



State Program Committee Guidebook

I. What is a Program Committee?

A program committee is a group of members knowledgeable and active in one of the League's policy program areas. Current program committees and policy areas covered are Education, Government, Immigration, Natural Resources, Social Justice, and Women & Family Issues.

The major roles of the committees are to **educate** League members and **advocate** on state public policies. Although a state program committee may use positions developed by LWVUS as a basis of its work on New Jersey issues and it may promote requests from LWVUS, it does not initiate advocacy on federal public policy issues.

As educators, committees might select League policy areas on which to update our members. This could include an update on the current status of the law or pro and con background on current public policy discussions in New Jersey. Committee members can do this by writing articles for our newsletter or the website, hosting panel discussions at the state level, or preparing a meeting-ready program or speakers for local Leagues.

As advocates, committees would recommend action on specific legislation, regulations or public policy areas to the League of Women Voters of New Jersey State Board (the Board). Such action might include joining a coalition; testifying on issues of concern; meeting with legislators or executive departments; issuing press releases; or writing letters to the editor or action alerts to our members.

II. Responsibilities of a Committee

1. **Select a Chair:** The Chair is responsible for communicating on behalf of the committee to the Board and staff, coordinating the committee's efforts, delegating committee assignments, and scheduling meetings.
2. **Set a meeting calendar:** It is recommended that committees meet at least bimonthly. The more regularly the committee meets, the quicker you will be able to respond to action on priority campaigns, to submit requests ahead of board meetings, and stay on top of the work. Consider the best way to ensure your meetings are inclusive and accessible to potential committee members. Can all of the meetings be virtual to accommodate individuals across the state? If not, consider switching so that at least every other meeting is virtual. *If a committee needs help with virtual meeting setup, please reach out to LWVNJ Community Organizers.* Consider the timing of your meetings: are members that work full-time jobs able to attend?
3. **Send a list of meeting dates and locations, along with a list of committee members** with contact information to the Community Organizers (see contacts at end of document).

4. Recruit new committee members: Encourage your current committee members to be on the lookout for potential new members at state events, rallies, hearings, meetings, etc. Attend local League meetings to update members on your issues and recruit local League members from across the state, making your committee as representative as possible.

5. New Member Onboarding & Leadership Development. Be sure to meet individually with each new member (and consider doing this annually with all members).

- Set expectations for their role as a committee member.
- Ask what they hope to gain from this experience.
- What topics are they most interested in?
- What relevant experience do they already have?
- Does the current meeting schedule work for them?

Consider how new members are gaining knowledge that longtime committee members already have. Attending meetings may not be enough. What background information can they read, what discussions on the topic can they watch? Can more experienced members serve as mentors? Make sure all members read Study & Action, can access the drive, and review the training on the Legislative Process.

6. Study and track issues within committee's program area: Become familiar with LWVNJ Study and Action and LWVUS Impact on Issues. These publications explain League positions on the state and national level and are the basis for action.

7. Develop internal expertise on the program policy areas you follow.

- It may be most effective to assign committee members to a specific policy area of most interest to them—each becoming the “expert” on that issue for the committee.
- If, when setting priorities for a given year, a committee chooses to focus on only one policy area, it may be most effective to organize around the planned work. All committee members become the “experts” and may be assigned specific tasks: writing articles and letters; representing LWV on informal coalitions; making connections with appropriate policy makers; educating members of the LWVNJ Lobby Corps.; reaching out to local Leagues, etc.

8. Prioritize issues: The League is a multi-issue organization, and you cannot do everything all the time. Ask yourselves the following questions:

- What is the political landscape? What public policy issues can you expect on the agenda during the next 6-12 months?
- What is the best use of the committee's people resources?
- Where is the League's voice expected to be heard?
- Where can we make the most difference?
- What issues do your members want to work on the most?

9. Track legislation important to your work/priorities: Subscribe through njleg.state.us for free email notifications of legislative activity on pre-selected bills, join email lists of like-minded organizations, check the dockets of relevant legislative committees, attend hearings, and follow news coverage on the targeted public policy issue.

10. Participate in scheduled advocacy team Zoom meeting with other program chairs. These occur on the second Friday of each month at 12pm. If the Committee Chair cannot participate, please have a member of the committee participate in their place.

11. Join coalitions, when appropriate and with approval, to help advance priority issues and give LWVNJ more visibility.

12. **Report to the LWVNJ Staff and Board.** Committees should report their activities and findings to the staff and Board, even if they are not recommending action (see following sections). Such reports may include planned events or any other educational material on an issue. These reports should be submitted to the Community Organizers.

13. **Recommend action** on specific legislation, regulation or public policy issue to the LWVNJ Board. Please review the next section “Procedures for Recommending Action to the Board.”

14. **Lobby.** Committees should assign a member to join the Lobby Corps and work with LWVNJ Staff to move legislative campaigns forward. This person will be responsible for tracking legislation, crafting and delivering testimony, and working with legislators to advance committee policy priorities.

