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### **Welcome to The League of Women Voters**

The League of Women Voters is a group of women and men of all ages and backgrounds with a common interest in “Making Democracy Work.” As a member of the League of Women Voters, you will follow in the footsteps of a long line of leaders committed to building better communities and a stronger democracy.

Since 1920, the League’s mission has been to secure democracy’s promise through voter education, issue advocacy, and citizen outreach. Our goal remains to help create a participatory democracy - a democracy where the citizens are involved in their communities, at the ballot box, in public policy debates and forums, and in government deliberations.

The League gives you the opportunity to learn more about your community, to take a continuing and intensive course in government at all levels and to develop leadership skills. You can tailor your involvement and participation in the League to fit your interests and schedule. Even if you don’t have the time for active participation, your membership alone strengthens our voice.

### **PRINCIPLES**

The League of Women Voters believes...

- In representative government and in the individual liberties established in the Constitution of the United States.
- That democratic government depends on informed and active participation and requires that governmental bodies protect the citizen’s right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, by holding open meetings and making public records accessible.
- That every citizen’s right to vote should be protected; that every person should have access to free public education that provides equal opportunity for all; and no one person or group should suffer legal, economic or administrative discrimination,

- That efficient and economical government requires competent personnel, the clear assignment of responsibility, adequate financing, and coordination among the different agencies and levels of government.
- That responsible government should be responsible to the will of the people; that government should maintain an equitable and flexible system of taxation, promote the conservation of natural resources in the public interest, share in the solution of economic and social problems that affect the general welfare, promote a sound economy and adopt domestic policies that facilitate the solution of international problems.
- That cooperation with other nations is essential in the search for solutions to world problems, and that the development of international organization and international law is imperative in the promotion of world peace.

### **A Brief History of the League**

The League of Women Voters was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920 at the last convention of the National American Suffrage Association held six months prior to the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting women the right to vote.

The National League began as a “mighty political experiment” designed to help 20 million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters. From the beginning, the League has been a grassroots organization that believes that citizens should play a critical role in shaping public policy. It was then, as now, a nonpartisan organization, neither supporting nor opposing candidates of political parties at any level of government. Its basic purposes are to make democracy work for all citizens through voter education and to influence public policy through advocacy.

The League of Women Voters of Florida was organized in the spring of 1939 by women forming Leagues in Winter Haven, Winter Park-Orlando, and St. Petersburg. They needed three local Leagues and a membership of 100 for Florida to become the 34<sup>th</sup> state League. This was accomplished on Tuesday, October 29, 1939, and the Florida Non-Partisan League of Women Voters was formed. It was renamed the League of Women Voters of Florida in 1947. Over the years, the League in Florida has continued its ambitious course, studying and advocating for issues from education, natural resource protection, to voting rights and voting district reform. The League issues Voter Guides to inform citizens on state races and ballot amendments.

The League of Women Voters of The Villages/Tri-County Area was established in 2005 with membership open to women and men in Lake, Marion, and Sumter Counties who support the principles of the League. In addition to its monthly meetings, the League holds candidate forums, publishes and electronic voter’s guide during the election season and speaks on issues to interested groups. The League studies issues that not only affect citizens on the local level but also the state and national levels.

## **The Basics**

### **Mission**

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

### **Nonpartisan Political Policy**

The League never supports or opposes any political party or candidate for political office. The League does encourage its members, as individuals, to take part fully in the electoral process. However, some restrictions apply to board members, officers and public advocates in order to protect the League's nonpartisan public image. Those restrictions are determined by interpretation of the local partisanship policy.

## **The Work of the League**

The substantive work of the League divides itself into two general categories:

- Voter Service and Education
- Program and Action

In our Voter Service and Education roles, the League provides scrupulously neutral information on candidates and the electoral process. In Program and Action, the League advocates for changes in law and governmental policy based on study and consensus by the membership.

### **Voter Service**

League members have long been helping citizens to register to vote in workplaces, schools and other locations. The League successfully supported the "Motor Voter" registration law and advocated for online voter registration. In addition, local Leagues encourage voter turnout by providing reminders to vote and information on how to vote by mail.

Many local and state Leagues provide voter guides with information about the candidates and answers to questionnaires from the candidates. These may be printed in statewide and local newspapers, or, more often, presented online on local League websites or through the online platform from LWVUS, VOTE411. For many contested elections, local Leagues organize candidate events, debates, or forums.

