

New Hampshire Voter – the newsletter of the League of Women Voters NH

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Winter 2014

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Words from the President...

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President's Thoughts

As freezing rain falls outside my window, my thoughts turn to the hot issues coming up in the NH legislature. Some we've tracked for a long time: election law, education funding, expanded gambling. Others reflect issues we've studied recently: labeling of genetically engineered foods, progress on a new women's prison. Newest is a bill to abolish the death penalty in NH; our LWVUS position opposes the death penalty. The NH Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (of which LWVNH is a member) believes it may be possible to get this bill passed this year.

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Another bill I came across is HB 1571, which would require employers to provide "reasonable accommodation" to breastfeeding mothers. I'm long past having that matter to me personally, but isn't it interesting that women's rights issues are still being fought, nearly 100 years after winning our right to vote.

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In this issue you'll find a 2-page flier showing how and when the public can influence legislation. It is also in a color-coded pdf version on the "Action & Advocacy" page of our website under "Advocacy Tips." Please feel free to photocopy or send this electronically to everyone you know who wants to make their voices heard by government officials. As League members have learned by experience, we can make a difference.

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Let's All Think Membership!

What's the best way to increase League membership in New Hampshire? The Kearsarge-Sunapee League has been very successful in adding new members. They have attracted new members by having interesting program meetings. People interested in a particular issue who attend a League program are prime candidates for membership. Don't let an opportunity go by. Be sure to have League membership materials at your meetings and make an effort to reach out to potential members. Every member should "work the crowd" and talk up League membership. Tell them why you are a member.

Mary Perry and Mary Davies serve as state coaches, part of the LWVUS MLD (membership/leadership development) program. Each state has a Schur Fellow who works with them to promote membership. It would be helpful to have another coach in New Hampshire. A member at large would be a welcome addition and could help us look at ways to welcome and involve others who don't live near a local League. Contact Mary Perry, marybperry@tds.net or 603-648-2488, or Mary Davies, marbob75@yahoo.com or 603-228-6312, if you are interested or have other ideas on boosting membership in NH.

Agriculture Study Consensus

The national League study to update our agriculture position is well underway. The LWVUS board of directors has released the consensus questions. The questions and links to the study articles are on our website: LWVNH.org, then click on Agriculture National Study.

Local Leagues holding consensus meetings must submit their answers online by mid-April 2014. Members are welcome to attend any local League consensus meeting, which will be posted on our Calendar page. Here's the plan as we know it (1/31/14). LWV Kearsarge/Sunapee consensus meeting is Wed., March 19, 10-2 in the library of Hilltop Place, New London. The meeting hosted by LWV Greater Capitol Area is scheduled for Wed., April 9, 10-2 at Baker Library, Bow.

We shouldn't be daunted—it's a long list of questions covering many aspects of agriculture policy. We can decide not to address all the issues in our consensus meetings. The topics range from subsidies to food safety to animal management to research and development and genetically engineered food labeling.

League members at large and those unable to attend consensus meetings in person may participate by reading articles, doing any other research they wish, and sending their answers to the LWVNH office (4 Park St. Rm 200, Concord NH 03301) by April 4. Members may choose to answer only those questions on which they feel they are informed.

November Workshop Provides Food For Thought

About 40 people attended Food For Thought: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Farmers and Consumers in New Hampshire. In addition to League members there were farmers, legislators, others working in agriculture and interested citizens. There was plenty of “food” to get League members started on the national League study.

NH Agriculture Commissioner Lorraine Merrill gave an overview of the economic and environmental values of agriculture to NH. The state is a leader in the direct marketing of products to the consumer and in the number of farmers who do direct marketing. NH is also number one in the country in the percent of agricultural sales that are organic. The weakest area for NH agriculture is in profitability. NH agriculture is very diverse according to Merrill. The dairy industry has seen much consolidation across the country and in NH there are only 120 dairy farms left. The state she said needs both small and large farms to keep NH farming viable. Less than 7% of the land in NH is farm land; much is being converted to other uses. The biggest barrier to farming is the cost of land.

