



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE  
HOUSTON AREA

## **PROGRAM FOR STUDY & ACTION**

*A Guide to Local League Program*

Revised October 2009

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## LEAGUE PRINCIPLES

The Principles are concepts of government to which all Leagues subscribe. They are the beliefs shared by League members everywhere. Principles are the basis upon which national, state, and local program is adopted. The Principles themselves may be used to take action at any level of government. However, because they are broad statements, such action is usually taken in conjunction with current League positions. Additional information on their usage is found in *Impact on Issues*.

The League of Women Voters believes:

- in representative government and in the individual liberties established in the Constitution of the United States.
- 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.
- that every citizen should be protected in the right to vote; that every person should have access to free public education that provides equal opportunity for all; and that no person or group should suffer legal, economic, or administrative discrimination.
- that efficient and economical government requires competent personnel, the clear assignment of responsibility, adequate financing, and coordination among the different agencies and levels of government.
- that responsible government should be responsive to the will of the people; that government should maintain an equitable and flexible system of taxation, promote the conservation and development of natural resources in the public interest, share in the solution of economic and social problems that affect the general welfare, promote a sound economy, and adopt domestic policies that facilitate the solution of international problems.
- that cooperation with other nations is essential in the search for solutions to world problems, and that the development of international organization and international law is imperative in the promotion of world peace.

## **PROGRAM STUDY**

Program study relates to those items that have been adopted at the local, state or national level for study, leading toward consensus and a position. The following is a brief glossary of League terms used in relation to program study.

**CONSENSUS**—Substantial member agreement preferably reached through group discussion. Consensus is the sense of the group rather than a majority opinion. Discussion is based on information prepared by a study committee and is guided by consensus questions.

**CONSENSUS QUESTIONS**—Specific questions prepared by a study committee to stimulate interaction, focus discussion and facilitate conclusions by the group. Questions vary in style from open-ended to multiple choice. Questions are approved by the appropriate League board.

**STUDY**—The process of gathering information for discussion by members with a view of reaching consensus and establishing positions on a subject adopted by convention or annual meeting. Studies are conducted at all levels of League.

**STUDY COMMITTEE**—A group of local League members that meets regularly to carry out a current League study. The committee researches the subject, prepares the information for members, selects the material for presentation at meetings, determines how the material will be presented and serves as resource. The study committee analyzes recorders' reports and drafts consensus reports for the local board's approval. For local studies the committee develops the consensus questions and drafts positions for local board approval.

**STUDY GUIDE**—A League publication dealing with a current study prepared by a national, state or inter-League organization committee providing information and suggestions to assist local League study committees.

**UPDATE**—A study of limited scope to reevaluate an existing position in light of new information, changed circumstance and/or conflicts with another position, with a view to considering a position change. An update may be proposed by any local League through the position review process. Any new position resulting from an update must be approved by convention delegates. Local Leagues may also undertake an update of a local position.

## PROGRAM ACTION and ADVOCACY

Taking Action in the Community  
(From *League Basics*, LWV-US)

Interpretation of a League position is the responsibility of the board that oversees that position. Local League boards are responsible for interpreting their own positions before taking action.

A local League contemplating action on a community issue should consider the following:

- Does the League have a position that supports the proposed action?
- Do members understand and would they agree with the proposed action?
- Is it a priority for the League?
- Does the League have a unique role to play or would the League's assets (time and money) be better spent on other activities?
- Does it have some chance of success or make an important statement for the League?
- Are other organizations or a coalition already working on the issue?
- What action techniques would be most effective?
- How will the League deal with controversy?
- How can members be involved in the proposed action?
- What kind of community involvement would best support the League's efforts?

A local/state League may want to take action by using a national League position at the local/state level (i.e., not lobbying Members of Congress or the state legislature). If the local/state League board judges that its members are knowledgeable and support the action to be taken, it can act without clearance from the LWVUS board. Leagues may wish to consult with the LWVUS Board or staff for background on action previously taken at all levels of the League based on a particular position. Most state Leagues do not require clearance for state positions to be used locally.

League members should be encouraged as individuals to contact their legislators regarding League priority issues. Members, of course, are always free to take action on any topic, as long as it is clear that they are speaking as individuals, *not for the League* (i.e., they should not mention that they are League members in their communications). It is important to remember that only the League president (or designee) speaks in the name of the League.

