

LWV[®]



LEAGUE OF
WOMEN VOTERS[®]
MINNESOTA



**OBSERVER
CORPS**
LOCAL LWV

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**These materials are intended for
internal LWV Minnesota use only.**

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What is an Observer?

FROM "OBSERVING YOUR GOVERNMENT IN ACTION"¹ BY LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE UNITED STATES:

Observer Corps are a structured way for individuals to exercise their right to know. They provide a valuable service to the community. They help ensure that citizens are aware of the decisions that impact their lives and they promote government transparency and accountability.

An Observer is an individual who attends a governmental meeting, notes what happens at the meeting, and reports back to the League and through the League to the community. By attending public meetings of local governmental bodies/agencies, Observers learn more about what their government is doing. They learn about the issues facing their community and are empowered to take action, if warranted. They also learn how issues are being addressed.

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. They help ensure that the issues facing their community are being handled "in the sunshine," in the open. Ideally, Observers are monitoring both the issues being discussed as well as the process by which they are being discussed. While not every item up for discussion will relate to a League's priorities, ensuring that the meeting is being conducted in an open and acceptable way is critical to all of the League's efforts and the health of our democracy.

Observer programs are not vehicles for individuals to work personal or partisan agendas. Observers generally do not "act" on issues in these meetings unless serving as a designated spokesperson for the League. Observers should not provide commentary or testimony on issues on behalf of the League. Instead, Observers attend meetings to gather information. Through the process, their presence encourages better, more transparent government.

1 http://forum.lww.org/sites/default/files/lwvof_observingyourgovernment.pdf

Observer Corps Job Description

The League of Women Voters believes that democratic government depends upon informed and active participation in government and requires that governmental bodies protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings and making public records accessible.

A local League Observer is a trained member of the Observer Corps who attends a governmental meeting, notes what happens at the meeting, and reports back to their local League and community members. Observers learn not only what the government bodies are doing, but also how the government bodies are addressing issues. Observers also keep government officials on notice, letting them know that someone is watching. Observers also serve as a method to identify when and how your local League could take action either by issuing a local Action Alert, writing a letter to the editor or to the governmental body, gathering more information, holding a local meeting, or conducting a local study.

Anyone can be an Observer. There are very few requirements for Observers:

- Must adhere strictly to the Member Code of Conduct (also in this booklet) and be courteous to not only government officials but also other meeting attendees.
- Must have an interest in and willingness to learn about how government bodies conduct their business.
- Must have an interest in and willingness to learn about the substantive issues discussed by the governmental body they will be observing.
- Must not engage in personal or partisan agenda while serving as an Observer; individuals who serve as Observers may remain civically engaged and active in their individual capacity.
- Are encouraged to serve as an "ambassador" for LWV Minnesota and their local League by talking about the organization to other meeting attendees.
- Must not testify, lobby, or otherwise speak for the local League unless authorized to so by the local League president or board. Similarly, speaking for the state or national League requires authorization from that League's president or board.

Corps Time Commitment

Time commitment requirements will be set by your local coordinator and can be flexible. Corps members can choose what level of activity they want depending on their interests, availability and capability.

A Corps member might follow a city council, county board, school board, park board, zoning and planning, library board, etc. There are dozens of board and committee meetings in every local community that are open to the public and worth viewing depending on one's interests.

No one is required to attend any meetings. Corps members may attend only one meeting a month or all of them; it depends entirely on what they'd like to get out of the experience and what they'd like to contribute.

Some meetings can be viewed on local cable stations, on city or county websites, or by telecast on the internet (as available). What percentage of in-person and telecasting would be expected of a Corps member?

There is no minimum requirement, though not all meetings are telecasted. Volunteers are free to set their own involvement levels. Obviously, it is preferred that Observers attend in person, but viewing a meeting on cable or internet is not unwelcome.

Corps members should clearly communicate to local LWV board what level of involvement is desired. This allows local LWV staff to coordinate all Observer Corps work.

Member Code of Conduct

PURPOSE: As we join together to advance the work of LWV Minnesota, we believe it is important to establish a Member Code of Conduct so that we have a common understanding and shared expectation of how we, a collective of individual members, will operate in the best interest of the organization.

CODE: All members who join LWV Minnesota agree to the following:

1. Abide by the rules of the LWV Minnesota or the member's local league as set out in its Bylaws, Mission Statement and Shared Values;
2. Uphold the reputation and good standing of LWV Minnesota;
3. Act with integrity, show respect to others, and value alternative points of view;
4. Refrain from any behaviors or actions that are harassing, physically threatening, or physically or verbally abusive toward any LWV member, employee of LWV, or any attendee at any LWV sponsored function or event;
5. Do not commit LWV Minnesota to any action unless authorized to do so;
6. Refrain from making any statement on behalf of LWV Minnesota or purport to represent LWV Minnesota through any public medium, including digital social media, unless specifically authorized to do so by LWV Minnesota's President;
7. Act within the boundaries of relevant legislation;
8. Refrain from using the position of membership to unfairly benefit themselves;
9. Pay membership fees on a timely basis as part of continued membership.

POLICY: LWV Minnesota reserves the right to review any membership for validity and conformity to the Code of Conduct and other applicable policies. If a member fails to meet the expectations in this Code of Conduct or other applicable policies, LWV Minnesota, in its sole discretion, will decide on the appropriate action to take, up to and including disassociation of membership. Local LWVs should bring all membership concerns to LWV Minnesota for resolution.

LWV Minnesota reserves the right to update, replace or rescind this Member Code of Conduct policy as well as develop additional policies as may be warranted. By applying for membership with LWV Minnesota, members indicate acceptance and agreement with these terms of membership.

Approved by the LWV Minnesota Board of Directors January 24, 2017.