Chuck Souther, owner of Apple Hill Farm in Concord spoke about the challenges of working under U.S. Department of Labor regulations. He hires skilled temporary workers from Jamaica for harvest season but the rules or their interpretation change from year to year. Some of his Jamaican farm workers have been with him for 19 years. The law needs to be more workable. He would like to see immigration law reform.

Roger Noonan, owner of Middle Branch Farm in New Boston and President of the New England Farmer’s Union addressed the Federal Food Safety and Modernization Act of 2011. The regulations are one size fits all and more suited to mega-farms in Iowa than to the smaller operations in New Hampshire. Regulators he said tend to underestimate the costs to the small and medium farmer to comply.

Professor Estelle Hrabak of the University of New Hampshire gave scientific background on genetically modified organisms and noted a number of benefits. Benefits of GMOs in agriculture according to Hrabak include increased yields, potential health benefits especially in developing countries, and decreased use of insecticides and pesticides. On the negative side the focus is on technology rather than food and increased insect resistance. Testing and approval of genetically engineered foods falls under the purview of three federal agencies. GMOs are “the most highly regulated foods in the world,” she stated.

Representative Maureen Mann, sponsor of HB660, the GMO labeling bill, called for transparency. While there is no consensus on whether genetically-modified food is safe, proponents believe that people should have the right to choose the food they feed their families and avoid what they consider unsafe. After months of testimony and study the legislative sub-committee voted the bill ought to pass while the full House Environment and Agriculture committee voted inexpedient to legislate. Provisions of a NH labeling bill would be triggered only when five other New England states pass a labeling bill.

League members will meet over the next few months to reach consensus.

Under the Bridge

The **NH Coalition to End Homelessness** has developed a new program called Granite Leaders to build leadership skills within a selected group of homeless and formerly homeless individuals. This six-month program would increase these individuals' capacity to take influential roles on issues relating to their lives and support their ability to join other community leaders and groups. The sessions planned by the coalition included an introduction to advocacy, the legislative process, communication, perceptions about homelessness, working with the media and strategic relations. The coalition planned for 15 participants but ended up recruiting 20.

Sally Davis and Peg Fargo, on behalf of the League of Women Voters of NH, offered to lead the day spent on the legislative process and citizen advocacy. NH House rep Sylvia Gale worked with us and secured a room in the LOB for the session.

The participants showed up, very excited about being in the government buildings. There were 10 women and 5 men, aged from their 20s to their 50s, who participated along with 2 staff members of the coalition. The participants were on time, dressed appropriately for the location, clean, pleasant and polite. The first man in the room announced to the staff that one of the women in the program would not be attending that day because she had the flu. She is really sick, he said, and she needs to find a place to keep warm and rest today. They both stay in the same emergency shelter and of course, they can only go to the shelter at night and must leave again in the morning. No breakfast served there.

We gave a description of how a bill becomes a law and how to testify on a bill after which we took a tour of the State House. The participants were most interested in this part of the program.

The next segment of the day was a panel which included Senate President Chuck Morse, Senator Lou D'Alessandro and House Rep Sylvia Gale. All three spoke about the impact that these program participants might have as citizen advocates. When it came time for the participants to ask questions, Sally and Peg (and we think the legislators) were amazed at the questions that were direct, relevant, well-articulated and passionate about the barriers in NH for the homeless.

The day ended with lunch at the State House cafeteria and both league members and program participants had learned a lot. Once again the league stepped up to provide a useful and unique service to citizens of New Hampshire - no matter where they live.

Homelessness continues to be a critical issue in New Hampshire. It is present in every county to some degree and the reasons for becoming homeless are varied and difficult to address. Risk factors for becoming homeless can include; continued unemployment with limited job prospects, having limited educational background, having spent time in correctional facilities, having healthcare, addiction and mental health issues, losing their home due to foreclosure, not receiving public benefits for which they are eligible, being

a low income person and not able to make payments for rent and related costs.