Local leagues may act under local, state and national positions. Local positions cannot, however, conflict with either state or national positions. Action takes many forms:

- Press Releases
- Letters to the Editor
- TV Interviews and presentations
- Lobbying public officials
- Working with other groups to achieve action goals
- Monitoring administrative agencies
- Litigation

The following pages present the LWV HA positions and their history of action.

# LWV HA CURRENT POSITIONS

## I. Government

### City Government

1. Support a strong Mayor/Council form of government with the following components:
  - elected Mayor who is chief administrative officer of the city; who appoints all department heads subject to approval of Council; who has the power to remove department heads and staff members; who presides over Council and votes on all Council business but does not have the power of the veto.
  - a City Council which functions as a strong legislative branch; has direct input into the formulation of the agenda for Council meetings; participates fully in goal setting for and in the development of the annual budget; can independently establish standing committees; has access to a centralized council research staff which can research issues for Council as a whole; and has adequate access to legal counsel and services of the legal department.
  - an elected City Controller who is independent of the Mayor and City Council.
2. Support a City Council electoral structure that provides for:
  - members elected both at-large and by single-member districts.
  - a majority of the members elected from single-member districts
3. Support a City Council of optimal size that is determined by criteria which insure:
  - representation of all citizens
  - accountability
  - accessibility
  - effectiveness
  - affordability
4. Support of single-member district lines based substantially on population and which also:
  - ensure that minority rights are not diluted.
  - reflect geographic common sense.
  - maintain the integrity of neighborhoods.
  - create districts which are compact, contiguous, and continuous in shape.
5. Support 4-year terms for the offices of Mayor, Controller, and City Council with staggered terms for Council.
6. Support for a special election to be called to fill a Council vacancy when ten months remain in a two-year term or twenty months remain in a four-year term.
7. Oppose term limitations for elected officials. Support appropriate measures, or “escape clauses,” which will enable citizens to vote for candidates of their choice if term limitations are in effect. (1991/1992)

**History:** The City Government Committee undertook its extensive two-year study of Houston’s City Government in May 1991. In recognition of the substantial growth and change in the City of Houston and city governance since the 1980 consensus position, the Committee re-evaluated its current relevancy, efficiency, and political effectiveness. The first year addressed representation. The second year addressed political structure, responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of the strong mayor council form of government.

**Action:** Use this position to oppose term limits for elected officials; oppose elimination of at-large council seats during the court challenge by a Hispanic group; support Council efforts to get special elections for filling council vacancy; advocate 4-year terms for elected officials with staggered terms for Council members; and advocate rewriting of city charter.

### City Charter

Support a complete revision of the city charter of Houston. (1974)

## Financing City Government

### 1. Support financial policies that:

- are guided by sound principles of fiscal responsibility and operational efficiency;
- provide current revenues sufficient to support expenditures;
- are based on concepts of appropriate long range planning methods;
- are based on diversified sources of revenue.

### 2. Specifically support:

- the use by the city of additional sources of revenues in order to decrease the reliance on property taxes for funding the General Fund Budget;
- the maintenance of debt service costs for all types of financing at a level not to exceed 20% of the General Fund revenues;
- the maintenance of a General Fund undesignated ending fund balance whose level will be a minimum of 5% of the total expenditures less debt service costs;
- the setting of user fees and charges by the city at levels sufficient to recover the costs of providing those services, except for those services associated with provision for the general welfare and common good;
- the development of financial and management processes and systems which result in operational efficiency and cost containment. (1989)

**History:** The study was undertaken to formulate a position on the policies and principles basic to financing City Government, beyond the budget process, and give the LWV-HA the means to address such concerns as the city's over-dependence on property taxes for funding the operating budget, its need to maintain a healthy emergency fund balance, the level of city indebtedness beyond investment in capital improvements, and others.

**Action:** Used the position to oppose restructuring Public Revenue bonds in 1991; oppose the issuance of bonds to repay judgments against the City; oppose transfer of funds from Water and Sewer Funds to the General Fund to cover increased health care costs of city employees; support adequate funding for the Planning and Development Department following the defeat of the zoning ordinance; and express concern that the 93-94 annual budget was predicated on the debt-extended structure, Metro funds and anticipated revenue projections.

