

VOTE'S MISSION:

VOICE OF THE EX-OFFENDER (VOTE) is an organization dedicated to building the political power of people most impacted by the criminal justice system, especially formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs,) their families and loved ones. Through leadership development, community education and voter mobilization, VOTE will ensure that our constituents are at the center of transforming the criminal justice system.

Contact VOTE:

(504) 943-1901

Norris@vote-nola.org

Rosana@vote-nola.org

Danielle@vote-nola.org

swhite@vote-nola.org

www.vote-nola.org

3301 Chartres Street,
New Orleans, LA
70117



Participants map out organizing strategies at a CAT training workshop.

In this issue:

CAT Training Report **P.1**

Member Profile & Staff Profile **P.2**

Angola Re-entry and Henderson Interview **P.3**

End of the Year Highlights **P.4**

CTO partners with VOTE to bring OPP petition and organizing skills to community members

On the weekend of November 18th, VOTE teamed up with the The Center for Third World Organizing (CTO) to hold a three-day Community Action Training at the RAE house. The event brought together about 25 individuals from social justice communities that spanned multiple states and organizations. The training covered both the basic strategies of community organizing and applied them to issues of local concern in New Orleans.

The sessions were led by two organizers from the Oakland, California office of CTO, Yeashan Banks (a former MAAP intern at VOTE), Keith Snodgrass (a former MAAP intern at Safe Streets), and Mirishae McDonald. They led workshop sessions in topics such as, grassroots fundraising, approaches to social change, and basic campaign strategy development. In addition to these dynamic workshops and discussions, the CAT participants hit the streets in New Orleans to circulate a petition that spoke to issues of concern at Orleans Parish Prison (OPP).

“It was good for people from VOTE to interact with the community on an issue everyone can relate to,” Donald Chopin said, “It was one of the best efforts that I have been a part of”.

Specifically, the petition called for an end of the per diem system that funds OPP, and a commitment to cap the beds of the newly built jail at 1438. The CAT canvassing group was able to add about 250 signatures to a wider petition effort through OPPRC and colorofchange.org that ended up acquiring over 2,000 signatures in the span of a week.

You can sign the petition online at http://act.colorofchange.org/sign/OPP_perdiem/ and stay connected to the effort for a smaller, safer, more humane jail at: <http://www.opprc.org>

Member Profile: Eugene Dean

Eugene Dean has been with VOTE from the very beginning, as the organization sprang from an effort of incarcerated men within Angola to organize people both inside and outside of the prison around the right to vote.

“We had the Angola Special Civics Project and then we continued to work trying to change policies and laws,” he said, “we really focused on trying to get some laws passed regarding parole eligibility”.

From his own experience re-registering to vote, Eugene has realized how much the community still needs the consciousness raising and mobilization that VOTE undertakes.

“When I went to register to vote the lady in the voter registration office said she didn’t know if I could vote and I had to explain it to the head person in charge,” he said, “he told me I sounded like I knew what I was talking about and signed my letter.”

These misconceptions are not just limited to those that have no experience with incarceration, but are also perpetuated within communities that are directly impacted by the criminal justice system.

“I think that misconceptions happen because at the time people’s offense takes place they aren’t educated [about voting],” he said, “People have been led to believe that once you get a conviction you lose all your rights”.

Eugene is a living example of the principle of education leading to advocacy. Now that he has regained the right to vote, he works constantly to give civic and legal advice to family and friends.

“My favorite aspect is bringing incarcerated people’s issues to light,” he said, “my family and friends call me with advice because I have been through the legal system”.

Eugene’s advocacy doesn’t stop at the issue of re-enfranchisement. One of the ways that being in VOTE has got him thinking about the criminal justice system is by becoming involved in jail reform issues connected to OPP.

“I didn’t know all the interaction in the way that things are structured as far as how the sheriff goes about getting his funds,” he said, “the jail issue brought me to the next level.”

A member from the very start, Eugene has been able to witness the things that VOTE has accomplished in a first-hand way that helps him brainstorm for future efforts.

“I’m excited about future work on ban the box,” he said, “I’d like to see more young people involved.”



Shedrick white leads a classroom discussion. Pictured above



New Staff Profile: Shedrick White

Shedrick White, the new Project Coordinator for the Empowered Path Program. Discrimination (CEED), comes to VOTE with more than ten years of experience working with at-risk communities. His career has extended into several realms of social services, including administration, education, and organizing. He studied Psychology and Criminal Justice at Southern University at New Orleans, where he also worked as a field specialist.

The emerging nature of the campaign was appealing, rather than intimidating to Shedrick, when he signed on to work with VOTE.

“I’m looking forward to launching this project, while motivating and advocating for individuals who are trying to get their life back on track,” he said.

This urge toward advocacy has taken many forms so far within Shedrick’s life and career, from serving as a motivational speaker, to his current project with a group in Central city where he is trying to start an initiative for young fathers in New Orleans. Though most of his work has been with younger populations, Shedrick is now eager to spend time advocating for the needs of the formerly incarcerated.

“I feel that the discrimination against ex-offenders is real and needs to be addressed and changed systematically,” he said.

In addition to his career, Shedrick blends his passion for learning and his community into poetic pursuits. He is currently working on his Doctorate in Educational Leadership, and on a book of poetry entitled *I Know Why His Pants Are Saggin*.

