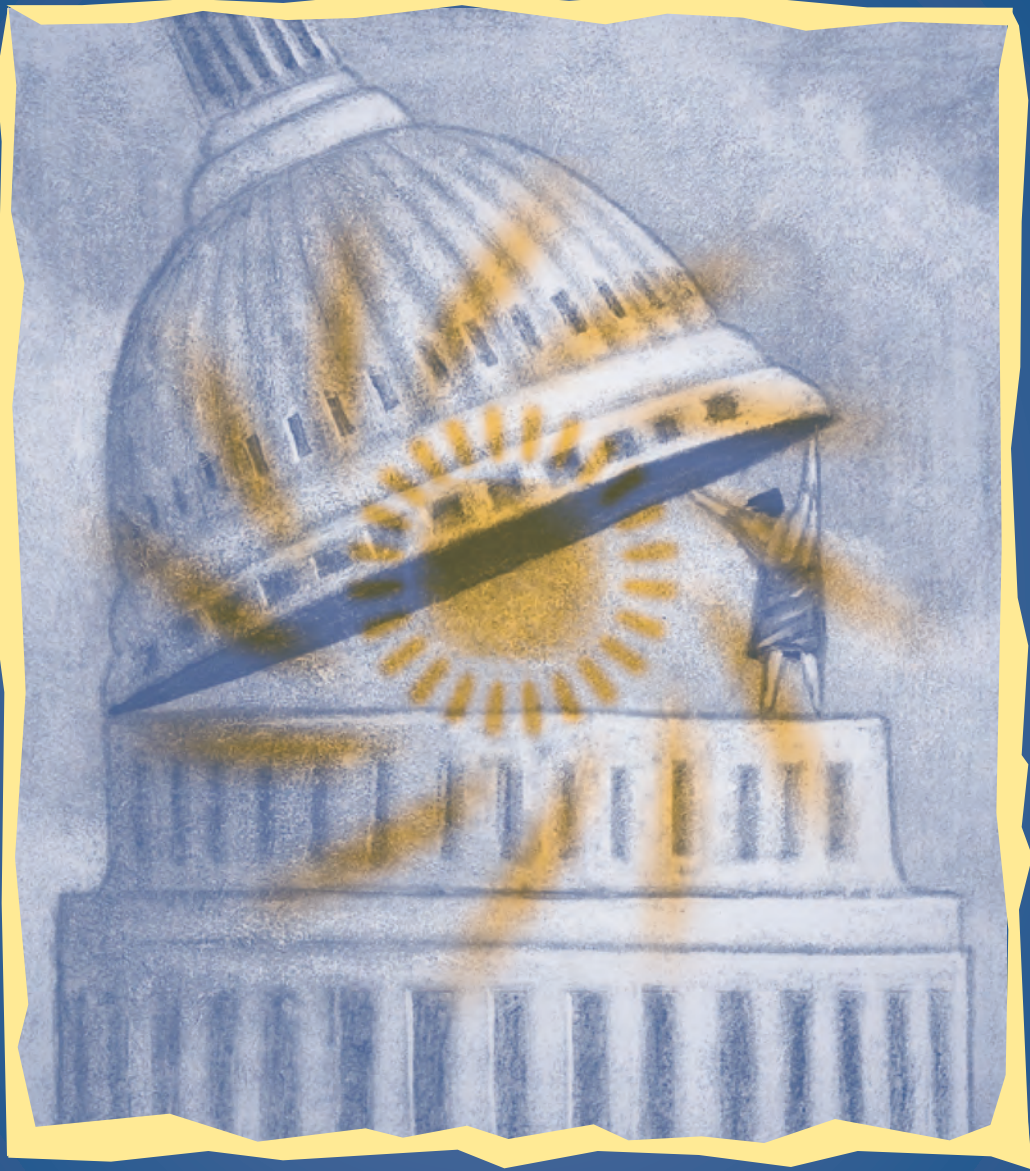


Observing Your Government in Action

Protecting Your Right to Know



A Resource Guide



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®

Preface

It is with great pride that the League of Women Voters Education Fund publishes *Observing Your Government in Action*. I am confident that the contents of this resource guide will be helpful to League leaders and others who share our commitment to open government and civic engagement.

Protecting our right to know is integral to the health of our democracy. Decisions that determine how our schools will be run, at what level community safety programs will be funded, and how land in our towns will be used impact our lives and are vital to our well-being. These kinds of decisions need to be made with public input and oversight. One important way to ensure that is to observe government meetings.

The League has been a champion of government transparency since our founding in 1920. It is one of our core principles and a vital part of our mission. Our efforts in this area reinforce our reputation of fairness, nonpartisanship and trust. League members attend governmental meetings to learn what their government is doing and to monitor whether those meetings are conducted in an open and transparent way. Experience has shown the importance of the League being present to watch—and to take action when necessary.

Consider this real-world example, selected from countless similar successes: Karen Mitchell, a founding member of the LWV of Spartanburg County (SC), began her fight to change the public housing situation in her county by attending public meetings. Though they were held in a cramped office with little advance notice, she would attend and listen. The League researched other towns and their housing communities, held a community forum, and engaged the local press. Shortly thereafter everything changed – new director, new board and new ideas that helped the residents. Since then, Spartanburg has been the recipient of two multi-million dollar federal grants that have transformed the housing communities and, as a result, the whole community.

As this example demonstrates, League “observer corps” or monitoring programs are not new. Many Leagues across the country have had programs in place for decades. The goal of this publication is to document how these programs work, as well as to describe the benefits that accrue to the League as well as the public. We have compiled some “best practices” as well as provided information about how these programs can contribute to the vitality of the League. It is our hope that even the most experienced observer will find something new in this guide.

We gratefully acknowledge The Herb Block Foundation for making the production of this guide possible. We also thank LWVUS staff member Kelly McFarland Stratman, who authored the guide, and LWVUS Executive Director Nancy E. Tate, who spearheaded this project.

I hope that this guide will be a valuable resource for Leagues and other community members as we all continue the vital work to keep government open and accessible to the public.

Mary G. Wilson, President
League of Women Voters

Observing Your Government in Action

Protecting Your Right to Know



A Resource Guide

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®

www.lwv.org

Funded by a grant from
The Herb Block Foundation

Acknowledgements: The principles reflected in this document were informed, in part, by excellent input received from numerous state and local Leagues. We gratefully acknowledge the Leagues that participated in the Observer Corps Survey (fall 2006). We give special thanks to the Leagues referenced in this publication – the LWVs of Champaign County (IL), Eden Area (CA), Greater Dayton Area (OH), Greater Lafayette (IN), Hingham (MA), Holland Area (MI), Las Cruces (NM), McLean County (IL), Michigan, Montgomery County (IN), Mountain Lakes (NJ), Oakland (CA), Pikes Peak Region (CO), St. Louis (MO), Salina (KS), Saratoga County (NY), Spartanburg County (SC), and Sudbury (MA). Other LWVUS projects, such as the Storybank, also served as resources for this publication.

Copyright©2007 by the League of Women Voters Education Fund. All rights reserved. No part of this booklet may be reproduced in any manner without the express written consent of the publisher, except in the case of brief excerpts in critical reviews and articles. All inquiries should be addressed to: League of Women Voters of the United States, 1730 M Street, NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20036



Contents

- Introduction.....1
 - What Is “Sunshine”?1
 - Sunshine as a League Priority1

- Starting an Observer Program.....3
 - What Is an Observer Program?3
 - Recruiting Observers.....4
 - Training Observers5

- Mechanics of an Observer Program.....7
 - Knowing the Law7
 - Setting Observer Program Goals8
 - Working with Those Being Observed10

- Sharing What Is Observed.....11
 - Internal Opportunities11
 - External Opportunities12

- Organizational Benefits from Having an Observer Program.....15

- Other Sunshine Mechanisms17

- Appendix A: Sample Reporting Forms19
- Appendix B: General Tips on Working with the Media/
 Doing Public Outreach.....21
- Appendix C: Resources.....25

Introduction



WHAT IS “SUNSHINE”?

