Vote for America's Mental Health in 2016
A Guide to Rights and Issues

With all of the changes in health care and voting laws happening at the state and federal level, it’s more important than ever for the mental health community to be involved in this year’s election. We have prepared this voter guide to help mental health advocates ensure that people with mental health and substance use conditions feel empowered and able to vote; that candidates at the federal, state, and local levels are considering the concerns of the mental health community; and to encourage all voters to ultimately Vote for America’s Mental Health in 2016. This guide provides:

- Voter registration information
- A “November Elections Action Checklist”
- Questions for Town Hall & Candidate Forums
- A “Letter to the Editor” & Talking Points guide
- Relevant websites & additional Resources
- A review of party platforms, and more.

Know Your Rights: Voting Registration Information

Over the past six years, troublesome restrictions have been placed on the voting process including barriers to registration and voter identification requirements. The Brennan Center for Justice warns that this growing use of state voting laws and requirements can seriously impact the 2016 electoral map. Knowing your voting rights will help make sure you can vote in November. With more than 1 in 5 Americans with some type of mental health condition, it is crucial that members of our community understand that individuals with mental health and substance use conditions and other disabilities have the right to vote and have the right to assistance in voting. The National Disability Rights Network provides information for voters with disabilities here and here.

Mental health consumers need to be aware of changes in voting laws that may make it significantly harder for many eligible voters to register or vote in the upcoming election. While many states have seen legislation introduced to expand voting access, 15 states have new voting restrictions in place for the upcoming presidential election as of August 5, 2016. The Brennan Center’s report “Voting Laws Roundup 2016” outlines the various ways states have used either expansive or restrictive voting legislation.

With legislation pending and a recent increase in courts striking down restrictive laws, it is essential that behavioral health consumers, community stakeholders, and YOU are actively aware of changes in voting laws in your state.

For the latest updates on YOUR states voting laws, visit The Fair Elections Network whose mission is to remove barriers to voting and improve election administration across the United States.

Deadlines to register before the general election vary state to state, but deadlines in some states are as early as October 8th. For specific information on registering to vote, re-registering, and registration deadlines in YOUR state, visit:

- The League of Women Voters
- Project Vote Smart
- Interactive Online App for Voting Rights
- Rock the Vote
- Or call 1-866-OUR-VOTE
Vote for America's Mental Health in 2016
Action Checklist for the November 2016 Elections

It is vitally important that the mental health and addiction communities make their voices heard during the upcoming elections. Use this checklist to ensure you are taking advantage of November’s local, state and federal elections to vote for America’s mental health.

1. Register to vote.
   It’s hard to believe, but roughly one out of three people of voting age were not registered to vote in the 2012 election. If you are already registered, get five other people to register.
   For information on how to register, visit:
   • [The League of Women Voters](#)
   • [Project Vote Smart](#)
   • Or call 1-866-OUR-VOTE

2. Learn about the candidates and issues.
   Visit the [candidates’ web sites or other web sites](#) to read about his/her views on mental health, health care reform and other key issues of importance to the mental health and addiction communities.

   [Sign up](#) to receive future breaking news and action alerts on important mental health issues.

4. Email the candidates.
   Most candidates allow you to email them. Sending an email only takes a minute, and as a constituent, your elected officials know that you are the key to their understanding of issues important to you, not to mention their political futures. They want and need to hear from you on issues you consider important.

5. Ask questions at candidate forums and town hall meetings.
   The simple act of asking a question at a town hall meeting is a great way to make candidates go “on the record” with important mental health issues. View a [list of questions](#) you can ask. Check your local paper for scheduled events.

6. Write a letter to the editor or call talk radio shows.
   Use the power of mass media! “Letters to the Editor” are the most commonly read section of the paper. The most effective letters are no more than 250 words, to the point, well-reasoned, and most importantly, from the heart. Calling the local television news, radio talk shows, or podcasts is another great way to help get your message to thousands of listeners. [Click here](#) for writing tips and talking points.

7. Talk with your friends and neighbors.
   Have a healthy dialogue with your friends and neighbors about why mental health is so important to any candidate’s healthcare platform. Speak up about your concerns and be sure to listen to theirs. [Watch the debates](#) with others and talk afterwards about what you agreed with and didn’t.

