

## 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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You can also join us  
on Facebook!



VOTE members conduct voter registration outreach outside the courthouse.

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## VOTE Launches 2012 Civic Engagement Platform with Registration Drive and Legislative Briefing

On Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, four VOTE members gathered at the courthouse on Tulane and Broad to engage in their first voter registration event of 2012. At the membership meeting days earlier, many members expressed their interest in having more voter registration opportunities in the upcoming election year.

This outreach effort in front of the courthouse was just one of several voter registration drives that VOTE will have this month. The calendar is full of opportunities of different varieties, from approaching people at venues like the courthouse, to tabling at community events and door to door canvassing in neighborhoods where voter registration is low.

VOTE's first tabling effort of the year was conducted in partnership with Masjidur-Rahim on January 14<sup>th</sup> at the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Weekend of Peace celebration in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. In addition to being a celebration of Peace, Doctor King, and civil rights victories, the event offered important resources to community participants, like health screenings, food and clothing, and music, in addition to voter registration and information.

The rest of VOTE's January voter drives will take place in a variety of locations around the metro area of New Orleans. They will be a combined effort of VOTE members, staff, and even college volunteers as part of Xavier, Tulane, Dillard, and Loyola's combined MLK Day of Service on January 21<sup>st</sup>. This month's civic engagement efforts will culminate in a **Legislative Briefing\* on January 24<sup>th</sup>, from 6-8pm at the Ashe Cultural Art's Center.** (See page 4)

At the Legislative Briefing, VOTE welcomes the community, and especially people who have been incarcerated, to come discuss the barriers to finding employment for Formerly Incarcerated Persons in New Orleans. The meeting will give information about laws in Louisiana that make it more difficult for those who have been incarcerated to find employment, as well as efforts to re-enfranchise individuals who are on probation and parole. Together the group will talk about ways that FIPs, their loved ones and allies can change these harmful laws, both by seeking out entrepreneurial opportunities and by fighting the legalized discrimination in the political arena.

\*The Legislative Briefing is sponsored in part by the generous support of Baptist Community Ministries.

# Member Profile: Betty Wells Allen

Some members join VOTE out of a sense of social responsibility or a personal mission. For Betty Wells Allen it was all of these forces combined with the joy of helping ex-offenders understand how to thrive in society.

"My son was convicted with a life sentence [for something] he didn't do," she said, "I came to learn what I could do for my child because when you are knowledgeable about sentences and what a crime entails you can help more."

From her personal interest in understanding her son's conviction, Betty became the active member of VOTE that she is as present. Grateful for the knowledge she learned in both the paralegal and street law classes, she hopes that she can use it to help unite ex-offenders in their common interests.

"My goal is for the organization to be very widespread because it touches a lot of African Americans," she said, "but I'm not just looking for African Americans, it should be ex-offenders all together".

Betty's central concern for ex-offenders re-entering society lies with the essentials like housing and jobs. She would like to see VOTE's message become more widespread among people who are lacking these essentials.

Betty's career working in the school system, both with children and parents, has illuminated the intersections between that system and the systems that VOTE seeks to change.

"My work in the school system relates to the work I am doing at VOTE because they both have to do with people helping people, trying to give everyone a chance in life," she said.

During her time at VOTE, Betty has had many new transformative experiences, especially through the trips and gatherings that VOTE has been involved with.

"[VOTE's recent trip to] L.A. was one of the best experiences that I have ever had," she said, "from getting a lot of information at the conferences I realized how intertwined we were with the other groups of ex-offenders."

At the end of the day, Betty's passion for VOTE comes from being part of the organization's community and part of the community for which VOTE advocates.

"Learning how to interact with different people, it's a joy in the midst of all this work" she said.

## Empowered Path Program Update

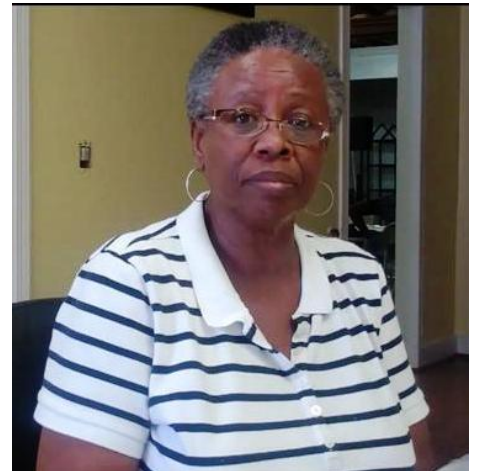
It's only Shedrick White's first month working at VOTE, yet the Coordinator of the Empowered Path Project is already moving through the process of making VOTE's own alternative sentencing project a reality. The EPP is a pilot project funded through the generous support of Baptist Community Ministries and Urban Strategies, which is designed to offer job skills training, peer mentorship and case management to repeat offenders who are currently in the court system.

