January 24th, 2004
Rowe House, 31 Maple Street, Oneonta
9:30-10:00 a.m. Coffee Hour | 10:00 a.m. Meeting

National and Local Program Planning
Come review our National LWV and Local positions
~ Discussion led by Barb Hein ~
Make recommendations for updates, deletions, or new studies
Bring a brunch item to share. Coffee and juice provided.

February 7th, 2004
Rowe House, 31 Maple Street, Oneonta
11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

General Membership Meeting
Election of the President
Laurel Elder will lead a discussion of the update of our national position.
Bring your lunch - beverage provided

In This Issue

President’s Letter 2
In Memoriam; First Night 2
Petition 3
Voters Service Report; Calendar of Events 3

Regional Workshop 4
Direct Recording Electronic Systems (DREs) 5-6
New Members 6
Welfare Reform 6-7
A LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Happy New Year to One and All,

This has been a busy 2003 for the Oneonta League of Women Voters and an even busier one is coming up. I hope you all are ready.

On the 24th of January, we will meet at the Rowe House for a Saturday meeting for National & Local Program Planning. Both are in your Membership Booklet. Details of the National Policies are included in this Bulletin. Barb Hein will be leading the meeting so come prepared with questions and suggestions. We will have a coffee time at 9:30 AM and the meeting will start at 10:00. Please plan on attending.

On Saturday, February 7, Laurel Elder will help us in our consensus on the League’s positions for the election of a president. Details of this issue will be explained in the January National Voter. This, too, will be at the Rowe House from 10:00 AM until 1:00 PM with everyone bringing a brown bag lunch. Coffee and tea will be provided.

This is an especially important year ahead for us as we inform, educate and urge our citizens to participate in this privilege they have of electing those who govern.

DEMOCRACY WORKS! 

~ Maggie Winne

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

President ..................... Maggie Winne
Vice-President ................ Kay Stuligross
Secretary ...................... Karen Geasey
Treasurer ..................... Gerri Haan
Bulletin Editor ............... Dorothy Bloom

MISSION STATEMENT

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization whose purpose is to encourage the informed and active participation of citizens in government. The LWV does not support or oppose candidates or political parties, but does support or oppose issues after study and member agreement.

IN MEMORIAM

We are saddened and made less by the death of League member, Carrie Kato. Carrie was one of those rare people who, when a job needed doing, said “I’ll do that” and did it!

Those who had the opportunity to know and work with Carrie hold fond memories of her warmth, her friendly manner, her smile and her great sense of humor. For Carrie the glass was always half full—never half empty.

We thank you, Carrie, for your dedication to the League over many years. We shall miss you.

~ Peg Hathaway

LAUREL ELDER TO DISCUSS THE ELECTION FOR THE PRESIDENCY

January marks the start of the 2004 presidential election. George W. Bush is running uncontested for his party’s nomination, while nine democrats are fighting to become Bush’s competitor. Even though the first primary isn’t until January 27th, some of the problems connected with our presidential process are already apparent: the complete breakdown of public financing for presidential elections, the frontloading of primaries and the tremendous power of the media in making or breaking presidential nominees. On February 7th, fresh from spending three weeks in New Hampshire in the heart of presidential campaigning, I will make some preliminary remarks about the presidential selection process, which I hope will be followed by lively discussion and debate.

~ Laurel Elder

LEAGUE PARTICIPATES IN FIRST NIGHT PARADE

Thanks to Karen and Dave Geasey, we got their truck decorated and ready for the parade on New Year’s Eve. We followed the theme of the evening with “Let Freedom Ring” with posters naming Rockwell’s four freedoms plus our League banner, voting signs and bells with crepe paper streamers. Chris Burgher helped decorate and rode on the truck with Karen, Michelle, Maggie and her daughter Karen carrying the signs in the back and ringing the bells while Dave drove us down Elm and Main. We were mentioned in the paper on Friday so it was worth the preparation and work as this was a last minute idea phoned in on the day before Christmas, suggesting we participate. We were glad it was such a mild evening and hope that keeping the League’s name in front of the public will continue to further our image as a viable organization in Oneonta and neighboring communities.
LWV GETTING THE JOB DONE!

A petition containing 2,245 signatures was delivered to the Otsego County Board of Representatives on Friday, asking that voters be allowed to approve or disapprove its redistricting plan.

