

Getting Started!

(Forming a Local League in Texas)

Our Mission

The League of Women Voters, founded in 1920 by women of the suffrage movement, is a nonpartisan political organization. Membership is open to men and women who are citizens, 18 years or older. **The mission of the League is to promote the informed and active participation of citizens in government and to influence public policy through education and advocacy.**

Nonpartisanship

Nonpartisanship means that the League of Women Voters does not support or oppose political parties or candidates, whether or not the candidates are affiliated with a party. The League does take action on issues which it has studied and on which it has a position. The League is multi-issue with positions falling into the general areas of government, social policy, natural resources, and international relations.

Citizen Participation

The League is primarily known for encouraging voter participation. New groups organizing to become a local League may register voters, conduct candidate forums, distribute state *Voters Guides*, and publish local guides to elected officials. They may also host public issues forums in order to present various viewpoints on subjects (e.g. recycling or health care), or ballot issues such as constitutional amendments.

How Can I Join Without an Existing Local League?

If there is no local League, a person can join as a member at large (MAL). When a local group determines, with agreement from LWV-TX, that there is enough interest in the community, then forming a new local League can be considered.

What are the benefits of being a MAL?

A member at large receives many benefits from League membership—receipt of the *Texas VOTER*, the *National VOTER*, and frequent mailings and/or e-mails from LWV-TX; the ability to participate in state studies and, at times, in national studies; and access to *Voters Guides* prior to statewide elections.

The Membership Meeting

Since you have identified your community as being ready for a League of Women Voters, *let's have a party with a purpose!*

The purpose of a membership meeting is to introduce your friends, neighbors, and the community in general to the benefits of League membership. This is a time of great enthusiasm that can be spent productively to secure League of Women Voters MALs.

Select a date, time, and a place with a warm, friendly atmosphere. Invite your business colleagues, friends, and some of the influential members of the community. Arrange for

a “buddy system” or other ways to encourage people already identified as interested to bring guests.

Be certain that at least one representative of the state League is present. That representative should meet with the organizers, including those who have already joined as MALs, before the meeting to discuss the steps after the meeting. At least an hour should be scheduled for that meeting to plan and discuss strategies.

Determine if that state board member would make an inspirational speaker, or if a community leader with knowledge of the League might be available. Ask the speaker to address the benefits of League membership for individuals and the community in a short ten-minute presentation. Allow time for questions from the participants. With guidance from the state League, order any recruitment materials needed from LWV-TX or LWVUS.

On the day of the party, make certain everyone has a name tag, that refreshments are served, that everyone has the opportunity to ask questions, and that each individual is personally asked to join the League (accept their checks and forward to LWV-TX).

Don't underestimate the importance of simply being friendly and welcoming! The LWV appreciates people with diverse interests and viewpoints.

Note:

Forming a Local League

How do we begin?

A local League of Women Voters begins with a Member-at-Large Unit, which is a group of people who have joined as members at large (MAL's) where no local unit exists.

Is My Community Ready for A Member-at-Large Unit?

The establishment of a member-at-large Unit requires a minimum number of members. The organizing group determines, with LWV-TX, the appropriate number for each community.

Each organizing group should discuss the following resources necessary to maintaining a Unit:

- demographics--population, mobility;
- economics of the community--healthy, declining, or stagnant;
- thriving community organizations--political, service, environmental, social, cultural, religious, union locals, professional associations, neighborhood groups;
- educational institutions--community colleges, junior colleges, universities; and,
- anticipated financial support of the business community and the members themselves over and above dues.

Minutes of the discussion meeting are sent to the Board of Directors of LWV-TX. The organizing group decides when to apply for MAL Unit status.

At the time the LWV-TX board officially recognizes the formation of a MAL Unit, the state board will appoint an advisor to the Unit. After the MAL board is formed, the board with the state advisor, sets a timetable to become a local League.

