

Ghosts Vote In The Bronx

On the complaint of New York Congressman Edward Koch, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Robert Fiske, has authorized an investigation of illegal use of federal funds by Roberto Munoz and his heavily funded methadone program SERA (Hispanic Association for a Drug Free Society) in New York City. The U.S. Attorney's first reports charge that SERA, which receives \$3.2 million a year in federal, state and city funds, has been billing the government for hundreds of non-existent outpatients and residents. While the investigation is not yet complete, SERA now claims over 100 residents in treatment while census of patients could uncover only 29.

The New York Post aptly summed up the situation in a front-page banner headline April 6: "Bronx Drug Program: \$4 Millions Go To 'Ghost' Clients." But this isn't the first time SERA has been caught dealing with the netherworld. New York's Committee for a Fair Election investigated Munoz in November 1976 and found that SERA was involved in creating a great bulk of the thousands of tombstone registrants uncovered in the Bronx who "voted" in the November 2 presidential elections. In a series of interviews, Munoz and his associates revealed how they "registered" over 8000 people in the four-day period preceding the close of mail registration Oct. 4. Of the newly "registered" people who voted in Munoz's area of the South Bronx, a full 15 percent were verified as "tombstone" voters.

The following is an interview with Munoz by the Committee for Fair Elections in January 1977:

Munoz: Let me tell you how we did this, which is in effect, what I've done. I took my staff and I told them, "How many would like to volunteer in terms of we're not committed to any political structure, ok? After 5:00?" And I said for them to, first, orientate all the residents, get them registered to vote, in the house. Then we went out and we drafted the services for SERA. And we went door to door.

Q: What services for SERA?

A: All of the services. Treatment of addicts, jobs for people, the health clinic care, etc. We had a small little giveaway that we put under the door. If no one would answer, we always took females with us. We would knock on the door and say, "Look, we're from SERA, these are the services we're providing, if any one's sick, or affiliated with drugs, etc., you can call this number, we'll have you picked up. By the way..."

Q: What does that have to do with registering people?

A: ...are you registered to vote?" Get it? We're out there, knocking on doors, particularly with females cause our people to open doors. "Oh, by the way would you like to register to vote?"... "Look, I don't even — I don't understand. I only come over here a short time. Look, I'm on welfare, I don't know if I want to be bothered." "Listen, if you are on welfare, you should be registered to vote."

The best thing that happened now is that you had these mail-ins. You seen the mail-in ballots? That was fantastic. We would just tell the person, "Well, look you haven't voted in a long time. So now you've got to register again. We'll do it all for you. Call us if you don't get your card in the mail." We just did it door by door. Those what would open the door.

Q: How many people did you register?

A: We registered something like a little over 8,000 people... "Let me tell you the importance of voting. Get out there, get counted. Do you expect any subsidies? Any programs that's coming in, get out there and do your thing... There are two sources of power — economic power — which we're limited to because of education... the other is the greebie, it's the power of the vote, that you can have if you just register and vote and do the right thing." And that's how we sell them.

Q: Vote for the right person.

A: Exactly. Pool your vote, don't give it away... We have a list of people who we registered... we divided them up among coordinators... these are all staff persons here... The idea was to get them registered, find out who they were, and pull in the vote. That was the key. Pulling the vote — we had all our people here request some time. You know, vacation time, or time they had coming, on Election Day. The agency — I think three-fourths of the people were out on the street... then you wait for them in front of the polls and you tell them what to do when they walk in... What happens when we were losing in a certain area, we would just send five guys in here (as pollwatchers), that's all. Anybody that walked in — 'Hey don't forget, do the right thing.'

Q: Those guys were —

A: pollwatchers, which is illegal so —

The Committee for Fair elections has arranged to present its evidence on Munoz's use of federal funds to generate thousands of fraudulent postcard registrations and to facilitate illegal vote herding on election day November 1976 to the U.S. Attorney for further investigation.