

VOTE411 Status Report July 26, 2020

Overview

Midway through the 2020 election year, with two elections down and two to go, seems like a good time to take stock and make a status report for Delaware League leadership.

As we are all aware, 2020 has been a challenging year. The VOTE411 team has adapted to changing situations due to coronavirus outbreak... election delays, closing of schools and libraries, and the general unavailability of in-person promotional opportunities.

Planning & Fundraising

The 2020 VOTE411 effort actually started in the fall of 2019, with advanced planning and fundraising efforts.

Erin Gordon of Delaware State University, who worked as our unofficial “PR Director” of VOTE411 in 2018, served an official internship in that capacity during the fall 2019 term, with Kim Wells supervising. Erin helped to brainstorm promotional ideas, and we came up with “Be Aware. VOTE Aware.” as our slogan for the year.

Kim spent the fall of 2019 applying for more than a dozen grants and sponsorships. In the name of either LWVNCC or LWVDE we applied to more than a dozen companies or foundations, including Community Bank, Delaware Humanities, Delmarva Power, Highmark, The Kenny Foundation, M&T Bank, New Castle County, Nordstrom, the Pelletier Family Foundation, Purebread Deli, a couple of car dealerships, TD Bank, a dozen Walmart locations, Wells Fargo, the WK Kellogg Foundation and WSFS Bank. Susan King was instrumental in the Delaware Humanities grant application, which hinged on free public movie showings at NCC libraries, and Sheila Mensch assisted with a Freeman Foundation grant request in Sussex County.

In the end we received \$250 from Delmarva Power, a \$500 “NCC Cares” grant to be used in New Castle County, and a \$1,000 Walmart Community Grant to be used specifically for a VOTE411 student ambassador program at William Penn High School in New Castle. There were some small personal donations and online fundraisers as well.

In addition to these specific funds raised, League of Women Voters of Delaware (LWVDE) paid the \$1,500 participation fee to LWVUS as budgeted, and then allocated an additional \$1,500 to the VOTE411 project from Roberta Ray’s bequeathed gift.

Early Promotions

We promote (advertise) to make Delawareans aware of the VOTE411 resource. Our goal is to convince people to research the candidates before they go to the polls, so they can cast an informed vote.

The early promotional strategy for VOTE411 2020 depended heavily on in-person encounters. In addition to these requiring little funding (since our budget remained small), the thought was that a personal contact is much more likely to sway behavior than a poster on the wall or an easily-ignored ad. In-person contacts were to include handouts at voter registration tables, live demos of the VOTE411

website at movie showings and community meetings, and “student ambassadors” wearing VOTE411 t-shirts handing out VOTE411 swag at school events. We also thought to place small “table tents” with VOTE411 QR codes at places where people sit and wait, like medical offices and neighborhood cafes, and we had permission to place instructional cards at the reference stations in NCC public libraries.

Before coronavirus hit, we were able to distribute handout cards and postcards at voter registration tables. And we scheduled movie showings for the weeks prior to each election, and purchased swag for the student ambassador project... but then the coronavirus put a stop to all of that.

In-person outreach events completed in February and early March included the following:

- Youth Environmental Summit (YES!) in Dover on Feb 28. We distributed some student swag (wristbands, cellphone wallets and pop sockets) here.
- NCC voter registration - dozens of registration events scheduled in schools and libraries, and perhaps half were completed before the shutdown.
- DSU voter registration – weekly events early in the year.
- Marie LaBerge UD Women’s Film Series, Mondays from Feb 24 to Mar 23.
- Information table at UUFN Sunday March 1.

Electronic communications eclipsed all other strategies once the COVID-19 state of emergency hit, and we also changed our focus from VOTE411 alone to VOTE411 plus awareness of expanded absentee voting options. We were able to get an article in UD’s Osher Lifelong Learning April newsletter, gave a VOTE411 demo for the Newark Senior Center “Senior Surfers” Computer Club by Zoom in May, and had weekly mentions in the Newark Partnership and IHB weekly newsletters. Network Delaware abandoned their “Who Runs Our Schools” voter guide this year, so we did not have a formal partnership with them as we did in 2019, but they did link to VOTE411 from the school board elections page in the Civic Engagement area of their website.

We decided to issue VOTE411 press release effort centrally this year, rather than duplicate the effort in each county. Liz Carlisle issued a “launch” press release in late April and follow-up media advisories in May, June and July with voter fact sheets to media outlets statewide, as well as a VOTE411 PSA script specifically to radio stations. WDEL recorded the PSA and put it into their rotation.

Social media efforts were video-centric this year, and we created a [VOTE411 Delaware YouTube channel](#) in support of this. We made use of the Buffer scheduling tool to post coordinated messages on Facebook (@vote411de), Twitter (@lwvde) and Instagram (@lwvde).

Presidential Primary

The League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) provides the VOTE411 voter guide for the Presidential election races in all fifty states. The April 28 presidential primary in Delaware was delayed first until June, then to July 7. All three Democratic candidates on the Delaware ballot provided statements... Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren. Even though Warren and Sanders had officially dropped from the race by that time, they still were listed on the Delaware ballot. Neither GOP candidate on the Delaware ballot... Donald Trump or Rocky De La Fuente... was invited to participate, based on the LWVUS rules for valid candidates (which include qualifying on a certain number of state ballots, and public campaign contribution thresholds).

School Board Promotions

In addition to the general promotional efforts, this year we held a mock school board election for “Pea Patch Island School District.” Featuring “candidates” from 2019 hit movies... Simba, Elsa, Kylo Ren and King T’Challa... this mainly targeted middle and early high schoolers, aiming to help them learn about civic engagement and informed voting. The effort included a [mock candidate forum on July 14](#), ably moderated by Sarah Bucic of the Delaware PTA.

