

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS of PULLMAN

OBSERVER CORPS – GUIDELINES and FAQs

September 2016

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The League of Women Voters of Pullman (LWVP) has an invaluable tool in its mission of working for good government when there is a vigorous and lively Observer Corps in place. This group forms the eyes and ears of the LWVP Board as participants attend and observe the workings of governmental bodies. (6) “The League's reputation as a civic monitor has been earned by the Observer Corps of the local Leagues.”(2)

What is the Observer Corps and what is its function within the League?

Observer Corps members attend council, board, commission, and advisory committees (these will all be covered by the use of the terms agency and entity in this document) to listen, learn, observe, and report back to the League with factual information about the proceedings and any information about which the Board may be interested. In particular, the Observer calls the League Board's attention to community and public policy issues that the League may wish to act/testify on based on League Position Statements. Observers also identify trends or problems for possible future study and action by the League. Observers' reports will be available to all members on the LWVP website.

What are the rules for Observers?

A key rule is that Observers do not speak or participate in the meeting being observed. Observers are the eyes and ears of the League Board, but are never the Voice of the League. (3)

The Observer must not pursue personal interests at the meetings. A simple question of clarification is allowed, preferably after the meeting.

Reports need to be completed in a timely way in order to be of consequence to the League and are requested to be returned to the Observer Board Chair within one week.

Observers maintain an impartial, respectful, and professional attitude.

How long is the term of an Observer?

Although traditionally a league member has been asked to attend meetings of the agency for a minimum of three months, the preferred “best intention” commitment is a “school” year (September-May). There is no maximum number of terms for being an Observer☺ and one is welcome to observe multiple agencies or change agencies after a period of time. The longer one participates, the more familiar members will be with the individual agency as well as the role of Observer in general.

What determines if an agency can/should be chosen to be observed?

- Governmental or government-related entities that are rule-making, manage public funds and run by elected or appointed officials.
- Agencies that make recommendations to a rule-making agency and tie into the public infrastructure. (1)
- Agencies that are subject to the ‘public open meetings/Sunshine laws’ or are willing to have a League Observer.
- There is a desire by the League to learn more about the business carried out by an agency, and/or its impact on our communities. It may be an agency of concern or it may be dealing with a “hot” community issue.
- A member indicates an interest in being an Observer of the entity.

- The League Board determines whether to include the agency among the Observer Corps roles. They will also consider the priorities of the League and the availability of members willing to be Observers.
- The *TRY* is a good reference for a listing of agencies the League may be interested in observing in Pullman and Whitman County but the boards, etc. listed there do not exclude other agencies of interest.

Will this board know who I am and what I am doing there?

Yes, the League’s Executive Committee sends a letter to the Chair of the agency that has been chosen and approved to have an Observer. That letter, of which the Observer receives a copy, introduces the Observer and the League Observer Corps program and asks the chair to include the Observer on the mailing list to receive agendas and other materials. The Observer should introduce her/himself at the first meeting the Observer attends. After that the Observer will be a part of the audience only.

How am I identified at the meeting?

The Observer will be given a League of Women Voters Observer badge to wear at every meeting you attend. It is large and should be visible to all if you wear it on your lapel. This badge should be returned to the Observer Corps Chair when you have finished serving as an Observer.

What if I am asked a question?

If asked, your answer to every question is that you are a League of Women Voters’ Observer. You attend these meetings to follow the activities of this agency, but not to speak.

How do I report what I have learned at the meeting?

Observers use an Observer Corps’ Report Form to briefly note “both the issues being discussed as well as the process by which they are being discussed”. (5) The Observer may comment on the openness of the meetings, or lack thereof, the feeling of comfort for members of the public attending, or any other comments about the workings of this agency. A copy of the agenda should be included, if possible, along with any pertinent materials shared by the agency. If the Observer prefers to write a brief summary in the form of “minutes” of the meeting, that is an option as well.

Does a League Observer ever testify before that board?

No! Any member of the Executive Committee, but usually the “Voice of the League” may attend a meeting and testify, based on League positions concerning issues under discussion. If the Voice of the League cannot appear, another Executive Committee member or a person appointed by the Executive Committee for this task may appear.

Does being an Observer help League in any other way?

Yes! “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.”(4) The League believes that the presence of Observers helps keep government entities attentive to their jobs, with the proper respect for doing the public’s business, and promotes transparency and accountability. If something of concern does take place, the Observer should talk with the Observer Corps Chair or a member of the League Executive Committee about it immediately so that League can testify or ask questions in a timely way.

What happens if I cannot attend a meeting or two?

If possible, the Observer Corps Chair should be notified well in advance so that a substitute can possibly be found. In the event that no substitute is available, the agency will not have an Observer present, but the Observer should not feel guilty if and when he/she cannot be present at every meeting. However, if absences are numerous, the Observer might want to change his/her selection to a time when he/she is more available.

Materials made available to Observers by the Observer Corps Chair:

Information about the agency:

- Meeting time, frequency, location
- Names and titles of the members of the agency
- The functions and/or services it provides
- Availability of agendas and other public materials

And, if available:

- The legal basis or jurisdiction of the agency
- How the agency is funded
- Access laws/regulations

Also:

- A Report Form
- Guidelines and FAQs
- Sample actual reports
- League of Women Voters of Pullman's current Position Statements

How do I sign up for this important and informative role?

The Observer Corps Chair will have a sign-up sheet at all League meetings that lists the agencies being suggested by the League to have an Observer.

Resources used for this document:

League of Women Voters of Washington

- (1) LWVWA, Ann Murphy, President of LWVWA, question and answer session in Pullman, 08/03/2016
- (2) LWVWA website: http://www.lwvwa.org/about_us.html, accessed 8/2016

League of Women Voters of the United States

- (3) LWVUS – League Basics, <http://forum.lwv.org/sites/default/files/member-resources/league-basics.pdf>, accessed 8/2016.
- (4) LWVUS - *Voters Service and Citizens Information*, <http://forum.lwv.org/member-resources/book/voters-service-and-citizens-information>, accessed 8/2016
- (5) LWVUS – *Observing Your Government in Action, A Resource Guide*, LWVUS, 2007
- (6) LWVUS – #36 Observer Corps, Guidelines from National for an Observer Corps Program, 2011
<http://lwv.org/content/36-observer-corps>, accessed 8/2016