LWV Oneonta and LWV Cooperstown did the leg work and got the signatures needed. Congratulations!

~ Marcia Merrin

And from Kay Stuligross who led the action:

Congratulations and thanks to everyone who helped with our successful Drive to petition the County to put weighted voting on the ballot. On December 19, I delivered a petition with 2245 signatures to Cooperstown.

Special thanks go to Martha Clavoe of the Cooperstown LWV who witnessed 300 signatures! 27 members of our League joined the 85 Otsego County voters who circulated petitions. Each of you was important to this success.

Now it is up to the County Board of Representatives. They will check the validity of the signatures and then must set a date for the public vote. This can either be a special election or at the next general election, next November. In the meantime, our job is to continue to inform the voters of the inherent unfairness of weighted voting as a means of achieving equality.

I spent New Year’s Eve afternoon at the county office building, along with the county employees who worked until 5:00 pm. Laura Child, the secretary and the person responsible for certifying our petition, was very polite, helpful and professional. Her notes were meticulous and easy to understand. As of January 12, it was too close to call. By the time you receive this Bulletin we will know the answer. At that time your League Board will decide the next step to take. We do believe, however, that whether or not the petition drive legally requires the County Board to give the voters an opportunity to vote on the weighted voting system, they must listen to the many voters across the entire county who have asked that their voices be heard.

~ Kay

VOTER SERVICES’ CINDY BENNER REPORTS ON SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES FORUM

We had a busy October with Candidate Forums on two evenings. I would like to thank the following League members who helped at the forums and distributed Facts for Voters and Voters Guides around Oneonta over the past couple of weeks: Martha Robinson, Bob Holstead, Lucille Wiggitt, Paul Scheele, Connie Tammer, Sandee Fleisher, Shirley Fiorvanti, Maggie Winne, Susan Hughson, Peg Hathaway, Dorothy Bloom, Karen Geasey, Kay Stuligross, Gerri Haan, and Pat Gourlay. An especially big thank you goes to Laurel Elder, who was a fantastic co-chair in helping me prepare for the forums, recruiting students to help, and helping at the forums. In addition, Laurel did a super job moderating the October 28th forum. I also want to mention what a terrific job Gerri Haan did in making the candidates’ name cards.

Chris Burgher did a wonderful job creating the Voters’ Guide; I don’t know what we would do without her expertise. Thanks to Dorothy Bloom for getting the Guide to the printer and to Maggie Winne for bringing the Guides to the forum on October 21. So many people have pitched in and helped out, and I couldn’t have done it without everyone’s help. I apologize if I’ve forgotten to recognize someone for their help. On a side note, I want to relay my thanks to Bette Wagner for her efforts in registering voters.

~ Cindy Benner, Voter Service Chair

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

January 24th, 9:30 PM - National & Local Program Planning, Rowe House, 31 Maple St., Oneonta

February 7th, 11:00 AM - General Meeting - Election of President, Rowe House, 31 Maple St., Oneonta

March 20th - Joint Meeting with AAUW, Lunch at Iannelli’s
2003—WHAT A YEAR!

The League had many challenges in accomplishing its legislative priorities in '03 and some important victories.

On the national level we helped bring about a decisive vote telling the Federal Communications Commission to roll back its unfair rules; we won funding for the Help America Vote Act to ensure fair elections and cheered the landmark Supreme Court decision upholding the main provisions of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (McCain-Feingold.)

On the state level we made significant progress on the Campaign for Fiscal Equity in education reforms. In the upcoming legislative session we will push for reforms of local property taxes and assessments to make them fair and uniform, urge that our legislators look into the competing views to determine the fairest adjustment in the operating aid formula and promote legislation that helps the neediest students first.

Implementation of HAVA has been and will continue to be a very high priority. Specifically we are concerned with the kind of voter ID that will be required for new voters who register by mail; we want the voter database expanded by using all state agency lists; we will work to see that increased training and compensation for poll workers is mandated; and we will work for passage of legislation that will require the NYS Board of Elections to design and implement a comprehensive voter education plan.

And locally, what a glorious effort we made to get the Weighted Voting Redistricting Plan on the ballot for the citizens to vote “yes” or “no” on weighted voting. As of this time, we don’t know the results of that effort.... time will tell!

