

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Voting Rights Deserve More Protection

November 4, 2018

Anita Johnson is in the trenches. She helps people in the city of Milwaukee get IDs, so they can vote. Anita works for the nonprofit VoteRiders and sees it all. "I worked with a 56-year-old woman very recently who had never had an ID," Johnson said.

She went with the woman to the state Division of Motor Vehicles and stood back as the woman approached the clerk at the window. The clerk asked the woman if she had a birth certificate or a Social Security card. When the woman said "no," the DMV clerk said he couldn't give her a voter ID, according to Johnson.

That's when Johnson intervened to start the woman's petition for a temporary voter ID. "If I hadn't been there, she would have walked away," Johnson said.

Erin Grunze of the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin says the DMV is poorly trained.

But DMV Administrator Kristina Boardman disagrees. She says staff is trained to go over a checklist of options for people seeking IDs.

"We have signs all over that say 'No Birth Certificate ... No Problem.'" Boardman says people seeking birth certificates can get receipts sent to them overnight while the DMV takes more time to get hard copies.

But Anita Johnson contends that too many people fall through the cracks. "There isn't enough advertising on what people are supposed to do," she says.

Johnson has helped homeless veterans and many people from out of state who struggle to get original birth certificates for a variety of reasons. Johnson says too many would-be voters give up because they might be working hard raising children and get overwhelmed by the process. Going to the DMV to get a state ID is not a high priority.

"The last thing we want is for somebody not to be able to vote," says Molly McGrath, director of the All Voting is Local Campaign in Wisconsin. "We just want people to know we have their back."

The DMV points out that applicants can get temporary Voter IDs with no credentials. Getting a state ID requires the original birth certificate or a passport along with proof of residence.

If someone is elderly from the Jim Crow South and there is no written birth certificate, DMV Administrator Boardman says there is still a way through the ID petition process.

"They can use an old family Bible, early school or census records to help establish a birth date," she says.

The problem is that DMV clerks don't always tell ID applicants what they need to hear. In 2016, then-VoteRiders operative McGrath and her colleagues visited 10 DMV stations around Wisconsin. They made audio recordings of the clerks. DMV employees gave visitors conflicting information about how long it would take to get an ID, McGrath told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in September, 2016.

No right is more sacred than the right to vote. The most challenged applicants seeking to do that should have their rights read to them in some legally mandated script, such as the Miranda rules. In 2016, federal Judge Jim Peterson struck down several parts of the previous ID law as unconstitutional. He threw out, among other things, the restriction limiting municipalities to one location for in person absentee voting, state-imposed limits on the time for in-person absentee voting, and he ruled one doesn't have to live in a place for 28 days to vote. He moved it back to 10.

"Milwaukee had 41,000 fewer voters in 2016 than in 2012," Anita Johnson says. "Twenty-nine-thousand were African-Americans in the five poorest districts. Nine-thousand did not have valid photo IDs."

I never worried about getting a photo ID for myself. It was never an issue. But hearing the emotions of the activists on the ground dealing with this struggle, I felt a tug on my once bleeding heart. Protecting the right to vote is a fight even 56-year-old curmudgeons like me can join.

Mitch Henck is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic. Watch Mitch's video, "Two Minutes with Mitch," weekdays on YouTube. Listen to his podcasts on MadisonTalks.com, and Wednesdays at 6 p.m. on Facebook Live.

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