15. **Prepare Convention report** for your program area biennially. Gathering information for the report is an ongoing process throughout the two-year period prior to the next Convention. This ensures that details, observations, testimony, and events are noted as they occur and that comprehensive minutes are recorded at each meeting. This will result in a headache-free production of an accurate report for the Convention workbook.

16. **Update Study and Action** “history” portion for your program area biennially.

III. Procedures for recommending action to the Board

A committee may recommend action to the Board. The committee may not take action in the name of LWVNJ without Board approval. Note that once the board has approved advocacy on a piece of legislation, a legislative initiative (broader than a single piece), or other specific public policy issue, it will not be necessary to return to the board for specific actions on that topic, such as letters or testimony. But it will be **necessary to receive approval from the Executive Director before such actions.**

Examples of action include:

- Writing letters to policymakers
- Joining a formal coalition (or taking action with an informal coalition)
- Supporting or opposing specific legislation or regulations
- Writing letters to the editors, press releases, or action alerts

To recommend an action item to the Board:

1. Write a report to the Board (not more than 2 pages, sample attached) which includes:

- **Date of the request**
- **Contact person** (this may be either the committee Chair or the committee “expert” on the action item).
- **Motion** (what you are asking the Board to decide). For example, “LWVNJ support/oppose A.123/S.456 which changes date of nonpartisan municipal elections from May to June.” Or “LWVNJ write a letter to XYZ supporting/opposing consideration of drilling for gas before the scientific studies are completed.” In the motion a short sentence is all that is needed to define the issue.
- **Position** (LWVNJ or LWVUS) on which your request for action is based.

- **Background information** about the bill or policy issue which will help the Board make an informed decision.
- **Pros & Cons** (reasons for the Board to support, oppose, or remain neutral). It is often helpful to think about what the “other side” will say on the issue. This can be helpful later when you set a strategy to implement your request. At the decision-making point it is helpful to Board members who are not necessarily knowledgeable about the issue.
- **Expected strategy** once approval is received.

2. Submit a request to the Community Organizers who will have it placed on the agenda of the next Board meeting. In many instances, it may be necessary and helpful for the committee Chair or committee expert to be present at the Board meeting to answer questions.

If the motion is approved, the committee should further plan an advocacy strategy (testimony, letters, articles, etc.). During this process, the committee will be expected to work closely with the Community Organizers.

Iv. Who Acts, On What, and With What Approval

The League of Women Voters speaks with one voice: We are powerful because we are one organization impacting change at all levels of government. However, to be effective, we must coordinate all our efforts.

1. If the request is **FEDERAL** (federal legislation/regulations/etc.): Program committees must first come to the Executive Director with any federal action requests (for example, contact a federal agency, meet with a federal elected official, or take action on federal legislation). The Executive Director will review the request and give approval to the committee to submit an action request to LWVUS. **LWVUS has ultimate approval power on all federal requests.**
2. If the request is **STATE** (state legislation, meeting with a state legislator, contacting a state agency/executive department) and is a **new** campaign (has not been ongoing over the last year) program committees request action through the state Board. To do this, bring action to the community organizers who will review with the Executive Director and help you submit ahead of the board meetings. **The LWVNJ State Board has ultimate approval power.**
3. If the request is **STATE** and is on an **ongoing** campaign (for example, writing an LTE, joining a coalition, or testifying on action that the Board has already approved) then the committee must work closely with the Organizers and get **ultimate approval from the Executive Director.**
4. If the request is **LOCAL** (local ordinance, local community issue, speaking with local elected officials), then a local League may act without approval. However, all local Leagues should coordinate with the program committee that covers that League policy area (if any) to ensure that there is no conflict of ask or messaging.

Important: You cannot take any action at any level, including the local level, that contradicts any position of the League at the state or national levels.

V. Working with other groups

Both informal and formal coalitions can be helpful. Membership on a formal coalition requires Board approval as it usually represents a position for LWVNJ in the coalition. Informal coalitions consist of existing groups working on the same issue. In both cases the committee should assign a member to attend meetings, conference calls and receive emails. Exercise good judgment when participating in specific strategies a coalition may employ. Certain strategies may appear partisan, such as speaking out against elected officials and not the underlying public policy issue. Ask yourself if participation (in a press conference, rally, petition drive, advocacy campaign, etc.) will cause the League to appear partisan – and consult the League’s staff and board and if you are unsure of the answer.

