



National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND VOTER REGISTRATION: SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

AUGUST 2012

With the upcoming 2012 national, state, and local elections, questions arise about safety considerations for domestic violence survivors when registering to vote. Guidance from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) Technical Assistance Team follows.



Voting may pose safety and privacy concerns for victims of domestic violence. Once a voter registration application form is sent to local or state election officials, it becomes a matter of public record and can often be accessed by almost anyone. In some states, access is limited to political parties or candidates, as well as to others who meet the requirements of the state law governing its use. However, in many states, access to voter rolls is unrestricted.¹

Not surprisingly, domestic violence victims who fear being found by their abusers may not register to vote to avoid having their contact information included in public records. Likewise, domestic violence victim advocates will go to great lengths to protect the confidentiality and safety of those they serve. Given that stalking is a very common tactic of abuse, with two-thirds of female victims of stalking being stalked by intimate partners², victims' and advocates' apprehension is not unfounded. Fortunately, anti-violence advocates have worked on behalf of all victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking to help ensure that options are in place to protect voters who fear for their safety.

The NRCDV has developed this Technical Assistance Guidance to provide victims and survivors, as well as their advocates, with recommendations for protecting and enhancing victims' safety while exercising their right to vote. This guidance may also be helpful to organizations and community groups that are mobilizing civic participation and engaging in voter registration efforts. If victims and survivors are unaware that voter registration lists are considered a public record, they can unknowingly put themselves in harm's way. Information about potential risks and safety options available to victims of domestic violence and other crimes can be proactively incorporated into voter education activities that are designed to inform the public about their democratic rights and election procedures.

It is crucial to keep in mind, however, that each of these safety measures is just one component of a larger safety plan that victims are encouraged to develop with assistance from an experienced advocate. Moreover,

¹ For a state-by-state survey of voter registration data gathering and laws governing use of voter data, see: Alexander, K., & Mills, K. (2004). *Voter Privacy in the Digital Age*. Sacramento, CA: California Voter Foundation. Available at <http://www.calvoter.org/issues/votprivacy/pub/voterprivacy/index.html>.

² Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf.

available options may vary from state-to-state. Victims and advocates are encouraged to consult their respective **state and local elections offices** for more information. Finally, advocates should be well informed about laws in their state that may require photo ID for victims and the implications of such laws to the safety of domestic violence victims. Given that victims often leave important documents behind as they try to escape abusive relationships, advocates should also be able to help them safely secure the form(s) of identification that are needed in their state for voting purposes.

How Can Victims of Domestic Violence Register to Vote Without Having Their Contact Information Become A Public Record?

Voter Confidentiality Programs: Address Confidentiality Programs (ACPs) and confidential voter listings are state-administered programs that allow victims of domestic violence to register to vote without having their contact information becoming a public record. ACPs usually allow a victim to use a designated address for all public records such as court case information, vehicle ownership, and property ownership, and to register her/his confidential address with the ACP. Once the mail is sent to the designated address, the ACP officials will then forward that mail to the victim's address. Over **half of the states** in the country now offer these life-saving programs. For example, in the state of **Wisconsin**, voters who are victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault or stalking have the option to not have her/his name and address written on poll lists when signing in to vote. Instead, the voter presents a voter identification card with a unique identification serial number provided by the municipal clerk and uses that number to "sign in."

In Minnesota, the statewide address confidentiality program known as **Safe at Home** gives victims of domestic violence, and other individuals who fear for their safety, a post office box (P.O. Box) address where they can have their mail sent. The Safe at Home program, in turn, forwards participants' First Class Mail to their actual physical address, which will be kept private by Safe at Home. As part of the program, which is offered by the Secretary of State's office in collaboration with local victim service providers, participants petition to have their names removed from the public voter rolls.³ Programs such as this one offer crime victims an extra layer of protection when used in conjunction with an overall safety plan. Trained advocates can play a critical role in assisting domestic violence victims with obtaining a confidential address and registering to vote to assure that victims are able to participate in the election process as safely as possible.

Election Day Registration (EDR): Most states in the U.S. require voters to register before an election, usually with the 30 or 15 days prior. In a few states, such as Iowa, voters have the option to register the same day that they vote. In the states that allow Election Day Registration, also known as EDR, voters can usually show up at their designated polling place with proof of identification and residency (although the type of acceptable documentation varies from state to state). After filling out the necessary registration application, they are able to vote. (For more information on Iowa's EDR procedures, go to the **Iowa Secretary of State** website.) Domestic violence victims and advocates across the country can check with their respective **Secretary of State or local elections office** to learn if Election Day Registration is an option in their state.

For victims of domestic violence, and other voters who fear for their safety, the advantage of EDR is that voters' information will not be in the state's database before Election Day and will only be entered long enough to verify that they voted at the address at which they registered to vote⁴. To utilize EDR, the voter will need to submit a written request along with their registration application, on the day of the election stating

³ Minnesota Council of Nonprofits. (n.d.). *Voter Registration For Nonprofit Organizations: A toolbox to help nonprofit organizations conduct voter registration activities*. St. Paul, MN. Available at http://www.mnparticipationproject.org/voter-registration/voter-registration-guides/Voter_Registration_Toolbox.pdf.

