

# Voters Service and Citizens Information

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The League's Voter Services and public education activities provide information about public issues, including those on which we have a position. Voter services activities are designed to provide citizens with unbiased, factual information that they can use as a basis for reaching their own decisions.

Over the years, the League has built an excellent reputation for providing the public with accurate, nonpartisan services and information on elections and on governmental and public policy issues. The League's voter services activities are designed to provide citizens with unbiased, factual information that can be used as a basis for understanding the election process and reaching their own voting decisions. The League's citizen education activities, on the other hand, provide information on public issues, including those on which we have a position; by law and League policy, it is not necessary to present both sides of an issue in such situations. In other words, Leagues may educate the public about a particular point of view or "side" of an issue (e.g, a League could hold a forum about why the death penalty should be abolished without including experts/panelists in support of capital punishment).

It is the responsibility of the board of directors to ensure that voter services activities and lobbying activities are kept clearly separate. Voters' guides and other voter services materials must not contain statements of League positions, and League positions on ballot issues must not be discussed at voter services events. A reader or candidate should not be able to "guess" the League's position based on the wording of a question.

Educational activities may be funded with either operating funds or tax-deductible monies—either through direct sponsorship or through grants. (See below for information about conducting membership recruitment at educational programs and tax considerations.) If tax-deductible monies are used, there are IRS regulations that must be strictly followed. If the event is an election event, then additional regulations from the FEC and FCC (if broadcast) must be followed. Some recommended publications on the legal aspects of voter services work are *Face to Face: A Guide to League-Sponsored Debates* (published by the LWVEF) and *The Rules of the Game* (published by The Alliance for Justice), as well as IRS publications.

## Voter Services

Leagues carry out a variety of election-related services, which may include:

- Making registration and voting information available through a variety of means, including a Web site ([www.VOTE411.org](http://www.VOTE411.org)).

- Organizing voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns that target groups that have traditionally not participated in elections.
- Publishing voters' guides/candidate questionnaires, often in foreign languages as well as in English.
- Sponsoring candidate meetings, debates and interviews.
- Providing speakers on election issues, such as voting procedures and ballot measures.

### **Candidate Meetings/Debates**

Sponsoring candidate debates requires careful decision-making by the whole board to protect the League's nonpartisanship. Leagues are strongly advised to adopt careful, objective candidate participation criteria *before* each election season gets underway and before the candidates are known (e.g., at the League's January board meeting). For example, the League might require evidence that a formal campaign is being waged, i.e., existence of headquarters, campaign staff, issuance of position papers and campaign appearances. Such criteria can then be used to determine which candidates are eligible to participate in the League's debate, should the League choose not to invite all candidates.

A League may stage a debate even if some invited candidates decline to appear as long as the debate is not televised and more than one candidate for a given office appears. FCC regulations require that a debate sponsor not proceed with a debate unless at least two candidates for the same office appear at the same event. Some states may have comparable requirements for state and local elections. Leagues should refer to the Guidelines for State and Local Debates including "empty chair" debates (on the League Web site) and the LWVEF publication Face to Face for step-by-step guidance on legal requirements and technical considerations in staging candidate debates. Sample candidate participation criteria also are available on the League Web site.

### **Working with Other Groups or Allied Organizations**

In providing voter information, Leagues often work with the media and other organizations that endorse candidates. In deciding how to work with such groups, a League needs to consider carefully how its participation might affect its nonpartisan status or the public's perception of the League's nonpartisanship. The board must make sure that the ground rules are set to ensure that the activity is conducted in a strictly nonpartisan manner. It also is important to make clear that the League cannot waive its nonpartisan policy or any procedures that ensure fair treatment of candidates. The same is true when a League cooperates with a newspaper or other media outlet to produce or distribute election information. Guidelines for broadcast events should include a prohibition on airing selected portions of the event by either the candidates or the media.

### **Public Information**

## **Observer Corps**

Observer Corps are a structured way for individuals to exercise their right to know. 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 through the League to 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.

## **Public Education Year-Round**

Public education encompasses all of the other issue-related or process-related activities that Leagues undertake to help members and the public understand and participate in government and politics.

For example, the League can sponsor or cosponsor meetings on government operations, the political process, or a hot issue in the community or it can join with educational or academic bodies in organizing and running high school, college or adult education programs. It can work alone or with other groups to explore an issue or to provide political know-how about testifying, petitioning, or any other technique for getting something done in the community. It can also present educational forums about issues on which the League has a position, provided that the discussions focus on issues of concern rather than the merits of specific pieces of legislation, no lobbying takes place and no call to action is issued. These events are good times to include membership, media and fundraising components.

## **Financial Considerations**

As a general rule, voter services and citizen education events can be funded using tax-deductible monies. However, the safest and most flexible way to structure such events is for a League to host the event in its own name but to fund the event, in whole or in part, with a grant from an education fund. Those who attend then may (and should) be actively solicited for membership and for contributions. Membership brochures may be distributed—but remember that grant monies may not be used to pay for them; the grant from the education fund must be restricted to the costs of providing the educational content. One more advantage of the League hosting the event is that the League itself will then own the list of attendees, who can be solicited for membership and support.

The same principle applies to voters' guides. If a printed voters' guide is funded using tax-deductible monies, then any "ad" promoting League membership must be funded through the League's general operating funds.

(Further education fund information that includes fiscal compliance, IRS Guidelines and how to use tax-deductible monies to fund voter services/citizen education events and activities is available on the League Web site.)