



DJJ residents portray 2008 presidential candidates in mock election. (Faces obscured to protect resident identities.)

DJJ Youth Exercise Civic Duty And Vote In Mock Presidential Election

From October 27, 2008 through November 4, 2008, DJJ sponsored an annual Election Day Program for youth in both detention facilities and group homes. The youth were given the opportunity to witness first-hand the electoral process through mock debates between candidates, press conferences, speeches, the completion of actual voter registration cards and a vote with paper ballots. Youth were chosen to play the roles of candidates and members of the press in recreating a campaign atmosphere complete with placards for the candidate's supporters. This program inspired the children to open their eyes to the possibilities for changes in public policy, and encourage future participation in the electoral process.

The program began with the residents watching the last Presidential Debate on October 15, 2008 to familiarize themselves with the candidates. The youth then had daily discussions on an election-related topic. The discussions were scheduled in the afternoon, after school hours and all sites discussed the same topic on a particular day. Topics included: The Right to Vote, African-Americans and the Vote, Women and the Vote, The Role of Political Parties in an Election, The Value and Civic Duty of Voting, and Voting and the Constitution.

As the final step, the youth conducted their "Voting Campaign Registration Forum" in which they were instructed on the procedure of correctly filling out a real Vote Registration Form. All the youth involved in the program enthusiastically thrust themselves into their roles, creating an electric atmosphere that resembled the energy of the electoral process. The enthusiasm on the faces of the children was palpable as they created peer-inspired commercials to impact the vote. The commercials were performed by the youth between the debates.

Organized by Director of Program Services Sonia Galarza, the program helps youth discover the empowerment that comes with a participatory democracy and the relevance of voting in their lives as citizens of this great country. The youth asked many questions about the electoral process and many of them were able to identify the important roles of political parties, the candidates themselves and the press.

"It was a lot of fun allowing them to explore their different ideas and views on issues of importance to them", Sonia Galarza said. "This day was very informative and a great educational experience for all the youth".

Actual election results compiled from resident elections: Democrat Candidate Barack Obama received 87.8% of the vote and Republican Candidate John McCain received 12.2% of the vote.

