



THE CENTENNIAL PLAN

A ROAD-MAP FOR THE FUTURE

OUR MANDATE

As the League of Women Voters of New York State approaches the end of its first hundred years, it faces the challenge of planning for a future that its founding members could not have envisioned. From its formation in 1919 to help recently enfranchised women carry out their new responsibilities, it evolved into a unique, nonpartisan organization that is a recognized force in molding political leaders, shaping public policy and promoting informed citizen participation at all levels of government. Its tripartite model of study, education, and action is the gold standard for citizen action groups.

In the educational arena, local Leagues are at the forefront in educating citizens about salient local issues. Their voter services activities, such as candidate forums and voter guides remain a major force in educating voters about local elections.

In the advocacy arena, local Leagues enjoy both the local citizen base and the flexibility to respond quickly to matters of import to their communities. The New York State League has been a tireless advocate for campaign finance reform, ethics reform, full and meaningful transparency of government with disclosure to the public, nonpartisan redistricting reform, adoption of a unified judicial system and merit selection of judges, and protecting the integrity of the vote during New York's implementation of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

League members are frequently asked to serve on statewide commissions. Recently, League representatives served on the Commission to Promote Public Confidence in Judicial Elections (Feerick Commission) and the Citizens' Election Modernization Advisory Committee, making recommendations for New York State implementation of HAVA. The League's Legislative Director served on Governor Spitzer's transition team, where she chaired a subcommittee making recommendations for good government initiatives.

The constantly accelerating rate of change makes reevaluation of our goals and review of our methods essential to continued efficacy. In preparation for its upcoming centennial anniversary, the League has developed a road map to ensure its continued vibrancy in the 21st century.

OUR PLANNING PROCESS

The Current Operations

New York State currently has 51 local Leagues, 3 Inter-League Organizations, and 1 Member At-Large Unit. The state League office is currently staffed with a full-time Executive Director, full-time Program Director, and part-time receptionist/Secretary. The remainder of its program is implemented by an active and articulate cohort of citizen volunteers.

The Current Challenges

Women now compete with men in the workplace, leaving limited time for the volunteer activity that has always been the backbone of the League. The same conditions that pose challenges for the League make it imperative that the League survive. The world of the twenty-first century is increasingly specialized, professionalized, and factionalized. The exponential increase in information citizens are asked to digest leaves all subject to manipulation by the special interest that is able to throw the most money at a problem. The reality of globalization and national and international multi-culturalism pose particular threats for democratic institutions at the local, state, national, and international levels. At a time when information is reduced to the sound bite and mass media reigns, the League remains relevant and essential to the strength of our democratic institutions in a number of ways:

- **The League's** non-partisan nature and method of formulating positions after study of issues gives it a credibility not enjoyed by partisan or single-issue organizations. It is currently one of the organizations most trusted by our country's citizens, and this trust gives it credibility in the advocacy arena;
- **The League's** grass-roots structure and multi-issue focus give it the flexibility to identify, study, and advocate for breaking issues at all levels, from the local to the international. Thus it is able to achieve a breadth of coverage not possible for organizations limited in the scope of issues covered or areas of operation;

The League provides valuable educational services not provided by other organizations. This is especially true at the local level, where it publishes materials and conducts local forums about current local issues, and provides ongoing voter service information in the form of voters guides and candidate forums. League moderators of candidate forums remain in the eyes of both the public and candidates as the gold standard of impartiality;

- **The League** provides a mechanism for members to become politically involved in a nurturing, mentored environment, where education, careful study, and an open mind are valued and fostered and provide a backbone to the organization's mission. Few, if any, organizations foster involvement without requiring that members commit to a position on an issue or a specific point of view.

Review of Operations

Over the past year the League has conducted an analysis of current operations, looking at the strengths and weaknesses of its structure and brainstorming about ways in which this structure might be improved. As the first step in this process, a SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) was distributed to local Leagues. The second step involved a series of questions distributed to local Leagues, seeking their input about the extent to which the state League of the future should replace its volunteer staffing model with paid employees. The third step consisted of a series of workshops held around the state¹, in which we sought local League input about ways in which the LWVNYS might assist local Leagues in fulfillment of their missions and input about the direction in which the LWVNYS should move.