⁴ Minnesota Council of Nonprofits. (n.d.). *Voter Registration For Nonprofit Organizations: A toolbox to help nonprofit organizations conduct voter registration activities*. St. Paul, MN. Available at http://www.mnparticipationproject.org/voter-registration/voter-registration-guides/Voter_Registration_Toolbox.pdf.

that s/he fears for her/his safety and wishes to be removed from the public voting rolls. Victims who choose this option will have to re-register the next time s/he wishes to vote.

Use of Shelter Address and Vouching for Victims: Domestic violence victims living in shelter may have the option to use the shelter's address for the purpose of registering to vote. Should the victim need to prove her residence in the shelter, a shelter employee may be able to vouch for the voter. In Minnesota, for instance, "vouching" may be used by voters to prove their residence in a residential facility if an employee of the facility signs a legal oath stating s/he personally knows that the resident lives in the facility. There is no limit to the number of residents for which an employee can vouch. For more information on MN's "vouching" option, go to the [Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State's](#) website. Domestic violence victims and advocates in other parts of the country can consult their respective [Secretary of State](#) to find out if this safety measure is also available in their state.

Safety and Privacy in the Digital Age: Current trends in technology, campaigning and election administration have significantly impacted voter privacy in the digital age, making it critical for abuse victims and their advocates to consider the safety implications of such trends.⁵ For example, most states now have an online statewide voter database to ensure that registration data is streamlined and up-to-date. Having a single database could potentially make it easier for abusers to acquire voter data and therefore access a victim's confidential information. In addition, the paperless nature of voter records comes with security risks such as accidental or intentional security breaches of government computers, unauthorized access by government employees, negligence and intrusion by hackers. Research also indicates that many states are gathering more data from voters than may be necessary for election administration. That information is then widely disseminated to secondary users such as candidates and political parties or those seeking information for commercial purposes, typically without any notice to voters that their information will be shared.⁶

While it is the government's responsibility to protect and improve voter privacy,⁷ a few safety recommendations for those facing life-threatening circumstances (and for all voters, for that matter) in the digital age include:

- Educating oneself about the implications of disclosing personal information for voting registration purposes. This includes learning what secondary uses of voter information are permitted in one's state and which fields on the voter registration form are deemed required or optional.
- Currently, a variety of websites allow individuals to register to vote online. Websites use log files, cookies and pixel tags to keep track of users' visits, preferences and profile information in order to customize users' experiences. Victims and their advocates must keep in mind that an abuser may be monitoring the victims' computer and that it is not possible to delete or clear all computer "footprints". Therefore, victims are always encouraged to use a SAFER computer at a library, a community center, or a local advocacy program if they are going to be entering information when they register to vote that they want to keep confidential from the abuser. Of course there is never a guarantee that a particular computer will be completely safe, however.

⁵ Presently, political campaigns are relying on high-tech tools for "micro targeting." That is, by combining bits of available data about voters (e.g., voter's Congressional district, credit card type, voter registration records, etc.), campaigns can tailor their messages for specific voters.

⁶ Alexander, K., & Mills, K. (2004). *Voter Privacy in the Digital Age*. Sacramento, CA: California Voter Foundation. Available at <http://www.calvoter.org/issues/votprivacy/pub/voterprivacy/index.html>.

⁷ For policy recommendations to states for protecting voter privacy while maintaining the integrity of election administration and the ability of campaigns to reach voters, see: Alexander, K., & Mills, K. (2004). *Voter Privacy in the Digital Age*. Sacramento, CA: California Voter Foundation. Available at <http://www.calvoter.org/issues/votprivacy/pub/voterprivacy/index.html>.

- Voter registration forms for some states require a Social Security number (SSN) to prevent fraudulent registration and voting. When filling out a registration form online, it is recommended not to type in the SSN in the form. If this information is required in a given state, an applicant can manually write her or his SSN after printing the form for mailing to the local election office.

For further information related to technology safety, victims and advocates are encouraged to contact the **Safety Net Project** of the National Network to End Domestic Violence at safetynet@nnedv.org or 202-543-5566. Safety Net educates victims, their advocates and the general public about the dangerous and potentially lethal sides of various technologies in the hands of abusers and perpetrators. Conversely, Safety Net also addresses how to use technology strategically to help find safety and escape domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking.

Conclusion

This guidance provides general information on available options for protecting victims' privacy and safety when registering to vote. Knowledge of the laws and resources in one's own state is critical for effective safety planning, and the importance of voter education efforts should not be overlooked. Advocates can encourage civic engagement and help protect victims' right to vote by proactively providing accurate information and safety planning with victims throughout the voter registration process.

In just one day in 2011, across the United States and its territories, more than 67,000 victims of domestic violence sought services from domestic violence programs and shelters. That same day, victims made more than 10,000 requests for services that could not be provided because programs did not have the resources to offer these services.⁸ For this and other reasons, it is not surprising that domestic violence victims may have a strong interest in electoral participation to ensure that public policies, legislation and funding account for their multiple needs and concerns. From providing information about stalking to helping victims obtain a confidential voter address to educating voters about their options for privacy in the electoral process, advocates can help domestic violence victims safely exercise their right to vote.

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The NRC DV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Technical Assistance Team at <http://www.nrcdv.org/TARquest.php>.

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⁸ National Network to End Domestic Violence. (2012). *Domestic Violence Counts 2011. A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelters and services*. Washington, DC. Available at http://nnedv.org/docs/Census/DVCounts2011/DVCounts11_NatlReport_BW.pdf.