**DATE**

**CONTACT:**

**Donté Donald, Demos: (212) 485-6062**

**Brady Henderson, ACLU of Oklahoma: (405) 524-8511**

**Michael McDunnah, Project Vote: (202) 905-1397  
Stacie Royster, Lawyers’ Committee: (202) 662-8317**

**Voting Rights Advocates Settle Matter Alleging NVRA Violations**

***Oklahoma Agrees To Bring Public Assistance Agencies into***

***Compliance with the Law***

NEW YORK, WASHINGTON and OKLAHOMA CITY (July 30, 2015) – Voting rights advocates and Oklahoma officials announced today that a settlement has been reached to provide more effective voter registration opportunities to citizens throughout the state.

This effort began last summer when the Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League, the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma and Metropolitan Tulsa, and YWCA Tulsa notified Paul Ziriax, the Secretary of the Oklahoma State Election Board, that it appeared Oklahoma’s public assistance agencies were not offering clients a meaningful opportunity to register to vote. Under the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA), state agencies that provide public assistance must ask clients whether they want to register to vote, offer them voter registration materials, and help them complete registration forms.

The community groups said in their letter to Secretary Ziriax that the number of voter registration applications reported statewide by Oklahoma public assistance agencies had dropped 81 percent since the initial implementation of the NVRA in 1995. At the same time, the average monthly participation in the SNAP program, just one of the programs covered by the NVRA, nearly doubled. Only 61 percent of Oklahoma citizens in low-income households were registered to vote in 2012, compared to 81 percent of those in affluent households. In fieldwork investigations conducted at Oklahoma public assistance agencies on behalf of the community groups, a significant percentage of agency clients interviewed said that they received no voter registration services whatsoever when, under the NVRA, they should have.

“After we sent the notice letter in August of last year, Oklahoma’s officials quickly demonstrated a commitment to our shared American value that every eligible voter should be able to vote come Election Day,” said Jenn Rolnick Borchetta, Senior Counsel at Demos and a lawyer for the community organizations in this matter. “By agreeing to a comprehensive blueprint for voter registration services at public assistance agencies across the state, Oklahoma has exemplified the NVRA’s principle and promise: States must do their part to bring all Americans into our democracy.”

“As an American, our vote is our voice, it is a powerful expression of what we value,” said Deidre Alvarez, Director of Housing at Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League. “At the Urban League, both locally and nationally, we empower the community to exercise their right to vote, to have a say in important issues that affect their community, to hold public officials accountable and seek justice.”

“This settlement helps make voter registration more accessible to many Oklahomans. It is a win for the organizations involved and for the state of Oklahoma,” said Brady Henderson, Legal Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma. “Communities are strongest and healthiest when people from all walks of life are empowered to participate in the political process freely. Oklahoma is no exception. Our state is made stronger when more of its people can exercise their right to guide its government.”

Today’s settlement agreement is between the community groups and the State of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma State Election Board, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, the Oklahoma State Department of Health, and the Oklahoma Healthcare Authority. It includes a robust plan for ensuring public assistance applicants receive voter registration services throughout Oklahoma in compliance with the NVRA. Some highlights of the agreement include:

* Each public assistance agency will ask all public assistance clients whether they want to register to vote, provide voter registration forms, offer clients assistance in completing forms, and transmit completed voter registration applications to elections officials. These services will be offered regardless of how the client interacts with the agency – whether in person, online, through self-service portals, or over the phone.
* Each public assistance agency will assign a staff member responsibility for coordinating and implementing voter registration services, and all staff who engage clients during public assistance transactions will be trained on how they must provide voter registration services.
* The Oklahoma State Election Board will oversee public assistance agencies to ensure voter registration services are provided. This oversight will include regularly reviewing public assistance agency compliance, publicly reporting its findings, and intervening when it appears a particular office or agency is failing to provide required registration services.

“The League of Women Voters is encouraged by the positive response from our election officials and agency directors to the request. We are confident that full compliance with the NVRA will increase voter registration by low-income Oklahomans. This is what is at the core of the League’s work: advocating for systems that improve our democracy and allow everyone’s voice to be heard,” said Sheila Swearingen, president of the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma.

“We are pleased that Oklahoma took seriously our concerns and worked with us in good faith to create a compliance plan that meets everybody’s needs,” said Michelle Rupp, Election Counsel & Assistant General Counsel at Project Vote. “When advocates and government officials work together, everybody wins.”

The community groups were represented by public policy organizations Demos, the ACLU of Oklahoma, Project Vote, and the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

“YWCA Tulsa is grateful that the Oklahoma State Election Board took the community’s concerns seriously, and worked with us to create a strategy to ensure voting is accessible to more Oklahomans,” said Vanessa Finley, YWCA Tulsa Chief Executive Officer. “With voter turnout in our state at record lows, it’s critical that every eligible citizen have the opportunity to register and participate fully in the democratic process.”

“This agreement is a win-win for Oklahoma voters, the State of Oklahoma and American democracy,” said Ezra Rosenberg, Lawyers’ Committee Voting Rights Project Director. “To achieve this result without the need to resort to litigation is a testament both to the legitimacy of the issues that have been resolved and the responsiveness of state officials after the problem was brought to their attention.“