8. Raise awareness online.
   There are multiple social media sites that can connect you to the candidates. The opportunities to raise the profile of mental health in the 2016 presidential, gubernatorial or congressional elections are endless. Social networking sites can empower you to share with your friends the importance of supporting the behavioral health community when casting their vote. [Tweet](#) or post to [Facebook](#) or [tumblr](#) about campaign issues that affect individuals with mental health conditions. With a couple mouse clicks, you can [post an image](#) on your social media profiles or email signature.
9. **Empower others to vote.**

Work with other community stakeholders to empower mental health consumers to exercise their right to vote. Many individuals with mental health conditions may be reluctant to vote because they either believe they are not allowed to do so or because they are simply afraid of registering. Helping just one person understand that they are allowed to vote is a worthwhile endeavor.

10. **Vote!**

Sadly, about half of voting-age adults do not vote, but the simple act of voting is one of the most empowering actions you can take to make a difference in the future of America’s overall mental health and wellness.

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**Election 2016 Checklist**

- I have registered to vote.
- I have read up about candidates for presidential and other elections.
- I have signed up for email updates from an advocacy group like Mental Health America.
- I have contacted the candidates by email or on their websites.
- I attended and participated in a forum or town hall meeting.
- I wrote a letter to the editor or called into a local radio station.
- I talked with friends and neighbors about the election.
- I posted a banner on my social media account or added an email tagline.
- I convinced at least one other person to vote.
- I VOTED!
The simple act of asking a question at a town hall meeting is a great way to make candidates go "on the record" with important mental health and addiction issues. Here are some mental health facts and suggested candidate questions. Check your local paper for scheduled candidate forums and town hall meetings. The August Congressional recess continues through Labor Day Weekend and much of October is dedicated to preparing for the election. Look for events during those times as Congressional members will be in their districts and states campaigning.

**Workforce and Access:** Many communities face a shortage of mental health providers. Because of this workforce shortage, many people cannot access the supports and services that they need. Other supports, like peer services and telehealth programs are also not widely available.

> How do you plan to ensure that people can actually get the mental health services that are supposed to be covered by their health plans?

**Families:** Across the nation, our families struggle to find the best ways to support their children with emotional and behavioral challenges. They have to cobble together what they can find and they receive very little support.

> How will you make sure our families have access to the evidence-based programs they need to best help their children with emotional and behavioral challenges?

**Children’s Issues:** Only a small percentage of children who need services in schools actually get them. Often, children receive these services only very late, and even then these services are not coordinated with services they receive outside of school.

> How will you ensure that children in schools actually get the coordinated mental health services and supports they need to be college or career ready?

**Parity:** Even after the passage of the federal Mental Health and Addictions Parity and Equity Act in 2008, there is still uncertainty about what exactly is expected. There is very little federal/state oversight and enforcement of the parity law, but clear evidence of violations has been reported.

> How will you make sure health insurers, regulators, and consumers are all best equipped to understand their roles in making mental health and substance use parity a reality?

**Integration:** Mental health services and supports include more than just medication and therapy sessions – cost-effective treatment also includes community-based supports.

> How will you make sure that health care most effectively partners with the community to treat mental health and substance use conditions?

**Criminal Justice:** As jails and prisons have become the largest behavioral health providers, support for evidence-based jail diversion programs has grown. Unfortunately, most of these programs are funded by short grants, which hurt their effectiveness and sustainability.

> How will you use policy to sustainably finance jail diversion programs that build our communities and reduce taxpayer costs?
Veterans: More than half a million Iraq and Afghanistan war vets have not sought care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), even though 20 percent of vets have PTSD or depression, and another 20 percent report traumatic brain injury (TBI) during deployment. Cumulative deployments also have contributed to more mental health diagnoses among military spouses and higher rates of emotional difficulties for children of service members.

What are your plans to make sure we fulfill our duty to our military service members, families, and Iraq and Afghanistan veterans?
Writing a Letter to the Editor:

"Letters to the Editor" are commonly read by policymakers and legislators. The most effective letters are no more than 250 words, to the point, well-reasoned, and most importantly, from the heart. Below are some tips for writing an effective letter and examples of some original talking points you can use as an example for your own statement. If you email or send in a letter to the editor, let us know by copying (CC:) info@mentalhealthamerica.net on the email.

**Writing tips:** Start by determining the newspaper's submission guidelines and where to submit. You can usually find an address, online form, and/or an email address to submit your letter to the opinion or editorial section.

**Check the requirements:** Determine the newspaper's requirements as there may be word limits. Always include your name, address and phone number. Note: your address and/or phone number will never be published or printed. Newspapers will often call to confirm that you want your comments published.

