Rights of Canvassers in Pennsylvania

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (ACLU-PA) is available to help if your group runs into obstacles, including registration or permitting requirements, background checks, waiting periods, and unreasonable curfews on when you can solicit, etc.

The Law

Registration/Permitting requirements: The ACLU believes that the Watchtower Bible case declared clearly that all registration and permitting laws, as applied to charitable, religious, political and GOTV groups, violate the First Amendment. Nevertheless, municipalities continue to enforce such requirements.

If your group is not asking for donations or dues: A federal appeals court in Pennsylvania has made it crystal clear that you cannot be asked to register, get a permit or even to notify local officials about your canvassing plans (*S.E.I.U. v. Municipality of Mt. Lebanon*). Of course, if you choose to alert local police about your plans to avoid problems with residents, that is YOUR choice, but the municipality cannot insist that you do so.

If your group is asking for donations or dues: Some municipalities argue that the 2002 Supreme Court decision allows them to require a permit under these circumstances. The ACLU disagrees, believing that there is no difference whether you ask for money or not. The only two courts to have considered the matter (*N.J.E.F. v. Wayne Township* and *Ohio Citizen Action v. City of Mentor-on-the-Lake*) have ruled that the municipalities cannot require permitting or registration, even if money is solicited, but neither case is legally binding on Pennsylvania towns.

Background checks, photos and waiting periods: All three are unconstitutional. If municipalities cannot require groups to register, they cannot require you to wait, submit a photo or have a criminal background check completed.

Curfews: The law is clear that municipalities must allow canvassing between 9:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m., seven days a week. (City of Watseka v. Illinois Public Action Council; New Jersey Citizen Action v. Edison Township). Nevertheless, restrictions on canvassing after 6:00 p.m., sunset or on weekends and holidays are still common.

If you encounter any of these restrictions...

Please contact the ACLU office nearest you for help. Leave a message and someone will return your call within 24 hours. If you need a faster response, speak with your director, who has additional contact information to reach ACLU lawyers directly.

Philadelphia: 215-592-1513; 877-PHL-ACLU (745-2258)
Harrisburg: 717-236-2258; 877- HBG-ACLU (424-2258)
Pittsburgh: 412-681-7736; 877-PGH-ACLU (744-2258)