Angola tour provides re-entry show and tell for community members

By Danielle Unger

When Norris Henderson told me that he could get me on the clearance list for an upcoming trip to Angola, I jumped at the opportunity without even asking about the occasion.

That Tuesday before Thanksgiving I waited for a bus on Tulane and Broad, which, when it finally came, was quickly filled with other community members, lawyers, and court employees. On the bus, Judge Laurie White reminded us that the purpose of this trip was to, “show you what we are doing to address re-entry issues.. [so you’ll] go back and tell the community.”

Among various stops we made around the prison was Angola’s museum. A wall of weapons confiscated from inmates and movie posters from movies filmed at the prison sat inside wooden cases that bore small paper plaques with names and correctional numbers, indicating that the cases were crafted by prisoners. In retrospect it seems interesting that I spent my first few hours in Angola without seeing a single person that was incarcerated.

We met with the re-entry participants and mentors in the auto body repair shop, and they explained the technical aspects of the re-entry programs. The courts identify a non-violent repeat offender for the program, and the prison pairs this short-term inmate with a lifer with the skills and interest in teaching someone a trade and providing them with life skills counseling. The student we spoke with talked about the certifications he was getting and how busy the program kept him. The mentor talked about the progress the student was making and how he felt like he was increasing public safety by taking part in this rehabilitation behind bars. Elsewhere in the shop, other pairs of mentors and students worked on cars. There were correctional officers passing through from time to time, but otherwise, it looked like the inside of any vocational school. From my limited vantage point in the auto body shop, both the mentor and the student seemed grateful for the purpose that the re-entry activities provided them. The sheer presence of something productive to do in prison, the opportunity to get your GED to create something, must be a relief.

However, there are unsettling questions lying under these positive reports, which were best articulated by a woman on the bus. “This is depressing,” she said. “It’s a shame that all of the skills that these guys have are going to waste in here when who knows if they are going to be able to use them when they get out.”

On our way back to the front gates, members of the tour group asked questions about Angola. Where did the money from the Angola Rodeo go? Where does the money from the sales of all the prison produced goods go? The production of goods in the prison is, evidently, a concern of Prison Enterprises, a company that resides on Angola’s grounds, but is separate from the prison. The museum, too, while directly feeding off the infamy of Angola, is completely separate. I think there is a problem with separating out these operations, which all occur within the same 18,000 acres, behind the same gates. I even think there is a problem with separating the mentorship situation that is occurring within Angola from the economic situation that awaits the incarcerated people who make it through the program. The fact that these students are gaining skills and purpose behind bars can’t be separated from the depression of their lost potential, from the difficulty of acquiring compensation for those skills on the outside.



Henderson worked for Safe Streets, Strong Communities before founding VOTE. Photo from the Louisiana Justice Institute’s Blog

Parnell Herbert Interviews Norris Henderson

Norris Henderson: [The] Question is “Do we have bad boys or do we have a bad system?” Socio-economically the largest numbers of people of color to come out of that system are worse off than they were when they went in. We have created a vicious cycle.

PH: You mean a perpetual cycle of poverty?

Norris Henderson: Exactly! Louisiana is first where we want to be last and last where we want to be first. We are on a parallel track with our crime rate and our incarceration rate. We should be first or last in one or the other. Prison is a growth industry and these young brothers are becoming the commodity.

PH: One of the things we want to discuss is how the system is set up for young Black males to do something dumb in the streets so they can take you off of the streets and benefit from your presence while incarcerated. Many of these young men depend on their weapons and their boys in the streets. What happens when the boys are not around and weapons are no longer available behind those prison doors?

Norris Henderson: Attitudes change immediately because you realize, this is a different playing field. No AK, no Uzi, no Mac... You are now in an environment where no one is afraid of you because they have done what you have done and worse.

PH: Why do you think these young brothers are killing each other and what do you think we can do about it?

Norris Henderson: We have to create opportunities. Crime is about economics. Murder is the most serious. I know this personally because I lost a son to it. When my son died his boys said “The streets are going to run red.” Standing in front of my sons casket dressed in prison garb and shackles I said “No. It stops here.”

PH: We discussed the use of the word “Madness” and I agree with you. Our kids are not mad. They are not insane or crazy but they do some dumb stuff. The most dangerous man alive is the one without hope. \

Norris Henderson: Seeing something better about you is hope. Hope is a good thing. You’ve got to have hope. If you don’t have hope you are just giving up on yourself.

THANK YOU FOR ALL OF YOUR SUPPORT IN 2011

Here is a listing of some of our great strides forward! We couldn't have done it without you!

JANUARY: VOTE launches the Campaign to End Employment Discrimination (CEED)

MAY: VOTE begins to screen *Freedom Riders*, a documentary about the Freedom Rides, on their 50th anniversary.



JUNE: Our charter Paralegal Training Class, begun in November of 2010 and originally slated to last only 10 weeks concludes with 12 firebrand students.

SEPTEMBER: Our new Communications Fellow, Danielle Unger, arrives

NOVEMBER: 12 VOTE members and 2 staff travel to Los Angeles, California for two conferences: *The Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted People's Movement Gathering* and the *International Drug Policy Reform Conference*.

DECEMBER: Our new EPP Project Manager, Shedrick White joins the team



JOIN US FOR THE NEXT MEMBERSHIP MEETING
WEDNESDAY January 4th, 2011 AT 7PM AT THE RAE HOUSE
1212 St. Bernard Avenue, NO, LA 70117