

NEW WAY TO VOTE

Eight years after Congress outlawed mechanical lever voting machines (Help America Vote Act 2002) New York State joins the rest of the nation in the modern electronic era. Starting with the fall primaries, voters will go to their usual polling place and sign the usual voter registration book. But instead of pulling a lever they will be given a paper ballot and directed to a privacy booth where they will fill in an oval for each candidate. This is similar to the absentee ballot form now in use in New York City. Disabled voters may use a Special Ballot Marking Device to help them mark the ballot; this has been available at each poll since the 2008 elections. The voter then inserts the completed ballot into an optical scan machine to be counted and stored for a possible hand recount if necessary. Each scanner will produce a tally sheet at the close of Election Day and these will be secured at borough offices. On January 5th the New York City Board of Elections voted to award the contract for the new machines to Election Systems & Software. WCC compliments the City Board for its fair and transparent process and plans to participate in the public education program. You can see the new machines on the Board of Elections website: www.vote.nyc.ny.us. Click on New Pollsite Voting System under "Important Notices."

Marjorie Kelleher Shea

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

• **MARCIA BYSTRYN**
President, New York League
of Conservation Voters

• **SUSAN COOPER**
• **ELAINE EPSTEIN**

• **MARY F. HOLLOWAY**
Former Executive Director,
Association for a Better New York

• **JAMIE KRISTEN MAZZURCO**
Former Schools for Schools
Program Assistant, Invisible Children

KID KORNER

Proliferating Progeny

Teresa Lamb, who was one of our Special Projects Administrators last year until sends word that 7-month old Henry is a joy. She is currently looking for a job which might entail writing, development, and/or community relations. The highest recommendations will be given to prospective employers by those WCC members on whose projects she so successfully worked.

On the evening of January 7, 2010, **Katie and Heath Watkin** sent a joyous e-mail announcement of the birth that morning of Abigail Frances, little sister of Ella. Katie was an active member of the Education Committee, joining co-chairs **Ellie Stier** and **Dorothy Wilner** visiting schools throughout the boroughs to report back to the committee on programs in traditional and charter schools.

Education Committee Intern Sharon Van Engen, who was Project Associate of the committee's published report of charter schools entitled "Snapshot of New York City Charter Schools 2002" began her journey into motherhood shortly after completing her assignment at WCC with the birth of Kiernan John at the beginning of 2004. Maeve was born at the end of 2005 and Tighe in the spring of 2009. It is a well-known fact that local public schools can only improve with the future enrollment of the children of WCC-involved mothers.

We hear that the joys of motherhood are only exceeded by the joys of recent grandmotherhood; check with **Mary Ellen Rudolph** and **Marjorie Ives** for confirmation.

TASK FORCES

The Physical Education Task Force is a sub group of the Public Policy Committee. Its members are **Susan Alt, Gail Edwin, Katie Lobach, Barbara Rochman and Barbara Zucker**, with **Amy Schwartz** and **Phyllis Lusskin** serving as co-chairs. The group is looking into the problems of insufficient physical education in the NYC schools and working to develop a policy position, recommendations and advocacy on the situation. Faced with a childhood obesity epidemic, the City's schools are failing to provide students with NYS mandated requirements for physical education. Recently the city Health and Education Departments issued a report finding that increases in school physical activity improves student academic achievements and high school graduation. The Task Force is meeting with city physical education and health officials, advocates and stakeholders to explore problems, current efforts and opportunities for improving the problems of insufficient physical education in schools.

Education Group to Meet: The Task Force on Education will meet to address current education issues on Thursday, February 11th at noon at WCC office. All WCC members who are interested in the proliferation of charter schools, the increasing size of classes, the assessment of teachers based on student test scores, the diminution of physical education and art programs, the lowering of State test standards, the disregard of State mandates and other related issues are invited to join the group at its first meeting to discuss current WCC policies related to these issues and actions the WCC might take.