VI. Communications

- Within the committee, remember that emails are not private communications. Until a decision on an action has been made, emails should be sent only to members of the committee or LWVNJ staff and state Board members. Copies should not be sent to non-committee members unless it is in conjunction with a working coalition. At certain points in an advocacy strategy, you may not want your plans or personal evaluations circulated publicly.
- When planning communications for the general public (letters to the editor, action alerts, petitions) you must coordinate with the Executive Director, and you must provide lead time (suggested lead time at least 2 weeks).
- When communicating with partner groups remember to remain courteous and professional. You are acting as a representative of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey. Building authentic and respectful partnerships is a priority for the League.
- Testimony or written comments must be submitted to the Executive Director in advance of hearing or comment deadlines. Testimony and written comments must be approved in advance and will be printed on LWVNJ letterhead.
- Social networking: The League of Women Voters of New Jersey maintains a Facebook page, Instagram account and a twitter account. Committee members can suggest that items be posted on these accounts (for example, you might want us to tweet a photo from your meetings), but appropriate lead time is needed when possible. Additionally, use common sense when you are using your own social media account as an individual. You are free to post and interact with other organizations as you choose. However, as you become more visible as a League leader, your posts and tweets might be construed as League position or endorsement. Keep this in mind. Do not share private communications between committee members or advocacy strategy socially.

Resources

- Sample reports recommending action to the Board are attached
- Study & Action (LWVNJ) and Impact on Issues (LWVUS). Both are available online at <https://www.lwvnj.org/> and <https://www.lwv.org/>
- New Jersey legislative website, <https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/>. You can search for bills, check status, check how committees and legislative body voted, view the legislative calendar, and listen to hearings.
- Site for New Jersey Register and Administrative Law Code to find regulations, <https://www.state.nj.us/oal/rules/accessp/>.
- Introduction to the Legislative Process Training [Recording](#); [Slides](#)
- Conducting Lobbying Meetings Training [Recording](#); [Slides](#)

Contacts

- Executive Director, Jesse Burns, jburns@lwvnj.org
- Community Organizer, Assatta Mann, amann@lwvnj.org
- Community Organizer, Melissa Marks, mmarks@lwvnj.org
- 1st Vice President, Iveth Mosquera, imosquera1005@gmail.com
- President, Jennifer Howard, jhoward@lwvnj-board.org



**Sample Reports:
Recommend Action to the Board**

Sample One

League of Women Voters of New Jersey

Date: May 1, 2010

Contact Information: Committee, Name, Email, Phone

Motion: LWVNJ support A 105/S 557: Allows persons on parole and probation to vote; provides registration assistance

Bills Introduced:

A 1015: Spencer & Coutinho dropped 1/12/2010 in Assembly State Government Committee

S 557: Cunningham dropped 1/12/2010 in Senate State Government Committee

Position: Voting Rights for Parolees and Probationers (2009)

Background: This is a very straight forward bill mirroring our position. It was heard in committee during lame duck January 2010 and held for technical corrections. The League testified in support at that time. Pro: Those on probation and parole are living in the community and regaining or retaining the right to vote can be helpful in keeping these individuals integrated into society.

Con: voiced by probation and correction officials during a hearing on this bill in lame duck, was that it was onerous to expect them to provide registration assistance.

Sample Two

League of Women Voters of New Jersey

Date: May 1, 2010

Contact Information: Committee, Name, Email, Phone

Motion: LWVNJ support A2321/S1352: Revises OPRA (open public records act)

Bills Introduced:

A2321 Johnson & Vainieri-Huttle dropped 2/25/2010 in Assembly State Government Committee

S1352 Weinberg dropped 2/8/2010 in Senate State Government Committee

Position: LWVUS Citizen's right to Know/Citizen Participation: "governmental bodies must protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings and making public records accessible."

Background: this bill makes a number of changes to OPRA

- Requires documents containing certain information concerning criminal investigations be made available within 24 hours or as soon as practicable
- Changes copying cost fee to a flat \$0.10 per page for letter size sheet and \$0.15 for legal size
- Provides special service charge requiring extraordinary equipment or effort (currently in the law) be based on a posted hourly rate
- Allows emailing of records without charge
- Requires the record custodian to accept a record request made on a document other than adopted form if it includes the required information
- Provides that if information is redacted the custodian will notify the requestor as to why and the total number of records redacted
- Provides definition of immediate access with regard to certain specified information
- Changes the knowingly and willfully standard for violations of OPRA
- Adds two members to the Government Records Council, changes it from being in the Department of Community Affairs to being in, but not of, DCA, requires that the GRC submit an annual budget request to DCA.

Most of these changes are in response to problems individuals have attempting to access records.

The law currently allows charging for extraordinary requests involving equipment or staff to gather records, but is currently silent on how to determine that cost.

LWVNJ voted to support a bill related only to copy cost in April 2008

Pro: Changes clarify or make it easier to request records. Allows the custodian to email records, which should be easier than copying and mailing. Related to cost of copies the taxpayer has already paid salaries, cost of offices and equipment, cost of having employees collect data and prepare reports. Providing those to the taxpayer should not turn into a profit point for the government.

Con: Many custodians and government entities maintain it consumes staff time and therefore resources they need to use for other projects. Therefore citizens requesting records should pay for that employee's time. Record custodians maintain that others often have the records requested and they should not be held in violation if deadlines or requests are not satisfied.