



# A Great Idea

communications

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## Focusing Get Out the Vote Efforts on Friends of Children

Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland (OH)

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*Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland, a member of Voices for America's Children, believes that all children should have a voice. Because children cannot vote, their concerns can only be represented by those who do. Unfortunately, many people who care about children are not registered to vote. Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland decided to work to register voters and then try to engage and mobilize them to speak out for children.*

### Background:

Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland was dismayed to find that many of those who work in child service agencies are not registered to vote. Many of the parents who use their services also were not registered voters.

Parents and those who work directly with children are the most powerful communicators to legislators on what public policies are needed to support young children. Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland was deeply concerned that a large segment of this important population was not sharing their views with elected officials nor were they making their desires known through the power of the vote. Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland feared that without a strengthened voice, support for education, health and human service programs, and other public policies critical to children would continue to weaken.

In January 2004, the organization launched a non-partisan electoral advocacy campaign—"Your Vote Matters to Me"—to promote the importance of voter registration and voting to those who care about the welfare of children. The organization partnered with more than 85 other organizations to lead a Get Out the Vote (GOTV) effort. The campaign targeted its voter registration and education efforts on parents and individuals at child care and service agencies.

*"Our goal is to make sure that staff who provide social services, and families who receive services, know that their votes matter to children." - Amy Nicholls Swanson, Executive Director, Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland*

### Key Elements

- **Phase I, Voter Registration**
  - **Registration**—Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland and its partners targeted child care and service agencies for its voter registration campaign. The organizations' goal, in recognition of the 2004 election year, was to register 2,004 adults for the general election in November.

- **“Train the Trainer” Sessions**—Facilitated by Voices’ staff and conducted by county Board of Elections personnel and volunteers, the trainings showed employees at local child care and service agencies how to make voter registration part of their ongoing efforts. Training encouraged agencies to sign their employees and clients up to receive absentee ballots, so that it would be easier for them to vote in November. Fifty people participated in five training sessions, held over lunch, and lasting about an hour and a half. At local agencies, one staff person was needed to coordinate voter registration efforts. Responsibilities included distribution, collection and sending of completed registration forms to the Board of Elections.

- **Phase II, Voter Education**

- **Billboards**—25 billboards were placed around Cleveland for several months leading up to the 2004 general elections. The billboards featured a picture of a young child, with the following text: “Your Vote Matters to Me. Vote on November 2<sup>nd</sup>.” It took four to six months for Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland to get the billboards donated, produced and installed. The billboards were placed around the Greater Cleveland area and Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland was generally pleased with their locations. Former Congressman Louis Stokes hosted a press conference to launch the billboard campaign.
- **Voter Education Forum**—As part of the overall campaign, Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland held a non-partisan candidates forum called “Who’s for Kids and Who’s Just Kidding” in October 2004. The event was open to the general public and provided them with an opportunity to hear candidates express their views on issues impacting children. The forum also provided the organization with a vehicle for directly educating candidates on the needs of children. Every candidate registered with the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections was invited to attend the forum. Of 41 invited candidates, 10 candidates from both major political parties participated. More than 300 people attended the forum.

- **Phase III, Get Out the Vote and Voting Efforts**

- **Leveraging Existing GOTV Materials**—Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland and its partners also disseminated existing non-partisan GOTV materials—registration cards, bumper stickers, voter forum brochures, fact sheets with voting tips, and information on felon voting rights—to its target audience and the general public, capitalizing on existing work of partners such as Every Child Matters and the county Board of Elections. Voter education materials were distributed at child service agencies, during meetings (such as the Voter Education Forum), and via the Internet.

## Costs

- Billboards—The Wolpert Fund of the Cleveland Foundation paid approximately \$2,000 to print the billboards, and Clear Channel Communications donated approximately \$30,000 in space for the billboards. Clear Channel also donated the labor costs of installing the billboards.
- “Train the Trainer” Workshops—The five training sessions cost approximately \$2,500 including lunch for participants and photocopying costs (for GOTV and other voter education materials).

## Outcomes

- The organization’s goal was to register 2,004 adults for the November 2 general election. Four weeks into the campaign, more than 1,200 new voters had already been registered. While Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland did not keep track of the final number of new voters it registered, it far exceeded its goal of registering 2,004 voters.
- Voices for Children of Greater Cleveland wanted to ensure that the campaign continued to positively impact children after the 2004 elections. To that end, “Train the Trainer” workshops at local child care and service agencies will support ongoing voter registration and education efforts.
- Following up on the Voter Education Forum, the organization will be monitoring changes in elected officials’ platforms and/or public positions on children’s issues. Additionally, Voices of Children of Greater Cleveland is planning on re-engaging with elected officials in Spring 2005. The organization will sponsor an education and advocacy day in Columbus, Ohio to focus on budget issues and to present the organization’s budget position statement.