Member-at-Large Unit Requirements

The MAL Unit board assumes responsibility for the health and viability of the Unit. Therefore, according to *LWV-TX Policies and Procedures*, a MAL Unit must meet the following requirements:

- ✓ Maintain a minimum membership, the number to be approved by LWV-TX Service to Local League Committee
- ✓ Conduct an annual meeting to adopt a budget and elect officers--chair, secretary, and treasurer;
- ✓ Develop local bylaws using a model provided;
- ✓ Assign responsibility for membership development, fund development, and voters service;

- ✓ Plan to meet regularly—minimum of five (5) board meetings and four (4) general meetings annually;
- ✓ Conduct an annual fund development campaign to support the work of the Unit,
- ✓ Publish a newsletter or appropriate substitute at least quarterly;
- ✓ Request training for the Unit board at least once every two years; and,
- ✓ Conduct a community analysis as defined in the League of Women Voters of the United States' (LWVUS) publication, *Know Your Community*.

Member-at-large Units are encouraged to participate in LWV-TX member activities, like Statewide Conference and Convention, Lobby Day, state studies, and when possible, LWVUS studies. A MAL Unit may request information about national studies from their advisor. Additionally, a MAL Unit is expected to respond to all Action Alerts of LWV-TX.

A benefit of MAL Unit status is voting representation at state Convention. Individual members at large may attend as observers only.

The Organizational Meeting

It is time to get organized! The purpose of the organizational meeting is to elect officers and begin planning the activities for the coming months. Be certain at least one representative from LWV-TX is present, ideally the advisor appointed by LWV-TX. An agenda for the meeting would include:

- election of officers;
- determination of the means of communicating activities to members and public,
- discussion of possible activities in the areas of voters service (registration drives, forums, *Voters Guides*), fund development, membership development, and League program;
- formulation of a calendar of meeting dates for the next three months--include officer meetings, budget committee, voters service, other committee, activities, Unit meetings, officer training, and upcoming state and national League events; and,
- plan the community analysis.

Geographic Basis

When a Unit is formed, the members at large and LWV-TX must define the community in which the Unit is located. MAL Units form either as city, county, or area groups. The determination is based on several factors. Consideration should be given to the distance between the major population centers of the county and whether it is possible to serve all the various cities and school districts in the county. Each will likely request candidate

forums and would welcome *Voters Guides* for their elections. Will members want to travel many miles to attend general meetings? The area needs to be compact enough that member resources are not overly burdened. The larger the area, the more complicated is the community analysis and the greater the responsibility of the MAL Unit.

The Role of the Advisor

The role of an advisor to a MAL Unit is that of a friendly guide. The advisor will assist the members in their understanding of League and the way it works.

Specifically, the advisor will:

- assist in arranging board training for Unit officers;
- attend a minimum of three Unit meetings annually;
- maintain frequent contact with Unit officers;
- advise the budget committee during budget preparation using model provided;
- aid the nominating procedure by helping the Unit select a nominating committee, training a committee chair, and nurturing the nominating process;
- approve, prior to release, all news releases, public statements, and local publications;
- help the secretary, treasurer, and person(s) responsible for membership establish and maintain record keeping and filing systems;
- guide the development of local policy statements;
- advise the committee charged with development and review of local bylaws;
- report to the Services to Local Leagues (SLL) Committee of LWV-TX;
- approve taking action at any level of government; and,
- ensure that membership recruitment and retention proceed according to guidelines from the SLL Committee of LWV-TX.

MAL Unit Relationship with their Advisor

The MAL Unit will:

- send a copy of everything to the Unit advisor;
- include the advisor in the editing process for Unit publications;
- consult with the advisor before taking action at any level of government;
- invite the advisor to participate annually in calendar planning;
- allow adequate time during at least two board meetings for interaction with the advisor; and,
- give the advisor advance notice of the time and place of meetings listed under *The Role of the Advisor*.

An Advocate for Change

The League of Women Voters has taken positions on issues and advocated for governmental change since its formation. Early issues of interest to the League more than 50 years ago were safe, affordable housing and childcare! At every level of government, the League is known for its thorough research of an issue and the careful study conducted by the membership in order to reach a consensus of opinion. The League takes action only on those issues on which it has consensus. Designed as a "living laboratory of democracy," the League is tri-level, like government itself--local, state, and national, and has positions at all three levels.

MAL Units do not study local issues or adopt local positions. A MAL Unit may take local action based on state and national positions. The advisor must be consulted before action is taken at any level.

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