Although the Pea Patch Island mock school board election did not attract much student participation this year, it did garner some interest from an Appoquinimink district-level social studies specialist, who felt that something like this could help the schools meet the “informed voting” standard in the Delaware Civics Curriculum standard (4th and 5th grades). This is something for future VOTE411 project teams to investigate further, as it would be a “win” all around... students learn about informed voting, VOTE411 gets broader reach, and Delaware civics education hits a target that is currently often missed “4-5a: *Students will understand that in order to select effective leaders, citizens have to become informed about candidates' qualifications and the issues of the day.*”

School Board Results

The May 12 Delaware school board elections were delayed first until June 10, then until July 21, 2020.

Contested seats existed and elections were held in eight Delaware school districts. Elections were initially scheduled in two more districts, but candidate drop-outs canceled the elections in Christina and Brandywine. We provided candidate information on VOTE411 for all districts, even those with only uncontested seats; we invited uncontested candidates to participate as an outreach activity to parents in their district. Statewide, 27 of 41 school board candidates provided statements on VOTE411 in 2020 (a two-thirds participation rate).

Google analytics show that 3,380 Delawareans used the VOTE411 guide prior to the July 2020 elections. This is up from around 900 DE visitors prior to the school board elections in May 2019.

Plans for Fall Elections

For the fall 2020 elections (Sept 15 primary and Nov 3 general), along with VOTE411 we will be emphasizing the new mail-in voting option provided by HB 346 passed by the Delaware General Assembly in June 2020.

Current promotional initiatives include the following:

- In lieu of in-person voter registration tables, we have VOTE411 bookmarks being distributed with library curbside pickup book orders in all three counties.
- Yard signs are on order with voter registration and VOTE411 QR codes. We will pilot these at libraries and other venues in NCC. Both QR codes are trackable so we can see how effective this effort is and if we should expand to the rest of the state.
- We will have a VOTE411 slide at Midway Movies during preview ads in the fall. Sussex team leads are trying to get one at Clayton theater as well.
- Organizations are actively asking LWV for interviews and Zoom presentations on voting in 2020, and we are tacking VOTE411 demos on whenever we can. At the current time Kim has one

scheduled on August 4th at a Sussex “Interconnection of Race & Politics” Alpha Kappa Alpha virtual forum event with Connie Jones in Sussex, in late August at the Wilmington Library and in September at a Newark Rotary Club, both with Jill Itzkowitz.

- VOTE411 drink coasters under consideration, but we don’t have any “takers” for them yet.
- Kathleen Baker of Sussex League recently donated 50 VOTE411 car magnets for Sussex County, so these now have joined the dozens of small oval “ads on wheels” already circulating in New Castle County from the NCC Cares grant and Stand Indivisible Newark purchase.
- VOTE411 cards are being distributed at St. Patricks senior center in Wilmington.
- Sussex is pursuing poster placements at high impact stores, and perhaps post offices.

Invitation letters have been sent to all 96 primary election candidates in Delaware. Follow-up calls have begun and will continue next week. Our target “go-live” date for the VOTE411 voter guide for the September 15 Delaware state primaries is Monday August 3, 2020.

Team Members

Dozens of people have helped already in one way or another with the VOTE411 project this year, and I’d like to acknowledge them here.

- *Grantseeking* – Carole Jones, Sue Claire Harper, Pat Newcomb, Susan King, Sheila Mensch
- *P.R. planning* – Erin Gordon
- *VOTE411 Student Ambassador planning* – Shaniya Lewis, Susan Mitchell
- *Library liaison* – Judy Taggart
- *Press contacts* – Liz Carlisle, Jane Lord, Anne Parker-Dockins, Dr. Amystique Church
- *NCC team* – Linda Barnett, Liz Carlisle, Nicole Cerqueira, Letty Diswood, Jill Itzkowitz, Susan King, Sharon Kwiatkowski, Nancy Lopez, Susan Mitchell, Callye Morrissey, Sallie Reissman, Karen Stanley, Philippa Sunnergren, Jenn Wells
- *DSU crew* – Dr. A.Church, Anne Parker-Dockins, Erin Gordon, Stephen Cassese, Kaden Barrett
- *Sussex team* – Lori Yadin and Denise Davis (team leads), Pat Makos, Connie Jones, Suzanne Hain, Marge LaFond, Kathleen Baker... perhaps others I don’t know about
- *Writing tasks* – Liz, Callye, Sheila M, Suzanne H, Sandy Spence
- *Spanish translation* – Nancy Lopez
- *Voter registration outreach* – Alan Evantash, Dini Silber, Patti Christopher, Letty, Les & Christine Stillson, Donna Reed, Anne PD
- *Graphics and marketing* – Jenn Wells
- *Social media and mock election* – Jenn, Lia Naselli, Sarah Matthews, Melissa Sanchez, Sarah Bucic
- *Video editing* – Ryan Wilson
- *Radio consulting* – George Stewart

We could not provide the VOTE411 service to our Delaware voters without these wonderful volunteers! Their assistance, creativity and enthusiasm is much appreciated.

Lessons Learned

Two major take-aways for me from the 2020 VOTE411 project so far are (1) We should avoid using election dates and deadlines on printed materials. Our beautiful VOTE411 postcards this year became quickly outdated and unusable as the dates shifted. But the handout cards which have more generic language can still be used for the remainder of this year and even into future years. (2) Neither online fundraisers nor grant seeking efforts are effective uses of team members' time. I will not recommend or engage in these fundraising efforts in future years.