

La Crosse Wisconsin Voter

No. 95 League of Women Voters of the La Crosse Area Newsletter Jan./Feb. 2008



THE PRESIDENT'S PODIUM

Nancy Hill, President, LWV of the La Crosse Area

A new year begins, and there will be so many activities for La Crosse Leaguers to keep track of. It's the time of year to reflect on what we have been doing, and to look forward to the adventures of 2008.

We have been quite busy for several months, learning about immigration, and preparing for the Consensus Vote in January. We are aware that immigration has become a major election issue now. Our results are tallied at the state and national level and then League decides how to swing into *Action*. If you have yet to study the complicated immigration issues, be sure to look at the League website. We do study thoroughly.

You have received Action alerts and have probably acted on some of them. This is how League impacts decisions made by our governments at the local, state, and national levels. This Action is based on earlier studies where we have reached consensus.

We will be moving on to other issues in our program studies. Health care has continued to be a major issue, even though we studied it some time ago. There are new twists and turns we should be aware of. We also are working on energy and environment.

It's my belief that the time is now for Leaguers around the state to press for dental help (health care issue) for underprivileged children. With health care reform on everyone's mind, I wonder if we couldn't ask that people think of at least a minimal level of dental care for all citizens.

In March, from the 21st to the 29th, there will be a delegation of four legal professionals and a facilitator (translator, etc.) from Kyrgyzstan here to study Rule of Law and stay with local families. I think you'll want to meet them. Our involvement in enhancing democracy is the reason we were asked to be a part of this effort – arranging housing and programming for them.

We are all aware 2008 is an election year. Please help with Voter Services and Catherine Kolkmeier, as we assist with municipal elections this spring, and get into the national election fever with the Wisconsin primary in February.



Please note that the National Convention, a biennial event, will be in Portland, Oregon in June 2008. The national conventions are fun, good hard work, a great learning experience, and a place to meet interesting people. You will certainly learn more about League. Think about attending.

The best to you and yours for a wonderful 2008.

2008 Local and State League Meetings

More details will follow, but mark your calendars now for these upcoming events:

LWV of the La Crosse Area Legislative Breakfast, March 29

LWV of Wisconsin Making Democracy Work Summit, October 3

LWV of the La Crosse Area Annual Meeting, May 5

LWV of Wisconsin Annual Meeting, June 6-7

La Crosse Area Dental Coalition

By Betty Kruck

The La Crosse Area Dental Care Advocacy Coalition is comprised of legislators, concerned citizens and representatives from the La Crosse Dental Society, La Crosse Area Dental Hygienists, Franciscan Skemp Medical Center, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center, Independent Living Resources, La Crosse Community Foundation, La Crosse County Health Department, La Crosse City Human Services Department, La Crosse County Health and Human Services Board Members, Legal Action, Scenic Bluffs Community Health Centers, St. Clare Health Mission, Western Technical College, Wisconsin Dental Association, Coulee Cap and the League of Women Voters. Its mission is: "To assure access to dental care for Medicaid recipients and uninsured individuals and families." This broad-based coalition has been meeting for two years to assess the need for dental care in the community, to raise awareness of this need, to provide some immediate measures to assist people in pain, to promote preventive care and to advocate for a solution to the problem of access to dental care. There are work groups focusing on each of the following: preventive care, emergency/urgent care and legislative awareness.



The problem is acute. It is difficult to find dentists who will take new Medicaid patients. Dentists must complete extensive paper work to be licensed to receive Medicaid reimbursement. The reimbursement is only 40% of the cost of providing services. Wisconsin is ranked in the bottom five states in the nation for percentage of Medicaid funds allotted for dental care. Less than 1% of Medicaid dollars are spent on dental care in Wisconsin.

State Representative Jennifer Shilling and Senator Dan Kapanke have co-chaired the meetings of this coalition. These legislators worked with their colleagues to heighten awareness of the problem of dental access that exists throughout the state, and they made extensive efforts to have money added to the budget to raise MA reimbursement rates for dental care. The Joint Finance Committee endorsed a pilot project to increase pediatric dental rates in La Crosse, Racine and Brown Counties to determine the extent to which MA rate increases affect dentists' willingness to provide dental services to MA and BadgerCare recipients. This pilot project was seen by the coalition as an important first step toward raising the reimbursement rate and solving a major part of the problem that exists. However, the final budget agreement omitted this pilot project.