## Budget Process

### 1. Support a budget process that meets these criteria:

- is based on long range planning;
- provides for thorough budget review and evaluation;
- has well defined channels for citizen input and review.

### 2. Specifically support:

- a budget format that provides for budget controls and accountability and provides for analysis that reflects policy goals and directions;
- a budget process that is regulated by well defined timelines for each step of the budget process, and that these timelines are written into the city's code of ordinances, and that these timelines should provide for adequate timing for public study and input with each step;
- a budget process that encourages public participation by such specific means as:
  - public meetings on budget policy and issues held by the mayor and council members in different sections of the city;
  - publishing a brief budget summary in newspapers that would include important budget revenues and expenditures and highlights of major policy changes;
  - availability of the proposed budget when given to council with provision for a number of copies available to the public at cost;

- giving adequate notice of all proposed actions, holding open meetings, and making all public records accessible.
- notice of all hearing dates.
- a budget process that provides for testimony by the individual citizen at the public hearing or as provided for by state law prior to the adoption of the proposed budget. (1988)

**History:** Focus #47 (December 1976), entitled “Financing City Government,” outlined LWV-HA’s consensus position on the budget process which was reached in spring, 1975. The Committee chose to study the budget process in 1987 chiefly to reassess the progress achieved in over a decade of change in city government. As in 1975, the 1988 consensus emphasized public input, long range planning, availability of budget documents, a budget calendar, and support for integrating the Capital Improvement Budget with the Operating Budget.

**Action:** Advocated for the adoption of the budget calendar (since achieved); passage of the Capital Improvement Budget integrated with the Operating Budget; earlier inclusion of council members in budget process; more reasonable time between public hearing on the annual budget and its placement on the council agenda for approval; and following the timelines of the budget calendar as adopted.

### **Capital Improvement Budget**

Support the consideration of the capital improvement budget along with the operating budget. (1988)

### **Libraries**

Support measures to insure adequate library facilities for Houston area residents, including merger of city and county systems and the regional library concept. (1969)

**History:** When this study began in the late 1960’s, libraries were few and of low quality. Library budgets were politically easy to cut.

**Action:** Since 1969 this position has been used to lobby City Council for needed funding. We have also worked with other groups seeking increased library hours and personnel. There have been significant improvements. Although merger of the city and county library systems has been politically impossible, the two systems do cooperate. In 2002 wrote letter to Houston mayor and council members opposing the shortening of service hours for city libraries. Our monitoring is on-going.

### **Annexation**

1. Support annexation by Houston of the Ship Channel Industrial Districts, with negotiation of short-term contracts in the interim. (1977) The LWV-HA recognizes the importance to the city of Houston of the power to annex additional geographic territory in order to protect its economic base and to provide a government which addresses regional needs. However the League feels that Houston should exercise this power within the following guidelines: (1979)
  - Checkerboard patterns should be avoided;
  - No unincorporated areas should be left surrounded by the city (except those within the extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) of another city);
  - Houston should not pass over economically depressed areas as it proceeds with annexation;
  - Houston should plan annexation in advance in order to make sure that city departments are prepared for expanded services;

- Houston should notify residents of areas to be annexed in advance and give them the opportunity to help plan how needed services will be provided and/or coordinated with facilities already in place;
  - Houston should provide services related to public health and safety services immediately upon annexation, and set a schedule to provide other services within a reasonable time;
  - Houston should provide adequate levels of services to all annexed areas, and this should be done without extra assessments to residents of areas where such assessments would be a severe burden. These should include: improving streets and drainage to a level at which services can be provided to people living on those streets; and provision of city water and wastewater service within a reasonable time if the area has no adequate facilities;
  - establishes an impartial board to weigh the importance of annexation to the health of the city and the ability of the city to accommodate the needs of the area. (1979)
2. Support a comprehensive planning process for growth, open spaces, and capital investment in the ETJ, recognizing the possibility of eventual annexation of these areas. (1979)
  3. Support the adoption of a subdivision ordinance for the city and the ETJ. (1979)
  4. Support policies encouraging development within the city limits. (1979)
  5. Support a policy encouraging water districts to consist of a single parcel of land. (1979)
  6. Support a long-range policy of annexation and the adoption of a policy for annexation and disannexation to include:
    - legal clarification of circumstances under which disannexation would be permitted;
    - a review board, preferably at the state level, to hear cases of disputed annexations and disannexations;
    - a requirement for an annexing city to establish a baseline for the provision of municipal services to be maintained in all parts of the city and provided to newly annexed areas at the same level. (1983)

