



My Voice, My Vote, My Right

National Residents' Rights Month October 2012

by Sarah Wells, Executive Director
National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care

As a child, I remember going with my parents to vote in elections – that was back when you pulled a lever or wrote on a piece of paper and dropped it into a box (no “hanging chads” or e-voting then!). We’d pull the curtain shut around us and my dad or mom would explain how the names were organized and why were voting for this person or that person. Coming out of the voting booth, I remember a sense of immense pride – we cast our vote, our voices mattered! The privacy of the whole voting experience, the thoughtfulness by which my parents approached their decision and the ceremony of pulling the lever – it definitely left an impression on me. It was very exciting when I cast my own ballot for the first time.

Do you remember voting in your first election? Becoming eligible to vote was a rite of passage into adulthood. So many of us have deep rooted beliefs and/or things we’d like to see changed in our community – having a voice and the ability to use it makes us full members of society and truly American.

Residents' Rights Month 2012 reminds us that residents of long-term care facilities have the right to participate in the American political process.

Residents do not lose their right to vote because of where they live. Residents can participate in elections nationally, state-wide and locally. Voting is our right and responsibility as citizens of this country.

Residents should be given options for a range of activities surrounding civic engagement. Nursing homes can organize outings during which residents can campaign for political candidates, or they could attend a speech or town hall event hosted by a politician. If residents cannot leave the facility due to illness, events can be held within the facility - they can hold candidate forums, inviting politicians to speak to residents or participate in resident council meetings. Staff can also encourage residents to write letters to their political representatives. Facilities can encourage voting by assisting residents in registering to vote, helping residents access absentee ballots, working with their community to offer mobile polling or even becoming a registered polling place. Many residents participated in significant political events in the past -- some residents were casting votes during historical moments, such as during the civil rights or women’s rights movements -- and they may still want to participate. Residents need to be given avenues to vote and express their opinions.



This year's Residents' Rights Month theme *My Voice, My Vote, My Right* challenges us to facilitate voting for long-term care consumers and to think of creative ways to involve residents in the political process. It is time to bring residents back into the political landscape. When this happens we all will benefit from it.

As we prepare for Residents' Rights Month in October and start thinking about the upcoming election in November, let's work together to make 2012 the year we provide long-term care residents with access to voting and encouragement to participate in their community. We all benefit from residents having a voice.