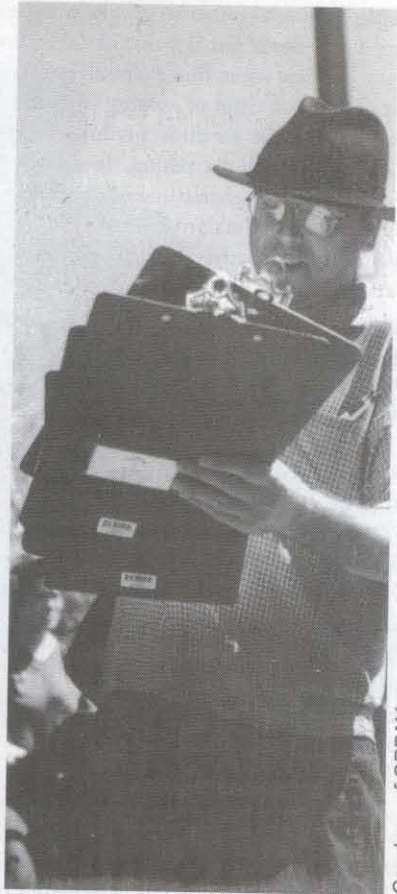


# Becoming Visible

*A new homeless voter registration drive has already empowered 300 people to stand up for themselves. And with a nationwide event planned for the end of the month, we may be on the verge of a new constituency.*

by Seth Baum



Courtesy of CPPAX

It started when Jim Cronin, Frank Atkinson, Roger Schagnon, and Dwayne Lopes, each homeless at the time, met with their state representative, Anthony Petricelli. They asked what was on the table at the House on issues of direct importance to them, such as jobs, affordable housing, health care, and substance abuse programs. Petricelli answered that there were things on the table, but they weren't going anywhere, largely because homeless people are not voting and speaking up for themselves. This left them annoyed but resolved to do something about it.

Since then, they have been spearheading a homeless voter registration drive based out of the Pine Street Inn. The project is currently run by Frank and Jim, with support from Pine Street Director of Government and Community Relations Amy Coolidge.

Getting homeless and low-income people registered to vote has been a challenge for them, as people are often saddled with misunderstandings of their eligibility or concerns over the responsibilities of being registered. Many convicted felons were under the impression they couldn't vote despite having served their time—this is not true. Others worried about jury duty. But, as Frank explained, "There isn't a prosecutor or lawyer in the state that would put someone in a [transitional] program on a panel. That's just the bottom line."

**"When I got out of Walpole prison in '65, I was under the impression, as we all were, that we were second class citizens. It was ten years before I learned that I could vote, that I had choices, that I was part of America."**

Getting past such misunderstandings is a big personal challenge. "When I got out of Walpole prison in '65, I was under the impression, as we all were, that we were second class citizens—couldn't obtain a passport, couldn't vote, and that was it. And I was a Navy veteran, and I was pissed," Jim said. "My self-esteem was dashed to the ground. I had acrophobia, I had a lot of other phobias that had to do with the insecurity that I felt. I was devastated. I was smashed. In more ways than one, I might add. I was also an alcoholic. Bay Rum Jimmy is what I was known as in the South End. . . . It was

ten years before I learned that I could vote. I registered to vote and . . . I had choices, I was part of America, part of something bigger than me."

This took me by surprise. When I showed up for the interview, I was expecting to hear about the effect voter registration could have on political discourse, but it hadn't occurred to me that it could have such a profound effect on the voters themselves. Jim not only recognized this, but used it in his outreach.

"This is part of my spiel," he said. "And we've registered more than 300 homeless people. And they can expect an impact, a dramatic elevation of their self-esteem. . . . And you know, they're all watching the news and reading the papers. And this is an election year."

At this point it hit me that this is more than just an ordinary voter

