

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

of The Spokane Area

OBSERVER CORPS – GUIDELINES and FAQs

The League of Women Voters of the Spokane Area (LWVSA) has an invaluable tool in its mission of working for good government through an active Observer Corps.

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

Observer Corps members attend council, board, commission and advisory committees to listen, learn, observe and report back to the League Board with factual information about the proceedings and any information about which the Board may be interested. Importantly, the Observer calls attention to community and public policy issues 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 on the LWVSA 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. Observers maintain an impartial, respectful and professional attitude. The Observer must not pursue personal interests at the meetings or use information obtained from outside sources to discuss or give an opinion about an issue discussed at the meeting. One may not "step out of the observer role" before or after a meeting. Observers may ask a simple question for clarification (e.g., checking on a date or a term), or to ask how to obtain further information on a topic 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.

How long is the term of an Observer?

Although there is no required commitment, the preferred "best intention" commitment is one year. 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 Observers participate, the more familiar they 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.
- 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 an important and timely 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.

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

Yes. The League's Executive Committee will communicate with the Chair of the agency that has been chosen by the LWVSA. The communication 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.

How am I identified at the meeting?

Observers will wear either a LWVSA name tag or an Observer pin to identify them.

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 as a guide to succinctly note issues being discussed as well as the process by which they are being discussed. A copy of any pertinent materials or a link to them may be included. Observers may submit their report using a format they are comfortable with. This report is sent (usually by email) to the Observer Corps Chair who reviews the report and may ask follow-up questions of the reporter. Then the report is forwarded to the Executive Board who may also ask questions and considers issues brought up by the observer for League consideration. Then the report is made available on the League website.

Does a League Observer ever testify before that board?

No. Only the "Voice of the League", the President, or a designated member of the Executive Committee may attend a meeting and testify, based on League positions concerning issues under discussion.

Does being an Observer help League in any other way?

Yes! Observers keep elected and appointed officials on notice and let them know someone is watching what decisions are being made and how they are being made. The League believes 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
- League of Women Voters 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. You can also contact Lunell Haught (<mailto:lh1@fastmail.com>)

Quick Reference LWVSA Observer Corps Guidelines

An Observer Corps is one way the LWV promotes government transparency and accountability. LWVSA Observer Corps members attend council, board, commission, and advisory committee meetings and report on issues that might concern the League. Observers attend meetings to learn about their community, to ensure that government meetings are conducted in the open, and to encourage the accountability of public officials. Observer Corps members do not speak on behalf of the League without prior authorization.

League members observing government meetings as part of the LWVSA Observer Corps should follow these guidelines:

1. Take a copy of the meeting agenda with you to the meeting (agendas are usually available online.)
2. Take a copy of the *LWVSA Observation Report* form with you to the meeting.
3. Wear your League pin and/or name badge. It is important the League's presence be visible.
4. Observe the meeting's processes and decisions. Note any concerns regarding issues of potential interest to the League or the manner in which the meeting is conducted.
5. Be polite and respectful. Avoid verbal and nonverbal behavior that could be perceived as distracting, disruptive, or disapproving.
6. If asked about your reason for attending, simply indicate you are observing the meeting on behalf of the LWVSA to learn about your local government and ensure open meeting policies are honored.
7. When given the opportunity, cultivate a positive relationship with public officials and staff.
8. Do not speak publicly at the meeting.
9. Do not make any partisan statements, engage in partisan discussions, or participate in partisan activities while serving as a League observer at a meeting.
10. Complete the *LWVSA Observation Report* as soon as possible after the meeting. Your report may be very brief if there were no issues of concern. It is not necessary to provide a comprehensive report of everything discussed at a meeting.

Resources used for this document:

1. LWVUS – *Observing Your Government in Action, A Resource Guide*, LWVUS, 2007, https://www.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/lwvef_observingyourgovernment.pdf.
2. LWVUS - *Voters Service and Citizens Information*, <https://www.lwv.org/league-management/voting-rights-tools/voters-service-and-citizens-information>.
3. LWVWA website: <https://lwvwa.org>