**Make your point:** Feel free to use the talking points we have included, but tailor them to the audience and community. If you have a personal involvement or experience specific to the issue you are writing about, mention your experiences to make your points. Use short sentences to make sure your argument is clear. Mentioning a candidate will have an impact—they pay attention to what citizens are saying!

**Follow-up:** Many letters are submitted so don't be disappointed if your letter is not published. You can also follow up with the editor to ensure they received it and get a sense of whether they may use it. If the editor indicates that it will not run, ask why (it may just need some retooling).

Many newspapers allow readers to publish comments online in response to articles and editorials. Although publications may require you to register, you can usually post anonymously.

**Talking Point Examples:**

"Discussions about health care access must also include care for mental health. Mental health conditions strike people of all ages and are the leading cause of disability and premature death in the United States today. Severe mental illness costs our economy more than $300 billion annually in lost productivity.

We do not wait until Stage 4 to treat physical illnesses, so why do we wait to treat mental illnesses? We must prioritize prevention for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; access to integrated health and behavioral health care for those who need it; and recovery as the goal. These changes will not simply save dollars; they will save lives and deliver true health security. I want to see these ideas included in our candidates’ plans for the future of health care access and reform." – *Name, City, State*

"Under federal law, everybody has the right to health benefits, including mental health care. Parity laws require health plans to pay for mental health services on the same terms as surgical and other medical care. The final rule released by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services makes mental health care a priority.

Almost half of all Americans will be diagnosed with a mental health condition at some point in their lives, so it's important that everybody can access the type of treatment and supports they want when they need them. States need to enforce these parity laws to make sure that people get mental health services, which will save lives and money down the road." – *Anonymous, City, State*
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Relevant Websites & Additional Resources

Presidential Candidates’ websites
- Hillary Clinton: https://www.hillaryclinton.com/
  - Read Mrs. Clinton’s Comprehensive Agenda on Mental Health.
- Donald Trump: https://www.donaldjtrump.com/
  - Mr. Trump has not released a mental health plan as of publication (Sept. 23, 2016).

Local and State Candidate websites
- Visit Project Vote Smart, enter your zip code, and you will be directed to information the candidates that will be on your ballot: http://www.votesmart.org/

Read the Candidates’ Reform Proposals
- Kaiser Family Foundation http://www.kff.org/pullingittogether/2012.cfm
- Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease http://www.fightchronicdisease.org/media-center/resources

Major Party Platforms
- Democratic Party Platform
- Republican Party Platform

Voter Registration Information
- Registration deadlines:
  - State-by-state dates: click here
- Need to register to vote? Visit:
  - The League of Women Voters http://www.vote411.org/
  - Project Vote Smart http://votesmart.org/
  - Rock the Vote http://www.rockthevote.com/
  - Declare Yourself http://www.declareyourself.com/

Voting Law Changes & Updates
- The Fair Elections Network http://www.fairelectionsnetwork.com/
Below are excerpts from the parties’ platforms specific to mental health and substance use.

**Democratic Party Platform Excerpts***

**Honoring Indigenous Tribal Nations.** “We will work to fully fund the Indian Health Service, Tribal, and Urban Indian health care to ensure that all American Indians have adequate, safe, and affordable access to primary care providers, including oral health, mental health practitioners, and substance abuse treatment options” (22).

**Supporting Community Health Centers.** “We must renew our commitment to Community Health Centers, as well as community mental health centers and family planning centers. These health centers provide critically important, community-based prevention and treatment in underserved communities, prevent unnecessary and expensive trips to emergency rooms, and are essential to the successful implementation of the ACA” (35).

**Combating Drug and Alcohol Addiction.** “We must confront the epidemic of drug and alcohol addiction, specifically the opioid crisis and other drugs plaguing our communities, by vastly expanding access to prevention and treatment, supporting recovery, helping community organizations, and promoting better practices by prescribers” (36).

**Treating Mental Health.** “We must treat mental health issues with the same care and seriousness that we treat issues of physical health, support a robust mental health workforce, and promote better integration of the behavioral and general health care systems. Recognizing that maintaining good mental health is critical to all people, including young people’s health and development, we will work with health professionals to ensure that all children have access to mental health care. We must also expand community-based treatment for substance abuse disorders and mental health conditions and fully enforce our parity law. And we should create a national initiative around suicide prevention across the lifespan—to move toward to HHS-promoted Zero Suicide commitment” (36).