### **Voter Education**

Because it does not support or oppose candidates or political parties, the League is known as a trusted source of fair and impartial information on many issues. At the beginning of a new study or to call attention to a timely issue that the League has previously studied, local and state Leagues may present public forums featuring differing viewpoints. A frequent topic of these presentations are the constitutional amendments featured on the ballot in Florida.

The League publishes information and offers training on how to lobby public officials at all levels of government, run for office, moderate a forum and convene a meeting.

## **Program and Action**

“Program” refers to specific activities that the League engages in on governmental issues. These are supported by the specific policies and position statements on which the League can take action. At each level – local, state and national – program must be consistent with the League’s principles which illustrate the breadth and variety of League concerns about government structure, social policy, fiscal policy, natural resources and international relations.

Specifics of the state League (LWVF) program and positions are available in “Study and Action” on the League’s website [www.lwvfl.org](http://www.lwvfl.org). The national (LWVUS) program and positions, “Impact on Issues” is online at [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org).

## **Program Planning**

The League is unique in its grassroots approach to planning and adopting program where issues to be studied are proposed and decided on from the grassroots up.

At program planning meetings, members consider what parts of the existing local, state or national program need special attention and what new issues, if any, should be studied. Recommendations for issues to be restudied and new programs are forwarded to the board of the League at the appropriate level. A local League’s annual meeting and the state and national conventions use these recommendations to help decide what parts of the existing program need special emphasis and whether to begin a new study.

The program concerns of local Leagues vary. Some Leagues do little in the way of local study and action, while others have an extensive catalogue of positions, often concerned with local development, public schools and community services.

## **Study and Adoption of Program**

When League members at an annual meeting or convention decide on a study or re-study, local and state boards appoint a chair of a study committee. Taking part in a study is an excellent way for new members to become familiar and involved with the League.

The committee is responsible for developing reliable and balanced information to be presented to the membership at a discussion meeting (or meetings). “Consensus” questions are used to focus discussion and encourage attending members to come to agreement. The responses to these questions are compiled by either the local, state or national League and, if there is substantial agreement, a new or modified position is added to the program at that level. The issue is not voted up or down, the task is to try to reach the core or “sense” of the group’s conclusion.

“Concurrence” is another method sometimes used to adopt a new position. In this process, members of a local League or delegates to a convention are asked to concur with a position statement. They are provided with the same kind of thorough and unbiased information as when using the consensus process. But instead of responding to consensus questions, the membership or delegates are asked to agree on a position statement that has already been formulated. Often these are positions arrived at through study and consensus by another League.

Once positions are adopted and are part of the League program, they are re-endorsed regularly. Local positions are voted on at annual meeting; state and national positions are voted on at the respective convention. National positions apply at all levels; state positions may be used at both a state and local levels; and action on local positions is confined to local communities.

LWV of The Villages/Tri-County Area recently completed a four-year study of Florida's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program. After reaching consensus at the local level, study findings were forwarded to the state league resulting in new language being adopted in the LWVFL program.

### **Action**

The whole purpose of program development is to be able to take action on issues of concern. Although League issues are governmental, action need not be confined to lobbying elected officials. Action can be a public relations effort to persuade citizens to recycle, for example, or to conserve water. Here are some examples of the ways the League may take action:

- Lobbying for changes in a law, letter writing, email and telephone campaigns to legislators or other policy makers, drafting new laws and local ordinances
- Testifying at hearings
- Publishing and distributing persuasive and pertinent materials
- Participating in public forums or local cable TV programs
- Organizing letters-to-the-editor campaigns
- Working in coalition with other organizations
- Litigating constitutional concerns
- Monitoring and observing governmental bodies

Since there is always more to do than can ever be done, it is important to prioritize and strategize. At each level of the League, members and delegates to conventions, as part of the program planning process, decide where to focus the League's energy, time and resources. It is the responsibility of the board of directors to determine how these priorities will be carried out. At the same time, the leadership depends on members to help implement these decisions.

### **Organization**

The League exists on three levels: national, state and local. A member of a local League automatically becomes a member of the state and national Leagues. When a League is composed of more than one town, it is called an area League but is still considered a local League. In Florida, most Leagues cover one or more counties. There are currently 29 Leagues in Florida.

### **Annual Meeting**

Local Leagues hold an annual meeting each year, usually in late spring, when members adopt the local League's program, approve the budget and any bylaws changes, and elect officers and directors. All members are encouraged to attend. The meeting is an opportunity to catch up with old friends and get to know new members.