~ Peg Hathaway

ONEONTA BOARD MEMBERS ATTEND REGIONAL WORKSHOP FOR LOCAL LEAGUES

On Saturday, October 4, Oneonta League Board members Maggie Winne, Dorothy Bloom and Karen Geasey, attended the Regional Workshop at Tompkins-Cortland Community College. The workshop was sponsored by the LWVNY Board and presentations were given by Marcia Merrins, LWVNY President, Nikki Harris LWVNY Vice President/Development, and Martha KennedyVice President/ Membership.

Marcia Merrins was the first presenter and she spoke about leadership from many angles. She spoke about the League Leaders’ Syndrome which is how a local league allows and encourages the President or other strong Board members to do more work than is necessary. It is a problem which shows through the Board or League having no infrastructure beyond that particular leader. In these cases, no delegation takes place, and Boards/members “approve” of decisions made by others when there should have been a group committee making the decision. A group of League leaders need to make collective decisions, taking the time to discuss, delegate and share responsibility so that others are trained all the time, more members feel ownership of decisions and actions of the League and so that burnout of strong leaders/members can be avoided.

Marcia also stressed the importance of good record keeping for the person who will next fill a position in the League. Leadership in the League is a service you give to the group. It’s not about the leader’s magical touch, but about the entire organization. Someday all leaders will leave and there must be others ready to take over the responsibilities.

Martha Kennedy explained to us all about the Membership Incentive, or “Let In Some Fresh AIR” campaign, which our League in Oneonta has committed to participate in for the next two years. With this program, applications must be filled out by local Leagues and sent in to LWVNY to be eligible for the rebate. The League will be allowed to keep the State portion of PMPs (per-member-payment) for FY 2005, if the League experiences a 5% growth by January 2005. Many good ideas were shared about “growing” your League, and this segment was enriched by all the input from the 5 Leagues that were in attendance that day. We also enjoyed sharing ideas during lunch and some of them are already being implemented this year by our League.

Nikki Harris concluded the presentations by discussing fundraising responsibilities and ways to reconnect Board members to their “passion” for the League and its mission. Nikki touched on the differences between donating to our Education Fund, which can be claimed as “charitable” and also earmarked for a particular local League, and donating to the League as a non-tax deductible contribution. We were told that each local League has a “grants account” within LWVNY, which is where our education fund donations are collected. Each League then requests an amount as needed as a grants system, since the money in the account belongs to the individual local Leagues.

There were many useful handouts, as always with the League, covering a lot of related items, as well as a CD containing more materials for our use. Overall, the workshop was a positive experience, despite the very windy and rainy weather. It was a nice opportunity to meet other League leaders, and to put faces with familiar names.

~ Karen Geasey
DREs—Direct Recording Electronic Systems
Tamper Free Voting or Quick-Fix?
(from the Congressional Research Service)

Direct Recording Electronic Systems (DREs). In July 2003 computer scientists from Johns Hopkins and Rice Universities released a security analysis of software purportedly from a DRE touch screen voting machine of a major voting-system vendor. The study drew public attention to a long-simmering controversy about whether current DREs are vulnerable to tampering that could influence the outcome of an election. DREs are the first voting systems to be completely computerized. Touch screen DREs are arguably the most versatile and user-friendly of any current system, and their use is expected to increase under provisions of The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002, which specifies that each polling place is expected to provide at least one machine completely accessible to any qualified voter.

While a defense-in-depth approach would appear to be generally desirable for addressing security questions with DREs, any attempt to implement such an approach needs to take into account potential problems that can be associated with making substantial changes in the way an election is administered. For example, when a voting system is replaced in a jurisdiction, the proportion of residual votes and problems administering the election may actually increase initially at least in part because neither voters nor poll workers are familiar with the new system. In addition, there are no proven cases of tampering with DREs or other computer-assisted voting systems in public elections. For these and other reasons some observers argue that any changes to current technology and procedures should be incremental. Others, however, state that given the evolving threat to the environment, an incremental approach is not sufficient to prevent undetected tampering that could change the outcome of an election. Policymakers will need to weigh such differences in determining what if any actions to take in response to this set of issues.

The question for the LWV then is: in view of the possibilities contained in the assessments, under what guidelines should Members take their positions?

(from the ACLU)

The integrity of the voting process is fundamental to the operation of our democracy. A major component of a valid electoral process is voting technology that honestly and accurately counts every ballot. Because voting technologies have always been susceptible to error, bias, and corruption, we must remain vigilant about new technologies and insist that they maximize the likelihood of recording what each voter intends, regardless of the voter’s race, economic status, or geographical location.