As Lincoln reminded the nation in his Gettysburg Address, ours is a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Government exists for our benefit and is accountable to us, its citizens. However, our rights in terms of access to government information and decision making were not codified until more than 100 years after Lincoln made his famous address.

In 1966, with the passage of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the federal government defined what the public has a right to know, and how they can exercise that right to obtain government-held information. This was followed by passage of the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972 and the Sunshine Act of 1976, both of which focused on public access to government meetings. Pursuant to the federal example, all 50 states, the District of Columbia and some local governments passed similar laws. These laws are often known as “sunshine” laws or public access laws. Although each law is different, they generally declare that all records and meetings are open unless certain specified exemptions apply.

“Sunshine” or openness in government refers to two distinct areas: access to public records and access to public meetings. This publication focuses on the latter. The League’s *Looking for Sunshine: Protecting Your Right to Know*, published in 2006, focuses on access to public records; it is available at www.lwv.org.

Regardless of what label an access law is given—“sunshine,” freedom of information or transparency—the premise behind its inception is that everyday people have the right to know what actions their government is taking. From watching elected officials deliberate about a new traffic pattern in the community to being able to hear expert testimony about the environmental impact of a new landfill in the county, people can exercise their right. Sunshine regulations afford them the right to attend public meetings and have access to public documents; they also often provide guidance about how individuals can exercise this right.

SUNSHINE AS A LEAGUE PRIORITY

The League of Women Voters has been an active champion of openness in government throughout its history. The organization’s principles include the requisite that “government bodies protect the citizen’s right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings and making public records accessible.” Over the years, the League has supported various federal, state and local initiatives to expand open government requirements and has fought against proposals aimed at limiting access to public information.

Our nation’s access laws are only as good as we, the people, demand that they be. Protecting the public’s access to information—either written public documents or access to governmental meetings—is fundamental to

the League's mission and, we believe, is fundamental to the health of our democracy. Securing information from government agencies and officials has never been easy, and much of the public is not well informed about the breadth of publicly held information that might affect them, or how to access it. In the post-9/11 age, increasing amounts of information, once accessible to the public, have been declared off-limits.

At all levels of the organization, League members are working on ways to ensure that the citizen's right to know is protected. The League has supported Sunshine Week since its inception in 2005. Held each year in mid-March, this is a national initiative to open dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information. Journalists, civic groups, libraries, schools and others interested in the public's right to know have banded together to help promote this non-partisan effort to enlighten and empower individuals to play an active role in their government at all levels, and to give them access to information that makes their lives better and their communities stronger.

The League has helped to convene national experts to discuss and promote the topic of openness in government. For instance, the national League has cosponsored panel discussions about government transparency at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, video feeds of which were broadcast to sites across the country. The League also has created a companion piece to this publication. *Looking for Sunshine: Protecting Your Right to Know* (available at www.lwv.org) is a resource guide that provides an overview of the most significant federal and state laws—those that protect and those that restrict public access to government information. It also contains suggestions about ways that Leagues can become more involved in this area, and identifies other national and state organizations working on these issues.

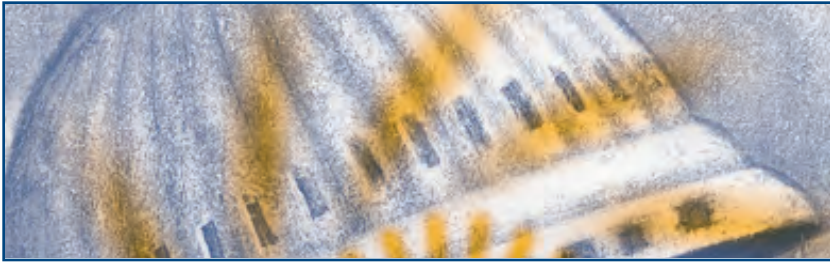
State and local Leagues have long been advocates for and protectors of government transparency. They have lobbied for improvements to (and in some cases for the creation of) state and local sunshine regulations, and have obtained government documents under state

freedom of information acts and other relevant laws. The Leagues also have been observing the actions that elected and appointed officials take, and the manner in which actions are taken. Often called "Observer Corps," these programs have given Leagues a very effective way to protect and strengthen the citizen's right to know.

The purpose of this guide is to provide interested organizations, but especially Leagues, with some general information about observer programs, suggestions about how to start or strengthen observer programs, and how to share more effectively what is being observed. The guide also contains information about how to utilize transparency efforts, such as observer programs, as a way to strengthen the organization -- using it to generate visibility, engage more members and potential members, and build stronger ties to the community. You'll read "success stories from the field" throughout the guide that show the importance and strength of the League's efforts.

Observer Corps programs are only one way for Leagues to ensure that "sunshine" or government transparency regulations are followed in their communities. For more suggestions, such as freedom of information audits, see the "Other Sunshine Mechanisms" section of this guide.

Starting an Observer Program



WHAT IS AN OBSERVER PROGRAM?

Observer programs (or Observer Corps) are a structured way for individuals to exercise their right to know. Organized under the auspices of a grassroots organization (such as the League of Women Voters, which is referenced throughout this publication), they provide a valuable service to the community. They help ensure that citizens are aware of the decisions that impact their lives and they promote government transparency and accountability.

An observer is an individual who attends a governmental meeting, notes what happens at the meeting, and reports back to the League and (hopefully) the community. By attending public meetings of local governmental bodies/agencies, observers learn more about what their government is doing. They learn about the issues facing their community and are empowered to take action, if warranted. They also learn *how* issues are being addressed.

Observers keep elected and appointed officials on notice; they let them know that someone is watching what decisions are being made and how they are being made. They help ensure that the issues facing their community are being handled “in the sunshine,” in the open.

Ideally, observers are monitoring both the issues being discussed as well as the process by which they are being discussed. While not every item up for discussion will relate to a League’s priorities, ensuring that

the meeting is being conducted in an open and acceptable way is critical to all of the League’s efforts and the health of our democracy.

Observer programs are *not* vehicles for individuals to work personal or partisan agendas. Observers generally do not “act” on issues in these meetings. Unless serving as a designated spokesperson for the League, observers should not provide commentary or testimony on issues on behalf of the League. Instead, observers attend meetings to gather information. Through the process, their presence encourages better, more transparent government.

Observer programs benefit the observers, the organization organizing the observer program and the community. The benefits to the individuals and organization are detailed later in this publication, but by looking at how an observer program can benefit the larger community, the program’s range and scope of influence can be better understood. Observer programs benefit the community by:

- Creating a civically engaged and empowered cadre of watchdogs;
- Connecting individuals (observers and others with whom their observations are shared) with government;
- Promoting open, transparent and accountable government;
- Connecting elected/appointed officials with their constituents;

Who are Leagues Observing?

A recent survey of Leagues with observer programs showed that League observers are attending and monitoring a wide range of offices and agencies (with both elected and appointed officials):

- Airport authority/Aviation board
- Board of elections
- City/Town Council
- County commissioners
- Department of human services
- Health department
- Historic preservation commission
- Hospital board
- Human relations committee
- Library board
- Park district board
- School committee
- Solid waste/Sanitary board
- Visitors and convention commission
- Water district/board
- Zoning/Planning board

- Educating the public about issues impacting their communities and their lives; and
- Identifying areas where action or improvement is needed.

RECRUITING OBSERVERS

The most critical piece to building a successful observer program is having a dedicated group of observers. Finding volunteers to commit to this type of effort can be challenging, but many Leagues have thriving observer programs—some longstanding and others newly established.

There are several key elements to keep in mind as you start to build your program:

- Just as there are numerous benefits to your League and your community, *observer programs benefit the observers, too*. Observers are “in touch” with what is happening in their communities. They are able to

learn about issues and processes from League mentors and by attending governmental meetings. They are given opportunities to network at meetings—with officials and other concerned citizens. Some observers are eventually asked to serve on a board or feel empowered to seek elected office. Most importantly, they are providing a community service. They are acting as “watchdog” on behalf of their friends, family and neighbors, and helping to ensure the vitality of their community. Advertising these benefits can help to recruit new observers.