The SWOT Analysis

Strengths included our non-partisanship, excellent community relations and respect, excellent local leadership and programs, strong voter service. The League's on-line presence is seen as strength, although many Leagues believe improvements are necessary.

Often repeated weaknesses included the League's image as being a group of little old ladies, declining membership, insufficient individuals to assume board positions and do the work, money, and high PMP. There was some criticism of the LWVNYS for having insufficient contact with local Leagues. The LWVNYS was also criticized because its publications were not up to date and the website was a work in progress. A few Leagues voiced concern that board and off-board specialist positions were not defined and the method of selecting people to fill these positions was not defined on the website. It was suggested that the website needed to be made more user friendly and updated regularly. Some Leagues criticized the perception of the League as a liberal organization. There was some limited feeling that the League was trying to do too much and that it should concentrate on education rather than advocacy.

Opportunities included the ability to use technology, the need to develop grant-writing capability, the willingness of other organizations to co-sponsor events with the League, and the opportunity to recruit younger members through alumni associations, public relations aimed to a younger audience, and Students Inside Albany.

Threats included the fact that partisan political organizations attract more passionate members, the inability to attract younger, more educated women, the increasing demands that careers and families place on women, the fact that many members (especially older ones) fight the use of technology, and the fact that many citizens are less willing to come to community events and rely on newspapers, blogs, and the internet for information.

¹ This discussion was conducted as part of the Ida Trager Workshops, annual workshops held throughout the state to discuss matters of importance to the League. They are funded through a generous fund created on behalf of long-time New York City League member Ida Trager.

The Ida Trager Discussions

The portion of this year's Ida Trager Workshops devoted to development considered the following questions:

- How could the state League better assist local Leagues;
- How could the mission of the League be better supported through technology;
- Should the League plan to initiate a program to attract young voters by cutting-edge technologies such as You Tube and blogging? Do local Leagues support long-term planning to pay individuals at the state level to perform functions currently performed by volunteers?

Assistance to Local Leagues

The Albany County League stated the state League should be. "the glue that brings us together, informs us about each other, and spreads the word about what other Leagues are doing."

The most common complaint of local Leagues was that active members were stretched too thin and that Leagues were unable to attract active new members. Leagues were adamant that state could not raise state PMP because that would result in further falling away of membership. One League suggested that the state could help by providing programs to local Leagues.

Many Leagues suggested the state League could assist local Leagues with public relations. A number of Leagues indicated the state League should assist in attracting members by development and placement of radio, television, and newspaper ads and development and placement of a public service announcement.

The local Leagues loved the Legislative Director's former newspaper column Capitol Beat and suggested it should be resurrected monthly in camera ready form for inclusion in the local Voters.

Technology

The League's relationship to technology is ambiguous. The League's current membership grew up in a pre-internet era, and the majority of members prefer the printed word to electronic communication. Over one-third of local Leagues do not have websites. However, if the League is to attract younger members and to remain competitive for larger grants, it must investigate and consider adoption of cutting-edge technology.

General consensus among the Leagues was that it made sense to reconfigure the state League website so that it was better organized, more user-friendly and contained more materials. Local websites could then contain links to the state website that would enable users to return to their local websites. One League suggested the state should add a map of the state with local leagues plotted out, so that potential members could find a local League. One League suggested using the state Website to communicate membership ideas that worked. This concept could be expanded to the development and issues and advocacy fields, so that the state website becomes a more effective vehicle for sharing information on a statewide basis.

It was suggested that the web provided an excellent opportunity to foster the educational function of the League. The current website needs major updating to meet this goal. The League should consider technology that would allow it to upload clips of television interviews, press conferences, etc. Some Leagues suggested it could use the web for posting on-line training. Webinars could also be established to do training without the need for local members to travel.

