

## Oregon Action:

# Developing Leaders by Registering Voters

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Views editor

**G**racie Gage never used to spend much time involved in the political process. This year is different. Gage, a 45 year-old African American woman, is one of 100 volunteer leaders participating in Oregon Action Fund's Voter Project. "I wanted to do something for the community," she says. "I wanted to be part of something positive."

Gage is like many of the new activists Oregon Action Fund is recruiting into the political process, says project director Jo Ann Bowman. "We are working primarily with low-income people, people

of color, and people with felony convictions," explains Bowman. "Many of them don't believe they have leadership skills. Our project shows them that they already have what it takes — we just help them apply their skills to have an impact for their community."



Jo Ann Bowman (left) talks strategy with Western States Center Finance Administrator Ruth Alice Anderson, who in her spare time is the president of Oregon Action.

## 100 LEADERS, 30,000 VOTERS

Oregon Action Fund's project aims to register 30,000 Oregonians to vote this year. Unlike some other voter registration drives that begin and end with the voter card, "Oregon Action Fund is building an army of people who can make change happen in their community," Bowman says, "whether as Oregon Action members, advocating for change with their local government, or even running for office."

At the core of the Voter Project is an intensive leadership development program. Seventy-five percent of the 100 participants selected were recruited directly by Oregon Action Fund members and staff to match their target constituencies. The rest were picked from over 400 applications received after MoveOn.org publicized the volunteer opportunity. While these applicants were predominantly middle-class and white, they were screened to determine their commitment to the project's goal of building power in low-income communities and among people of color.

**"The training taught me that everybody's vote makes a difference. Voters can change the issues." — Gracie Gage**

Once accepted into the program, volunteers commit to an astounding 20 hours each month. Organized into teams of ten, each team selects its own leaders and stays in close touch to keep each other on track to achieve their monthly voter outreach goals. Incentives for teams that exceed their goals help keep it fun in the spirit of friendly competition.

Monthly training days include several standard features. Training in the electoral process helps demystify the basic mechanics of civic participation. Leadership development topics build skills in areas like public speaking, conflict resolution, advocacy, and media relations. Finally, each month features an elected official who shares the reasons they ran for office; what they have accomplished for their community; and what they would advise other potential candidates.

## 33 PARTNERS FOR INCREASED IMPACT

Bowman, herself a former state legislator, says "Whatever road people decide to take to make change, the skills they develop in this program will have a long-term impact on their communities."

In addition to the 30,000 voters Oregon Action Fund aims to register with its volunteer leadership teams, the organization is also serving as coordinator for a larger network of community-based groups. With funding from their national partner, USAction Education Fund, 33 groups in Oregon will receive \$2.00 for each new voter they register. Besides acting as fiscal sponsor for the effort in Oregon, Oregon Action Fund maintains a master calendar of the outreach activities planned by all of the groups and offers joint trainings. Western States Center Trainer/Organizer Moira Bowman is helping with the next partners' training in conjunction with the Center's VOTE Project (see page 10). Voter registration activities sponsored by this network of partners provide an alternative for activists who can't make the extensive time commitment required by Oregon Action Fund's leadership development program.