- *This is a specific (and limited) request for help to individual members*. Observers do not need to work in teams or committees. Observers go to a designated meeting on their own. Reports need not be cumbersome or arduous (see sample reporting forms in Appendix A), and can be submitted to League leaders via e-mail. While it would be ideal to have every meeting of a given agency or office covered, that may not be practical. Even attending sporadically will establish a League presence. It may be more difficult to follow specific topics, but certainly processes could be monitored—especially the requirement of having minutes of previous sessions available to the public!
- *Observer programs are not “all or nothing” programs*. In other words, given the proliferation of government agencies and committees, it is unlikely that a League could observe the work of every agency or office. Instead, it is important for League leaders to focus where they will place their resources, in this case their volunteer observers. Just as a League would identify priorities for its other programmatic work, Leagues should identify the best locations for their observers and not be discouraged from establishing or maintaining a program even if the League will only be observing a handful of local agencies or offices.

Leagues have employed different methods to recruit observers. Perhaps the easiest and most obvious method is to advertise in League publications. Using the organization’s monthly newsletter, e-mail “tree,” and Web site are good and inexpensive ways to

contact members. Flyers about the program also can be made available at League events, and observers can be asked to share their experiences. Some Leagues have advertised their programs “externally” in local newspapers as part of their efforts to gain new members as well as observers.

Regardless of what method is employed, there are some common (and more general) recruiting principles that can be applied to help attract new observers:

- If someone is invited, that person is more likely to participate. Do not assume that members know they can volunteer to participate in an observer program. They might believe that they need to have certain skills or training, or even hold an elected office in the organization to participate. This is especially true of new members. Be sure that advertisements about the program contain an explicit invitation to participate. Better still, *League leaders should personally ask members to participate.*
- *Show the value of participating.* Underscore some of the benefits described above. Show that participation in the program will benefit not only the League but the observer as well. If possible, reference some successes that have resulted from the League’s work to promote government transparency.
- In addition to organizational successes, *share personal stories.* Personal stories have greater resonance. Even if a League has never had a formal observer program, a League leader will undoubtedly have had some experience with a local government office or agency that can be shared.

TRAINING OBSERVERS

Serving as an observer is something that anyone can do. It is an opportunity for new or less active members to contribute to the organization’s work. It might be something that would appeal to students or new residents who are trying to learn more about their new community, or to recent retirees who have new-found free time and more flexible schedules. While there are no “qualifications” per se, ideally observers are:

From Observer to Pioneer Policymaker

The late Harriett Woods, a two-time Democratic nominee for the United States Senate and a former Lieutenant Governor of the state of Missouri, credited the start of her political career to her role with the LWV of St. Louis observer corps. She was asked to monitor the University City Human Relations Commission. She was a dedicated observer and when a vacancy on the Commission occurred, Woods was appointed. She went on to run for local office and eventually became the first woman elected to statewide office in Missouri. She was a tireless advocate for women’s involvement in politics. Carol Portman, a member of the LWV of St. Louis, remembered Woods in her League’s *Voter*, “To Harriett Woods, we say Thank You for the legacy...it is priceless.”

- good listeners and able to summarize and “interpret” proceedings in a fair way;
- interested in local government and/or issues being discussed by the governmental body that they are observing;
- able to serve as an “ambassador” for the organization (e.g., talking about the organization with other attendees at a meeting);
- discrete and courteous;
- not working a personal or partisan agenda while serving as a League observer.

Leagues approach training new observers in different ways. In some cases new observers are mentored by a current observer. Others hold an annual meeting of “veteran” and new observers to exchange information. Some Leagues have an observer coordinator who provides guidance to new observers. The type of training that a League provides depends upon the number of observers, its resources and the longevity of its program. There is no “one size fits all” approach.

However, no matter what training mechanism is used, there are some essentials that all observers need to know:

- the legal basis or jurisdiction of the office/agency being observed;
- the functions and/or services it provides;
- names and titles of the members of the office/agency;
- meeting procedures (e.g., time and place of meetings, availability of agenda and minutes);
- how the office/agency is funded;
- state or local meetings access laws/regulations.

BEST PRACTICES

For New Observers

1. League president sends a letter introducing the observer to the head of the agency/committee to be observed.
2. Observers introduce themselves to the presiding officer and secretary/clerk at the first meeting they attend (and “make contact” with them at subsequent meetings as appropriate).
3. Observers introduce themselves to any members of the media that might be present to begin to foster a relationship/be seen as a resource.
4. Observers wear something (e.g., lapel pin, sticker or button) that identifies them as League members.
5. Observers should arrange to receive the meeting agenda in advance – to verify the availability of the agenda and be familiar with the current business items.

For Retaining Observers

1. Show observers that they are appreciated. Let them know how valuable their work is – how their efforts are making a difference. When possible, acknowledge them publicly at League events and in publications.
2. Have fun! Consider having some social component to your observer program (e.g., an annual breakfast or quarterly meetings). Don’t just make your program about reports and deadlines.
3. Make reporting easy. No one likes doing paperwork. Make forms as user-friendly as possible. A sample check-off form is available in Appendix A.
4. Be flexible. People are very busy and have numerous commitments. If they can’t attend a particular meeting, perhaps they could watch and report on a broadcast of the meeting on public access television. Or, perhaps the League can provide additional support to its observers. At least one League offers to pay for any babysitting fees that its observers incur while attending meetings!

Mechanics of an Observer Program



KNOWING THE LAW

It is critical to understand the laws that govern public access before establishing an observer program.

Three major pieces of federal legislation codify the public's right to know. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) formally established a presumption that records in the possession of agencies and departments of the executive branch of the U.S. government are accessible to the people. The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and the Government in the Sunshine Act (Sunshine Act) are the federal open meeting laws. The Sunshine Act and its state-level equivalents are the most relevant to observer programs.

State governments, and in some cases local government entities, have followed the federal government and established their own open meeting acts/regulations. In most cases these mirror the federal law. But, state and local Leagues should review the laws in their respective jurisdictions to understand the specific provisions or rules that apply to the agency or office they plan to observe. This information is generally available on state legislative Web sites or through the state attorney general's office. Many state Leagues also have publications/information about state sunshine laws.

Passed in 1976, the Sunshine Act (5 U.S.C. § 552(b)), with some exceptions, provides that "every portion of every meeting of an agency shall be open to public observation." The statute defines an "agency" as an entity "headed by a collegial body composed of two or more individual members, a majority of whom are

appointed to such position by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, and any subdivision thereof authorized to act on behalf of the agency."

There are 10 specific exemptions for categories of information that do not need to be disclosed or deliberated in open meetings. Agencies do not disclose matters—

1. Authorized under Executive Order to be kept secret in the interests of national defense or foreign policy
2. Related solely to internal personnel rules and practices of an agency
3. Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute
4. Involving privileged or confidential trade secrets and commercial or financial information obtained from a person
5. Involved in accusing any person of a crime or censuring any person
6. Involving personal information whose disclosure would constitute an invasion of personal privacy
7. Related to certain investigatory records compiled for law enforcement purposes
8. Contained in, or related to, examination, operating, or condition reports prepared for or used by an agency responsible for regulation or supervision of financial institutions
9. The premature disclosure of which would be likely to significantly endanger the stability of any financial institution or significantly frustrate implementation of a proposed agency action
10. Specifically concerning the agency's issuance of a subpoena or participation in a civil action or proceeding.

The Sunshine Act also prescribes specific procedures that agencies must follow in announcing and changing meetings, closing meetings, and withholding substantive information regarding meetings. It delineates procedures for keeping minutes and making them available to the public. And, it outlines enforcement mechanisms (i.e., action through the federal courts) that members of the public can employ. The full text of the Sunshine Act is available at www.usdoj.gov/oip/gisastat.pdf.

