



Courting the Addiction Recovery Vote

By Jacob Levenson, Greg Williams and Gina Thorne

January 08, 2016, 12:30 pm

In tight political races swing voters are the key to winning elections. ‘Soccer Moms’ helped drive President Clinton’s 1996 bid. President George W. Bush had ‘Security Moms’ to thank for his victory in 2004. In 2016, there is an important demographic block whose priorities are bubbling to the surface of American politics, straight from our communities come individuals who have overcome one of the toughest health challenges of our time to the dais of presidential debates. Meet the ‘Recovery Voter.’

As addiction treatment providers, individuals in recovery, and voters, we believe the most important discussion in this election ought to be about addressing our nation’s response and approach to substance use disorders. Today, one in five American adults has a personal connection to the disease of addiction, either because they have personally struggled with substance use or they know a friend or family member with the illness. Twenty-two million Americans now struggle with addiction, another twenty-three million are living in recovery, and each year, we lose 135,000 lives. The Center for Disease Control has declared opiate addiction an epidemic.

Given the skyrocketing impact of opioid use and addiction on American families and communities, Presidential candidates are now weighing in. We applaud them. In the most recent Democratic debate, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) called addiction a disease, not a choice. Americans of every major party agree, including 80 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of Independents and 64 percent of Republicans, according to a November survey of Americans conducted by MAP Health Management. Hillary Clinton has held two well-attended community forums in New Hampshire specifically on addiction and has outlined her policy platform on her presidential campaign site.

On the Republican side of the aisle at a Jan. 5 forum on Addiction Policy in New Hampshire, Jeb Bush, Gov. Chris Christie (R-N.J.), Carly Fiorina, and Gov. John Kasich (R) all shared deeply personal connections to addiction, and went on the record in support of reducing stigma and increasing access to care. In this unprecedented Presidential policy forum with hundreds impacted by addiction in attendance they all came out for one reason - to court the Recovery Voter.

Recovery Voters appreciate this growing dialogue because we are in great need of action. We want elected leaders who will stand with us to ensure Americans have every tool to fight this public health crisis. In October 2015, for the first time ever, tens of thousands of people gathered on the National Mall at the UNITE to Face Addiction rally in Washington, DC to demand better policy and the expansion of treatment and recovery services for Americans facing addiction. As we enter 2016, we are still waiting for Congress to enact legislation to expand access to care and to ensure those services utilize an outcomes-based approach which is done with other chronic diseases.

Congress currently has a host of bills under consideration aimed at combating the addiction epidemic that is ravaging communities nationwide. As our elected officials consider these policies, they need to know that Recovery Voters want real solutions for those struggling. In fact, 70 percent of Americans favor legislation that ensures treatment facilities demonstrate a science-based and an outcomes-based track record in order to receive government reimbursement for their services.

Politics is the intersection between self-interest and common-interest. As candidates compete for the hearts and minds of the 2016 swing voter, we want them to understand a key point; there is an alignment between swing voters and the issue of expanding recovery services.

Pollsters and pundits have suggested that Election 2016 will see younger voters (particularly young women), aged 18 to 34, who are not firmly aligned with either party, and non-college educated adults (women in particular) among swing voters in November 2016. Of these key demographics, 78 percent of young women aged 18 to 34 say they are more likely to support a Presidential candidate who supports expanding recovery services for addiction. And, non-college educated adults (regardless of party affiliation) respond with strong commitment to the same statement, including 71 percent of those with a high school education or less and 74 percent of those with some college education.

Successful change for families struggling with addiction will begin in two ways: by shifting to an outcomes-based healthcare approach and by voting for politicians who support recovery. To our candidates, we urge you to tell us where you stand and to make your response to the substance use crisis a formal part of your platform. To our elected officials, we ask you to pass the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act now. Finally, to Recovery Voters nationwide, we urge you to stay vigilant, remain hopeful and know that on Election Day, you will swing the election.

Levenson is the chief executive officer of MAP Health Management, LLC (www.MapNetwork.com, www.ThisIsMap.com), an innovative, data-driven company whose mission is to improve outcomes for individuals battling the disease of addiction. Williams is the co-founder of Facing Addiction (www.facingaddiction.org), a national non-profit organization dedicated to finding solutions to the addiction crisis by unifying the voices of the over 45 million Americans and their families directly impacted by addiction. Thorne is part of the leadership team for the Treatment Professionals in Alumni Services (www.tpasrecovery.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting professionals who provide alumni and other continuing care services to people in recovery from addiction.