



Suffolk County Voter

www.lwv-suffolkcounty.org

April 2007

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Thurs. April 19, 2007 LWVSC Board Meeting, 10:00am—Riverhead Library
Thurs.. May 10, 2007 LWVSC Annual Convention, approx 4:30-7:30pm
Location and further details will be announced

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LWVSC VISITS BD OF ELECTIONS

On March 7, 2007, members from the LWV of Suffolk County met with Commissioner Anita Katz and newly appointed Commissioner Cathy Geier as well as her staff. At this time no one is certain when or which voting machines will replace our levers. In fact, we can not be certain who will ultimately be making the choice. The LWV is advocating strongly for a single statewide optical scan voting system and supports Assembly Bill #A05170 sponsored by Assemblyman Galef and cosponsored by some of our own legislators: Ginny Fields, Fred Thiele, Jr., and also James Conte and Steven Engelbright. The commissioners were skeptical that this bill would pass as two years ago legislators had abdicated and left the decision to the counties. However, we should all be thanking our legislators who support this bill as well as advocating for our other legislators as well as state senators and Governor Spitzer to support a single statewide optical scan system so that we can be certain our votes are counted and counted correctly.

We also need to begin lobbying for unrestricted absentee balloting. According to Aimee Allaud, the LWVNY has supported this since the early 1990's when members testified extensively in a series of hearings. Now that everyone is certain and concerned that whenever the change of voting machines occurs, there will be some confusion at polling sites and resistance from some voters, it seems an excellent time to lobby for unrestricted absentee ballots. Thirty states now allow anybody to cast an absentee ballot whereas six years ago it was only twenty. In New York under current law, only voters who are physically impaired, under a doctor's care, and unable to get to the polls or those persons who are not in the county on Election Day due to business or vacation can vote on an absentee ballot. Even with the extended hours for voting, this presents a hardship for voters who may live in

one end of the county and work on the other or even for some people on the east end who work in the city. These voters are often faced with the dilemma of not voting or not being truthful when applying for an absentee ballot. Both Commissioner Katz and Commissioner Geier favor easing restrictions for absentee voting.

They both also reminded us of another very important role that LWV members could fulfill; ie, poll inspectors. Change of any kind meets resistance. Not only will voters be skeptical but it is anticipated that poll workers and inspectors will also be and it is assumed many will quit. Who would be able to better fulfill the job of inspector than League members? Not only will we be able to provide a concrete service on Election Day, but it will provide us with first hand knowledge of what else needs to be done to keep making improvements and help elections run smoothly. New York has been slow to decide which machines we will use and this has been beneficial as it has resulted in our not making the mistakes of others. However, let our members NOT delay in getting involved. We have so much we can do to help our BOE. Let's do it!

Judie Gorenstein



Katherine Hoak & Lisa Scott working the LWV table at Touro Law School on Mar.14.

SC FORENSIC MENTAL HYGIENE HOUSING PROGRAM (FMHHP)

League members are currently meeting with our State Senators and Assembly Members to present this program which will divert people with mental illness and/or co-occurring substance abuse disorders from the SC Correctional Facility into safe and supportive housing, a cost-effective alternative to jail, while reducing the risk of recidivism for offenders with mental illness. This proposed program model is supported by Community Mental Hygiene, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), District Court, Probation Department, and the Coalition of Mental Health Service Providers.

Suffolk County is unique because of the three psychiatric centers which had housed nearly 33,000 people, and at their peak, about one-third of all institutionalized patients in the State. Now only Pilgrim Psychiatric Center remains open with approximately 600 patients. Reinvestment funding was an attempt by the State to foster continued downsizing of psychiatric institutions by linking funding to counties for the development of community mental health resources. However, most of the funds were attached to a statewide pool of funds allocated to all counties, rather than to the specific localities actually affected by the reduction in State psychiatric facility beds. Suffolk County, therefore, never received the funding that matches the demand and service needs of individuals who were de-institutionalized. The impact of inadequate State funding has been profound.

In any given year, an average of 6,000 people with serious mental illness are involved with Suffolk County's criminal justice system. Several polls show that approximately 20 percent of the inmates in our jails (and 10 percent of probationers) have serious and persistent mental illness. Many of these people, when not jailed, are homeless, unemployed, undereducated, and lacking in daily living skills. They normally do not receive adequate treatment for their mental illness. When they are

jailed, it costs the County \$230 a day for each, or over \$74,000 annually!

Because the County's mental health systems are so overburdened and underfunded, and because there are a minimum number of safe, supportive housing units available to them, individuals with mental illness, often with co-occurring substance abuse disorders, seek housing in unlicensed, unregulated, and unsafe sober homes, DSS emergency housing, or end up homeless. Often they become victims wherever they are.

Given these current conditions, people with mental illness lose their ability to function; they repeat the very behaviors that put them at risk of incarceration in the first place.

FMHHP will provide supervised community residence and supported housing to these individuals, who would be able to move into supported housing to provide a cost-effective alternative to jail, while reducing the risk of recidivism for these non-violent offenders with mental illness. This program will strengthen participants' social functioning through peer support groups, reduce substance abuse, improve overall mental health and employability and link participants with supportive services upon release from this program.

The purpose of our interviews with State legislators is to ask them to work with the Governor's Office, the Division of Budget, and the Office of Mental Health to ensure that the Governor's proposed mental health housing expansion is incorporated in the final budget and to ensure that funding is made available specifically for Suffolk County to fund this proposal. We did attend the Budget Public Hearing presented by Republican Assembly members on March 2nd. Because of time constraints, though, we were unable to speak, but left a copy of the FMHHP program and the presentation on it we planned to make for each of the Assembly Members.

Katherine Hoak

SUFFOLK COUNTY REPUBLICAN WOMEN

We were invited by Fran Brechter, President of the Suffolk County Republican Women, to join them at their first General Membership Meeting of 2007 at the Islip GOP Headquarters on March 7th to talk about the League and some of our activities and goals. Members of the Babylon, Brookhaven, Huntington and Islip GOP Clubs were present. Their primary goals were to increase their membership and to encourage more women to become involved in the political process. They wanted information and education from us.

We gave an overview of the League's mission to educate and motivate citizen participation, our Voter Service activities, and the primary positions (Affordable Housing, Alternatives to Incarceration, focusing on services for mentally ill people who become involved with the criminal justice system, Redistricting, Campaign Finance Reform, and Environmental Concerns, specifically the Lloyd Aquifer) which we work on.

We received a warm response and met many women who share our concerns and involvements. It was a rewarding evening!