



Pequannock demonstration helps mentally ill understand voting process

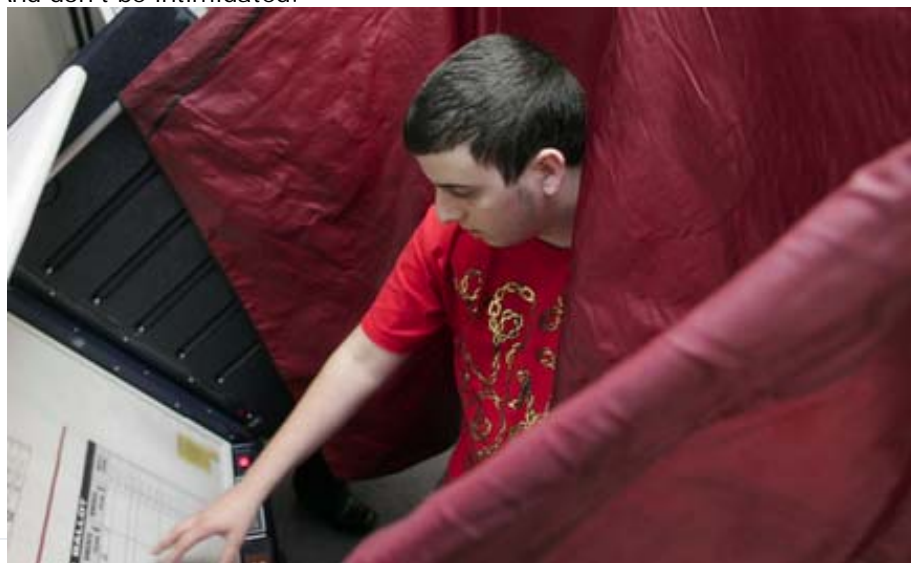
By Eugene Paik/For The Star-Ledger

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PEQUANNOCK--The 30 people coping with mental illnesses who attended a voting machine demonstration today were urged to remember three things:

Don't forget to bring your sample ballots to remind you of your choices. Remember to press the red button at the bottom of the machine to cast your votes.

And don't be intimidated.



Alexandra Pais/New Jersey Local News Service

Joel Lumpkin tries out a voting booth during the demonstration at the NewBridge Day Service Center in Pompton Plains.

"It does look a little bit scary, but don't be afraid of it," Garrett Schubert, a Morris County elections official, told the crowd at the NewBridge Services counseling center.

By the end of the hour-long demonstration, not many of them appeared to be.

"It seems real simple," said 19-year-old Joel Lumpkin, a Pequannock resident who has never voted in an election.

"It's set up real nice, but I can see how some people can get confused."

With a high-profile contest for the governorship headlining state ballots this year, officials with NewBridge Services, a nonprofit organization with locations in Morris and Passaic counties, felt this year was the right time to teach the group how to vote.

"This is a message to the community that they're part of the community," Executive Director Robert Parker said. "I think this year might have more value to them because of the local races."

It's a move that aims to bring more respect for people with mental illnesses. Advocates for the mentally ill say the group has been unfairly marginalized for years, with even the state constitution stating "no idiot or insane person shall enjoy the right of suffrage"

before the language was amended in 2007.

The constitution now states that only people who have been determined by a court to be too incompetent to vote cannot take part in elections.

No one from the NewBridge group was currently in hospital care, but many had "persistent and chronic" mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorders, Parker said.

According to Parker, it was never the law that prevented them from voting: It was their self-esteem. He said many of them are too intimidated to learn about the voting process because of a public perception that they can't understand it.

"People with mental illnesses have a right to vote," he said. "They can vote, and they want to vote."

The crowd had many questions as they learned how to select the candidates they wanted and how to type out the name of a write-in candidate.

"Do we have to close the curtain?" one person asked. "How will we know where to go?" asked another.

The demonstration inspired Lumpkin and two others to register to vote, and the teenager vowed to learn more about the political process.

"My dad's into political stuff, but I never really was," Lumpkin said. "I should be, though. I want to."

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