**History:** The first use of this position has been with the recent annexation of Kingwood and others.

**Action:** In addition to the general meeting on annexation, the Houston League has issued a press release and written to Houston's elected state officials urging their support for maintaining the city's annexation powers. Testimony was given before a state legislative committee against a bill seeking to weaken Houston's annexation powers.

## **Comprehensive Planning**

1. Support planning in Houston's extraterritorial jurisdiction through:
  - the development of goals and priorities for Harris County by assessing the needs of the total community with maximum public participation;
  - central planning coordination and implementation tools for the unincorporated areas of Harris County;
  - development of a uniform performance building code for the unincorporated areas of Harris County;
  - feasibility studies for the consolidation of planning services between municipalities and Harris County;
  - increased use of Harris County of the planning services of the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and the development by H-GAC of practical services reflecting the planning needs of Harris County. (1976)
2. Support the development and adoption of a long-range flexible, constantly updated, comprehensive plan, developed with adequate citizen input. This plan should include:
  - the coordination and centralization of the planning process in Houston, with the strengthening of a central planning authority;
  - the development of goals, objectives, and priorities for Houston through a process which assures maximum public participation;
  - a broad-based planning commission with members with diverse backgrounds and expertise;
  - a comprehensive plan which includes economic, social, and environmental concerns as well as physical development;
  - public involvement in the planning process at the neighborhood level, and public hearings on proposed plans;
  - an explanation to the public by the City Council of why any given plan is or is not adopted; (1976)

- a strong role for the City Planning Commission, committed to the full range of powers granted it by the city charter, and to the coordination of its work with an equally strong Planning Department; cooperation between the private and public planning entities, with public participation throughout the process;
- vigorous enforcement of current regulations, and the enactment of additional ordinances which focus on civic concerns such as traffic congestion and storm water runoff; preserve and improve the quality of life in Houston neighborhoods;
- the use of growth management techniques such as performance standards, impact fees, and both short-term and long-term capital improvements budget planning;
- a city ordinance requiring the setting aside of land for open space and parks. (1984)

**History:** League members thought there was a lack of long-range planning in both the City of Houston and Harris County. The League wished to expedite better planning and coordination both in and between city and county. Studies in 1976 and 1984 addressed these issues.

**Action:** This position was used between 1990 and 1993 by LWV-HA to lobby for a zoning ordinance for the City of Houston. In 2003 joined with the Blueprint Houston project to promote public participation in comprehensive city planning.

### **Tax Abatement & TIRZ**

The LWV-HA supports the use of tax abatements and tax increment reinvestment zones in the Houston region with appropriate oversight and public input

The League of Women Voters of the Houston Area supports tax abatements as an economic development tool in competitive site situations to attract new “magnet industries” and to retain existing businesses and encourage them to upgrade and provide new jobs.

The League also supports tax abatement as an environmental incentive, for historic preservation, and to revitalize blighted areas. Tax abatement contracts should be analyzed for public benefit and rigidly monitored for compliance and should be terminated if contract terms are not met.

The League of Women Voters of the Houston Area supports Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZs) with appropriate oversight and analysis by the governmental jurisdiction(s) involved and community input, to develop or redevelop blighted areas, for land use management, and for economic growth in tax base.

For both tax abatements and TIRZs, the League of Women Voters of the Houston Area supports

1. annual collection and dissemination of objective data
2. regional cooperation
3. a mandatory public hearing for meaningful and timely input on whether a proposed contract should be granted
4. regular re-evaluation of criteria in light of broader community planning goals (2006)

**History:** The League originally studied tax abatements in 1996. Our position was restudied and TIRZs were added to the study in 2006.

**Action:** No action has been taken under our new position.

## **Ethics**

Support of effective ethics regulation with strong enforcement

**History:** This position was adopted in 2007.

**Action:** An LWV HA member was appointed to the Citizens Task Force on Ethics established by County Judge Ed Emmett.

## **Homeowner Associations**

The LWV HA undertook a study and published as Facts and Issues: “Homeowner Associations - American Dream or Nightmare?”