## **Convention and Council**

The LWVUS convention is held biennially in even-numbered years, and the LWVF convention is held in odd numbered years. Delegates are appointed by local Leagues in numbers proportionate to their membership, and observers also attend. Any member is eligible to serve as a delegate when approved as such by their local League board. Delegates debate and vote on program, budget, and bylaws changes and elect officers and directors. Council, a much smaller meeting, takes place on alternate years of both LWVUS and LWVF to adopt a budget and give direction to the national or state board.

## **Board of Directors**

Each of the levels of the League is governed by a board of directors, which includes the officers and directors who are elected or appointed. The number of directors and how many should be elected or appointed vary and are determined by the bylaws of the appropriate League.

Local and state boards usually meet once a month to decide priorities, activities and action.

A Nominating Committee submits a slate to the annual meeting or convention. Nominations can also be made from the floor of the annual meeting with the consent of the nominee.

Serving on a local League board puts you in immediate touch with the issues of your county and municipalities. Local and state levels of the League also appoint volunteers as specialists in particular program areas. As an example, a land use specialist may act for the League on local land use matters.

Local and state board meetings are open to all members.

## **Finance**

As a nonprofit organization, a 501(c)(4), the League relies on dues and contributions from its members and supporters. League membership dues include per member payments (PMP) to both the state and national Leagues. The amount of dues is determined locally by a vote at the annual meeting.

**Dues alone are not sufficient to support the work of the League at any level.** Leagues, at all levels, raise a substantial portion of their funds through contributions, grants, bequests, advertising, and fundraising.

The **LWV Education Fund**, at the state and national levels, are 501(c)(3) organizations and accept tax deductible contributions to support the voter services and citizen education activities of the League. Donations made to the FL Education Fund through our local organization are reserved in an accrual fund for local education projects.

## **Membership**

Membership in the League of Women voters is open to everyone over 16 years of age. Joining at any level automatically confers membership at every level: local, state and national. League members who are US citizens and at least 18 years old are voting members. Members who are under 18 or non-citizens are non-voting members. Full-time students may join the League for

free. Members-at-large (MALs) are League members who live outside the area of a local League or within the area of an emerging League (MAL unit). Florida has one MAL unit.

## **Benefits and Opportunities of Membership**

### **EDUCATION**

#### **Publications and Communications**

Local Leagues send members a newsletter, often electronically. Every member receives a subscription to their local newsletter, state newsletter – The Florida Voter, and communications from The League of Women Voters of the United States, along with invitations to meetings, Action Alerts and other information about League events and concerns, often by email.

The LWVFL [www.lwvfl.org](http://www.lwvfl.org) and the LWVUS [www.lww.org](http://www.lww.org) websites also offer valuable information for League members. The local website is [www.lwvtrifl.org](http://www.lwvtrifl.org).

#### **Meetings and Forums**

Local League meetings, often organized as forums on particular issues, provide an excellent way to learn about how your community works. Topics range from those of local interest to those with broader implications. Local and state board meetings are always open to all members, and members are encouraged to attend LWVF convention and council.

Another important membership activity each year is the Legislative Seminar in Tallahassee, an opportunity to lobby at the state capital, held during the Legislative Session. This event gives members the opportunity to learn about LWVFL legislative issues, to meet with their legislators, and to hear from important state policy makers. Those issues, the legislative priorities, include concerns submitted by local Leagues as well as state committee members and the state board.

#### **Ways to Get Involved**

Meetings – Members are invited to attend monthly meetings and other special events. Board meetings are also open to all members.

Voters' Guide - At election time, members are needed to help formulate questions on relevant issues for local races and then contact candidates to request their participation.

Voter Registration- Members are needed to attend events to register new voters or help them update their registration information. Online training is a prerequisite.

Candidate Events – Members are needed to help organize candidate “meet and greet” events and/or moderate candidate debates and forums.

Speakers' Bureau- Members are needed to present information to the public on various topics to interested community groups.

Observer Corp- Members are needed to observe and report on meetings of important governmental bodies.

Study Issues - Members are needed to study issues and monitor LWVFL committee phone calls so local members can be updated on new developments.

Finance and Development – Members are needed to support the financial activities of the organization by serving on the annual budget committee, annual financial review committee, and assist with fundraising or grant writing activities. Professional skills are needed and welcomed. Participation – Members are needed to serve on and/or lead ad hoc and standing committees. Leadership – Members are needed to step forward to lead as elected board members and officers.

Organizational work offers the opportunity for members to learn new skills. Many members have built on the skills and knowledge they've gained as League leaders to run for public office and to serve their community in a wide variety of constructive and influential ways.

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