Poverty Task Force: Longtime Poverty Task Force member Joan McAllister, who publishes a newsletter for homeless families in New York City, recently wrote an article that appeared in WestView, a West Village local paper, which was distributed to members of the task force. The members suggested that all WCC members would want to read it. Portions of the article entitled "Unlocking the Homeless Cycle" follow:

"In Mayor Michael Bloomberg's first years in office, the city helped move families out of shelter by making available to them federal housing programs – vouchers that aren't time limited – and the total number of families in shelter dropped. Then, in 2004, the Mayor announced he planned to reduce homelessness by two thirds in five years. As part of that plan,

his Department of Homeless Services switched policies, no longer offering homeless families long term rent subsidies like NYCHA apartments or Section 8 vouchers on the theory that they just attracted people into the shelter system. I remember the rationale that went like this:

"They don't really need to be homeless – they're just doing it to get housing vouchers." Instead, the city began offering a temporary housing subsidy called Housing Stability Plus (HSP), which failed within two years, and replaced it with a second program of housing subsidies called "Work Advantage" for people with at least 20 paid hours of work a week and "Children Advantage" for people with child welfare cases. This subsidy program offered one, or at most two, years of housing aid, after which the families are on their own. As of this fall, the number of homeless families in New York City's shelter system is at an all-time high of 10,096 – including more than 16,000 children. But don't expect an admission of program failure. The Mayor's response to this statistic? An all-out effort to push the families out of the system fast, with no regard for individual needs and conditions.

It sounds a little weird said this way, but what attracted me to write for families in the shelter system in years past was that it seemed like a place of hope. No one wants anyone to be homeless, certainly not children. But all of the people who ended up in shelters were rock-bottom poor and many had desperate needs – needs that had not been met. For them, the stay in a well-run shelter was a new start. My newsletter carried many stories about shelter offerings that could really prepare a family to succeed – GED classes, parenting classes, financial fitness training, counseling, mental and physical health treatment and referrals. Earlier this year I stopped in on a shelter I had often visited before and asked about their parenting class and was told sadly by a caseworker, "No, we don't do any of that any more. All we have time to do is find them jobs at places like Wendy's so they can get the Advantage subsidy."

On the assumption that families need pushing because they aren't trying hard enough, the city has now made new rules: That threaten eviction to the street for at least 30 days for a long list of reasons, many beyond control of the homeless themselves; That would permit shelters to evict families to the street if their welfare case is closed or suspended – even though

it's proven that a large proportion of case closings are due to bureaucratic error; That would allow shelters to evict families to the street without any provision for people with disabilities or handicaps; That evict families even though it means their children would have to be removed and placed in foster care.

More surprising is that the Mayor's effort to push families out of the system fast also targets the shelter providers, assuming they too are dragging their feet. Family shelters and hotels under contract to the Department of Homeless Services are paid a per diem rate based on the number of families under roof. DHS is introducing a new system of payment that will award a 10% bonus to shelter providers for moving families out in less than six months and impose a 20% penalty for families that stay in longer....

The number of families who left the shelter system for permanent housing but returned later is way up. Almost 60% of the families entering the shelter system in September had been there before, and this is happening month after month. Families leave shelter, settle somewhere, and bounce back. It's called recidivism. A few years ago studies done by reputable groups like the Vera Institute showed that families with long-lasting housing subsidies (such as Section 8 and NYCHA which we no longer offer the homeless) were associated with the lowest risk of return to shelter. But this knowledge hasn't influenced policy lately. DHS publishes the figures on recidivism but is otherwise silent on the subject. Where did these families live? Did they have help paying the rent? Why are they back? It seems to me there are ways of solving social problems that are better than others." The rest of the article then describes the Nurse-Family Partnership program, now thriving in 28 states, with data showing a 48% reduction in child abuse and neglect, 67% reduction in behavioral and intellectual problems at child's age 6, and 59% reduction in arrests among children. It links a young mother with a registered nurse who visits from early in the pregnancy through the baby's second birthday, starting weekly and tapering to monthly for a total of 64 visits. A Rand Corp. study of the program estimated that savings to society and government over the child's lifetime is at least four times more than the cost of the program.