Consensus was reached by the Units following a study of the Homeowners Associations Facts and Issues. A Position Statement was approved as follows: The League of Women Voters of the Houston Area supports changes in Texas law governing mandatory homeowner associations which would provide

- protection against foreclosure on homesteads
- priority of payments so that assessment payments apply first to assessments and then to non-assessment items
- secret ballots in homeowner elections
- adequate safeguards against fraud to assure uniform, honest and accurate election results
- that the Texas Open Meetings Act and the Texas Open Records Act cover homeowner associations

**History:** This position was adopted in 2008.

**Action:** No action has been taken under this new position.

## II. Natural Resources

### Parks and Recreation

Support measures to insure acquisition, maintenance, and development of public lands in the Houston area by:

- comprehensive planning for public lands in Harris County to meet National Parks and Recreation Association standards;
- adequate funding;
- adoption of an objective priority planning policy;
- investigation of legal ordinances to facilitate parkland acquisition and contribution of land and money by developers;
- maximum cooperation and coordination of park services and planning between city and county;
- maximum use of schools and churches for program development;
- opposition to long-term private and public leasing of public lands. (1970)

**Action:** In 2002, we joined the Houston Quality of Life Coalition, and we support the coalition's goals. In 2003 wrote letter to Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept supporting more aggressive land acquisition and water conservation policies. In 2004-05 we supported additional funding for the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

### Transportation

Support comprehensive transportation plans which include:

- best land use of land and access to employment, cultural, civic, medical, educational, and other facilities;
- public participation in the early planning stages; (1971)
- a well-balanced, environmentally sensitive, multi-modal transportation system which includes buses, rail, and well-regulated paratransit (jitneys, etc.);
- cooperation and funding of joint ventures among the different transportation agencies – Highway Department, Metro, and city and county;
- use of highway funds in the following order of priority:
  1. maintenance
  2. new construction
  3. public mass transit
- limited use of user fees such as toll roads to help fund development and/or construction of a transportation system. (1985)

**History:** The League has historically been concerned about mobility. Impetus for study began when the city purchased a local bus company and set up an agency to run it.

**Action:** League members monitored transit use and served on state transportation committees. LWV-HA and Houston-Galveston Area Council lobbied with other groups to pass enabling state legislation for a city referendum to establish a transit authority.

## **Flood Control**

Support comprehensive long-range planning for flood damage avoidance in Harris County by considering:

- all alternative methods for flood damage avoidance;
- the effect of future development on flooding patterns;
- the full effects of stream modifications;
- the flood plain as a multiple use resource, especially its role as a natural retention system which reduces and delays peak flows;
- economic, social, and environmental factors, especially water quality. (1978)

**History:** At 11 feet above sea level, there is no place in the Houston area that might not be under water in a 5 inch rain. New flood maps are being finalized in 2005; some areas (e.g., Bellaire) have been expanded; others reduced.

**Action:** The League has a member on the citizen Harris County Flood Control Task Force (the chairperson is the League representative). Several League members representing other organizations are also members of the Task Force, which meets quarterly. The Harris County Flood Control District does a good job planning as defined by our position except, perhaps, in considering “the effect of future development on flooding patterns” which is governed by Houston and Harris County, not the Flood Control District.

## **Solid Waste**

Support a long-range solid waste management plan which emphasizes:

- recycling and development of new technology;
- separation of solid waste at the source;
- judicious use of incineration and landfills;
- effective land use principles;
- control of air and water pollution;
- regional planning;
- promotion of public education efforts;
- citizen participation. (1972)

**History:** The League began studying solid waste issues in response to federal, state, and local statutes, and because of controversy arising from the operation of the Holmes Road incinerator.

**Action:** LWV-HA continues to lobby on this topic, urging reduction in packaging so less waste is generated, greater use of recycled materials, and economic incentives which enable recycled materials to compete effectively with “virgin” materials. In October 1997, the League held an all-day workshop on waste reduction and recycling.