Being an LWV Ambassador

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THE MEMBERS CODE OF CONDUCT IS REQUIRED.

Observers should strive to be most courteous and respectful to not only committee and board members, but also to other meeting attendees. Some specific points for proper conduct at meetings:

- Arrive early, so that you do not interrupt or distract from the meeting by arriving late.
- Turn your cell phone and other mobile devices on silent or off. This is very important because a loud, ringing phone is the quickest way to draw unfavorable attention to yourself. Cell phones are technically not even allowed in most legislative hearing rooms.
- Gather copies of the agenda or handouts if possible.
- Do not talk during meetings; if you must say something, please whisper very quietly. But even whispering can sound very loud in the meeting rooms. For example, the Senate Building hearing rooms carry sound and even a whisper can sound loud to other attendees. A better option would be to bring extra notepaper so that you may write notes silently to others.
- Do not eat during meetings. If you bring a drink, please ensure it is bottled or has a lid. Accidentally spilling a drink can cause a major distraction to the meeting. Note: some government meeting rooms do not allow beverages of any kind, lid or not.
- Local Observers are not authorized to speak for LWV Minnesota. Observers typically do not speak for local Leagues, either, but may be authorized to do so by a local LWV president or board. Observers may state facts that are generally known to the public, e.g., LWV Minnesota is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to civic engagement.
- Before or after meetings, Observers are encouraged to promote local Leagues and LWV Minnesota to other attendees.
- Observers are strongly encouraged to wear LWV-branded clothing or accessories, such as a button, lapel pin, or patch.



Be very, very sure that all your electronic devices (cell phone, tablet, laptop, etc.) are on silent or turned off.

Who, When and Where to Observe

There are many types of councils, boards and committees to observe in your local community.

County boards, city councils, school boards and other local committees and councils are generally subject to Minnesota's Open Meetings Law and Government Data Practices Act. Under the Open Meetings Law, these governmental bodies must notify the public ahead of time regarding when and where the meeting will take place and what is on the agenda.

Under the Government Data Practices Act, these local governmental bodies must also make their records available for public inspection or upon request, unless the information within the record is protected as nonpublic or private under the law. On rare occasion, these boards may go into "closed" or "executive" session. This means that they may exclude the public from the meeting to discuss information that is highly confidential and not public, like legal advice or personnel issues.

To learn when and where to observe, an Observer can find a calendar of meetings, along with agendas, on the county, city, school district, etc. website. Most county boards, city councils, etc. have a set meeting schedule where they meet once a month, e.g., every second Monday. But you should confirm with that government body when its regular meetings are and whether there is a listserv to join. Typically the town, city or county clerk can point you in the right direction.



It is recommended that Corps members sign up for any available listservs, as meetings can happen outside the normal schedule.

What and How to Observe

EACH LOCAL LEAGUE WILL HAVE ITS OWN REPORTING REQUIREMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS.

- Some Leagues may want a summary paragraph or short report for the local newsletter.
- Others may ask the Observer to report at the local League meetings.
- You may be asked to complete a Google report form.
- Local Leagues may want to compile data to report at the annual meeting about how many members observed and where, as well as information about issues important to the local League.

It is helpful to Observers if the local League board gives Observers an idea of what to watch for and what to report. Please be as factual and impartial as possible in your summary.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- What were the agenda items discussed?
- What were any questions or statements made by members of the committee/board?
- Did committee/board members get into a debate or challenge each other?
- Did the committee/board discuss topics outside its jurisdiction?
- Did members of the public testify? If so, what did they say? Did committee/board members treat them with respect?
- Were there any other events of interest?

Google Reporting Form

Local Leagues can create their own Google reporting form using their official LWV Minnesota Google account (e.g., St. Paul's is lwvstpaul@lwvmn.org). Below is a sample form used by LWV Minnesota for the state Observer Corps.

Observer Report Form

Use this form to submit an Observer Report to LWV Minnesota. If you have questions, contact Nick Harper, Civic Engagement Manager, nharper@lwvmn.org or 651-424-4603. Please do not submit Observer Reports by email; those reports will not be recorded.

* Required

Email address *

Your email _____

What type of committee or board did you observe? *

Choose _____

Name of the committee or board *

Your answer _____

Date of Meeting *

MM DD YYYY
_ / _ / 2018

Scheduled Time of Meeting

Time
_ : _ AM

Did the meeting start on time? If not, how late did it start? *

On time (within 10 minutes of the scheduled start time)

10-20 minutes late

20-30 minutes late

30-60 minutes late

Over an hour late



If your keyboard/typing isn't too loud, you can type your notes on a laptop during the meeting, or hand-write them and type them up/paste into the form later.

The Observer Checklist

- Sign up for the board or committee listserv, if available.
- Arrive **10-15 minutes early** to the meeting location; be sure to allocate **time in addition to this** to find parking or use public transit.
- Wear an LWV insignia, preferably an LWV Minnesota button.
- Turn off or silence your cellphone prior to entering the meeting location.
- Always be courteous and respectful to others; never distract others.
- Pick up committee or board meeting documents. Usually there are public copies available at the front of the meeting room on a table. Public copies are limited, so arrive early to ensure you get a copy.
- Don't be afraid to introduce yourself to board/committee members or other members of the public before or after the meeting if you can do so without interrupting them from other work. Feel free to talk up LWV to other members of the public before or after the meeting.
- Do not speak for your local League or LWV Minnesota except as authorized.
- Take comprehensive notes on important information. Notes should be as factual and impartial as possible. If you would like to add personal commentary, analysis or opinion, keep that separate from the rest of your notes. Compile your notes into a report.
- Summarize the meeting for your local League. Brevity is key.



If you have questions about procedures and practices, please contact your local Observer Corps coordinator.

Notes
