

LWVC Convention Workshop Script: HOW TO TAKE ACTION

So we are ready to talk about a local League getting involved in action on a local issue. I said getting involved, because the League does not always have to be the lead agency.

Where do these issues come from? The obvious would be someone on your board or in your League brought it to the board's attention. But it could come from another group, maybe the PTA Council or local NAACP, that ask for League help. Or from an elected official or organized issue campaign. Don't be too quick to reject something without evaluating it. With a little bit of digging, interest can grow even when it is not immediately evident.

Or it just may be an issue where a League like voice is needed, This may be something the League has not been involved in recently, a known position is there, but the need for League to speak is just now recognized.

Or someone's twelve year old comes home with a concern and asks "Mom, what is the League doing about this." Happened to me many years ago.

O.K., they have your attention. Now what? Time to take a closer look.

- **What would be the impact of the League becoming involved? Would you be able to make a difference? You will be investing resources, people if not money. What would you not do if you do this.**
- **Does the League have a position. Look wide and deep. Not just at local positions, but vertical positions at all levels, state, national, ILO/county. Look at the issue carefully. If it is a ballot initiative, read the document in it's entirety. If it is city council or supervisors action, get the staff reports. You may not have a position on the specific issue but does State and Local Finance cover an important part of it. You may want to oppose something based on how it is to be implemented. Or the fiscal impact. Look at the Action Policies in your "Action Policies and Positions." Still not have the answer? Go to the listserves and see if someone else has had the same issue. Put the question out there. Or ask a real person? Ask your MTA. Ask state board or staff. Consult what Helen calls the "Tribal Elders, you know who they are.**
- **You really can't find a position. Now what? I can think of two alternatives. It depends on the issue and your community.**

League steps back. The League name is not used. Those passionate about the issues join another group around this one issue. May be a lost opportunity but we really don't have positions on everything.

Become the trusted convener. Do an issues forum. Provided good background materials on what the issue really is. Do a series of Voter articles. Educate the community.

- As you look at all of these aspects think about how important is this to your League? To the larger community? How much bandwidth do you have? Is the timing right? Again, what would you not do if you did this? Balance the pros and cons. Can this be a membership growth tool? Are you prepared to take advantage of that opportunity?**

All of this will probably need to be done quickly, so it is good to discuss this as a "what if" in advance if your League hasn't done this recently.. Action issues, be they city council action or a ballot initiative usually don't give you a lot of lead time.

- **Which is a good opening to bring up a frequent misconception == that you have to do a new study on a particular proposal – especially a ballot measure. Just deciding to do a study stops all action, it is admitting that current positions are inadequate. Here is where you apply existing positions at some level. And, if there are no positions, go to another level of action such as an issue forum. In the heat of a contested issue is not a good time to do a study – and it probably would not be done in time to make a difference, could be questioned as to balance and might not even reach a consensus.**

This does not mean you do not use the skills developed in doing a study to look at the issue, research the background, check current law, look at how other jurisdictions have dealt with the same or similar issues. The skills are transferable but starting a study stops action.

You have made the decision to take action on this issue. Where do we go from here?

- **Define the issue that your League is supporting or opposing. The larger issue is usually pretty well defined for you, but are you focusing on the fiscal**

impact, the implementation, what action does the positions you are using support.

- **Building your team/coalition – or joining one. There are good guidelines in How to ..Take Action. These are very common sense but easy to overlook, especially if you are joining a campaign committee.. Look at fiscal committments. Usually all they want is the League name but make sure. Make sure you can review, and reject, anything that goes out with the League name on it. Any printed material, any campaign mailer. Any press release that includes the League. Who speaks for the coalition/campaign? Are you getting the exposure you expect. Getting all of this out, up front, having the president or designee speak out and be strong from the first can prevent a lot of headaches later.**
- **Engaging your members first makes engaging the community easier. This can be a great opportunity right now as we have many new members who often have limited time – or really no time – to do the traditional League advocacy, i.e. another meeting. However. They can do some internet research after the baby goes to sleep. Make a few phone calls or emails to friends, talk it up at other meetings they do attend (none of us can be everywhere), write letters**

to the editor in response to a letter or op-ed officially from the League, post on Facebook, like on Facebook, tweet, and just talk to their friends. Having member support gives credibility to asking for wider support. We never really know who a member might know.

- **Engaging the wider community. Ideally this is a joint project of the campaign committee. The more visible support you have from your membership, the stronger your outreach campaign. Nothing works like one on one, but that is time intensive. Every member has name recognition somewhere in the community so encourage social media posting and sharing, letters to the editor, speaking engagements to their own neighborhood groups or other organizations they are involved in. It is important to remind people about the difference in speaking as an individual and speaking for the League. Usually the president speaks for the League, definitely when it is a quote in print or such. Other statements that could be fuzzy should be cleared with the president.**

Any controversial campaign brings out questions of members speaking as an individual. We encourage our members to be politically involved and to speak as individuals if they are not specified board members (see your non-partisan policy). Members must be

careful not to talk about League in any way that does not support the adopted League position. Local non partisan positions apply, but also common sense. Unless I specify differently, anything I say may be taken as a League position.

- **Advocacy/ lobbying for action. A clarification of terms. Lobbying is what we did Thursday, talking to elected officials or their staff about a specific piece of legislation. I am very careful in using the term, while I often lobby my city council members, I don't use that word. Where I live, it is often associated with paid lobbyist and I don't get paid. Advocacy is a much broader term. Advocacy can be a lobby like activity, it can be community education, it can be all degrees in between. Here is where local League history can be useful. No one is surprised to see League advocating and lobbying for voter rights. In my community I am known to have been advocating for early childhood education for many years. No one is surprised if I speak out wearing my League hat. I am considered knowledgeable on the issue and can lobby/advocate as a respected voice.**

Here is where League history/positions are valuable. If we are lobbying based on a state position or one

adopted several years ago it is not giving in to local pressure. Or the money behind the campaign.

Just a reminder, ballot measures are considered “direct lobbying” just like talking to the electeds, so be aware of your 501 (c) 3 status, not that most Leagues would be spending that kind of money.

The Trusted Convener role is almost another workshop. This can be a difficult path to walk, but it can also be an important role for League to play. This is bringing all sides of the community together for a respectful discussion about an issue where the League has no relevant position. It can be very good for your League if well done, but must be well done. Especially if it is very controversial.

These activities, both community education and advocacy, help answer the question about what League does when there is not an election. When we are not doing Voter Service work.

Think about how any action fits into the big picture for your League. Is there a way to use it to gain new members? To involve those who recently joined. To deeper engage those recently joined or members in name only? To increase community awareness that there is a local League and that you do more than candidate forums.

Your handouts have more ideas that I didn't have time to mention, other things to think about as you plan a campaign. And, as Helen said, there are more resources on line and an email or phone call away.