

NYC Department of Correction Gets Out the Vote



Although an estimated 6.1 million Americans are disenfranchised due to their involvement with the criminal justice system, most individuals incarcerated in jails ARE in FACT eligible to vote. Additionally, New York State authorizes individuals to vote if they are on probation, have completed their sentence, received a Certificate of Good Standing, or have a pardon through Executive Order 181.

The NYC DOC takes its duty of providing access to voting for those in its custody very seriously and has made increased civic engagement a priority over the past 4 years. It has a deep understanding of the state's eligibility laws and pursues its civic engagement efforts accordingly.

How do people in custody exercise their right to vote?

The Department's Civic Engagement Coordinator and Programs Division facilitate voting in our facilities in three phases:

1. Distribute and make available all necessary voter registration and absentee ballot forms in all available languages.
2. Provide non-partisan voter education and in-person assistance for individuals to understand and complete the required forms.
3. Leverage partnership with the Board of Elections to ensure in-person drop-offs, pick-ups, and timely delivery of all election mail on behalf of people in custody at no charge to the individual.

In 2019, the Department submitted to the Board of Elections a total of 1,225 voter registration forms and 356 absentee ballots

How do people in custody learn about elections?

- Prior to elections, the Department hangs posters in high-traffic areas alerting individuals to the election, their right to civic engagement, and the state's voter eligibility criteria.
- On a quarterly basis, in partnership with external service providers and city agencies, the Department conducts civic engagement events spread over the course of a week that assist individuals with voter registration and provide civic education.
- Volunteers and staff conduct voter registration and absentee ballot drives within the facilities, distribute information brochures, and offer civic education. Both are trained on how to educate those in custody on relevant campaign issues and on the ways that individuals in custody can practice their constitutional rights.

Since 2016, the Department has registered a total of 3,227 voters and submitted 919 requests for absentee ballots

How does the Department accomplish this with a transient population?

These mechanisms are more difficult to accomplish in a jail setting than in prison as people in jail move in and out more frequently. However, the Department does everything in its power to start and complete the process for everyone in custody and set them up with a path for future civic engagement upon release.

- The Department created a Civic Engagement Coordinator position to oversee the operation of ensuring individuals in custody have the ability to execute their civic rights. The Coordinator builds relationships with external partners, volunteers, and city agencies to provide technical assistance for voter registration, form dispersal, vote submission, and release follow-up.

What is the Department doing for the 2020 Election during COVID-19?

In the wake of COVID-19, the Department has had to suspend many of its in-person voter facilitation efforts. It has distributed voting instruction packets that include voting instructions, eligibility criteria, and the requisite voter forms. These will be collected and submitted accordingly. While the packet arrangement is not ideal, it's presently necessary to keep people safe. The Department looks forward to resuming its in-person civic engagement operations and welcoming back civic engagement volunteers as soon as it is safe to do so.