Many Leagues were concerned about the issue of communication, or perceived lack thereof, between the state and local Leagues. Some Leagues will not read an on-line State Board Report (SBR) and suggested a printed copy be made available for a fee. As a practical matter, many League members are not on-line. One member said individuals would like Board agendas and Director's reports in advance. Conversely, it was suggested that the web could facilitate on-line collaboration as well as communication.

In light of the differing communication demands and preferences of its members, the League must update technological services, while continuing to provide snail mail backup for the foreseeable future.

Youth Programs

Leagues were divided about developing special programs to appeal to youth, with approximately half of responders believing it was a good idea and half uncertain. During the workshops themselves, League members were more favorably disposed toward using innovative technology, especially designed to recruit new members and to appeal to youth.

Movement from Volunteers to Paid Staff

There was much concern about movement from a model utilizing volunteers to one employing staff. This concern took many forms. Many Leagues opined that their strengths arose from their grass-roots activities - their abilities to study, take positions on and advocate for local issues. Any movement to paid staff should not limit this ability. One League pointed out that the movement to employees was a slippery slope, with a danger that when one began to hire people, it might be necessary to hire people for all formerly volunteer positions. A number of Leagues expressed concern that employees could not represent the League's positions as effectively as volunteers. To that end it was suggested that the state League search for new sources of volunteers. One potential source would be to obtain interns through local undergraduate and graduate programs. Most local Leagues agreed that the League currently received much of its statewide publicity from its advocacy function. General consensus was that it would eventually have to pay a lobbyist. Locals felt strongly that we should not hire a lobbying firm and that anyone who held the position should work closely with local Leagues. In general, local Leagues did not support hiring individuals other than a lobbyist, although they agreed that a number of new initiatives, such as upgrading websites, use of innovative technology, and design of a campaign to appeal to young voters should be considered.

OUR PLAN

The strength of the League has been and will remain rooted in its ability to attract educated and engaged volunteers and to engage in education and advocacy at the local level. The state League, in planning for its future, must remain sensitive to this fact and must support local Leagues while assuring they retain their power to function autonomously.

There is a consensus among local Leagues that the state League can best assist them by fulfilling the following functions:

1. **ACT AS A CLEARINGHOUSE**, making national and statewide information available to local Leagues, sharing best practices, and informing local Leagues of what their sister Leagues are doing;
2. **MAINTAIN AN AGGRESSIVE ADVOCACY PRESENCE IN ALBANY**, expanding capacity through recruitment and use of Off-Board Specialists and movement into regulatory advocacy. The League must, in moving to fulfill this function, plan for an eventual future in which it will no longer be able to recruit a volunteer Legislative Director;
3. **INCREASE SOPHISTICATION IN USE OF TECHNOLOGY** as a tool to achieve the missions of state and local Leagues. Establish a technology committee to provide ongoing recommendations about ways in which technology could strengthen League operations and consider expanding the board to include a Director of Technology. Provide technology advice and services to local Leagues in need of those services. Plan for and develop a more sophisticated website, with the understanding that, over time, the League will move to an electronic communication model;
4. **INCREASE SOPHISTICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING** at the state level and make this expertise available to local Leagues to assist in their operations. Establish a public relations committee and consider expanding the board to include a Director of Public Relations. Public relations and marketing should include a range of services, including graphic design, video, website design, commercials, public information spots, and press releases/op ed articles that could be tailored by Leagues to their specific local situations.

A Framework for the Future

The remainder of this plan will be devoted to a discussion of how strengthening the League in these areas might benefit the League in the following operational areas:

- Membership;
- Voter Services;
- Development of Issues, Education, and Advocacy;

- New Initiatives;
- Technology
- Public Relations.

It should be noted that this document creates a framework and sets forth a vision of how the League of the future might be organized. Realization of the vision, of course, is dependent on a massive fundraising effort that would begin immediately. Given that it would depend heavily on planned giving, it could not be expected to come to fruition in the immediate future. The accumulation of funds will necessitate a further dialogue with and between local Leagues about how to set specific priorities for their use.

