

LWVBWC ANNUAL MEETING

Thank you for inviting me to speak to this annual meeting today. I am here to talk a bit about the League's work for the coming year and to share learnings from my own experiences with community engagement. I worked as a civil legal aid lawyer for poor people until I retired a few years ago. During and after my legal career, I have also been active on non-profit boards, appointed to public advisory groups, and participated in a range of informal community projects.

My formal legal career focused on various aspects of anti-poverty advocacy. Early on, I realized that the legal system itself was not the effective path to social change it had seemed to be, and it has only become less available as a way to achieve progressive goals. Thus, I made sure that part of my advocacy included both seeking changes to public policies, and also forging and becoming involved in an array of community-based partnerships. Especially in the latter arena, I think my approach was unusual among my colleagues, but it made sense to me then and continues to do so now. My recent experiences have been in the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force, serving as a Commissioner of the local Housing Authorities and generally supporting community efforts

supporting the development of affordable housing, participating in the creation of a county racial equity commission, advocating for improved access to behavioral health treatment and addressing what are now known as the social determinants of individual and public health, and serving for a period on the board of the dispute resolution center.

The reason that I am glad to have been invited today flows from what I have come to understand about the culture and values of the League, and my respect for the work the League has done in Whatcom County to date. Like all of you, I am sure, I have been increasingly dismayed by the intractability of a host of social problems locally, nationally, and in some cases globally as well. I appreciate very much the fact that our League has created an opportunity for this chapter to address the current moment. Last year you adopted a 5-Year Strategic Plan and today, we have a Local Program of Work to advance the strategic goals in the coming 12 months. Heather summarized very well what I think are excellent outlines for our efforts. I will concentrate here on what to me is the most important element of these plans, labeled as Strategic Focus Area # 4c, which calls on us to “Influence public policy through advocacy.” In current lingo, I have been

working “in those spaces” for quite a while. If I am persuasive today, many of you will too.

I believe our board’s goals for this chapter’s coming work include the intention to focus where possible on local issues we can actually influence, tackling issues that have promise for improving livability here. Huzzah. I embrace those goals wholeheartedly, as I suspect all of you do.

I think it should be obvious from reading the strategic plan and this year’s local program of work that they are a framework, and they need a lot of details fleshed out, a lot of clarification, probably some new approaches to the League’s work, and a lot of energy from our membership in order to be up to the tasks we have set for ourselves. I start by noting that focus area # 4c calls for selecting priority areas and topics for advocacy based on Program Planning meetings. That is a critical, and huge, first step that needs to be done thoughtfully but done soon as well.

Most of us will have fairly similar lists of problems that affect the health and livability of our community. We could start with the persistent, even growing lack

of affordable housing, inadequate living-wage employment opportunities, credible concerns among diverse groups about the burdens they face from intolerance and unfair treatment, a growing number of persons without any housing and minimal basic supports, alarming increases in the numbers and acuity levels of people with mental health problems across the lifespan from young school children to the elderly), a relentless rise in substance use disorder and the wave of petty crime that engenders, insufficient and unaffordable childcare, increasing food insecurity in families, and widening inequities in annual income and lifelong asset-building.

And the list of urgent human needs I just ticked through hasn't touched on broader but just as compelling problems like accelerating climate effects, ineffective land use and growth management policies, and cascading harms to the existence of flora and fauna.

Just this partial list should immediately prompt alarm. But wait, there is more. In recent years, we have witnessed broad and troubling divisions in our public spheres, changes in how we see problems and try to devise solutions, changes in our relationships and interactions with many of our neighbors, and changes in the

compassion we offer or choose not to offer our fellow community members.

These divisions exacerbate the impotence and frustrations many folks feel.

