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Longtime New Brunswick resident loses home but not his belief in electoral process

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Edwin Session fully intended to vote Tuesday, just as he had in nearly every presidential election since 1968.

A change of address since the last time he had registered, though, jeopardized his opportunity to cast a ballot this year. Formerly a Carpendar Road resident, Session now dwells in an encampment alongside the Raritan River. But while he's been homeless since January 2006, Session, 58, says his claim on the country's future is as solid as anyone else's, maybe more so.

"You still want to participate, you're still a citizen, still an American," Session said of the homeless' stake in the nation's direction. "You have less of a leg to stand on if you don't vote."

Session, then, took the opportunity to register through an initiative spearheaded by the Middlesex County Resource Center, a Remsen Avenue institution that provides a range of services to the homeless and to others rebuilding their lives. For several Thursday evenings starting in mid-September, the center's Sandy York and Rutgers students affiliated with RU Voting, a voter education and registration effort run by the Eagleton Institute of Politics and other university institutions, canvassed clients at Elijah's Promise soup kitchen on Neilson Street.

The effort got Session and about 300 other homeless persons onto the voter rolls by the Oct. 14 registration deadline. Though Session's dwelling doesn't have an address, per se, state and federal laws, including motor-voter legislation, have made it possible for him to register and vote. According to the state's voter registration application, homeless persons need only provide the address of a "contact point" to be eligible to vote.

Session's contact point, as it is for the majority of the 300 homeless who registered, is the Resource Center.

"Many people were under the mistaken impression that they couldn't vote, because of a lack of a permanent address or, in some cases, their criminal histories," York said. New Jersey is also among about 20 states that allow persons who have served their sentence and fulfilled their parole and probation obligations to vote.

While RU Voting's primary mission is to get students to participate in elections, registering the disenfranchised gained resonance for the student canvassers as the campaign progressed, said Martha Guarnieri, a Rutgers junior and the RU Voting student representative.

"A lot of the clients (at Elijah's) felt very empowered," said Guarnieri, a 20-year-old political science major. "It's not common to do voter registration in that part of the community and it makes up such a large part" of the city. The initiative registered more than half of the estimated 519 homeless adults in the county, according to January numbers culled from an annual survey of the homeless, York said.

Deborah Jacobs, the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, which has worked for voting rights on behalf of a cross section of residents, including former inmates and people who are in jail but whose cases haven't yet been adjudicated, said the homeless have perhaps even a greater responsibility to vote than other citizens.

"The fact that someone is homeless shouldn't preclude them from able to vote," Jacobs said. "In fact, one might argue that people who are down and out have even more reason to voice their opinion in this rough economy than anyone else."

Session cited jobs, health care and affordable housing as among the top issues he wants meaningfully

addressed. And he thinks that Sen. Barack Obama is the person to do that. "You do want to vote ultimately for someone who will help your situation," said Session, who said a bad breakup helped cause his homelessness.

Session, a Vietnam War veteran who has worked "a lot of different jobs," including in a machine shop and in a law office, but is now unemployed, surveys the political lay of the land mainly by reading The New York Times, and also by way of other national media, including public radio. He spends time at the city library "virtually every day" to stay informed, he said.

Another Elijah's client, Stan, who is on the cusp of 50, will cast his first-ever ballot on Tuesday. Stan, who did not want his last name used, came of voting age during the Carter Administration but was never much interested in politics.

"I cared, but just didn't follow through," said Stan, who said he lives "here and there" in New Brunswick.

The current political and economic climate, and the ease with which he was able to register through the Resource Center's initiative finally fired up his dormant civic inclinations, he said.

"Everything is all messed up right now," he said. "The rich get richer, the poor get poorer and there's no middle class."

Stan, an unemployed machine operator, also mentioned jobs and affordable housing as key issues in this election.

He said he would cast his vote for independent Ralph Nader.

"He's always been for the people when it comes down to it," Stan said, mentioning Nader's past work as a consumer advocate. "I just want to see what kind of change we can have."
