

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.

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OPP policies have gain widespread criticism from the New Orleans community.

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Community Rallies around OPP Reform

Over a year after Mayor Landrieu convened the Criminal Justice Working Group to consider issues related to Orleans Parish Prison, such as the appropriate size of the new jail and the per diem funding system, few decisive actions have been made by the City Council Members that comprise the group.

At a criminal justice working group meeting held on October 19th, council members spoke about crime trends in Orleans Parish during the past year, but didn't commit to particulars like ending the per diem system (a policy which pays the sheriff's office a daily amount for every prisoner currently being detained) or capping the new jail at 1438 beds. Dr. James Austin, an expert contracted by the working group to compile information on the jail, presented at the meeting and said that the exact number of beds needed for the new jail was still under negotiation, contrary to the City Council's previous agreement that 1438 beds would be enough.

Community members spoke out on the slow action of the working group at a City Council budget hearing held on November 1st. Members of OPPrC and members of the Occupy Nola anti-racist working group delivered public comment opposing the per diem system and insisting upon a 1438 bed cap on the new jail. Council members themselves also debated whether it was in their power to end the per diem system or whether a legal, consent decree was needed to reverse the policy.

On November 15th, the MICAH project of Louisiana, an inter-faith coalition of clergy that are committed to making a difference in the community, hosted a national summit to address issues of education and incarceration. At Household of Faith Church, in New Orleans East, hundreds of participants listened to testimony from both citizens and clergy, and rallied against current criminal justice and educational policies in New Orleans. In the audience, members of MICAH held bright orange signs explicitly asking for the end of the per diem system and a 1438 bed cap on the new jail.

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Ms. Peggy works on legal research with other members of VOTE's paralegal class.

OPP... (continued from page 1)

Partnering with the Center for Third World Organizing, VOTE co-hosted a Community Action Training on November 18-20th that focused on concrete activist strategies. Participants of this workshop used this leadership building opportunity to speak out once more against the per diem system and jail size increase, by door knocking and gathering signatures for a petition.

Within an hour and a half, the outreach teams had gathered over 200 signatures. They heard numerous stories of family members locked away in over-crowded cells, held for unreasonably long periods for petty crimes and of the violence, filth and corruption in OPP. Outreach workers returned energized, and despite many of them living in other parts of the Gulf Coast, they felt invested in continuing the fight against over-incarceration.

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: Peggy Rayas Matthews

Though Peggy Rayas Matthews has been with VOTE for less than a year, her accomplishments have established her defining presence and commitment to the mission of the group.

"I came out to a meeting this January for the first time and I was impressed with what VOTE was about," she said, "it seemed everyone was on the same page and I joined that night".

Matthews heard about VOTE from her co-worker, member Betty Allen who sparked her interest by advertising the paralegal class that was about to begin. Since then, she has expanded her involvement to include legislative research and outreach, participation in the Greater New Orleans Organizer's Roundtable, and fundraising efforts for November's leadership conferences, which she also attended.

Matthews's passion for the issues VOTE endorses comes from both personal and professional experiences.

"I have a 29 year-old son who has been involved in the criminal justice system on and off," she said. Matthews has been a social worker for about 30 years, in which she has worked with the formerly incarcerated, the homeless, mentally ill, and the physically disabled.

"The target population that seemed the most handicapped to me was the ex-felons," she said, "formerly incarcerated people were getting the short end of the stick which is why I choose to focus on that group".

The community opportunities that VOTE provides are central to Matthew's experience, from the Eracism training she participated in with the People's Institute and the Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted People's Movement conference, to VOTE meetings themselves.

"I feel we accomplish something coming together," she said, "and the platform that the FIP movement presented was the epitome to me, that was something concrete in the end that we can go forth with".

Matthews sees registering FIPS and pre-conviction detainees to vote as one avenue of concrete change.

"When we have that 5,000 people behind us building that strong voting block, I think the sky is the limit," she said. In the short-term, she sees VOTE's economic improvement campaigns as urgent antidotes to present societal problems she encounters everyday on the job. In her future with VOTE, Matthews would like to help implement more classes and resources to aid FIPS immediately after their reentry.

"Everything in this country boils down to economics," she said, "In this country it's supposed to be we the people, so let's let it be we the people."

The People's Institute teaches anti-racism through organizing

By Danielle Unger

There were two significant differences that separated the People's Institute's Undoing Racism training from every other formal context in which I had previously been taught about race. The fundamental difference was that a majority of the trainers and the workshop's participants were people of color, and a significant percentage of the entire workshop, even the white participants, were longtime residents of New Orleans.

The People's Institute trainers posed the hard questions to a multi-racial group, in a conversation that is too often too short and too polite, forcing everyone to confront concepts that organizers and cultural workers are faced with a daily basis. From the fear of being, "run-away white children working in anti-racist settings," to the burden on black artists to be, "cultural artists," the group discussed issues in a way that emphasized both the systemic and the experiential.

In a society where non-profits are too often looked to as a fix-all solution to failed or reduced government efforts, People's Institute co-founder Ron Chisom emphasized organizing as the only way to undo racism, while providing a healthy critique of the organizational bureaucracy that often surrounds it.

Physically, fifteen hours is a long period of time to sit in the same room and talk about racism in America. Yet our time together only allowed us to brush the surface of this country's dehumanizing racial realities. The People's Institute understands these time limitations, and prioritizes learning and truth telling as an anti-racist collective over any quick fix. I can only really speak for my own experience in the training, but from our beginning in song to the workshop's ending in a group picture, we worked to uncover racism from where it hides uninterrogated in our minds, organizations, and our country.



VOTE members attend a workshop about successful efforts to "Ban the Box."

Photo by *Baba Bob Shipman*

VOTE members return from L.A Conferences

All of the grassroots fundraisers and media trainings that VOTE members have given their energy to in the past months came to a head during the first week in November, as fifteen members traveled to Los Angeles to represent VOTE at the International Drug Policy Reform Conference and the Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted People's Movement Conference.

In a week packed with cross-country travel, countless workshops and speakers, and a whole new arena of grassroots activism, every member cited a different peak moment in their experience.

One of the advantages of convening with like-minded organizations from across the country was seeing the collective support behind campaigns like Ban The Box, the anti-employment discrimination effort to stop employers from using formerly incarcerated people's admission that they have been convicted of a crime on job applications to disqualify them from jobs.

"[The] exciting part is that it's a national movement, we are just a small part of a big picture," Peggy Rayas Matthews said, "we can take note and incorporate some of it into what we are doing."

Because the two conferences were located in California, many of the participants came from the West Coast. Therefore, the fact that VOTE members attended in such a critical mass reflected positively on the civic engagement efforts of FIPs in Louisiana.

Though the exposure to national and international platforms on incarcerated people's rights and drug reform policy was inspiring to members, VOTE remains focused on using these experiences to effect change at home. Encouraged by the turnout at large-scale events, Eugene Dean expressed that VOTE needs, "to hold those type of forms [here]...to make ourselves more visible."

VOTE members were able to begin this push for increased visibility while still in Los Angeles, where Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston and Eugene Dean were interviewed for the Los Angeles Sentinel.



ELIZABETH OWEN WINS IPAD!

VOTE is happy to announce the
WINNER of our October L.A.
Conference IPOD raffle was:

ELIZABETH OWEN!

THANK YOU to everyone who helped
make this fundraiser a success. We
raised over \$1000! Stay tuned for
future VOTE raffles!

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