As with almost all legislation, the Sunshine Act is not without critics or controversy. Some believe that the “collegial” nature of agencies or offices is damaged when discussions are recorded and public; people become more guarded in what is said or done. There is some ambiguity about what constitutes a meeting. Newer communication methods such as conference calls and e-mail further exacerbate this ambiguity. And, of course, how exceptions are applied is a perennial concern. All of which underscore the critical need for “watchdogs” like citizen observers.

Leagues Not Only Monitor the Law But Help to Create It

The League of Women Voters of Oakland (CA), having crafted and advocated for the passage of a local sunshine ordinance in 1997, is still working to ensure that the public has access to governmental records and meetings. Education and training are always prime means to ensure that regulations are enforced and upheld. The League is marking the local ordinance’s 10th anniversary by doing its own education and outreach about the importance of open government.

SETTING OBSERVER PROGRAM GOALS

Organizations always wish that they had more volunteers to do the hands-on work of the organization. Observer programs are no exception. According to local Leagues that currently have observer programs, one of the greatest challenges is recruiting

observers. Therefore, it is very important that Leagues establish clear goals for their observer programs to ensure that they get the biggest return on the investment of their most precious resource: their members’ time.

It is also critical that Leagues understand what they want to accomplish with the program. Individuals want to see success—want to know that their efforts are making a difference. There should be common understanding about what a successful program looks like and hopes to achieve. This will help to retain observers as well as keep the program strong.

There are three main areas that Leagues should consider when establishing their goals: (1) What agencies or offices will it monitor; (2) What types of information will observers be monitoring; and (3) What will be done with the information collected? Some suggestions about how to approach each are offered below.

What Agencies or Offices Should the League Observe?

League volunteers observe a myriad of meetings—city/town council, county commissioners, school committee, zoning/planning board, and others. As many observer programs involve less than 10 members, it is impossible for an individual League to monitor every office or agency within its jurisdiction. Instead Leagues must choose which agencies or offices they will observe; they must prioritize their efforts. One way to do this is to employ questions similar to those that are used to help focus a League’s legislative or programmatic work:

- Where can the League have the most impact—on what issue or office/agency?
- Is there an office or agency that is of particular concern (e.g., some local scandal)?
- What office or agency has jurisdiction over the issues that are considered the organization’s areas of expertise or strength (e.g., voting systems)?
- What issues have high member interest and what office or agency has jurisdiction over them?
- What is the “hottest” issue in the community and where (through what office or agency) will it be resolved?

- Does a volunteer observer have a particular interest or strength that can be utilized?
- Where would the League’s impact be most visible?
- Where is the climate “ripe” for change or input?

By answering these questions, Leagues should be able to see where to concentrate their observers (e.g., on city/town council, school committee or zoning/planning board meetings, etc.).

What Issues Will the League Be Observing/Monitoring?

The next step is to outline what the observers will be monitoring. Sample reporting forms are available in Appendix A. There are two broad categories of information that an observer can collect: (1) process and protocol and (2) content.

Process and protocol encompass several components:

- *Who is there?* Are the members of the board, commission, or agency present? Is appropriate staff present? Are members of the media present? Are members of the public present?
- *How is the meeting being conducted?* Was the meeting announced in advance? Was the agenda available in advance of the meeting? Is the agenda being followed? Are the proceedings being conducted in a professional manner? Are items being discussed—or do decisions appear to be “cut and dried”? Is there adequate opportunity for public input? What is the overall tone or atmosphere?
- *Where is the meeting being conducted?* Is the venue accessible? Can the proceedings be heard? Can the space accommodate members of the public?

The second set of information relates to the agenda items themselves. What issues are being discussed? Did they approve some action? If so, does it relate to any of the League’s priorities or positions?

Both sets of information are important as they inform the League about where possible follow-up action is needed. This action may be as simple as a letter to the agency itself suggesting that a larger venue be secured for future meetings or as complex as working with a

media partner to monitor how an agency handles a “hot button” issue. Whatever the outcome, the information gathered is very valuable.

In most cases, more information is better. However, it is important to be realistic when establishing any internal reporting protocols. Observers will want to be able to provide information to League leaders easily and

Coordinating an Observer Program

Depending on the size of a League’s observer program, League leaders may want to designate a specific observer program coordinator. This removes some of the burden of administering a program from League leaders, who have other duties. It also empowers a specific individual to provide the observer program (and more importantly its observers) with the attention and care it needs to succeed.

In this sample job description, a coordinator:

- Directs the activities of the League’s observers at meetings of public offices/agencies;
- Funnel the information from observer reports to League leadership (for possible action, sharing with community, etc.);
- Leads observer recruitment efforts;
- Trains and advises observers;
- Reviews guidelines, reporting forms and letters used in the observer program to make sure they are current;
- Provides observers with a copy of the organization’s public policy positions;
- Provides observers with the necessary tools (e.g., reporting forms, League pin/badge, information about local open meeting regulations, etc.);
- Recommends to the League leadership which specific offices or agencies should be observed;
- Reviews observer reports and makes recommendations to the League leadership about possible follow-up action;
- Assists with the action (i.e., writing a media release) when appropriate;
- Promotes the organization and increases its visibility through the program.

Adapted from a job description in Observer’s Manual, a publication of the LWV of the Greater Dayton Area (OH).

quickly. Some Leagues have discovered that a simple “check-off” form is sufficient. Others ask for more information. In addition to not overwhelming observers, it is equally important not to overwhelm the League leaders who will receive the information. Observers want to know that their efforts mean something—that their reports are being read in a timely manner. League leaders should give careful thought to what is too much information for them to process.

What Will Be Done with the Information Collected?

Knowing what will be done with the information is key to knowing what information to collect. The next section of this guide discusses in detail some internal and external options for sharing what the observers learn. While different situations will require different actions, there should be some consistent venue for sharing the information collected—e.g., a quarterly or semiannual public meeting, a column in a local newspaper, articles in the monthly League newsletter or updates on the League’s Web site. This will help to elevate the observer program within the organization and the community as well as inform members (and others who may see the information) about local government issues. It also is a tangible way for observers to see that their efforts are important and appreciated.

WORKING WITH THOSE BEING OBSERVED

While it is assumed that all observers will be courteous at meetings, the mere presence of an observer (no matter how polite or respectful) might be perceived in a negative light by the presiding officials. It is very important for observers to communicate their role to the members of the office or agency that they are observing. Observers are there to watch the proceedings; they are not there because something is assumed to be wrong or, if something is, to place blame. They are there to learn what is happening. They are there to ensure that the public’s right to know is being honored and protected and, in some cases, to offer expertise on a given subject.

“As a member of the Observer Corps, I take my knitting to County Commissioners meetings, wearing my League button proudly. The commissioners call me Madame LaFarge, but they take my presence seriously. Our local League drafted a code of ethics, which the County Commissioners adopted last year. This was an important step in building a stronger community.”

—Mary Gilroy, LWV of Pikes Peak Region (CO)

As was suggested earlier, it is useful for the League leadership to send a letter to the office or agency that is going to be observed. It should introduce the observer as well as the observer program. It is also helpful for observers to introduce themselves at meetings and to wear something (e.g., lapel pin or sticker) that identifies them as League members.

Over time, many Leagues have won the trust and respect of local officials—especially those being observed. Some League observers have become valued resources, being called upon for information or testimony. In some communities, officials have become League members. And, in other instances, League members have been appointed to boards/commissions or have sought elected office themselves. In McLean County, IL, two League observers have gone on to serve as town mayors!

While becoming “friends” with government officials should not be the goal of an observer program, establishing good communication between the League and the government offices and agencies should be a goal. Doing so will have a positive impact on the organization, local government and the wider community.

Sharing What Is Observed



While attending and observing governmental meetings is useful, sharing what is observed is where observer programs can have their greatest impact. However, Leagues that have established observer programs indicate that this aspect of the program is sometimes overlooked or not given the attention it deserves. Therefore, it is important to plan in advance, and think through and commit to sharing what observers learn as widely as possible. This section contains some ideas and opportunities for sharing observer findings within the League and with the larger community.

INTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES

There are numerous existing mechanisms through which an observer program can be shared with League members. Remember that not only can “observations” be shared, but the program itself (and its need for resources—both human and financial) can and should be promoted!

- Run a column or feature in the League’s newsletter.
- Dedicate a section of the League’s Web site to observer program findings/reports.
- Send out an e-mail blast to members when there is breaking news from a meeting, or when the League has had some success.
- Weave observer experiences into regular League meetings or hold a meeting specifically dedicated to reporting on observer outcomes.
- Highlight the observers and their work at the League’s annual meeting.

- Highlight the observers and their work in your fundraising appeals.
- Issue a call to action when a problem is identified.

Successful Observer Program Events

The LWV of Montgomery County (IN) holds an annual catered dinner meeting at which observers report on the actions/activities of the boards that they have observed. The program for the meeting is a packet that includes (for each board, commission or council observed) the names of the board members, when the board meets, and its official responsibilities. According to League President Gail Pebworth, “This evening is like a semester course in local government.”

Twice each year, the LWV of Salina (KS) holds a breakfast event to share what the observers have learned. According to past League President Kaye Crawford, “Everyone has fun. It’s important to keep observing fun and interesting.”

The LWV of Champaign County (IL) holds two meetings each year, at which the League’s observers who monitor some 28 different agencies and offices in the county, report on their experiences and findings. One meeting is even broadcast on their community access television station. The League also recently began spotlighting the observers themselves in its *Voter*. They want League members to know who is helping to keep their community healthy and strong by participating in their observer program.

EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES

Beyond recruiting individuals to serve as observers, observer programs offer opportunities for public engagement and citizen education, the cornerstones of the League’s mission. Most members of the public are unaware that observer programs exist. It is critical to raise their awareness about the existence of these programs, why they are important and, when possible, how they can help to make a difference (e.g., call to action, invitation to join). There are a variety of ways to do that.

Add-Ons to “Internal Opportunities”

Many of the opportunities outlined above could easily be adjusted to have a more “external” component. For example, if the League runs an observer program column in its newsletter, then think about expanding the newsletter’s mailing list. Include some of the elected officials that are being observed, or send it to other organizations in the community that share the League’s passion for good government and/or some of the specific issues referenced in the column.

Any public League event could have an observer program component. What could be more engaging than a personal story from the “local government trenches” to kick off a meeting and introduce the public to community issues and the League’s work?

E-mail blasts do not cost the organization anything. Disseminate updates, success stories and calls to action via e-mail to as wide a group as possible.

Most Leagues create a *Know Your Government* publication. Be sure to include information about the various offices and agencies, when they meet, and how the public can participate. Information about the League’s observer program also could be included—especially an invitation for individuals to become observers.

Media Outreach

Perhaps the single most effective public outreach mechanism is working with the media. This can take many forms.

- Leagues may issue press releases on some finding/problem identified by their observers.
- Leagues may submit an op-ed or letter to the editor that ties their observer efforts to stories about local government happenings.
- Leagues can draw attention to the larger issue of openness in government by utilizing LWVUS press statements or using external “hooks,” such as Sunshine Week.
- Leagues may meet with the editorial boards of the newspapers in their community to talk about their observer programs and its findings.
- Leagues may schedule a “deskside chat” with a reporter to discuss the larger themes of openness in government. Leagues should be prepared to provide local details, such as examples of local government getting it right or wrong, that can be helpful to creating a specific story.
- Leagues also may establish themselves as a resource or expert source for individual reporters to call when news is breaking.
- Leagues may try to get a column in a local newspaper, where they can regularly share observations, trends and other information with the public.
- Leagues may pursue some “less traditional” media outlets, such as on-line publications, or may even consider starting their own blog about local government issues.

While working with the media will almost guarantee that new public attention is brought to the issues identified by a League’s observer program, it is a labor intensive endeavor. Reporters are flooded with calls and e-mails from a range of groups and individuals—all of whom are pitching a story. To help ensure that a League’s efforts result in the publication of a story, there are some best practices that Leagues can employ.

Most importantly, League leaders should *build relationships* with individual members of the press. Find out what reporters work the “local government beat,” and let them know about the League’s interests and work. Let them know that from time to time the League will be issuing releases, and also encourage them to use the League as a resource. These reporters are likely to be

the same ones who attend the governmental meetings that observers are monitoring. Encourage observers to introduce themselves to the press as a way to further build these relationships.

Because reporters receive so many news releases via e-mail and fax, it is important that Leagues personally follow up with reporters. *Persistence* is critical to getting a story run or event covered. Reporters may need to be contacted multiple times (and in multiple ways—e-mail, phone, fax) to get results. See Appendix B for a comprehensive list of tips for working with the media.

Whatever external opportunities a League pursues, there are some common messages or themes that should be combined with whatever “new information” (e.g., lapses in protocol at city council meetings, closed door decision of the school board to adopt a new policy, League’s suggestion adopted by the zoning board) is being presented to the public. Such messages include:

1. *Observer programs benefit the entire community.* Government transparency is vital to a healthy democracy. And, through its observer program, the League is helping to keep the community healthy, vibrant and strong.
2. *The League is nonpartisan, respected and trusted.* For more than 87 years, the League has been working to protect the public’s right to know. The organization is called upon by elected officials and others for its expertise in this area as well as its knowledge of local issues.
3. *The League is an all-volunteer organization.* The organization does not have “professional” or paid observers. These efforts are truly grassroots and open to all members of the public.

Engagement of Public Officials

Leagues may want to make special efforts to engage elected officials on the topic of transparency. These efforts can take many forms depending upon the specific situation in a community and how successful the League has been in building relationships with those in local government.

Successful Outreach Efforts

The LWV of Mountain Lakes (NJ) sends an observer to every borough council and board of education meeting, and publishes the observer reports monthly. It is the number-one reason people join their League!

In 2005, the LWV of Michigan published its fourth *Report Card: Citizen Access to Government in Michigan*. Using a series of nine benchmarks, including “making the government’s workings and decisions visible and accessible to all who wish to participate in democratic self-government,” they evaluated the performance of state government. This publication has helped the League bring attention to some of the threats to citizen access to government in Michigan.

At a minimum, Leagues may consider sharing their observer program findings (both positive and negative) with the officials being observed as well as any appropriate “oversight” office. If there are specific issues that have arisen (e.g., venue is not accessible, agenda not distributed), then the League could try to meet with the “offending” office. Besides discussing the issue, the League could offer to assist in finding and implementing a solution.

Even if there are no “problems,” a face-to-face meeting is still a useful endeavor. It can be a time to underscore the commonalities in the League’s work and that of the elected officials—serving the larger community. The League can also establish itself as a resource/expert in the area of openness in government.

League members may try to employ the help of elected officials in elevating the importance of sunshine in government. Ask officials to acknowledge the need for government transparency through a symbolic gesture, such as issuing a proclamation for Sunshine Week, or through more substantive means, such as mandating training on sunshine laws for all government employees. Some Leagues even perform the training (or produce informational packets) about sunshine laws for newly elected or appointed officials themselves. It should not be assumed that they will get this information elsewhere!

Of course, Leagues can lobby officials as appropriate regarding local legislative and executive branch decisions that may be restricting access to information and meetings. Leagues may even consider engaging candidates for office on this topic by including a question about openness in government in Voters' Guides or at candidate debates.

Public Education Efforts

Public education is the hallmark of League. In addition to any of their "routine" public education efforts, Leagues may choose to undertake new programs depending on their observations/findings.

