

NH Voter, the newsletter of the League of Women Voters New Hampshire August 2023

2 pieces of information and a request of League of Women Voters NH members and other supporters of fair elections:

First, the call to action: The New Hampshire Campaign for Voting Rights, of which League is a member, is hoping to find some volunteers to help complete roughly 100 research calls to town officials across the state, to identify whether they have set aside money in their town budgets to purchase new ballot counting devices.

The information gathered in these calls will help make a compelling case for subsidizing the cost of purchasing new ballot counting devices for individual towns, by painting a clear picture of how prepared (or unprepared) New Hampshire election administration offices are to purchase new devices as soon as they are approved.

We have a list, phone numbers, call script, and instructions, and are very happy to set up a Zoom to train and make these calls collectively! I think these calls should be quite easy with a group of volunteers, as they are purely information-gathering, not a huge number, and not making any asks of those we are calling.

Please, if you are willing to **make just 5 phone calls**, we can get this done. The contact person is Kelsey Fisk. Below is her email—tell her you're willing and copy us so we know League is pulling its weight on this. We would be very, very grateful for the help! Kelsey at kdouville@americavotes.org and LWVnewhampshire@gmail.com

Second, a new survey of attitudes towards greater housing choice in NH has just come out. We all know how knee-jerk the NIMBY reaction is, but now it seems that NH residents see why we need to increase affordable housing in our towns. To the statement “my community needs more affordable housing to be built” 78% of the respondents agreed, a whopping 20% more than last year. For those under age 35, no one disagreed, highlighting the struggle that younger members of our workforce are facing to find housing. Another surprise, in this year's survey 52% supported changes in land-use regulations, up from 29% a year ago.

Along with these positive changes in attitude that more housing choices are needed, is the special legislative committee that is studying housing needs. Let us hope that realistic legislation in 2024 comes out of that committee's work.

More details of the study can be found in a Union Leader front page article of August 23. The study was conducted by St. Anselm College Survey Center in July.

Our third topic is Belarus. Not what you were expecting? Neither were we.

Two members of our LWVNH state board had the opportunity this week to meet with two people from Belarus, thanks to the World Affairs Council of NH and the US State Department. Daniil is in his 30s and Kate in her 20s, and they are representing the Belarus government in exile in Lithuania. They are among a quarter to more than half a million Belarus citizens who have fled the country since the rigged election of 2020 (nod when any of this sounds familiar) and the violence that followed.

In 2020, president Lukashenko (now in his 30th year of a dictatorship that is the last in Europe) jailed all the dissidents who tried to run against him in the 2020 election. The wife of one jailed candidate, Mrs. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, had the courage to run for president in

her husband's place. Why was she not jailed? Daniil told us, Lukashenko thought "she's merely a woman" and let her run, assuming he would win again.

Why were these people willing to run against a dictator? Well, as president, Lukashenko had done a terrible job guiding the country when Covid hit. He claimed it was not a serious problem, that if one drank enough vodka one would be fine. Only when a very prominent person in Belarus died of Covid (sorry—who that was got lost in translation in our meeting) did the public realize the danger that Lukashenko was placing them in. These normally placid people were converted almost overnight into dissidents.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya did run and won the election. "What was the voter turnout?" we asked Kate. She explained that Lukashenko's administration controlled the election count, so no one is quite sure. When he lost, he declared the count was inaccurate and gave a new vote count. (are you nodding yet?) He declared he had been elected and continued in his role as president.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya fled the country under threat of violence, is now living in Vilnius in Lithuania. Daniil and Kate gave up their lives in Belarus to serve in her administration in exile, in the communications department. Other exiles are working on a new constitution for Belarus, to limit the power of the dictator/president. Kate's job is to try to get the messages about this work into the country (whose media are controlled by Lukashenko's government.) They are relying primarily on ads, which he apparently can't control.

To bring this back to the US point of view, just this past Monday the US issued a "do not travel" advisory for Americans considering going to Belarus, and the US embassy in the country is trying to evacuate any Americans living there. Belarus is a formal ally of Russia since 1991 (the only country to rejoin Russia upon the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1990), and Putin has used Belarus as a staging area for his Ukraine invasion. The Belarus military is not involved, but recently the Wagner forces have taken up positions in the country. Where this all will lead we must wait to see.

In the meantime, young dissidents like Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya and Daniil and Kate are trying to tell their story. We are sharing bits of it with you now, and feel privileged to have met with them.