

Reaching every Minnesota voter, when every vote counts

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Jennifer Brooks
@STRIBROOKS

In a democracy, they say, the people end up with the government they deserve (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Joseph_de_Maistre).

Minnesotans worked hard this year to get out the vote and get people who deserve the best from their government a choice in their government.

"We're getting souls to the polls," Shawn Renée Kennon said with a laugh.

Kennon, an assistant public defender for Hennepin County, helped

handwrite and mail cards to more than 1,000 young people who had registered to vote but hadn't voted.

She and other members of the Links Inc., a nonprofit service organization of Black professional women, organize voter registration drives every year, but in the middle of a pandemic, they were hoping the novelty of a handwritten appeal, delivered by snail mail, might appeal to these first-time voters.

First-time voters like the teenager she walked from her office to the nearest mailbox, flanked by his beaming parents, so he could mail his voter registration card earlier this year. He was a U.S. citizen; his parents were not. There was no one to help him vote until Kennon stepped in.

"I gave him a stamp and the whole family walked to the [mail] box," she said. "He had the biggest smile on his face. ... I had tears in my eyes."

If you can vote, vote. Generations [marched](https://edubirdie.com/blog/womans-suffrage-timeline) (<https://edubirdie.com/blog/womans-suffrage-timeline>) and [bled](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/john-lewis-tribute-jamil-smith-voting-rights-1040806/) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/john-lewis-tribute-jamil-smith-voting-rights-1040806/>) and [died](https://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/civil-) (<https://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/civil->



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[rights-memorial/civil-rights-martyrs](https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/elections/right-to-vote/voting-rights-for-native-americans/) for that right (<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/elections/right-to-vote/voting-rights-for-native-americans/>).

The vote is so precious, Minnesota takes the right away as punishment.

Kito J. Bess, Minnesota's chief U.S. probation officer, was used to talking about voting with people who couldn't.

As of Friday, nearly 2 million Minnesotans had already voted, either by mail or early in-person. That's a lot of us, but not all of us.

"When people come into our office, we typically advise them of their rights in terms of what they've lost," he said. "Their right to bear arms, their right to vote, the right to hold public office."

But no one was talking with people on the other side of the process, when they were off probation, off supervision, off paper.

"We needed to advise folks about what they'd gained," said Bess, who organized voter registration drives around the state to make sure former felons know they were now eligible voters.

"For me, it's about information, it's about community involvement," he said. "And it's about really trying to positively impact the lives of these folks and their families."

Around Minnesota, as the newest Americans raised their hands and took their oaths, the League of Women Voters waited, masked and ready, to register the new citizens for their new duties as voters.

In the middle of a pandemic, volunteers didn't even have to get out to get out the vote.

Smiling faces logged onto online election workshops the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office organized on Zoom and Facebook Live, in English and Oromo. Minnesota is home to the largest Oromo community this side of Ethiopia, but until recently, strength in numbers hasn't translated into turnout at the ballot box.

"Look, you want to effect change? We give you a chance," said Dr. Obsa Hassan, a physician who has worked with the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office on voter outreach in the Twin Cities' thriving Oromo community. "You want a responsive government? This is your right and your duty: to vote."

It can be hard to encourage people forced from one home by violence and government repression to trust the political process. But there's an Oromo candidate on the ballot in Minnesota this year, for the very first time; Jamila Mame, running for a seat on the school board in St. Paul.

"You are Minnesotan, you've got to get involved," Hassan said.

"The people voting for the first time, they take this very solemnly," he said. "Having firsthand experience of what it means to live under a repressive government, enjoying the freedom afforded us in this country is very motivating."

If you have a ballot gathering dust at home, remember, don't mail it in (<https://www.startribune.com/court-late-minnesota-absentee-ballots-must-be-separated/572917081/>). The courts got involved and now it's too late. Drop your ballot in one of Minnesota's many fine ballot drop-off locations (<https://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting/other-ways-to-vote/cities-and-towns-with-in-person-absentee-voting/>). Or vote early in person at your county election office. Or turn out to the polls on Election Day (<https://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting/register-to-vote/register-on-election-day/>).

All the information you need is on the Secretary of State's website at: [sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting](https://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting) (<https://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting>).

Jennifer Brooks is a local columnist for the Star Tribune. She travels across Minnesota, writing thoughtful and surprising stories about residents and issues.

jennifer.brooks@startribune.com 612-673-4008 @stribrooks