- Hold community forums on the topic of openness in government. Feature expert panelists such as a professor, newspaper reporter or editor, League observer, and local elected official. These could be held in partnership with other organizations to help defray any costs and expand the potential audience pool.
- Create a publication of observer experiences or findings. Distribute it as widely as possible.
- Take advantage of opportunities around Sunshine Week to promote the observer program, its findings and successes. This might include working with freedom of information groups to cosponsor an event or co-author an op-ed.
- Work with local civics/social studies teachers to draw attention to this topic. League observers could address classes. Some Leagues have had success in using student observers!
- Share this publication with other community organizations.

Public Officials Take Notice

The LWV of Saratoga County (NY) understands the value of communicating with public officials. After a meeting of the Board of Supervisors, a member of its observer corps asked the chairperson why the minutes of the Board's meetings were not posted on the county's Web site. He agreed that they should, and soon they were!

When surveyed, the LWV of Las Cruces (NM) stated that the biggest success of its observer program was that elected officials are reading the *League Voter*. How do they know that they are reading it? Officials have let them know when an observer report is inaccurate!

"Membership quickly grew to about 100 women, and the League's impact was soon felt in town, as the women fanned out to serve as observers on virtually every town committee. 'There were a lot of old-timers and they were used to running the town.' said Howard [the LWV of Sudbury's first president]. 'Here were all these new upstarts, but I think we opened eyes to areas that needed attention.'"

—Excerpted from the *Sudbury (MA) Town Crier* (February 21, 2007) on the occasion of the LWV of Sudbury's 50th anniversary.

Organizational Benefits from Having an Observer Program



While the primary reason for creating and maintaining an observer program is to promote and ensure a healthy democracy, there are numerous ancillary benefits for Leagues that have these programs. Many of these benefits have been noted throughout this guide and are underscored by the League success stories included in this publication.

Like so many of the projects and programs that Leagues undertake, observer programs are not insular. They connect with other League activities and events and, most importantly, they connect the League with the larger community. Taking advantage of these connections to increase the League's membership, resources and visibility is just as critical to the organization's mission as the observer program's primary goal of protecting the public's right to know.

The League's standard of study, education and community engagement coupled with the organization's stellar record of nonpartisanship and fairness provides the LWV with a unique opportunity to improve and strengthen communities. Reminding the larger community of the organization's efforts (as well as its credentials) helps to ensure the League's continued success.

Depending on the type of observer program that a League establishes, there are four areas of potential benefit or growth.

1. Existing members will become more engaged.

- By hearing regularly through observer reports about what is happening at local government

meetings, members will feel "in the know" and part of something larger; this makes them more likely to remain supportive (financially and otherwise) of the organization.

- An observer program lets members see how the organization's mission is being fulfilled in a concrete, measurable way. Besides strengthening their connection to the organization, this gives members something easy and specific to showcase when asking potential members to join.
 - Members are provided with specific opportunities to get involved with the League through the observer program. These are discrete, flexible tasks that can benefit them individually as well as the League. It brings individuals in contact with community leaders and provides them with opportunities to "be noticed."
- ## 2. The League will increase its community ties.
- Observer programs help to strengthen communication (and therefore relationships) between the League and local government officials/agencies.
 - By being present at government meetings, Leagues can identify larger community issues, concerns or trends that can help to inform or shape future League programs/work.
 - Observer programs can help foster relationships with other community organizations or allied groups. Government transparency is a unifying issue; organizations from all parts of the political spectrum believe it is vital to the health of our democracy.

3. The League will become more visible.

- Simply by having observers present at public meetings (especially if observers wear a League button or name badge), the League's visibility increases. If some of the suggested "external opportunities" described in the previous section (or similar ones) are pursued, visibility is further increased. The more visible the organization is, the more likely individuals will understand the League's mission and want to support it by joining or giving a donation.
- League observers become experts in local government. They are a tremendous resource for local media. With some persistence and attention to relationship-building, the League will become a "go to" source for local media. This will ensure consistent and regular coverage in local newspapers, an invaluable commodity.

4. New members will join the League.

- Because of the visibility, the renewed enthusiasm of existing members and new ties to the community, it is likely that new members will join the League. However, it is critical to remember that a story in the newspaper may pique interest in the organization, but in most cases, a person will JOIN only when personally asked to do so.
- Remember that observing and recruiting are not exclusive of one another. While observers need to be tactful about doing so at meetings, observers can also be membership ambassadors—talking about their experience with the League to potential members, providing additional information about the organization, and even carrying a membership brochure to every government meeting.

- A strong observer program is representative of an organization that is focused. Given the myriad of issues that the League works on, it can be hard for non-members to understand what the organization does. Having an established program, like an observer corps, helps to reinforce the organization's niche as a "good government" group, and makes it more accessible to non-members.

The LWV of Greater Lafayette (IN), recognizing that the League's strength is in understanding and engaging citizens in government, decided to focus its efforts for 2002-2003 on a program called "Government of the People." Their year-long agenda started in the fall with an evaluation of the election process and an opportunity for residents to meet the newly elected officials.

There were two additional meetings with legislators later in the year. League members provided "an insider's view" before or after a select number of regularly scheduled governmental meetings, such as city council meetings or a meeting of the county commissioners. In addition, the LWV of Greater Lafayette had "Insider Escorts" who were available to attend other government meetings, if a resident requested it. These efforts had several positive results for the League:

- The League was focused on a cohesive program agenda.
- Membership increased! They gained 17 new members.
- They "added-on" a fundraising element—a community events calendar that was sold in local stores—which increased the League's visibility and produced additional funds.

Other Sunshine Mechanisms



Observer programs are just one way in which Leagues and other community organizations can strive to protect the public's right to know. The following is a sampling of other activities that can be pursued to promote government transparency.

Open Meetings

While having observers present at meetings is the most effective type of observer program, there are other means by which Leagues can monitor the activities of governmental offices and agencies. League members can watch and report on local meetings that are broadcast on government or public access stations. (In fact, Leagues can advocate for the broadcast of such meetings, if that is not already occurring.) League members can monitor government Web sites to see if information, such as agendas and minutes, are being posted. Observations from this "alternative" monitoring can be collected just as the in-person observation reports are. They, too, are valuable and informative.

Open Records

The other "component" of sunshine is open records. There are two main methods for monitoring the accessibility of public documents.

1. Any individual can make a *Freedom of Information (FOI) request* at any level of government. To start, research what information you want to receive and where (i.e., in what agency or office) it is located. It is important to understand how to file an FOI request in your state or locality. The National

Freedom of Information Coalition (www.nfoic.org) is a clearinghouse for information on state laws and how to use them. This process can be used to learn more about a given issue or simply to "test" the open records process within an agency or office.

2. Another way to learn about how freedom of information regulations are being employed in a community is to conduct an *FOI audit*. Very simply, this is a coordinated FOI request, in which multiple requestors (in the same locality or in different ones) visit pre-selected government offices, ask for copies of a particular public document and then record how well the agency responds. Journalists commonly undertake these, and the Society of Professional Journalists (www.spj.org) has a toolkit about how to conduct an FOI audit.

In March 2005, the League of Women Voters of Oakland (CA) released the results of a records-request audit that the League had conducted. About 70 percent of the time, League members were successful when asking for a copy of or permission to see a specific public document. However, when a group of students at Oakland's Fremont High School made some identical requests, their success rate was only about 50 percent! The League issued a media release about their findings and asked the city attorney to respond.

Accessing Local Government

Without some basic level of understanding about how local government functions, some members of the public can feel too intimidated to participate in the process. There are two public education components that Leagues can undertake to empower citizens to participate.

1. Leagues can provide information about local government through publications like *Know Your Community*. These booklets often have listings of government offices and agencies as well as contact information for them and some description of their duties or jurisdiction. These publications might also include general information about local sunshine ordinances and/or how citizens can participate in local government.
2. Leagues can encourage the citizens of their community to visit city/town hall and take a tour to learn more about how their local government works. *Tours of city or town halls* are easy to schedule and are a great way to symbolize openness in government. League members may even serve as the guides.