According to the “point-in-time” census for January 2013, there were 1,685 homeless. This census is taken during one 24-hour period on a day in January. People in camps are counted, those in medical facilities, at food kitchens, in shelters or served at agencies.

It is an imperfect count at best since it does not accurately count those who are homeless and staying with friends or family, called “doubling-up”. It would also not cover those who were not in a central location of some type that day. It does, however, give an indication of the trend of homelessness and the individuals and families who are homeless. The overall homeless population decreased marginally but unsheltered homeless and precariously housed population increased significantly between 2012 and 2013.

Based on the information received, in addition to those staying overnight in emergency shelters or transitional housing shelters, 1 in 4 homeless individuals are unsheltered, living in cars, abandoned buildings, tents or other places not intended for human habitation and that means 365 days a year. This subjects the individuals to severe hardship and makes them susceptible to illness, drug abuse and violence.

The 2011 point of contact census indicated that homeless that day had the following issues:

- 1,270 had known mental illness,*
- 980 reported alcohol abuse,*
- 954 indicated other substance abuse issues,*
- 806 with dual diagnosis,*
- 139 with developmental disability,*
- 724 with physical disability,*
- 417 were victims of domestic violence,*
- 335 veterans,*
- 14 with HIV/AIDS, and,*
- 895 who are chronically homeless.*

Persons in the census responded to all issues related to them so many have multiple issues. Tragically in 2011, families comprised 33% of those served in shelters and 19% were children.

There are 692 shelter beds in NH located in 42 shelters which include: 18 emergency shelters, 6 specialty shelters, 12 domestic violence shelters and 6 transitional programs. Some of the shelters do not allow any individuals who have been drinking and several do not allow families with children. Thus, even the beds that we do have are limited in who can fill them.

Solving the issue of homelessness will take collaboration between public and private groups, the state and the federal government to develop a comprehensive plan to address the complex issues of the individual homeless individuals and families. Hopefully, by developing small programs like the Granite Leaders, we can work one-on-one to empower, inspire and encourage advocacy toward real solutions.

League Action

Gambling – How many years have we been opposing expanded gambling as a source of funding government in NH? In some ways, this year's efforts make me more optimistic than ever that the NH "brand" will remain our mountains, forests, and lakes rather than as is in Connecticut - casinos. We have had four meetings with a huge attendance - well-run meetings with good ideas and people willing to take responsibility.

Timing is everything and our contacts with specific Representatives as identified will be critical. We will be ready with stories of experiences and reflections of what supporters are calling facts about job opportunities, regulatory proposals and income estimates. We know that once there is one casino, there is no way to stop others. We are encouraged by the growing awareness in MA of the negatives for communities being approached by operators. Votes in the Ways and Means Committee will probably occur in early March so the next weeks will be busy ones. To help you with arguments, go to www.casinofreenh.org.

Subscribe and get updates of the research being done now. The bills are posted.

Sally Davis

Repealing the Death Penalty in NH – HB 1170 to repeal the death penalty in NH was heard by the Criminal Justice Committee of the House on January 16 before a large crowd, most of whom supported the legislation. The committee is now considering the bill which is expected by most observers to eventually pass the House. In the Senate, however, it will likely face a tougher battle. The league supports this bill and members are requested to contact their representatives and senators. Gov. Hassan has indicated that she will sign the bill if it is passed.

Election law update

Last session the Legislature created an Election Law study committee to look for ways to increase voter participation and make voting easier for citizens. The League, along with a coalition of voting rights groups, has decided to concentrate on three recommendations for the committee:

1. Implement the League's website and voter education proposals which can be found on the LWVNH website.
2. Establish statewide polling hours to keep polls open from 7:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.
3. Cap the number of people voting per polling place at 3,500.

We believe these three changes would provide consistent, accurate information to voters and significantly cut down on wait times in larger communities.

