

Across Florida, voter registration mailers go to dead relatives, pets

[Jeffrey Schweers](#), Tallahassee Democrat Published 7:00 a.m. ET June 26, 2019 | Updated 11:17 a.m. ET June 26, 2019

Sunrise resident Cory Mimbs was incensed, but polite, when he wrote a letter to the Broward County Supervisor of Elections Office alerting the office about a recent mailer the Center for Voter Information sent to his late wife, Louise.

The letter said that according to their records she wasn't registered to vote in Broward County and included a state voter registration application.

"I thought you might be interested that this organization's database must be flawed in that she was automatically removed from the voter registration rolls upon her death in 2015," Mimbs said. "I just thought that in light of recent claims of election meddling that this might be an attempt to register ineligible voters."

Mimbs is one of hundreds, if not thousands, of recipients across the state who received misdirected mail erroneously saying either they were not registered to vote when they still were, or addressed to a dead relative or even a pet.

"You've got to challenge the integrity of a mailing from a ... private group where the envelope says, 'Important Government documents enclosed' and includes a Tallahassee return address....." Broward County Supervisor of Elections Pete Antonacci said.

Voter confidence is of paramount importance to Antonacci, who was appointed Supervisor of Elections for Broward County in December after then-Gov. Rick Scott suspended Brenda Snipes after her questionable handling of the November elections.

About 7,000 Broward County residents got similar letters from the Washington, D.C.-based CVI and 55,000 similar letters from its sister organization, the Voter Participation Center.

For years, county election supervisors have been deluged with calls from confused and angry voters every time the Center for Voter Information and Voter Participation Center send out their mailers urging people to register to vote.

They're tired of it.

The mailers were especially tough on counties that were in the middle of conducting special elections for vacant legislative seats.

“At a time when voter confidence is historically at an all-time low, your organization irresponsibly contributed more fuel to the fire at the worst possible moment,” Pasco County Supervisor of Elections Brian Corley wrote to Jennifer Carrier, attorney for the VPC and CVI. “In addition to last minute preparation for election day, my staff was taxed with dealing with angry voters.”

'We are very good at what we do'

The mission of the privately funded VPC and CVI is to get traditionally underrepresented people registered and motivated to vote, including young single mothers, young adults and people of color – a group collectively called the “Rising American Electorate.”

Because there is no readily available list of unregistered voters in Florida, VPC has to hire several vendors to help put together a mailing list from several data sources, said Page Gardner, president and founder of VPC.

Those sources including magazine subscription lists and other commercial sources.

“What one does is you look at and get commercial datasets, and match those to a voter file as accurate as the state provides,” Gardner said. “The most important point is the quote-unquote error rate is very de minimis.”



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June 3, 2016

Notice-

According to public records that we have examined, no one at this address is currently registered to vote. If you have already registered at this address or are ineligible to vote, please disregard this notice. Otherwise, please fill out the enclosed form and mail it in the pre-addressed postage-paid envelope.

According to the State of Florida's database, most eligible citizens are registered to vote. As part of our ongoing voter registration monitoring, we will be reviewing the Florida voter file in eight weeks to see if you have mailed your form. We would like to find you on the list of registered voters.

To check your current voter status, please visit:

<http://registration.elections.myflorida.com>

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

A mailer from the Washington, D.C., based Voter Participation Center is causing confusion among Leon County voters. (Photo: Jeff Burlew)

Gardner points to the number of applications the organization generates and the successful applications that get on the rolls.

"Eighty percent of the applications we get back are successful registrants," Gardner said, without saying what percentage of the people who receive the mailers actually fill out the applications, though.

The organizations are transparent about who they are and what their goal is, she said. And the instructions clearly tell people to ignore the mail if they are already registered to vote.

"We don't want to send to any wrong person. Those stories appall us as well," Gardner said. But she downplayed the number of misdirected letters as minor and inconsequential, especially compared to the good they do. Last year, VPC helped register more than 800 people in Pasco County alone, said VPC spokesman Jim Popkin.

"The reason we have been so successful and in business so long is because we are very good at what we do," Gardner said.

'The mailers make voters lose confidence'

Leon County Supervisor of Elections Mark Earley said the organization sent 1,200 mailers out to his constituents, and his office received about 120-150 complaints – over 10 percent of the number sent out – by phone, mail and even in person.

Out of that mailing, the county received 11 new registrations, he said, or about 1 percent of the number of mailers that went out in Leon County.

“The mailers make voters lose confidence in the system,” Earley said. “I’m not sure that’s a good trade-off.”

His office, on the other hand, registered 120 voters on a recent Sunday – without drawing any complaints or confusion.

Gardner said the non-profit, non-partisan groups based in Washington, D.C., sent out nearly 452,000 such mailers in June. If what happened in Leon County occurred statewide, that would mean some 45,000 people received letters they shouldn’t have gotten.

“We began receiving calls from constituents last week with the usual complaints about inaccuracies in the VPC mailings,” Corley said. “Again the mailings have failed to meet the goal of the VPC organization. In reality, our experience is that it continues to erode voter confidence at a time when we need an increase and while my team and I work tirelessly toward that endeavor.”

Carrier said her organization could take the names of constituents who called to discuss mailing inaccuracies off of future mailing lists, to which Corley replied:

“Your offer to remove names from your database is noble, but to suggest my staff be responsible for cleaning up your files is misguided and uninformed. I don’t think you accurately perceive the intensity of how voters respond to the mailings.”

Brevard County Supervisor of Elections Lori Scott received 14 calls in one day, most of them from voters receiving letters to deceased family members. Both CVI and VPC sent a combined 10,216 letters to Brevard residents.

“I’ve gotten calls from voters whose pet received them,” Scott said. “Children have received them. A nine-year-old received one.”

Phones ringing with complaints

Since the [hacking reports about the 2016 elections](#), voters are hypersensitive about anything to do with voting records, Scott said.

"If you are registered, and receive something saying you may not be registered the first thing they think is someone deleted their record," Scott said.

Before 2016, people would react calmly, she said. "Now that is not the case. They're angry. They think it's coming from the supervisor because it has to do with voter records. They don't see that it's a third party entity."

Indian River County Supervisor of Elections Leslie Swan was told that CPI would be mailing 557 letters to Indian River County residents starting on June 19. Another email said VPC was sending out 1,806 letters.

Within days her staff was getting calls from residents confused by the mailings.

"One caller was extremely upset that her daughter, who passed away in 2004, received this letter," Swan said. "Others who received the VPC letter were already registered. It appears that some of the information is not accurate on the VPC's mailing list, which erodes voter confidence."

Escambia County Supervisor of Elections David Stafford said he's received several phone calls and forwarded mailings from concerned and confused voters.

"They seem to mainly fall in the category of deceased family members being sent the mailer – I would estimate a few dozen over the last week or so," Stafford said. "According to the information shared with us by VPC, Escambia was slated for just over 8,000 mailers."

Gardner reiterated that her organization is getting the most up to date voter information through its vendors, but refused to say how much she spent on them. And the organization then goes through a rigorous winnowing process right up to the day they send out the letters, she said.

"A lot of people sign up pets to get magazine subscriptions," Gardner said. "As a consequence, one of the most robust pieces of data cleaning activity we do is create a list of the most common pet names across the country."

When reports come back about erroneous mailers, Gardner said, "We have conversations with vendors and hold them accountable. We take the name off the list immediately, and back out exactly how that happened and get assurances of how they are going to improve their methods."

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