

Voting and Students with Disabilities

By: Stephanie Langer

This week is National Disability Voter Registration Week and DIG has been holding events all over Miami Dade county to bring awareness and discuss the challenges surrounding voting for persons with disabilities. During this week it came to my attention that we are not doing enough to ensure that students with disabilities are aware of their right to vote and we are not discussing with them how to register to vote. This is a missed opportunity and this must change.

In Florida, it is required to start discussing transition when a student with a disability turns 16. This is the natural place and time to begin discussing voting with the student. We discuss with these students what they want to be when they get out school, if they want to go to college or vocational programs, will they continue to remain in school till age 22 and we should be providing their families with a list of agencies and resources that are available in the community, but in all my years of attending transition meetings, I have never once discussed with a student their right to vote or how to register to vote. What a missed opportunity. In Florida, many students have a guardian advocate or a limited guardianship which requires the student to maintain some of their rights and I often see one right that is often maintained is the right to vote. Knowing that students often maintain their right to vote even with guardians, ensuring that they know what the right means and how to exercise that right becomes even more important. The first step to exercising the right to vote is to know how to register to vote. Students can preregister to vote beginning at age 16. While these students are still in school they are a captive audience and transition meetings are a required step to graduation. It is a perfect time to discuss voting and how to register to vote. A student only has to register once to become a voter for life. So next time you are in a transition meeting with a high school student don't forget to discuss voting and how

to register to vote. There are a few days left to register to vote for the August 28, 2018 primary election in Florida. You can register at any time at: www.Registertovoteflorida.gov. This system can be used to submit an application on line for new registration or to make changes to your existing registration. You need a driver's license or identification card and your social security number. To register to vote you must be a citizen of the United States, a legal resident of Florida, a legal resident of the county in which you are seeking registration, be at least 16 years old to preregister and 18 year old to register and vote; not had your right to vote taken away through guardianship, not be a convicted felon.

So many policies, procedures, legislation and laws impact people with disabilities but most people with disabilities are not involved in the making of these laws. People with disabilities often feel invisible in our society. One way to feel empowered, to feel heard and to feel that you are a part of a community is to vote. Let's empower everyone we can in all the ways we can. Let's not miss this opportunity to educate students with disabilities and register young people to vote.

“The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.”

by: Lyndon B. Johnson (1966)