Systems we previously relied on for responding to these problems are less and less capable of such action. Our capacity for open inquiry and dialog has become drastically limited. The problems we identified reflect a community in crisis. They are urgent. They demand creativity. They call for collective action. In my estimation, this is truly an “all hands on deck” crisis for thousands of our neighbors and with each passing year they have increasingly corrosive effects on our whole community. **[Deep breath.]**

One of the things I have learned in my community engagement work is that you are always better off in the long run if you speak the truth, especially within your own team, in order to promote the integrity of the process. I am encouraged that the board is choosing to confront our distressing circumstances directly by including a commitment to influencing public policy through advocacy – but I am encouraged in a qualified way, because that effort may require some self-critical reflection. In the planning task of identifying priority areas for advocacy, it doesn't take much insight to see how many of these problems are interconnected. I encourage the board to look for priority areas that can be

fulcrums of change, where actions in one area can affect others, where the League's advocacy impact can be maximized. In the spirit of working within community partnerships that I touted before, I also encourage the board and membership, as part of their priority-setting and advocacy planning discussions, to learn about existing or coming-soon efforts within these possible priority areas. Specialized groups in the Health Department's Healthy Whatcom project for Community Health Improvement are hard at work on several of the problems we listed. In the coming year, new public bodies may be established to work on climate action and racial equity, and new proposals will be made to advance common goals for public safety, diversion from incarceration, and increased capacity in our behavioral health treatment systems. The Community Foundation is working with a team to develop a comprehensive plan to enhance food security throughout the county. These are inspiring efforts. It may be the League can partner or participate in some way in those efforts, or on the contrary it may be the League can applaud those efforts and feel free to devote its attention to other priority problems. Those are calculations that need to be made carefully in creating an effective advocacy plan for improvements in community livability.

I am also gratified that our local program of work continues a commitment in Strategic Focus Area # 5c to connect with diverse communities and organizations, but I think we will have to break some new ground in establishing these connections. I know many groups have articulated a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and at the same time my experience is that most of those organizations are still struggling to fulfill their commitments. This requires a long, slow process of demonstrating humility; building trust and credibility; and cultivating the ability to listen and understand the world through the eyes of others. And that process is just the prerequisite for being able to work constructively with diverse communities and organizations. This is really hard stuff. I would also observe that deepening diversity, equity and inclusion involves more than making external connections; it requires changing our own personal views and re-thinking how we conduct our business and make our decisions internally. In the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force, for which I am a co-chair, we successfully encouraged the County to join the Government Alliance on Race and Equity and we have committed ourselves to utilizing GARE's Racial Equity Toolkit in the Task Force's work. I would urge both board and membership to look at that toolkit. The toolkit's deceptively simple set of

analytical questions promise to transform the task force's work and they could do the same for the League.

In all of these contexts, I will say is that I am not sure whether the traditional kinds of work the League is known for – internal study and research, thoughtful reports and position papers, balanced forums of discussion, voting support activities – all of which are part of our working plans, are by themselves up to the task of improving the livability of Whatcom County. This is not at all to say that traditional League efforts should be de-emphasized. Those have been and must continue to be critical parts of efforts to “influence public policy.” But I think the weakening of our civic discourse and our processes for adopting public policies requires more active – I might even say more assertive and more intense – kinds of involvement from us to accomplish local livability improvements. That is the “how” of any advocacy we undertake together. This level of detail is also not included in the plans we have so far, again left to the board and membership via program planning meetings. I very much hope the board details a range of possible activities that will define “advocacy” options for members to choose how they will be involved and how they will promote these goals in the plans. I believe

this kind of clarity will be critical to the League's success in creating a forceful, activist advocacy role in the community as soon as possible.

I personally don't think an activist role needs to run afoul of the League's commitment to nonpartisanship. At their core, the local problems we listed are not partisan issues, and collective efforts to address them need not reinforce existing partisan divides. My experiences in community engagement have led me to emphasize the "collective efforts" part of what I described before. So another perspective I would emphasize is the enormously valuable multiplier effect of building advocacy partnerships and the ongoing relationships that can ensue. This is a point touched on in several places in the plans, including but not limited to connecting with diverse communities and organizations. As examples, I was extraordinarily pleased to see several actions by the League in recent weeks. It was gratifying to have our chapter sponsoring the Day of Uplifting BIPOC people last Sunday, and receiving support for that effort from Indivisible Bellingham. I appreciated Joy's email this month encouraging our membership's voices on behalf of bipartisan federal legislation to reduce gun violence. And just this very morning, the national League of Women Voters was one of the mobilizing partners with the Rev. William Barber's Poor People's Campaign, in its Moral

March on Washington and to the Polls in DC. These kinds of steps, and more, that link us to individuals and groups that are aligned with League values can greatly advance our ability to influence public policy through advocacy.

