



E2S3 Voting from Jail is a Right, and Now a Reality in Chicago

A year ago, Illinois passed a law requiring all jails to ensure that pre-trial detainees have an opportunity to vote. Chicago's Cook County Jail was turned into a polling place during the 2019 primaries. Sheriff Tom Dart is an enthusiastic supporter of the program. And advocates like Amani Sawari are working to ensure voters in custody are informed and prepared to vote in the upcoming election. Pamela Kirkland reports.

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The Story

Getting Out the Vote Among Incarcerated People

“They say every person’s vote counts, so I just went ahead and just voted.”

-Talman Anderson

In 2019, the Illinois legislature voted to make Chicago’s Cook County Jail an official early polling place. Less than a year later, voting machines were brought inside for the first time and detainees like Talman Anderson cast their ballots in the presidential primary. He was among more than 1,800 detainees to walk into the jail’s chapel and participate in the essential process of living in a democracy.

While the effort was, by all accounts, a success, it’s hardly the norm. Cook County is one of just a handful of jails and prisons around the country that have prioritized voting for the incarcerated. It’s believed to be one of just two jails in the nation’s history to bring in voting machines. Many detainees are eligible to vote, but the process varies tremendously by state, leading to confusion and voter disenfranchisement.



Talman Anderson votes in the Illinois presidential preference primary from the Cook County jail. Photo: Pamela Kirkland

The Mission

Expand access to the ballot for those in custody

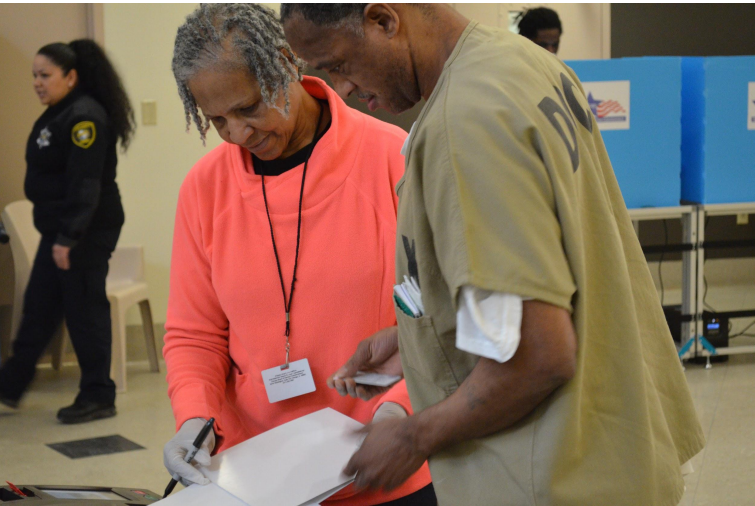
“We need to make sure that we're not just, saying, ‘hooray’ when a polling booth is created in the jail, but we need to say, ‘hooray’ when people feel fully equipped to use that polling booth.”

-Amani Sawari, Right2Vote

The mission is straightforward: make sure everyone with the right to vote is able to exercise that right. The trouble is, accomplishing that mission among those in custody is fraught with complications.

Advocates like Amani Sawari are working to cut through the red tape. Conditions differ on a state and even county level; jails and prisons have distinct policies regarding mail that can impact the ability of incarcerated people to cast their ballots. And only two states—Maine and Vermont, along with Puerto Rico—allow all incarcerated individuals to vote.

Sawari and other advocates are committed to educating detainees on the issues pertinent to them and their communities. That way, when detainees like Talman Anderson cast their ballots, they are exercising not only their rights, but their will to change their circumstances.



A person in custody at the Cook County jail hands his ballot to a poll worker to be scanned. Photo: Pamela Kirkland

The Strategy

Create awareness and accountability for prisons and jails around the nation.



Detroit-based Community Organizer, Amani Sawari, photographed outside of Detroit's Department of Elections building. (Photo: Nick Hagen)

“You’re a taxpayer. The jail is accountable to you.”

- Amani Sawari, Right 2 Vote

Bolstering the effort to help detainees exercise their right to vote is a matter of persistence, attention to details, and holding the facilities accountable.

Amani Sawari says there’s a very simple, powerful act anyone concerned with felony disenfranchisement can perform: call your local jail, ask who is in charge of voting, and offer to connect them to the Right 2 Vote campaign, and send them ballot applications, as well as educational materials(for example, on the latest legislative issues to impact incarcerated people). If jail administrators are open to partner with Spread the Vote, you can contact Amani at Amani@spreadthevote.org.

If there is no voting programs in place, offer assistance to create one. Look for local organizations working on Get Out the Vote Program and see how their efforts can be adapted to reach people inside your local jail. As Durel Douglas from Houston Justice points out, if jail administrators are not interested in creating a formal voting program from, there are workarounds. Organizations like his work directly with registered voters from inside jails by mailing information to them directly and empowering them to as informal organizers, who are invested and well positioned to speak with their neighbors inside about their rights, and how to exercise them. Be aware of the barriers to access, and understand the mailing restrictions, which vary across jurisdictions.

Resources

Find out more about Spread the Vote:

<https://www.spreadthevote.org/>

Read the latest newsletter released by the Right 2 Vote Campaign:

<https://sawarimi.org/right2vote-report>

Help bond detainees out of jail by visiting the National Bail Fund Network:

<https://www.communityjusticeexchange.org/national-bail-fund-network>

Read more about the legislative effort to make the Cook County Jail into an official polling place:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/voting-behind-bars-cook-countys-huge-jail-becomes-a-first-time-polling-precinct/2020/03/05/5bf10fc0-581c-11ea-9000-f3cffee23036_story.html

Learn more about voting in jails at the Sentencing Project:

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/voting-in-jails/>

Talman Anderson (L) and Eugene McGraw (R) vote in the Illinois presidential preference primary from the Cook County jail (March 14. Photo: Pamela Kirkland)



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