## **Toxic Substances**

Support:

- the protection of public health with special concern for sensitive populations as the primary factor in determining regulatory action and decision-making involving toxic substances, with economic costs a secondary consideration;
- a policy requiring industry and unions to fully inform employees and the public of potential risks of toxic substances, both in the work place and the community;

- informing the public of any possibility of adverse effect of toxic substances via clear labeling, public forums, public access to information, and articles and programs in all media to help make informed choices;
- regulating the transportation of toxic substances by
  1. enforcement of safety, speed, and inspection regulations
  2. establishment of realistic schedules, routes, and work practices to protect the public health
  3. requirement of complete and informative labeling on the transporting vehicle, whether hazardous product or waste
- stronger regulatory efforts to control hazardous pollutants in air and water by frequent re-examination of laws and regulations as new information is developed through research, and by enlarging existing regulatory agencies, as necessary, even at increased costs to the taxpayers. (1983)

**History:** Passage of the Toxic Substances Control Act in 1976 spurred LWV-HA's examination of the hazards of toxic substances in Texas' Gulf Coast region. A backgrounder was published in January 1980. After several general meetings, the 1983 consensus was reached.

**Action:** Shortly after the passage of the act, League members served on the Toxic Substances Task Force and as chair and vice chair of the Houston Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC). Members now serve on the Regional Air Quality Planning committee, the Clean Air Coalition, the LEPC, and the Environment Committee of the Greater Houston Partnership. They also monitor state and local legislation and work to educate the public about toxic substance issues. In 2003 wrote letters to U.S. senators opposing the loosening of pollution controls. In 2005, we testified before Houston City Council and at a town hall meeting about air quality in the Milby Park area, and we testified before the Texas Senate Natural Resources Committee concerning proposed air toxics legislation. We also wrote letters to federal, state and city officials urging stronger laws and enforcement of laws on air quality.

### **Building Codes in Coastal Areas**

Support the most up-to-date building codes possible for coastal areas, taking into account future storms of increasing intensity and frequency as well as cost. Building codes should take into account elevation, roofs and windows and should be strictly enforced at every governmental level.

Implementation: Members indicated that the Miami-Dade building codes were too strict for this area but that Category 3 protection was appropriate.

**History:** This position was adopted in 2009.

### III. Social Policy

#### Administration of Justice

Support the removal of certain areas of human behavior from criminal prosecution: sexual activity between legally competent consenting adults, gambling, adult access to pornography, use of alcohol. (1975)

Support measures for rehabilitation of offenders, which would include:

- punishment or penalties which fit the crime;
- more equitable punishment;
- alternative arrangements to placement of juveniles in state schools which would include small, family type units close to home with effective supervision and qualified personnel;
- provisions for pre-trial release such as are incorporated in the present (1974) Harris County Pretrial Release Program.

**Action:** Lobbied for repeal of Penal Code 21.06 to decriminalize consensual sexual activity between adults. LWV-HA sponsored a Conference at the UH Law School in September 1991 on Criminal Justice that was broadcast on the Community Access Channel. In 2002 participated with the Texas Criminal Justice Reform Coalition in programs to educate the public about voting rights of ex-felons. In 2002 held general meeting on capital punishment.

#### Bilingual Education

- Support educational legislation, policies, and programs that take into consideration the following:
- The purpose of bilingual education should be to teach every limited-English proficient (LEP) student to read, write, and speak English as soon as possible while maintaining academic achievement.
- The basis on which the effectiveness of bilingual education should be determined are:
  1. how quickly transition into English is made;
  2. standardized testing results of academic achievement, using valid data that can be confirmed.
- Factors that negatively influence the academic achievement of LEP students are:
  1. limited supply of qualified, committed teachers;
  2. high mobility of students' families;
  3. economic hardships;
  4. the low educational expectations of the teachers, family, and the children.
- The factors can be mitigated by:
  1. consistency of curriculum among school districts;
  2. adequate resources available from the Texas Education Agency;
  3. working with families and teachers to raise educational expectations;
  4. creating new avenues for recruiting additional teachers who are qualified and committed.
- Because of the preservation of ethnic cultures is the responsibility of the home and other institutions, funding for bilingual education should be focused on the acquisition of English proficiency.

