilities with complete clarity. The policy was revised to include the aspects of the new initiative and to enhance department voter registration activities as outlined in the remainder of this testimony.

#### *Results-oriented Project Management*

The team made a decision to develop a Web-based reporting tool that local office coordinators would use to report voter registration activity to the central office. The data collected will be used to identify high performing local offices, identify those offices that may be facing challenges, and provide a statewide picture of departmental voter registration activities. In addition, the data gathered will help us in reaching out to those offices that are doing well so that we can identify best practices to share with those offices that may be

struggling. Data will be shared with employees statewide. The combination of identifying local office coordinators, revising and enhancing our policy, and developing accountability and reporting systems, in concert, has also helped to elevate the initiative and to make Michigan Department of Human Services staff aware of the focused approach. This system will also be used to recognize and reward outstanding results related to the Civic Engagement Initiative.

#### *Training and Technical Assistance*

The next steps included developing training for local office coordinators and staff. The training developed for the voter registration coordinators is more than technical assistance training on reporting and policy specifics. The training is an opportunity to discuss the importance of the initiative, to discuss ideas for partnering with community organizations, learn how to use the public education materials most effectively, and get tips on working with the media. The platform for the training is a live Webinar. Like most human services organizations, the department has limited training resources making live training for this initiative cost prohibitive. The Webinar training can be accessed directly from the coordinator's work station. In addition, the training can be archived on the DHS-Net, our Intranet Web site, to be accessed at any point in time.

The department strictly adheres to a zero tolerance policy in terms of coercing or influencing clients in any arena. Included in both the voter registration coordinator and local office staff training, as well as embedded in the policy, are the following important mandates:

- Clients are made aware that voter registration is in no way linked to their benefits.
- Local office staff are not to attempt to coerce or influence clients to vote but to simply offer the opportunity to register.
- Local office staff may not display any political signs or slogans.
- Local office staff may not wear any political apparel or buttons.
- Local office staff may not give any advice or information about political parties or persons.
- Local office staff may not attempt to influence the political party chosen by the applicant.

#### *Public Education*

In addition to training coordinators and staff who are responsible for implementing voter registration activities, the team recognized the need to reach out to our clients and the public in order to build awareness that this service is available at the department and is part of our core mission. The team created public education materials to get the message out about the importance of registering to vote, and the role of the Michigan Department of Human Services in promoting voter registration. The department is providing local offices with copies of voter registration posters in English, Spanish, and Arabic. These can be displayed in local office lobbies and used during outreach activities. In addition, a DVD on voter registration is being provided to all local offices for play in their lobbies. With help from Demos and a marketing specialist, 30 second public service announcement scripts have been developed. We are in the process of securing several Michigan celebrities to lend their voices and personas to the cause in the form of radio and television spots. The department's Office of Communications has developed press releases related to the initiative and has created tips for

engaging local media outlets that can be shared with local office coordinators. Information and links on voter registration will also appear on the department's Web site and the intranet site.

### *Community Partnership*

Because of this need to build public awareness, and the constraints on resources, the team chose to engage community partners to assist in building awareness of the opportunity to register at department locations, and to promote voter registration in general in collaboration with the department. This is one of the areas that we are most excited about because of the supportive responses from community organizations. The League of Women Voters is extremely interested in working with local Michigan Department of Human Services offices to assist with the voter registration process. Some local offices will be inviting non-partisan community partners to sit in their lobbies and assist clients with the voter registration process. In addition, there may be opportunities for our staff to go outside of the local office to assist with voter registration.

### **Potential Benefits of Michigan Department of Human Services Approach**

The Civic Engagement Team expects that voter registration will be offered to tens of thousands of Michigan citizens in coming months at our local offices. We also expect that increased focus on voter registration promotion will also increase other empowerment-oriented activities as our workers become more adept at promoting civic engagement and the importance of each citizen becoming engaged in our communities. While this last outcome is most difficult to measure, we expect that it will make a difference in the effectiveness of our service delivery systems as we get better at working with consumers as partners with a real voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

The Civic Engagement Initiative ensures compliance with a federal mandate, creates a system of accountability for results, and generates hard data that can be used to improve the process and highlight successes. In addition, we have already begun to see a strengthening of intergovernmental relationships. We believe that the Department of Human Services' model can encourage public assistance agencies in other states to work toward innovative ways to meet the National Voter Registration Act goal of promoting voter registration.

In addition to strengthening department compliance and promoting greater partnerships with clients, community organizations and other governmental agencies, the success of the Civic Engagement Initiative will benefit the state and nation. A more engaged and more diverse citizenry will strengthen our democracy and help us all find the solutions we need to the challenges we face.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding this important initiative.