VOTE believes that job opportunities and support from others who have had the same experience will help change the circumstances that led them to the criminal justice system at the start.

In order to ensure the success of the program, Shedrick must conduct a significant amount of research before anyone is hired. The natural place to start has been to examine the processes of alternative sentencing programs used by other states, and their results. "We have been talking to different programs, so we don't have to take two or three years to learn things," he said.

In addition to learning from the successes and failures of other programs, there are many considerations to keep in mind for the design of VOTE's program. Shedrick has combined community service opportunities with an educational component and a life skills curriculum to create a complementary program that addresses the many challenges that repeat offenders face when trying to enter the workforce. "While many stake holders in the criminal justice system are still leaning toward the punitive side of justice, we believe that the EPP begins to address the root causes of crime," he said.

EPP is scheduled to launch in early March with capacity for six to twelve participants. Participants will be placed in part time apprenticeships at businesses that employ or are owned by Formerly Incarcerated Persons. VOTE's emerging green lawn care service, Earthworks Services, will be one of the placement sites.



Betty Wells Allen (above)  
Shedrick White (below)



# Mayor Landrieu (hardly) responds to one of New Orleans' most urgent issues

By Rosana Cruz

On November 29th, a coalition of over 30 local organizations delivered a petition with more than 2,200 signatures to Mayor Mitch Landrieu, calling for reform of Orleans Parish Prison. Specifically, the petition demanded that the Mayor formally commit to capping the size of the new facility being built by the Sheriff's Office at 1,438 beds, and that the City Council end the "per diem" budget system for the jail.

The petition delivery happened just days before the City Council was set to vote on the Mayor's budget, which included the Sheriff's budget for the jail.

Two days later the Mayor's office sent the following reply to Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition (OPPRC):

December 1, 2011

Dear Concerned Citizens:

Thank you for your passion and energy regarding this extremely important issue. I am committed to transforming New Orleans' criminal justice system and a right-sized jail is an important piece of the puzzle. Throughout the last year my administration has initiated a transparent public process regarding the prison facility. This open dialogue has been constructive and is still ongoing. I look forward to continuing this work together.

Sincerely,

Mitch

Mitchell J. Landrieu  
Mayor, City of New Orleans

This condescending response is completely devoid of any mention of the 1,438 cap or the per diem system. We at OPPRC fear that the Mayor's non-committal stance is an indication that back-room deals are still being cut, in order for the Sheriff to build a larger facility.

The fight over the jail size has been going on for more than a year. One year ago, Mayor Landrieu convened the Criminal Justice Working Group, to determine the size of the new jail facility. The Working Group recommended the City cap the number of beds at 1,438, and the New Orleans City Council included this number in the ordinance that approved zoning for the construction of the new jail facility. But Mayor Landrieu has made no formal commitment to adhere to this recommendation.

The time for a formal commitment from the Mayor has come. The proposed cap would still leave New Orleans at 43.8% more jail beds per capita than the national average. The City Council responded to the petitions by committing to end the per diem system within the year.

The Mayor can listen to the thousands of people, locals, criminal justice experts, crime victims who are asking for a brighter, smarter way forward, or he can choose to keep New Orleans in the dark ages, home of America's largest jail. Save the city's resources and invest in things that prevent crime, not this jail that has only made our crime problem worse.

## VOTE'S HOPES for the New Year

# 2012

- VOTE needs more local and national exposure.  
- Member Vernon Bolds
- People who go to jail to visit their loved ones, if they knew about this program, they would give it support.  
- Member Henry James
- My hope for VOTE is a stronger membership.  
- Member Carol Galloway
- My hope for VOTE is that people will stay committed.  
- Member Eugene Dean



VOTE members discuss the progress of their voter registration strategies.

# THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

## HAVE YOU BEEN INCARCERATED?

- Is it hurting you when you try to find work?
- Did you know that Louisiana has laws that make it harder for people with criminal records to find work?
- Do you want to work with others like you to end this and other forms discrimination?

Join VOTE to learn about laws that hurt Formerly Incarcerated Persons (FIPs) most and discuss ways that we can make a change.



**TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2012**  
1712 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd. Central City  
6pm - 8pm  
(Refreshments will be served)



**JOIN US FOR THE NEXT MEMBERSHIP MEETING**  
**WEDNESDAY February 1st, 2012 AT 7PM AT THE RAE HOUSE**  
**1212 St. Bernard Avenue, NO, LA 70117**