**History:** In May, 1998, The League of Women Voters of Houston adopted a two-year study of bilingual education in the Greater Houston Area to review and evaluate the federal and state laws, funding mechanisms, and policies relating to bilingual education; how programs are being implemented in the Greater Houston Area, criteria used for evaluating the success or effectiveness of the programs, and who makes the evaluations. After study and consensus, the position was adopted on April 24, 2000, by the League of Women Voters of Houston.

## **Child Abuse and Neglect**

Support the requirement for schools to honor parental written requests not to use corporal punishment on their children. (1989) Support the abolishment of corporal punishment in schools. This is a local position only.

**History:** The Child Abuse and Neglect study was begun in Houston in 1988. The Committee soon discovered that child abuse and neglect should be a state issue. At the LWVT convention held in Houston in 1990, the study was adopted as a non-recommended item and was studied locally by LWV-HA members under the guidelines of the LWVT. The child care issue was studied that same year as a recommended LWVT item.

**Action:** The 79<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session now underway is very important for Child Abuse and Neglect reform. Prevention programs need to be restored with health care provided for all our children in protective care. Caseworker caseloads need to reflect the national standard of 12 to 18 cases per worker. CPS needs to be adequately funded with the latest technology.

## **Domestic Violence**

Support efforts to:

- increase community awareness of the incidence of domestic violence;
- establish a process for keeping records on domestic violence calls, responses, charges, and dispositions;
- provide special training of police and special squads to deal with domestic violence;
- establish crisis intervention teams and provide aid to the victims;
- encourage the District Attorney's office to prosecute charges of domestic violence;
- encourage sensitivity to the problem of domestic violence throughout the justice system;
- encourage increased cooperation between agencies that deal with the problem;
- make counseling available for all members of a household involved in domestic violence. (1983)

**History:** We have had a position on domestic violence since 1983.

**Action:** Anti-stalking law was revisited and revised in the 1997 Texas Legislative session. The new law was signed and took effect immediately after the Governor signed the bill. Also a concern is the Federal Welfare Reform Bill with heavy focus on welfare-to-work programs. This poses several challenges to survivors of family violence. The 15% cut in the Social Services Block Grant (which in the 96/97 biennium comprised 97% of the budget for family violence programs), coupled with mounting need for services, threatens the funding level of state family violence programs. We are members of CADA (Coalition Against Domestic Abuse).

## **Education**

1. Support measures to improve educational accountability program in the school districts of the greater Houston area, with:
  - shared responsibility of educational accountability at all levels of the educational process, including the Texas Legislature, the Texas Education Agency, local school boards, administrators, teachers, pupils, parents, and the community.
  - state legislative accountability for fair and equitable funding;
  - teacher accountability for knowledge of competency in the subjects they teach;
  - student accountability for conduct and attitude;
  - community accountability for knowledge of election issues;
  - community involvement in accountability programs;
  - comprehensive student evaluations including methods other than standardized testing;

- parental input in the evaluation process of the school district personnel. (1978)
2. Support equal access to quality education, including:
    - providing opportunities for students to learn to function in our pluralistic community;
    - offering and encouraging the achievement of academic skills which enable each child to function at his/her highest potential;
    - providing superior programs and teaching which take into account the needs of the individual pupil;
    - offering superior programs in college preparatory and occupational/vocational training;
    - providing free transportation as an integrative tool for those requesting it;
    - student transfer policies which preserve existing integration;
    - magnet-alternative schools;
    - closing under-utilized schools;
    - combinations of the above. (1976)

**History:** LWV-HA adopted its education positions in the mid-1970's in response to perceived inequities in school funding and educational opportunities.

**Action:** Recent activities include monitoring state legislation on school finance (especially vouchers), and the impact of the religious right through affiliation with the Texas Freedom Network and Let Freedom Ring. The school tax base impact of tax abatements was considered in the recent LWV-HA Tax Abatement study. Lobbied House Education Committee members opposing pro-voucher bill. Committee members monitored Comptroller Sharp's performance review of HISD. In 2002-03 committee members began a restudy of the LWV-HA position on education. We wrote many letters in 2004-05 opposing vouchers and supporting adequate education funding. We attended the presentations before the Texas Supreme Court regarding education and will be monitoring the Special Session on education.

