

# MARBLEHEAD LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

## WHAT IS THE OBSERVER CORPS?

All 50 states have "Sunshine Laws" that generally require that all governmental records and meetings be open to the public, unless certain, specific exemptions apply. In a government "of, by and for the people," citizens have the right to know what actions their government is taking.

The Marblehead League of Women Voters Observer Corps is a structured way for individuals to exercise their right to know. It provides a valuable service to the Marblehead community by helping ensure that citizens are aware of the decisions that impact their lives and promoting government transparency and accountability.

Observers are the eyes and the ears of the League. They are the first line for conveying information that impacts League positions to League leaders. What they see and hear can lead to League action.

(Observing Your Government in Action, is a resource guide available at [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org).)

## WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE OBSERVER CORPS?

Encourage individual members to become better informed regarding the decision-making process in local government.

Gather information and identify problems, issues, and trends in the local government that are relevant to and have an impact on local/state/national LWV positions

Increase the visibility and enhance the image of the MLWV among elected and appointed officials, community leaders, and those persons responsible for effective delivery of services by public agencies.

Strengthen communication between the MLWV and local government agencies

Encourage better government through the observers' presence at meetings.

## WHAT IS THE JOB OF AN OBSERVER?

An observer is an individual who attends a local board/commission/committee meeting, notes what happens at the meeting, and reports back to the League. By attending public meetings, observers learn more about what their government is doing. They learn about the issues facing their community and how those issues are being addressed.

**OBSERVING** is a passive function. An observer listens and records the events or facts of the meeting, and reports back to the MLWV Steering Committee, but does not comment at the meeting, unless specific direction or permission from the Steering Committee is given.

## **GUIDELINES FOR OBSERVERS**

Visit the website of the entity you are planning to observe to become familiar with the organization, officials, functions, and operations of the agency and identify the appropriate contact person.

Arrange with the contact person to get on an email list to receive an advance copy of the meeting agenda.

Note when notice of the meeting was posted. Was it at least 48 hours before the meeting time?

Note if the meeting venue was accessible to the public.

Introduce yourself to the members of the governmental body you are observing and wear a League of Women Voters badge to identify yourself as a MLWV member.

Some government entities broadcast their meetings, so you can virtually "attend" some meetings and report on them if you like, although attendance in person is preferable.

Exercise discretion and tact at meetings. Remember, the LWV is a non-partisan organization.

Be good listener. Concentrate on, assimilate, and interpret proceedings and provide objective summaries of controversial issues.

Complete an observation form for each meeting that you observe. Turn it in to the coordinator after each observation. (Contact information is on the observer form.) You may want to attend the next meeting of the Steering Committee to report in person.

Keep your own file with agendas, documents, notes and copies of your observation report.

Attend meetings regularly, arrive on time, and stay through the entire meeting.

Observers should NOT speak at the meetings. If they need clarification or have a question on an issue, they should approach the chairperson at the end of the meeting.

# WHAT OBSERVERS WATCH FOR

## Identity of Meeting and Participants

- Type of meeting, e.g., regular, special, informal, or public hearing
- Members of the Committee, Commission, or Board who are present or absent
- Size and composition of audience, e.g., students, lobby groups, observers from other organizations, individual citizens with special interest.

## Conduct of the Meeting

- Are the proceedings formal or informal? Does the presiding officer have the meeting under control? Are officials attentive and alert?
- Does there appear to be adequate discussion of issues? Do decisions appear to be "cut-and dried"?
- Are visitors treated with respect and courtesy? Do petitioners have ample opportunity to present their complaints/requests?
- Is the atmosphere generally friendly?

## Content and Substance

- What items were approved or disapproved, postponed, or otherwise considered and disposed of that are of interest to the MLWV. THIS IS THE HEART OF THE OBSERVER ACTIVITY!!! If possible, relate each item to the League's positions and program areas and identify any that deserve immediate attention for possible action.
- The League of Women Voters Impact on Issues Guide to Public Policy Positions is an excellent resource and is available at [www.lwg.org](http://www.lwg.org).

## Physical Facilities

- Is the building/room adequate in size, have adequate lighting, and good ventilation?
- Are the accommodations for the audience comfortable?
- Is the building/room handicapped accessible?
- Can the proceedings be heard? Can the officials be seen?