

ACLU of Wisconsin: Issues recommendations about how to increase voting access for eligible voters in jail

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MILWAUKEE, Wis. – Following the release of the ACLU of Wisconsin Foundation's [statewide analysis](#) on jail voting in October, which found that eligible voters incarcerated in Wisconsin jails continue to face numerous obstacles when attempting to exercise their right to vote, the ACLU of Wisconsin Union issued a separate report today offering jail officials a series of recommendations that would help ease barriers to jail-based voting.

Free Voices– Democracy Ensured: Advocating for Change For Eligible Voters in Jail lays out solutions for the short, medium and long term, providing county sheriffs and jail administrators with a foundation for how to design systems that will not only enable eligible voters to access the ballot but also empower them to engage further in our democratic process.

While setting out to prescribe some high-level steps to make jail voting systems more accessible and smoother to operate, these recommendations also deal with the corrections system head-on, recognizing how the dehumanizing experiences endured by people in jail impacts their decisions about whether or not to vote. The report clarifies that acknowledging the humanity and dignity of people in jail – and meeting their basic needs – is a central component of jail voting advocacy.

Starting by outlining a set of basic interventions, the ACLU advises counties to forge closer relationships with nonpartisan voting rights organizations and permit them to register voters inside facilities and conduct voter education programs. These groups

would also provide accurate information on voting and elections that eligible voters can take advantage of.

Another simple step officials are encouraged to take is to adopt the jail voting model currently being used in Eau Claire, which provides eligible voters with election dates, deadlines and opportunities to learn about voting issues via kiosks or other internet-enabled devices. Jails should supply access to or photocopies of proof of residence or a photo ID document and facilitate access to voter registration requests for absentee ballots, designating a jail social worker as the contact person to provide voting assistance.

Once those practices have been implemented and eligible voters have the information and the means to vote, jail administrators and their community partners should begin reviewing the success of these efforts and look for areas for improvement. This process will entail regular audits of jail voting processes with measurable accountability benchmarks, subsequent consequences for underperformance, intentionally transparent public communication, and a willing and ongoing responsiveness to BIPOC, justice-impacted, and other affected communities.

The third and final set of recommendations underscores the importance of having various stakeholders – state and county officials, the Department of Corrections, and external community advocates – working together to ensure that every county in Wisconsin has legitimate jail voting policies, practices and procedures in place, stays committed to using them, and addresses their shortcomings in a diligent and public facing fashion. Fundamentally, this phase is about maintaining best practices, addressing lessons learned, and consistent revisiting of these interrelated issues to address new challenges. This is a process without end, until and unless there are no more incarcerated Wisconsinites.

“If we care about democracy, we cannot allow a single eligible voter to be denied the right to vote,” said ACLU of WI Campaign and Advocacy Strategist James Stein. “We need to think broader here, think about why people in jail feel disconnected, think about why we are so furious with the system, and why we would ever want to participate in it. When I was incarcerated, I didn’t care about voting or even have it on my radar. I was worried about getting out, getting a job (with a record), and paying off my debt. When I didn’t have control of the bare minimum needs to survive, my civic duty took a backseat. It is past time for our leaders to do the right thing, grant voters in jail the rights they are entitled to, and give directly impacted

people a seat at the table when improving the jail voting process.”