**Preventing Gun Violence.** “We will fight back against attempts to make it harder for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives to revoke federal licenses from law breaking gun dealers, and ensure guns do not fall into the hands of terrorists, intimate partner abusers, other violent criminals, and those with severe mental health issues” (39).

**Veterans and Service Members.** “We must also look for more ways to make certain the [Department of Veterans Affairs] provides veteran-centric care, such as providing women with full and equal treatment, including productive services; expanding mental health programs; continuing efforts to identify and treat invisible, latent, and toxic wounds of war; treating post-traumatic stress; and expanding the post-9/11 veteran’s caregiver program to include all veterans. We reject attempts by Republicans to sell out the needs of veterans by privatizing the VA. We believe that the VA must be fully resourced so that every veteran gets the care that he or she has earned and deserves, including those suffering from sexual assault, mental illness, and other injuries or ailments” (41).

*From the [2016 Democratic Party Platform](http://www.democrats.org/filer_public/91/70/91706f3f/8a38638e-276f-4af7-ad37-474959073eef/Democratic%20Party%20Platform%202016%20-%20ínterim%20FINAL.pdf)*
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Major Party Platforms

Republican Party Platform Excerpts*

Preserving Medicare and Medicaid. “Block granting Medicaid is particularly needed to address mental health care. Mental illness affects people from all walks of life, but there has been very little success in developing effective system-wide medical models for addressing mental health. For a variety of unique reasons, government is often the first frontier for people experiencing mental health problems—from first responders who deal with crises to publicly funded mental health facilities to prisons where large numbers of inmates suffer from mental illnesses” (24).

Choice in Education. “We opposed school-based clinics that provide referral or counseling for abortion and contraception and believe that federal funds should not be used in mandatory or universal mental health, psychiatric, or socio-emotional screening programs” (34).

Ensuring Safe Neighborhoods: Criminal Justice and Prison Reform. “Along with diversion of first-time nonviolent offenders to community sentencing, accountability courts, drug courts, veterans treatment courts, and guidance by faith-based institutions with proven track records of rehabilitation, our platform emphasized restorative justice to make the victim whole and put the offender on the right path. As variants of these reforms are undertaken in many states, we urge the Congress to learn from what works. In the past, judicial discretion about sentences led to serious mistakes concerning dangerous criminals. Mandatory minimum sentencing became an important tool for keeping them off the streets. Modifications to it should be targeted toward particular categories, especially nonviolent offenders and persons with drug, alcohol, or mental health issues, and should require disclosure by the courts of any judicial departure from the state’s sentencing requirements” (39).

Combatting Drug Abuse. “Heroin and opioid abuse touches our communities, our homes, and our families in ways that have grave effects on Americans in every community. With a quadrupling of both their sales and their overdose deaths, the opioid crisis is ravaging communities all over the country, often hitting rural areas harder than urban. Because of over-prescription of drugs is such a large part of the problem, Republican legislation now allows Medicare Part D and Medicare Advantage plans to limit patients to a single pharmacy. Congressional Republicans have also called upon the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to ensure that no physician will be penalized for limiting opioid prescriptions” (40).

Honoring and Supporting Our Veterans: A Sacred Obligation. “Like the rest of American medicine, the VA faces a critical shortage of primary care and mental health physicians. That’s why there are long waiting times to see a doctor and why doctors are often frustrated by the limited time they have with their patients. This is especially the case with mental health care, which often amounts to prescribing drugs because there are not enough psychologists and psychiatrists to do anything else. Inadequate treatment of PTSD drives other problems like suicide, homelessness, and unemployment. This situation may not be quickly reversed, but a Republican administration will begin, on day one, to undertake the job” (45).

*From the 2016 Republican Party Platform
There are endless opportunities to raise the profile of mental health in the 2016 presidential, gubernatorial or congressional elections, as well as state and local races on the Internet. Use the power of the social media to bring attention to mental health and the elections. These are some of our favorite ideas:

- Post about the election on your Facebook profile, Tweet, post to tumblr, or write a blog post.
- Download posters to hang on your refrigerator, in your office, or your dorm room.
- Add an image to your signature line. Every time you send an email you will encourage your friends and family to get better informed on the issues.
- Blog about campaign issues affecting individuals with mental health conditions.

Share Images on Social Media

Download these images at http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/vote16.

Send a quick email to info@mentalhealthamerica.net to let us know how you’re raising awareness this election season!