Though the now discredited punch-card voting systems failed all these tests, there is much debate about what voting systems should take their place. Touch screen voting systems offer tremendous potential advantages, including ease of use, accessibility to persons with disabilities, ready accommodation of the needs of language minorities, and the voter’s ability to review and correct ballots. However, computer security experts have raised serious concerns about whether those machines are open to undetectable error, tampering, or outright fraud.

The ACLU strongly supports the recommendation of computer experts that digital voting technologies be subjected to the most rigorous testing and certification procedures. This should include rigorous and public testing of the software used in these systems.

The ACLU believes that the voter verified paper ballots should not be employed until there has been a rigorous test of their reliability and practicality in circumstances comparable to their use on Election Day. This review should include a consideration of the possibility for human error and fraud in handling these ballots.

In the interim, if DREs are to be employed in the 2004 election cycle:

1. The computer source code for all security critical functions of the machines should be subjected to thorough independent review. “Open Source Code”, which can be freely tested, is the best solution to the problem of computer software integrity. At a minimum, the full code should be subjected to a review by an independent body and only open source code should be used for tabulating the results.
2. Rigorous physical security measures need to be instituted to ensure that the machines and any associated paper ballots are not compromised.
3. Election officials need to be thoroughly trained in their use and the physical infrastructure necessary to insure their use, e.g. sufficient electrical wiring, needs to be assured.
4. The jurisdiction should have a permanent broad-based security task force or oversight body, representing all interested segments of the community, to evaluate the potential for fraud or error in voting systems and to address the new security challenges that will inevitably arise in the future. That task force should have complete access to the DRE code and conduct its own independent testing.
5. Election officials should select technology that gives them maximum flexibility in taking advantage of emerging technological innovations. These should include the
incorporation of a printer that will provide a voter-verified paper ballot for use with touch screen systems, if such technological innovations are shown to be feasible.

from League President Kay Maxwell

The Election Assistance Commission
Washington, DC

Dear Commissioner Soaries,

On behalf of the League of Women Voters, I want to offer congratulations on your appointment and confirmation as one of the original members of the Election Assistance Commission. As an organization that has advocated for voting rights for more than 80 years, we understand the importance of the Commission’s upcoming work in improving our nation’s election processes in order to protect the voting rights of all citizens. We pledge whatever assistance the League can provide in helping you and your fellow commissioners achieve those goals.

The League believes that our nation must have practical and rigorous security for our voting machines and that basic safeguards for provisional balloting and accurate voter registration rolls must be implemented.

We look forward to working with you to build the voters’ trust in America’s election systems.

WELFARE REFORM IN OTSEGO COUNTY

On Monday, November 24th the League held a Presentation on The Impact of Welfare Reform on Otsego County. The implementation of Welfare Reform was based on the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996 which was signed into law by President Clinton in 1995. The key aspects of the reform included temporary and time-limited public assistance, individual work skills development and mandatory employment, and public and private partnerships to meet extenuating community needs. The panel, comprised of Commissioner Charles Christian of the Otsego County Department of Social Services, Mr. Tom Pritchard, Director of the Otsego County Office of Employment and Training, and Mr. Dan Maskin, Executive Director of the New York State Community Action Association were well qualified to speak to those issues.

WELCOME, JOB SEEKERS. This is the sign which hangs in the office of the local Department of Social Services. For 12 years, Commissioner Charles Christian has served as head of the Otsego County Department of Social Services and he worked in the Department of Social Services in Delaware County before that. Materials distributed by the commissioner showed how in 1995 there were 422 (PA) Public Assistance cases in Otsego County. In October of 2003 there were 109 Temporary Assistance cases, comprised of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families cases (Federally funded) and Safety Net cases (State funded). Otsego County was recognized by NYS OTDA Commissioner Brian Wing for the reduction of Public Assistance cases in response to Welfare Reform legislation implementation.

There is still much work to be done at the Department of Social Services. The typical client coming in receives a needs assessment, and the Department attempts to apply a diversion methodology so that someone who only needs one-time assistance with a specific issue may not go onto the TANF case rolls. Some one-time only needs might include assistance with care insurance payment, or with a single utility shut off. Eligibility must be determined, but on-going assistance may not apply in these cases. For working families, maybe all they need is subsidy for child care while they work. For others, the unemployed/unemployable, applications for multiple kinds of assistance, or referrals to other programs for which they are eligible, happen as part of the benefits application process.