The League will be advocating for several bills this session and opposing a few. We support HB600 to eliminate separate affidavits for people who don't have the required documents to register to vote. The bill which has already passed the House allows a citizen to use the registration form itself as an affidavit for any required information. We also support SB 206 which requires anyone who challenges a voter's identity to provide written evidence of the validity of the challenge and we support SB 272 which allows the Secretary of State to notify election officials in other states when a voter registers to

vote in New Hampshire.

The League opposes HB 1225 which would add "none of the above" to the ballot because we believe people who run for office should be respected for their efforts and because voters already have the option to not vote for people on the ballot. We also oppose HB 1506 and SB 284 which are bills aimed at preventing college students from exercising their right to vote. **Joan Flood Ashwell**

Kearsarge/Sunapee Legislative Update

The Kearsarge/ Sunapee League recently invited some local legislators to talk about their work in their respective House committees. We opened it to the public as an opportunity for learning about upcoming legislation. We attracted more than 50 people and was well received, so we hope to follow up with similar exchanges in the future. **Karen Ebel**, a new member of the Public Works and Highways Committee, spoke eloquently about the dire condition of the state's roads and bridges. She brought posters to illustrate their decline in maintenance and funding over time. **Sue Gottling** described a number of bills that will come before her committee on Resources, Recreation and Development. Sue lives on Lake Sunapee and is especially concerned about water resources and wetlands. **Tom Schamberg**, who serves on the Ways and Means Committee, said he is strongly in favor of Medicaid expansion despite the fact that he considers himself a fiscal conservative. (All four of the legislators were in favor of expansion, which was discussed at length.) **Linda Tanner**, another new legislator, said she had hoped to be on the Education Committee but had learned a lot as a member of the Labor, Industrial and Rehabilitative Services Committee. She said she was especially impressed by the tenor of the Legislature this past year; representatives were working together with less partisan tension. **Sally Embley**

Learn How NH Tax Pledge is Undermining Fundamental Services

How is it that New Hampshire's property taxes have doubled in the last 12 years, yet each year the state is falling behind in providing basic public services? To illuminate this problem, Granite State Priorities is sponsoring a presentation at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Concord on Tuesday evening, February 18. The speaker is former State Senator Mark Fernald whose 25-year analysis of state funding trends in three priority areas – education, roads and environmental protection – illustrates NH's deficit dilemma. We are trying to support a 21st century government with an 18th century revenue structure. The meeting on Feb. 18 will begin at 7 PM. Please come to learn about and discuss what realistic alternatives are available in today's tax-phobic climate.

Stay Informed - Each week during the NH session Sally Davis, LWVNH co-president and legislation tracker pulls selected bills from the agenda of upcoming hearings and votes. She creates a list that ties in with our priorities and also a few other bills of interest to League, and posts these on our website under "Hot Legislation." She also sends the list via email to anyone who would like to get it. If you have been on this list in the past you must email Sally to confirm that you wish to remain. Email Sally Davis at sally.davis36@gmail.com to stay on or to be added to her legislative notification list.

Want to Visit the Capitol with the League?

Each spring your state League board tries to pick a date when we invite League members to join us at the Capitol. In groups we attend committee hearings, sometimes offer testimony, and perhaps tour the State House. Every year we agonize over picking a date when it is likely bills of interest to League members will be heard. Some years we've had to cancel because of weather or changes in the legislative calendar. It is fun when it works but frustrating in other years.

So this year we have a different plan. If you would like to join a state board member attending hearings on particular bills, send us an email. When relevant bills come up, we'll email you and ask you to join us. A League board member or off-board expert will meet and brief you and then you will go together to the hearing and debrief afterward. If we already have a clear position on an issue, you'll be able to sign in expressing support or opposition. No need to testify, but signing in and being visible makes an impression on legislators.

Our priorities this year are election law, education funding, issues affecting women offenders, expanded gambling, agriculture, abolition of the death penalty and protection of women's reproductive rights. Which topics most interest you? Send us an email with the topics you care about and we'll put you on the right board member's list for future notification.

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