

Issues Briefing November 2020

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Workshop

Moderated by Jeanne Roberts, President LWV Appleton

My name is Jeanne Roberts and I am president of the LWV of Appleton and co-chair along with my friend Eloisa Gomez of the Community Alliances Committee. I would like to start by acknowledging that Appleton is located on the traditional homeland of the Menominee Nation. In addition to the Menominee Nation, there are ten other federally recognized Native American sovereign nations in Wisconsin as well as the Brothertown Nation that is not yet recognized. By acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional land of these sovereign nations we honor with gratitude the land itself and the people who have stewarded it throughout the generations.

Suffrage history focuses primarily on white women of means. And yet, according to Sheila Hanlon “We need to go back to the original records and re-write how we look at suffrage history,” “If you’re looking for working class or LGBT suffragettes, or suffragettes of colour or suffragettes with disabilities, then the place to find them is back in the archives. All of these things—race, class, disability, sexuality, gender—they all worked together and are a really important part of the unwritten story of suffrage.”

Or as my friend Karen (Karen Nelson, Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator for the City of Appleton), reminds me, women of color fought for the right to vote all the while knowing that they would not reap the benefits.

The same can be said about the history of LWV. The LWV has done great work over its 100 years. But the LWV has also had some glaring omissions and has remained a primarily white women’s organization. To paraphrase Dr. Carolyn Jefferson-Jenkins in her book, *The Untold Story of Women of Color in the LWV*, women of color at best have been marginalized and at worst have been excluded from the LWV. For example, In 1954 following the Brown Vs Board of Education decision, “on the subject of school desegregation, the League was silent.” This summer at the LWV National Convention, the Urgent Resolution – **A National Statement on Systemic Racism** - passed with 1094 yay and 32 nay votes 100 years after the founding of the LWV. \*(Motion #2020-136)\*, How painful must that be to the women who experience racism on a consistent basis knowing that the “everywoman’s organization” took 100 years to recognize this.

And this is our history and this is a big reason why our path to diversity, equity and inclusion must start from within us – as individuals and as an organization. Why should marginalized women in our communities trust the League enough to want to be a part of this organization? Because without earned trust, we will not become the organization that we profess to want to be.

In the 2016 presidential election after a very competent woman lost to a somewhat less competent white man, it was like a kick in the guts. And all of my friends described that same sensation. And then Tuesday night of 2020 when the only presidential ticket with a woman on it was behind by large margins in so many states, in my home state of Wisconsin, I had that same sensation (because I apparently forgot what the LWV had told me about being patient with the results). And I did not sleep much that night, but I did come to a moment of clarity. This was my white privilege. I had only had that kick in the guts feeling a few times, the sensation that my country thought so little of my gender. But this is the sensation that our sisters and brothers of color, that our LGBTQ sisters and brothers, that our sisters and

brothers of differing abilities experience all the time. The realization of how little their own country values them.

So to become more diverse we must first accept our whiteness and the privilege that this affords us just because of the color of our skin. We have to look within ourselves and our organization because if we are only looking outward to find systemic racism & discrimination then we are not going to find what we need to move forward. It is then and only then that we can begin to earn trust and only when we begin to earn trust can we be welcomed and can we work together.

So our goals are to become an organization that:

- Understands and values diversity
- Understands and practices the meaning of equity
- Understands the true meaning of our mission to empower voters and defend democracy

Today we will ask three League members to answer questions in three areas, but as they respond I would suggest we each take a look within ourselves and think of what our personal or local League answers would be to these questions.

There are a variety of tools available on the MEMBER RESOURCES/Virtual Programming site. In addition, the CAC ( Community Alliance Committee) is working hard to develop tools and is available to help anyone move forward with their DEI efforts. We are all in this together and we know that we are stronger together.

For those of you worrying that you can't do this, I ask that you remember the words of Dolores Huerta – Si se Pueda – yes you can

Thank you for joining us and now I would like to introduce our panel members, Earnestine Moss from the Dane County League, Eloisa Gómez from the Milwaukee County League, and Melanie Ramey from the Dane County League who also represents the LWV WI Board.

Questions for Discussion

1. In your opinion, what are some of the current barriers to membership in the LWV for diverse communities?
2. Can you tell us a little about what is being done at the state and some of the local levels to deal with these barriers?
3. What would you say are some of the steps we can take moving forward to becoming a more diverse community?