## Health

1. Support the establishment of comprehensive, culturally appropriate, and inclusive public health services for Houston Area residents. These services should be accessible to the public in terms of cost and location. Clients should understand available services. Emphasis should be given to preventive and primary care.
2. Support joint planning and coordination to eliminate duplication and gaps in health services and to improve the availability and quality of care including:
  - Centralized regional governance to pool resources and increase effectiveness;
  - Collaborative efforts by city, county, and non-profit public health care providers including programs to disseminate information enabling users to better manage their care; and
  - Channels for consumer input into health planning.
3. Support measures to control the escalation of health care costs including:
  - Increasing the insured population;
  - Accessing all available matching funds;
  - Utilization of local public and private funds to pay Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) premiums/Medicare Part B premiums for indigent elderly;
  - Increasing the number of federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), school clinics, and other clinics that deliver comprehensive medical services so that care is delivered in the most appropriate setting, thus lowering the use of expensive emergency room services;
  - Area-wide coordination of electronic health records including immunizations to be accessible by all health care facilities;
  - Area-wide coordination of highly specialized care involving expensive equipment; and
  - Utilization of para-professionals such as nurse practitioners, physician's assistants, and dental hygienists.

**History:** LWV-HA determined the need to evaluate the existing health care providers, distribution, and services in light of increases in the number of uninsured residents, over-crowding in public hospitals, and ever increasing reliance on emergency rooms to provide primary care services at prohibitive cost.

**Action:** LWV-HA has lobbied and given testimony at Harris County Commissioners Court to prevent cuts in the Hospital District budget. In 2002, LWV-HA wrote a letter to the Houston mayor and council members opposing shortened hours for city clinics. In 2004, a League member served on the public health sub-committee of the Greater Houston Partnership study.

League members served on a committee to study public health care in Houston and issued a report in 2005. Also in 2005, LWV-HA lobbied for a Hospital District budget that realistically addressed the demand for services.

## **Housing**

1. Support equal opportunities for all Houstonians with emphasis on additional well-managed, low-cost housing and continued support of existing positions:
  - a minimum housing code used in conjunction with existing building, fire, health, and sanitation codes;
  - adequate provisions for enforcing these codes, and any relocation of families necessary through such enforcement, to be the obligation of the city;
  - completion of a workable program for land use and housing for more orderly growth of the city, thus leading to qualification for federal assistance;
  - encouragement of private investment in low-cost housing and the use of private initiative to seek new ways of housing the needy. (1971)
2. Support a substantial increase in low and moderate-income housing stock expenditures for Houston and Harris County above the 26% and 30% of Community Development Block Grant funds allocated in 1990. The League believes that Housing Assistance should be the top priority of Community Development Block Grant funding. We support equal priority for Capital Improvements and Economic Development.

**History:** Our housing position was prompted by serious rental housing quality deficiencies. The Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) position arose from concerns that insufficient funds were being devoted to low and moderate housing as opposed to economic development.

**Action:** The LWV used its position to work with Houston City Council to create a housing code, which led to improvements in rental housing stock. The League also supported the City's 1993 stricter revisions to the Housing Code. At present, the City does not generally provide relocation help for displaced low-income families other than providing lists of other available housing.

## **Sexuality Education and Reproductive Services**

1. Support comprehensive sex education in all public schools in Harris County, including:
  - greater parental involvement;
  - broadening curricula;
  - student access to specifically educated nurses, counselors, and teachers;
  - greater use of city and county educational programs;
  - programs to help parents open discussions with their children. (1982)
2. Support adequate, easily accessible, publicly funded family planning services to meet the community's needs, including:
  - confidentiality of all clients;
  - efficient scheduling of family planning services;
  - advertising;
  - adequate funding;

- adequate, accessible facilities. (1982)
3. Support equal access to legal and medically sound pregnancy termination services for all residents of Houston and Harris County, with government funding and/or a combination of government/private funding available for low and moderate income residents. (1982)

**History:** This position was adopted in 1982.

**Action:** The LWV cooperates with Planned Parenthood at all levels to keep Roe v. Wade, or freedom of choice, the law of the land. The Texas Legislature regularly considers measures aimed at regulating abortion services. In 1997, parental notification and licensing standards bills were on the agenda. The League also supports providing foreign aid for family planning. Congress has authorized family planning foreign aid, but stipulated that no funds be used for abortions. In 2002 wrote letter to US senators urging ratification of CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) treaty.