The % of reduction in assistance cases is echoed throughout the nation over the last 5 years. Increases in the amount of families receiving child care subsidy indicate that more people may be working. In 1995 181 children received subsidy, and in 2003 345 children received services. More expenses but possibly a good sign. However, in 1995 there were 3121 Medicaid Cases,
and in 2003 there were 46,355 cases. This can be attributed to the add-on programs like Child Health Plus, Family Health Plus and the Infant Care Guarantee. There was also a 20% rise in Food Stamp participation with 1408 households receiving food stamps in 2003. Medicaid is a huge expense for the counties, and there are also other mandated services like ARC services, Chemical Dependency Clinics and Offices of Mental Health.

“The poor will always be with us” said the commissioner, but welfare has a negative connotation and “it is a burden to be a welfare recipient.” The Department of Social Services also has an employment unit, and assistance recipients are required to work to maintain eligibility for assistance. “We were getting people working, and one-time assistance was working, but the jobs didn’t come – and the jobs that they did get aren’t great.” When asked where the people are who were on welfare before and how they are doing, the commissioner replied “We don’t know where they are.”

Tom Pritchard has directed the Otsego County Office of Employment and Training for 10 years. He reminded us of the history of Federally Funded programs for employment training which included CETA, J O B Training Partnership Act, and now WIA (Workforce Investment Act). The goal of these programs has been to get people into the workforce and headed for economic independence.

He pointed out that there is a decrease nationally in public assistance caseloads, there is an increase in substance abuse, homelessness, petty crime, and domestic violence in the nation. Under the table employment has also increased, and these jobs, while providing some income for people, offer no benefits like insurance coverage or pension, and no stability of income.

“Otsego County is one of the least expensive places in New York State to live.” This is the good news and the bad news both. Otsego County is a service based economy. Jobs here are often in education, tourism, banking, and insurance. We do not have manufacturing which offers work opportunity in our area. We also have many entry-level, low paying opportunities and not many management, supervisory and administrative positions. Lower incomes make self sufficiency less likely, even though unemployment data for Otsego County shows we have one of the lowest rates of unemployment in New York State. What people earn is out of sync with what it costs to live here. Our HEAP (Home Energy Assistance Program) support for households is very high, and many families get this assistance who are not receiving TANF public assistance.

“Otsego County is the northernmost county eligible for Appalachian Regional Commission, and our economy merits it,” says Pritchard. “We need to be preparing students to live and work in our local communities, but the best and the brightest leave us.” There need to be real sustaining employment opportunities here.

Dan Maskin spoke about the implementation of Welfare Reform and provided a background for the audience on the history of Block Grant Funding, pending TANF re-authorization, HEAP and the amendments attached to the legislation, and Headstart funding. He referenced a self-sufficiency study which provided information on the income standards people needed to live in different parts of the country. One thing that can be observed about Otsego County is that our economy stays the same whether the rest of the country is doing well or doing poorly.” Dan made this and other local observations based on information gathered in his work with the Leadership Otsego Program held at SUNY Oneonta. “Community agencies pick up the pieces,” said Maskin. That was also clearly a goal of welfare reform. Dan also referenced Barbara Ehrenreich’s book, Nickle and Dimed - Getting by in America, as an example of the odds of getting a job at $5.00 an hour and becoming self sufficient with that job. The odds are 97 to 1.

Delaware County prepared one of the only follow-up documents in the state to evaluate what happened to the almost 60% of people on Public Assistance who no longer appear on TANF case loads after the implementation of Welfare Reform in NYS. The study showed there was no reason to believe they didn’t live in poverty with their newfound jobs, whether they were paid under or over the table for their work. Medicaid roles are constantly increasing, based on income eligibility for the program and lack of personal health insurance coverage. So many people were eligible for the Family Health Plus program that planned step ups in income eligibility for the program never happened.

Different counties have experimented with work rewards to stimulate self sufficiency, but by requiring full time employment (35 to 40 hours) of work for those receiving public assistance, we are talking about having more than one job, and at minimum wage, no benefits, this still will not lead people out of poverty to self sufficiency.

“We need $87,000,000” said Maskin. And good jobs.

Prepared by Kathie Greenblatt- League Member
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