Membership

New member recruitment will continue to be a local matter. The state and national Leagues have begun to use their websites for the collection and dissemination of membership materials and best practices. There is a membership list-serve by which all membership directors can communicate. This should be expanded as a tool of communication, with the state Membership Vice President assuming responsibility to disseminate new ideas and best practices on-line and through the web.

The state League currently develops membership brochures that are sold to local Leagues. With current desktop publishing facilities, local Leagues should also have the option of printing state materials from the website on an as-needed basis.

Local Leagues have suggested that the state League should develop public relations spots for radio and television to assist in local membership recruitment. This is an excellent idea. The state League should develop a public relations strategy that identifies cost-effective media for membership recruitment and develops the appropriate recruitment materials.

There is a subset of membership issues related to who joins, who remains a member, and who volunteers to work for the League. LWVUS has recognized that working people do not have time for the level of volunteer activity the League demands and has therefore targeted membership at retirees. This is a fertile field in which to recruit active members. A statewide campaign of marketing to organizations of retired professionals would help to expand membership.

Other Leagues have had success recruiting PTA members and ex- PTA presidents for leadership roles. This is a recruitment device that should be considered on a statewide basis.

The League, as it is currently structured, may not meet the needs of professional women. The state League should begin a dialogue with local Leagues to determine best practices for recruitment and retention of young, working members. This may entail development of a new model of meeting or pairing with other organizations such as women's bar associations, with no expectation that working members will play a particularly active volunteer role during their professional careers.

Membership Summary of Possible Changes

The state League could aid local Leagues in attracting new members by:

- Identifying and disseminating best practices;
- Developing protocols for attracting underrepresented groups;
- Designing and producing innovative membership materials, including public relations spots.

Voter Services

Voter Service remains the domain of local Leagues. The state and national Leagues have supported local Leagues in this respect by making materials for voter registration drives and candidate forums available on-line. This trend should continue, with the addition that training materials for local Voter Service Directors and volunteers might be developed by the state League and made available on-line.

The state League has recently provided local Leagues the opportunity of participating in Smart Voter, an interactive voter service website developed by the California League to provide voters with candidate information and election information. Because of a current cost of \$4,000 to each county, only Westchester participates. It is anticipated that if all Leagues were to participate, the annual cost would be \$250,000 plus \$50,000 in administrative expenses to enter data into the system. We believe that if this is a service desired by other Leagues, the state League will have to negotiate a centralized agreement to lower the cost and subsidize the services that local Leagues cannot afford. Customization could occur at the local level with execution, data entry, maintenance, and financial support provided by the state League.

Voter Services Summary of Possible Changes

The state League could improve its voter service activities and those of local Leagues by:

- Development, funding, and maintenance of an on-line, interactive voter services website along the lines of Smart Voter;
- Supporting local Leagues in their activities by design and publication of materials, as needed.

*Study of Issues, Education, and Advocacy*²

Issues and Advocacy remain among the primary functions of the League, which determines its advocacy agenda as the result of positions arrived at by consensus after study.³ A major strength of both the state and local Leagues is that they are free to determine their own issue agendas. This gives them the flexibility to remain germane in their respective spheres of operation. Although some Leagues are more active in local governmental issues than others, the ability to study and lobby for local issues has been and will remain a major attraction of the League. We do not recommend that this situation change.

In reviewing the Issues and Advocacy functions, it is helpful to consider the disparate skills and activities that comprise the totality.⁴ Statewide advocacy consists of the attempt to influence policy by making our positions known to legislators, administrative agencies, and the governor's office. Policy is influenced by contact with legislators, the Governor, administrative agencies, and the courts.⁵ Currently the state League has an effective presence in the legislature and the Governor's office. It has been successful in obtaining *pro bono* attorneys to undertake limited litigation in support of its positions. It currently has no presence in administrative agencies. Although it has a history of training citizens to become effective lobbyists, it has not yet taken the organizational steps of reducing these curricula to writing and putting them on-line.

