



Oklahoma Indian Bar Association

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Indian Attorney Association to Help Voters on Election Day

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK - With many political races being so close, many feel that Oklahoma's Native American voters could make a critical difference in various contests throughout the state for both state and federal seats. Oklahoma has the second highest population of American Indians of any state at 398,000, according to recent census figures. The Oklahoma Indian Bar Association (OIBA), a statewide group of attorneys and law students in Oklahoma, is part of a greater nationwide effort, referred to as "Election Protection 2008." The nationwide non-partisan Election Protection project includes over 100 groups and attorney associations as described on the www.866ourvote.org website, which has answers to many questions voters may have.

Spearheaded by the National Congress of American Indians ("NCAI"), the concern of the non-partisan group is not to back any candidate or platform, but rather, to make sure that voters don't have problems casting their vote at the polls. "If they do have problems, we'll be available by telephone to help them sort out what to do to assist them in exercising their right to vote," said Joseph Williams, co-chair of OIBA's Election Protection 2008 Project. On election day, November 4, persons in Oklahoma may call **405/272-9241** between 9:00 and 5:00 for phone assistance from an attorney volunteer.

The national Election Protection effort was felt to be necessary when various problems in interpreting rules and confusion surfaced and voters were sent home from the polls or denied the right to vote for various reasons. Complaints of deliberate attempts to intimidate or prevent a duly registered person from voting or of other instances of voter fraud will be taken and referred to law enforcement, if necessary.

According to OIBA president Arvo Mikkanen, the 2nd Election Protection Co-Chair, "many recently registered voters may not be aware of a federal law that requires voters who registered by mail for the first time to have a current valid photo ID or other documentation of their name and address at the ballot box on election day." HAVA, or the Help America Vote Act, was designed to address some of the problems that arose in Florida and in other areas where many voters were not allowed to properly cast their vote. "The most important part of HAVA, we feel, is the right of a properly registered voter to at least be able to cast a provisional vote on election day, if for some reason they cannot adequately verify their registration," said Mikkanen. The election workers will then attempt to verify the voters registration in the days after the election to determine whether the provisional ballot will be counted.

OIBA representatives have met with Oklahoma Election Board Secretary Michael Clingman who has already addressed one major concern - whether tribally issued photo IDs with names and addresses would count as a valid form of identification for those newly registered voters.

According to Secretary Clingman, "tribal IDs that have a photo and address will suffice, as would other forms of photo ID such as a drivers license, a state ID card available from any tag agency, or government issued photo ID." If a newly registered voter does not have a photo ID they can instead bring another qualifying document without a photo, so long as it contains the name and address of the voter. Under HAVA, a current utility bill, a bank statement, a government check, a paycheck, or another government issued document, should be accepted. "Even a tribally issued car tag registration, so long as it contains the voter's name and address, would be valid as a government issued document," said Secretary Clingman. "We want our tribal elders who may be voting for the first time and new registrants to know that they should bring these documents along to the polls as a precaution on Election Day," said Mikkanen.

The OIBA is relying on volunteer attorneys and law students who will not act as poll watchers, but rather will be available by telephone to assist with problems that might arise on election day. Calls about voters having difficulty in voting will be taken by an attorney and then other attorneys and law students throughout the state will be tasked with helping answer questions or directing persons to the proper officials. "Ideally, we hope that there are no problems and the phone will not ring on election day, but if it does, we will do our best to help the voter get the information they need to cast their vote," said Joe Williams.

"We're also fortunate that a major downtown Oklahoma City law firm, Andrews Davis, has donated space and the use of their phone system for this public service," said Mikkanen. "It's an excellent example of how attorneys can help the average citizens exercise one of their most fundamental rights - the right to vote," he said.

OIBA's Election Protection Project, although primarily concerned with American Indian voters, will not just be serving native peoples. "Others in the community may also be interested in what we are doing and may have questions about the election process," said Mikkanen, and "we'll do what we can to help them on election day if the need arises," he said.

Voters are also encouraged to consider voting early by going directly to their county election board in the days before election day. "By doing that you could avoid long lines and waits on election day at the individual precincts," said Mikkanen. "I'd expect that many of our tribal elders or senior citizens groups may want to go to vote on the Friday, Saturday, or Monday before election day to avoid the wait at individual polling places, although given the high expected turnout, there still may be some delays." The County Election Board Offices in Oklahoma are open on Friday, October 31 and on Monday, November 3 from 8 a.m. - 6 p.m. They are also open on Saturday, November 1, 2008 from 8 a.m. - 1 p.m.

For those wanting more information, please consult the OIBA's Website at www.oiba.net or contact the nationwide website www.866OURVOTE.org. For specific registration or ballot information questions, persons should first attempt to contact their local election board. If a voter encounters difficulties or needs assistance on November 4, questions may be directed to the OIBA Election Protection attorneys at Andrews Davis Law Firm in Oklahoma City at **405/272-9241** on that day only from 9:00 to 5:00. Other resources such as the **1-866-OUR-VOTE** toll free number can also provide assistance to voters prior to that time and on election day.

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