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Giving Santa Monica's homeless a voice come November

by Nick Taborek

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STEP UP — As candidates go door to door to drum up support ahead of November's election, there's one potential voting block they're almost certain to miss: the men and women who spend their days and nights on Santa Monica's streets.

Step Up on Second, a Santa Monica-based homeless services provider that focuses on those with mental illness, is doing its part to bring those who don't have a door to knock on inside the registered voter tent.

In tandem with the League Of Women Voters Of Santa Monica, the nonprofit held its second-ever voter registration drive for the homeless on Thursday, hoping to give people who have never been to the ballot box a voice come Nov. 2.

To Carolyn Baker, Step Up's vice president of community development, it's an event that's right in line with the organization's mission of empowering people who are down on their luck and frequently feel ignored.

"When you talk about recovery, it's really about participating in the community rather than being in exile, which is often the case when people are homeless and suffering from mental illness," she said.

Step Up held its first drive ahead of the 2008 election and signed up about 35 new voters.

Les Jones, a Step Up board member who helped launch the event two years ago, said there was a similar turnout this time around.

Besides simply helping members fill out voter registration cards and allowing them to use Step Up's address on the required form, the nonprofit also gives homeless people a place to learn about the issues that will be decided in the election.

Step Up screens debates between candidates for statewide office and gives members a forum to discuss their views. For those who are illiterate, there's help available to decipher the forms and understand the ballot. Decisions about how to vote, Step Up officials emphasized, are left entirely up to members themselves.

"It's amazing the depth of understanding our members have about the issues," Jones, who was formerly homeless himself, said.

Arthur Scriver, 53, a schizophrenic who said he has lived on the streets for 20 years, was at Step Up on Thursday and was planning to cast a ballot in his first election in decades.

He said he hadn't made up his mind how he'll vote but was mindful that local officials make important decisions that affect the homeless.

He said he sleeps outdoors around Santa Monica and comes to Step Up to shower and eat.

"[It's] really nice of the city of Santa Monica to let us sleep during the day in the park. God bless them for that," he said.

Theresa Gardiner, who said she moved to the Los Angeles area after Hurricane Katrina cost her her livelihood in New Orleans, registered to vote so she could speak up for protecting social security and Medical, California's low-income health insurance program.

"If we lose [these programs], we have nothing," she said.

A homeless man who gave his name only as Gene said he planned to support City Council candidate Jerry Rubin and was in favor of Measure Y, a ballot measure that would increase the city's sales tax rate by a half percent, and Measure YY, an advisory measure urging the council to pledge half of the money raised from the tax hike to public schools.

"Education is something that this country has really slacked on," he explained.

Joanne Leavitt, president of the League of Women Voters Of Santa Monica, said participating in the event was worthwhile because homeless individuals "may feel disempowered and not many people reach out to them."

"It's a way of helping them have their voices heard, because they have the same rights to be heard as people who live North of Montana," she said.

nickt@smdp.com