The state League is currently reviewing its advocacy function to fill in gaps in operations and to increase efficacy. The review will identify a number of areas for improvement. The following changes could strengthen both statewide and local Issues and Advocacy operations:

² This section includes discussion of three discrete functions which are currently joined operationally. For purposes of this plan, we separate them under study of issues and education of members and the public at large, hereafter referred to as, *Issues*. This distinction has legal and financial as well as functional import, for the Education Foundation (a 501(c) (3) organization) can fund educational activities, while the League must fund advocacy.

³ Study of issues and education occur at all three levels of the League, with the level at which a matter is taken up determined by its nature. National issues are studied at the national level, state-wide issues are studied at the state level, and local issues are studied locally. The League employs a federal type of structure, with positions of the higher level Leagues controlling the advocacy of the lower level Leagues. To the extent a higher level League has not taken a position on a particular matter, the lower level League is able to study and arrive at consensus on the matter, provided that the subject is not one reserved to the higher level League.

⁴ Because different Leagues employ different local educational and lobbying strategies, we will not attempt to analyze the function of local activities, instead limiting our analysis of the functions to the state level. We will, however, suggest a number of changes at the state level that we believe will assist local Leagues in their performance of these functions.

⁵ The current advocacy structure consists of a Vice President for Issues and Advocacy, Legislative Director, Director of Grassroots Advocacy, and Legislative Analyst, all of whom, along with the President, compose an Issues and Advocacy Committee. In addition Off-Board Specialists, who are experts in their designated areas, serve on the Issues and Advocacy Committee on an as-needed basis. All are volunteers.

Current advocacy functions include setting legislative priorities, research and development of materials to aid in the advocacy process, analysis of bills, legislative lobbying, organization of League members to lobby through action alerts put out on the CATT network and League lobbying days, in which local Leagues lobby legislators on legislative priorities, and communication of governmental activities to local Leagues.

- **BETTER EDUCATION** of League members about positions on issues and lobbying efforts by expansion of the Issues and Advocacy portion of the web site;
- **BETTER TRAINING** of League members for advocacy by development of training modules on PowerPoint / Video / DVD for Issues and Advocacy functions, including bill and regulatory analysis, drafting legislative memos, commenting on proposed regulations, presenting testimony, reporting activities, and citizen lobbying;
- **MORE TIMELY AND DETAILED REPORTING** to League members. Expand *Capitol Beat*, the Legislative Director's weekly newsletter to League members to include Issue and Advocacy efforts in other forums, both state and local. Publish a monthly camera-ready edition of Capitol Beat for inclusion in local Voters;
- **MORE PROACTIVE STANCE TO ISSUES AND ADVOCACY**
Expand the Issues and Advocacy function to encompass the activities of state administrative agencies. Enhance record keeping for the purpose of timely reporting to local Leagues, planning for the coming year, and updating Impact on Issues by weekly reporting of activities, including matters reviewed, memos or other documents written, and actions taken. Expand Legislative Priorities to Issues and Advocacy Priorities. In setting priorities, review the prior year's activities, convene an annual conference or conference call to develop recommendations for the next year, create an annual Issues and Advocacy Plan with local League input and state board approval, which will constitute the League's Issue and Advocacy agenda for the coming year.

Issues and Advocacy Summary of Possible Changes

The state League could improve its issue and advocacy operations and better facilitate those of local Leagues by:

- Expansion of the issue and advocacy function to encompass activities of state administrative agencies;
- Implementation of annual statewide education and advocacy plans, with input from members;
- Frequent and timely communication with local Leagues about the issue and advocacy function;
- Planning for and obtaining additional expertise to facilitate the issue and advocacy function at both the state and local levels. This might include identification of members or hiring of individuals to analyze issues, to develop educational materials, and to advocate before legislative and administrative bodies;
- Training of League members to analyze issues, to generate materials in support of positions, and to lobby at the legislative and administrative levels;
- Provision technology, and public relations services to local Leagues as is necessary to improve their issue and advocacy operations;
- Design and publication of materials, as needed.

New Initiatives

The state League, in consultation with local Leagues, could, as part of the planning process, identify and develop new initiatives that would keep its message and operations germane to an ever-changing world. Two areas that we believe are ripe for development are the negotiation of a statewide price for Smart Voter and development of a protocol for engagement of young voters in the electoral process. Such a protocol would identify methods and media used by young people and develop materials that would be attractive to them, such as You Tube, blogs, and exciting multimedia websites.