Other Monitoring Projects

Leagues may consider participating in or initiating other types of monitoring projects. Like the observer programs described in this publication, these efforts have the dual impact of improving the health of our democracy as well as bringing new opportunities to Leagues and the observers involved. Three such programs are:

1. *Citizen-Centric Government*

The Association of Government Accountants (AGA) has launched the Citizen-Centric Government Reporting Initiative, an effort to encourage governments to produce and publish an annual “state of the government” report. The reports are designed to provide citizens with basic information about the financial condition and performance of their local government. AGA is working with various civic groups as well as its

own chapters to promote this project among local government officials. More information is available at www.agacgfm.org/citizen/.

2. *Court Observation programs*

Just as this guide makes suggestions about how to monitor government offices or agencies, similar resources are available for observing court proceedings. Other organizations, such as Council for Court Excellence (www.courtexcellence.org) and Judicial Watch (www.judicialwatch.org), have established court observation programs, which may be of interest to Leagues. Some Leagues have these programs as well.

3. *Election Observers*

Another monitoring role that some Leagues take on is serving as election observers or monitors on Election Day. These programs vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For example, in 2003, the LWV of Holland Area (MI) was honored for its efforts to survey polling places to check their physical and attitudinal accessibility for those with disabilities. Other Leagues work with election officials to monitor how well local election laws are implemented on Election Day.

Appendix A

SAMPLE REPORTING FORMS

LWV of Eden Area (CA)—Observer’s Report

Agency _____ Date: _____

FEATURE EVALUATED	YES	NO	COMMENTS
• Did meeting start on time?			
• Were all members present?			
• Were members attentive?			
• Did the members appear to have done their “homework?”			
• Were members courteous to each other and the public?			
• Were Brown Act requirements followed?			
- agenda sent/posted 72 hrs before?			
- agenda items clearly described what was to be discussed?			
- adequate opportunity for public input?			
- was there the appearance that some action items were discussed in closed rather than in open session?			
• Was background information available to public?			

• Were any issues on the agenda relevant to any LWV state or local positions or programs? _____

• Do you recommend local League action on any of these issues? Yes ___ No ___ If “yes” what action do you recommend? _____

• Other Concerns: _____

Observer: _____ Date Submitted: _____

Report should be submitted to President or Secretary before next LWVEA Board Meeting.

Please attach agency’s agenda, if possible. Thank you.

LWV of the Greater Dayton Area (OH)—Observer’s Report

Meeting attended _____ Date _____

Your name _____

Type of meeting (circle one)

Regular Special Public Hearing Exec session

Members absent

0—1 2—3 3—4 5 or more

Staff present

0—1 2—3 3—4 5 or more

(Type)

City Manager Administrator Superintendent Treasurer

Legal officer Police/safety Other

Media coverage?

Yes No

Audience

Under 5 6—12 13—20 over 20

Students present Special interests present

Items approved?

(attach agenda and check those items approved)

Facilities (circle those that apply)

Big enough well lit handicapped access could hear
 Could see officials clean

Proceedings

Meeting opened with prayer? Yes No

Denomination? _____

Presiding officer have meeting under control? Yes No

Officials attentive/alert? Yes No

Adequate discussion of issues? Yes No

Decisions “cut and dried”? Yes No

Time for public comment? Yes No

Public comment encouraged? Yes No

Visitors treated with respect? Yes No

Other observations: _____

Appendix B

GENERAL TIPS ON WORKING WITH THE MEDIA/DOING PUBLIC OUTREACH

Local Leagues conduct media outreach all the time. Proactive media outreach is critically important to getting coverage. One of the most important (and ongoing) duties of a League leader is to foster relationships with members of the local media. The following tips on working with the media will help you to identify opportunities, develop and deliver your pitch, and follow up successfully. These tips can help to strengthen your media outreach efforts and, consequently, strengthen results.

According to some researchers, people need to hear the same message as many as seven times before it sinks in. With this in mind, state and local Leagues alike can have an opportunity to increase awareness about the League's work simply by thinking about ways to deliver concise and consistent messages about the organization.

Every time you have an opportunity to speak about the League, it is important to underscore the value of the organization and how it serves the community. It is also helpful to imagine every opportunity as one that will grow the organization. Remember to talk about the members who do the hands-on work of safeguarding democracy, and always include an invitation for others to join the League. This might not always be obvious or intuitive, but these points can be woven into interviews, media releases, speaking engagements, etc.

League Observer Program Publicized

"Anyone who wants to learn more about the way Hingham is run can join the Hingham League of Women Voters and be a part of the newly activated Observer Corps. To learn more about the Corps contact [contact information]. The Observer Corps is an excellent way for new members to learn about local issues and share information with League members through newsletter articles and League meetings. Observers' reports are factual and non-judgmental, present various sides of an issue and are intended to help members be well-informed before making any decisions concerning the possible League or individual action. Some of the town committees to be observed are the Board of Selectman, School Committee, Planning Board, Advisory Committee and others may be added, based on interest."

Excerpted from The Hingham (MA) Journal (October 5, 2006)

To help you prepare for any outreach opportunity (including working with the media), there are three questions you should answer:

- 1) *What's my goal?* What do I want to accomplish in this communication? Though you may not be used to writing down and outlining your goals, it's a great exercise to practice. For any outreach opportunity (large or small) that you have, you want to have a clear goal established for yourself going into it.
- 2) *Who is my audience and what do they care most about?* Think about your audience. What issues are important to them? How can you make your points resonate with them most?

- 3) *What is my messaging going to focus on?* Once your goal and target audience are determined, you need to decide what points to focus on. There are three phases to sharing a message: sharing knowledge; building will (i.e., making a connection); and spurring the reader/listener to action. Review your goal and audience, and determine how you can most effectively accomplish these three steps.

Below are tips for utilizing the four main mechanisms for getting media coverage: press releases and media advisories, op-eds and letters to the editor, editorial board meetings, and media interviews.

PRESS RELEASES AND MEDIA ADVISORIES

These are two methods to get out information about what your League is doing. Both provide succinct and pertinent information about your event or issue in an easy-to-read format. Media advisories are an effective way of encouraging media to attend your event. Unlike a press release, that will include background information and quotes, a media advisory just provides the Who, What, Where, When, Why of the event. It is absolutely vital that you include contact information on any materials you send to the press. Include your phone number, e-mail address and Web site address, especially if you're sending materials electronically.

While it may seem important to get the release out to as many media outlets as possible, there really is a great deal of importance placed on providing a personal touch. Taking the time to write a quick personal note to reporters, especially if you've seen their writing on your League's issues or have met them in the past, makes a huge difference. Also, remember that members of the press often set their calendars at the last minute; even if you send the release out a week ahead of time, be sure to follow up the day before the event to remind them. Even then they may not commit—but this is very normal!

Here are some additional tips to remember as you draft a release or advisory:

- **Always make your most important point at the top.** Reporters may only read the first paragraph before deciding if it's worth it to give you a call or include your League in a story.
- **Include a good quote.** Why should they care? How does this relate to other issues affecting the community?
- **Keep things short.** All information should fit on one page.
- **Do not send press materials as attachments.** Paste the information right into the body of your e-mail.
- **Call at the right time.** Most reporters have story deadlines of 3 or 4 pm, so calling in the mid-morning is usually best. In a follow-up call you just want to reiterate why it's important that they attend your event. Keep it short and friendly, and offer to resend the information!

OP-EDS AND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Opinion pieces (or op-eds) and letters to the editor are mechanisms for Leagues to get their opinions printed. These are generally short, no more than 250 words, and use very simple, clear, concise language that will grab attention. Op-eds and letters to the editor serve as great opportunities to gain coverage after an event has already happened.

Op-eds

Op-ed is an abbreviation for "opposite the editorial page" and can denote both the page itself and the opinion pieces that a newspaper publishes on the page facing the editorial page. Newspapers generally have a stable of op-ed columnists and regular contributors but most will also print op-eds written by outside authors. Sometimes a newspaper will call upon a local community group (such as the League) to write an opinion piece on a certain issue. Op-eds are often selected for their unique or fresh perspective on a recent event or news story. Opinion pages are generally put together a few days ahead of time, so be sure to submit it early enough in advance.