Working with people we agree with is one kind of advocacy, and one kind of partnership. Another kind, which are more like my own experience, involves wading in to engage those with whom we have differences, participating in what I will call interactive exchanges with individuals and groups having mixed goals and perspectives. This is a little different from traditional League “advocacy” such as drafting a set position statement which may, or may not, become championed by someone and then may, or may not, ultimately be turned into a formal public policy. To me, that traditional process feels a little too passive for the world of 2022. For myself, I have found fertile ground from active involvement in a collective or collaborative process that embraces the reality of differences and works slowly toward a consensus “position” via a messy back-and-forth “conversation”. In this kind of “advocacy,” “participation” can be as simple as speaking up for your point of view, asking basic questions without being embarrassed you don’t know the answers, and incorporating information you

gain from other participants into your own thinking. It turns out that a genuinely open and inquisitive attitude is a remarkably powerful advocacy strategy.

For me, these approaches draw on the basic principle of that seminal book “Getting to Yes,” where advocacy is rooted in articulating the general goals and values that bring you to the table, and not in holding to a specific “right answer” you think is best. A willingness to explain those goals and values can advance the understanding participants have of each other. It is a respectful and responsive form of engagement. Talking about goals and values affords flexibility in seeking agreements. “Yes and” is a much more productive posture to take than “yes but.” I can guarantee that others notice and appreciate that difference in tone. And, in addition to opening up potential solutions, this kind of conversation is the only way I can imagine that we can begin to heal the divisions in our community. I like this approach, it fits my training and, as I said, I have found it effective in building credibility and inching toward mutual understanding. It has helped me contribute to more formal settings like the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force and less formal settings like the stakeholder group working toward an ordinance to create a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission.

Now a lot of people may say, “I am not trained as a lawyer, I am not comfortable thinking on my feet and debating face-to-face,” but a “Getting to Yes” approach to our advocacy efforts is not at all limited to only those contexts. That is why I suggested detailing a range of activities that will carry out our advocacy goal. I would also hope that as the board and membership form their plans, they clarify goals and values in a way we all can utilize. Then, whether you are doorbelling or phone-calling, tabling at the Farmers Market, writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece, or advocating as a member of a non-profit board, you can promote a process that involves respectful dialog and responds to views that differ from the League’s goals and values. All of these activities can be seen as part of a conversation, and everyone can be a League advocate. To be honest, we will need lots more of you having lots more of those kinds of interactions if we hope to actually influence public policy through advocacy. That goal will require the entire membership to give direction to the board on its planning, keep evaluating its implementation, and most importantly take an active role in the various forms of advocacy that come out of that planning process.

So, I think what I have been encouraging this morning is for our chapter to be nimble and creative in response to changes in local needs, to expand its range of

activities to include a strong advocacy component, to ask a bit more from members in that regard, and to tailor its advocacy efforts to various situations we might take advantage of. There are examples of motivated groups following a similar path of organizational re-focusing and activism. Heather MacKay-Brown has touted the history of impressive work by the Black Sash movement opposing South African apartheid that has inspired both Joy and me. The Black Sash movement caused “good trouble” over many decades, expanding its original advocacy focus, accepting changes in the people attracted to its work, and ratcheting up its assertiveness in the face of resistance to the moral change it sought. In a moment, we will get a little more information on the Black Sash movement that I hope we all can draw lessons from.

In closing, I know many of you are familiar with the widely-used encouragement that progressives share amongst themselves – usually attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King but actually predating him by a good bit from what I could tell – which states, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That’s a comforting view. Recently, a friend and former legal aid colleague of mine quoted an update to that view, which she attributed to Dr. Ibram X. Kendi; although I could not confirm that attribution, it makes sense in light of the body

of his work and the circumstances we now face. She quoted Dr. Kendi as offering words something to the effect of, “The arc of the moral universe is long, and it takes effort to bend it, because it can turn toward justice or not.” We never know the results of our actions in advance but putting in whatever effort is needed to bend that arc toward justice is our obligation. Together, let’s all get started on that work. Thank you very much for your time.