New Initiatives Summary of Possible Changes

The state League could identify and plan for new initiatives by adoption of the following changes:

- Include a new initiatives function as part of its planning process;
- Design and implement a plan to attract young voters;
- Design and implement a plan to create and maintain interactive, on-line voter services and candidate information throughout the State.

Technology

Just as New York State is a state of economic and population extremes, local Leagues in New York are reflective of the state's demographics. Sixty-five percent of Leagues have their own websites. No Leagues currently use advanced technology such as webcams, You Tube, blogs, exciting multimedia websites devised to appeal to young voters, or video conferencing. In fact, the League meets the needs of its current members who are more comfortable with in-depth written reports than they are with sophisticated public relations materials, use of non-print media, and methods likely to appeal to younger audiences. This fact has resulted in the League's stodgy image. Although the League believes this image is totally unrelated to the relevance of its product, if it is to attract and retain new members, it should consider development and use of more sophisticated marketing techniques, especially those pitched to appeal to a younger audience.

The state League could act as the catalyst for technology updates to streamline operations, communicate with members, and recruit new members. Although upgrades would commence at the state level, we believe the state League could, by means of information dissemination and assistance to local Leagues,, play a role in making advanced technology such as website design,

video conferencing, and video streaming, available to local Leagues.. To the extent that uploading of local materials on websites and the creation of links to the statewide website is undertaken by the state League, it could guarantee a new level of technological sophistication to local Leagues that do not currently enjoy these resources and provide for further sharing of information on a statewide basis.

Technology Summary of Possible Changes

The League could expand its use of technology in the following manner:

- Expansion of the website to include all aspects of League operations, including historical archives and secure member services, with modifications necessary to present the additional information in an easily retrieved manner;
- Adoption of technology, such as SKYPE video conferencing to facilitate face-to-face meeting without the time or expense of travel;
- Adoption of more cutting-edge technology, such as video streaming, and graphically appealing interactive web technology to update the League's image and attract younger members;
- Provision of website design and maintenance services to local Leagues.

Public Relations

Just as disparities within local Leagues lead to different abilities to utilize technology, the mixed urban and rural nature of the state creates varied public relations challenges. Some smaller Leagues are on first-name bases with the editors or their local papers and see their Op Ed pieces published as they are submitted; others are unable to obtain publication of letters to the editor. Although the League once had a Public Relations director, more recently this function has been included in the various Issues and Advocacy functions.

Public relations again should become a discrete state function, with a statewide position created, either as a director or an off-board specialist, responsible for development of public relations materials for all aspects of League operations, including membership, issues, education, and advocacy, and development.

Public Relations Summary of Possible Changes

The League could expand its public relations activities in the following manner:

- Making public relations a discrete state function, with a statewide position created, either as a director or an off-board specialist, responsible for development of public relations materials for all aspects of League operations, including membership, issues, education, and advocacy, and development;
- Providing public relations services to local Leagues, including public relations spots, publications, and op ed pieces/letters to the editor that can be adopted for local use.

Personnel Implications for the Future

The League's authority has been, and in large part will continue to remain, a function of its status as a volunteer organization. By envisioning a League that offers additional services at the state level, it could further free its bright, energetic, and creative members to do what they do best. Although the volunteer paradigm is the ideal, the League must be prepared to hire staff at the state level when it is unable to obtain the type and level of necessary services through volunteers.

FUNDING THE FUTURE

Because undertaking the four statewide functions that have been identified as crucial to the League's core mission will create additional expenses for the state League, this Plan proposes creation of an endowed fund called the Centennial Fund through the LWVNYS Education Foundation. Monies would be placed in an unrestricted, perpetually endowed fund of the League of Women Voters of New York State Education Foundation, with annual income used to support ongoing educational operations of the state and local Leagues.⁶

⁶ The Education Foundation is a 501(c) (3) organization. Its funds are used to support the educational activities of the League.