Simply put, op-eds express the opinion of the author on a particular issue, and can offer an excellent opportunity for you to advance your messages. The following are some tips for writing and submitting an op-ed that will increase your chances of getting published.

- When drafting your op-ed, make sure that you are familiar with the types of pieces that are generally published in the paper and be sure to focus on the topic's significance to the community.
- An op-ed is not the best forum to promote an upcoming local event.
- Once you have confirmed the rules for submitting a piece to the paper (word counts, methods of submission and other factors vary depending on the outlet), submit one for consideration and be sure to follow up after a couple days.
- If it has not been accepted, ask if there are any adjustments that you might make to increase its chances of being published.

Letters to the Editor

Writing a letter to the editor is one of the best ways to respond to articles, editorials or op-eds published in your local paper. You should be prepared to submit a letter to amplify a positive editorial or highlight key information left out of an article.

The key to getting your letter published is making sure that it is timely. Ideally, you would submit a letter to the editor within 24 hours after the piece you're responding to appeared. They must include your full contact information and League title. The newspaper often will verify the authenticity of the submission with a follow-up phone call.

When you submit a letter to the editor, call the opinion page office and ask them who to send it to, what their submission requirements are, and if the paper is likely to run the piece. They will likely give you an honest answer. If they make edits to your letter, they may ask for your approval.

EDITORIAL BOARD MEETINGS

Editorial board meetings generally involve one or more people from your organization and three or more writers for the opinions section of a newspaper. They're usually not on issues of immediate news importance, but ongoing issues that are of interest to the community or the editorial board itself. They are conversations, usually about an hour, and sometimes result in an opinion piece being written. The editorial board members will have questions, but you should also have talking points prepared to make your case.

The best way to set these up is to call the opinion page office, feel out their interest and find out who the best contact person is. If you do get a meeting, BE SURE to do your research! Look through archives of the paper online, and read through any opinion pieces that have been written on the issue. This will give you a sense of the views of the board ahead of time, and you'll be prepared for what questions are coming.

MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Issuing press releases or fostering relationships with members of the media (print, television and radio) will hopefully result in your League being called for interviews. Below are some pointers to help you maximize these opportunities.

- **Be prepared and do your research:** The more knowledge you have, the more prepared you will be. There are several questions you want answered before the interview — some to consider are:
 - What's the interview about?
 - What's your organization's role in the piece being proposed?
 - What is the interview format?
 - What outlet is it for? If it is not one you are familiar with, ask about their format: Is it a weekly, a daily, a conservative/liberal radio talk show?

- **Remember who you are talking to when you are being interviewed:** You are talking to the audience that reads the story or sees it on TV. You are not talking to the reporter who is interviewing you.
- **Speak up!** If an interviewer misstates something or has a fact wrong, make a correction politely.
- **Be concise.** Keep your answers between 10-20 seconds.
- **Repeat, Repeat, Repeat.** Try your best to repeat the information that is most important and relevant (Web site address, organization name and location, contact information, etc.).
- **Have a fact sheet handy.** To the extent possible, always have current, up-to-date information available about the League and its work. You can refer to it also to help stay “on message.”
- **Tell a story.** People remember points much more if they are illustrated with a story. By forming a good story as part of your presentation, your delivery skills will automatically improve as well.
- **Know what you want to say in advance.** Your expertise might enable you to discuss endless aspects about the League’s work but only one, maybe two, points will make it into a story and even then a consumer of the story may only remember bits and pieces. Don’t let an audience member or a journalist decide what the most important point is on this issue. Select one or two key points to make and make them well.
- **Be calm and confident.** You may be nervous, but the most important thing is to be calm and confident. Feel free to keep notes in front of you during a phone or radio interview.
- **Use numbers, but sparingly.** Memorize one or two precise statistics that will give weight to your messages and bring your information to life.
- **Be honest! Don’t stretch the truth.** If you don’t know the answer, say so and suggest an alternative source.
- **Provide other sources that will back you up.** Independent experts can help to provide support for your position.
- **Everything is on the record.** Don’t give in to the temptation to tell the reporter something “off the record.” If you say it aloud, or put it in an e-mail, assume that it will appear in the reporter’s story.
- **Stay calm.** Getting flustered can convey a host of things—none positive! Prepare in advance, stick to your messages and you’ll ace any interview.

The following tips will help you deliver your messages effectively:

- **Collect your thoughts.** If a journalist calls and wants to conduct an on-the-spot interview, ask if you can call back in five minutes. Use that time to gather your thoughts and review your key points.
- **Keep it simple!** Use clear language and avoid jargon. You don’t want to bore your audience or make them feel stupid.

Appendix C

RESOURCES

Just as the League of Women Voters has worked for years to promote open government at all levels, there are many other organizations that do so, too. This appendix provides a list of the key organizations working in this arena, along with their contact information. Most of these organizations have a national scope and monitor federal laws and administrative practices. Some are active in advocacy to address changes in federal law and practice. In addition, most states now have open government coalitions or freedom of information centers. These groups monitor changes in sunshine policies – both good and bad – within their state and local governments. They also provide information on how to follow state procedures correctly in order to access desired information or meetings.

Coalition of Journalists for Open Government (www.cjog.net) is an alliance of more than 30 journalism-related organizations concerned about secrecy in government and the increasing closure of public records and meetings at all levels of government. Most of the coalition partners have individual freedom of information programs. As coalition members, they share information, coordinate activities and, when appropriate, combine efforts and resources in the fight for open government.

Freedom of Information Center, housed at the University of Missouri School of Journalism (<http://foi.missouri.edu>), hosts the National Freedom of Information Coalition. The Center is the research portion of the organization. Its Web site provides: (1) information on every state's open government laws and practices; (2) comprehensive analytical information on practices of local county open government law in the state of Missouri; (3) the Open Records Survey, which is a state-by-state list of reports prepared by organizations involved in analyzing the state laws and the effective use of open records processes. The Center also has staff available to answer questions and provide training on various topics.

Marion Brechner Citizen Access Project at the University of Florida (www.citizenaccess.org) provides an online guide to state access laws and a database that allows researchers to compare and contrast the provisions of all 50 state laws.

National Freedom of Information Coalition's (www.nfoic.org) goals are to help start up state freedom of information (FOI) organizations, to initiate joint fundraising efforts with state organizations, to develop FOI programs, projects and publications that can be utilized by the member FOI organizations, and to support the states in their efforts to obtain funding for individual projects.

OpenTheGovernment.org (www.openthegovernment.org) is a coalition of journalists, consumer and good government groups, environmentalists, labor, and others focused on making government a more open process for the overall health and safety of communities across the country. Its Web site provides information on the coalition's activities and links to each of its members' information-filled Web sites. The League is a member of this coalition.

Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press is focused on providing publications on and information about public access and other First Amendment topics. Publications include the *First Amendment Handbook* and *How to Use the Federal FOI Act*. Its Web site (www.rcfp.org) posts a guide to every state's open records and meetings laws, which is called *The Open Government Guide*.

Society of Professional Journalists provides a toolkit on how to do FOI audits (www.spj.org) as well as media alerts on FOI topics. The purpose of FOI audits is to determine the extent of the gap between what public records laws say and what citizens actually experience. They are most commonly undertaken by journalists.

Sunshine Week is a national initiative to open dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information. Journalists, civic groups, libraries, schools and others interested in the public's right to know have banded together to help promote this nonpartisan effort to enlighten and empower individuals to play an active role in their government at all levels, and to give them access to information that makes their lives better and their communities stronger. More information about Sunshine Week is available at www.sunshineweek.org.

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. Membership in the League is open to men and women of all ages. With more than 87 years of experience and 850 local and state League affiliates, the LWV is one of America's most trusted grassroots organizations.

For additional information or to make a contribution, please visit www.lwv.org or contact:

League of Women Voters Education Fund

1730 M Street, NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20036
202/429-1965



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®