While very disappointed in the lack of legislative budget action, the coalition will continue to meet. The strong coalition in La Crosse made some important advances in helping to highlight the need for increased access to dental care for thousands of individuals in La Crosse County. The coalition opened a dialog with State Secretary of Health and Human Services Kevin Hayden. Secretary Hayden met with representatives of the coalition in Madison and he made several subsequent trips to La Crosse to talk to coalition members and dentists. The League played a role in arranging the initial meeting with Secretary Hayden. The LWV has a role to play in keeping attention focused on the problem.

LWV Social

JOIN League members for a social hosted by Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins, 2642 Hackberry Lane, La Crosse.

MONDAY, JANUARY 28, 5:15 - 7:30 P.M.



LWV of the La Crosse Area Consensus Meetings

By Ellen Rosborough

Thursday, January 10, there will be 2 opportunities to participate in the Consensus on Immigration:

- 11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. at Southside Neighborhood Center, 1300 S. 6th St., La Crosse. Please bring your lunch – we will be discussing the consensus questions for the whole 2 hours.

- 5:30 – 7:30 p.m. at the La Crosse Public Library, Main Branch, 800 Main Street, Auditorium A. Please bring your supper or a snack. We will be discussing the consensus questions for the whole 2 hours.

Note that if we get a major storm that day, we will reschedule for later in January.

Present at each session will be a Moderator, who will direct the discussion, and a Recorder who will write down the responses, and take notes on the discussion. In addition, if any member would like to participate by filling in the form and mailing or emailing it to me prior to the meetings, I will incorporate their comments and opinions. Additionally, one or more local members will act as “Experts”—those who have participated in our series of meetings and have compiled much of the data collected in our study.

The official response from our league will be filed electronically after the meetings are concluded.

To help you prepare for the consensus, a large amount of information is posted on the www.lwv.org website. We have also put the following documents on our website, www.lwv-lacrosse.org to make them easier to find.

Consensus Questions

4 articles from *National Voter*

- Global Interdependence and Migration
- Immigration: Impact on U.S. Economy
- Border Enforcement
- Family Reunification and Diversity Policies

8 Background papers

- Economic Aspects of Authorized and Unauthorized Immigration
- Effects of Global Interdependence on Migration

- Immigration and the Economy
- Immigrants: Diversity and Inclusion
- Overview: Federal Immigration Policy and Proposed Reforms

What Motivates Immigration to America?

U.S. Immigration Policy: Family Reunification

Federal Immigration Policy: Enforcement Issues

Consensus on Immigration: January 10th

Upcoming Programs.

Each monthly program will be held twice, over a noon hour and another session in the early evening. Watch for emails on the details of where and when, as they may change venues. All of these programs are open to the public and will be advertised.

February 2008

Continue our discussion on sustainability by participating in a Natural Step Study Group.

March 2008

Learn about Election Administration from local county and municipal clerks. Panel discussions will include what occurs prior to election day, activities on election day, and post – election canvas and audits. You probably thought it was all about registering!

April 2008

Update on Dental Health issues and the status of health care in Wisconsin.

May 2008

Prepare for fall 2008 elections. Topics include How to Conduct or Moderate a Forum; How to Register Voters; How to be an Observer; and What you need to know to be a poll worker.

Interested in assisting with Voter Service efforts for 2008?

Contact Catherine Kolkmeier.

LWV Guest Column:

The Face of Poverty in the Coulee Region

In February 2007, Couleecap conducted the “2007 Couleecap Needs Assessment” to gather information regarding the needs of low-income people in our service area. The surveys were distributed to low-income households, staff, Board of Directors/Planning Committee members, and service providers in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties.

A total of 1,754 surveys were distributed and 815 (46.5%) returned. Of the 815 surveys returned, 627 of them were from low-income households, which represented a total of 1,585 people (children and adults).

Of the 627 households, 478 (76%) have annual incomes less than \$21,463; 344 (55%) have income from wages and/or self-employment; 289 (46%) are renters; and, 243 (39%) have children.

Of the 1,585 people, 259 (16%) work full-time; 311 (20%) have a disability; and 401 (25%) have a high school diploma.

Households were asked to rate problem areas and most significant concerns in their household. The top three problem areas are listed in priority order and the two top concerns within each problem area are also listed. Responses from key agencies, Couleecap staff and Board/Planning Committee members tend to generally agree with these results.

These are the significant concerns for the following problem areas associated with poverty:

Health: Cost and availability of dental care; Cost and availability of health care/insurance.

Housing: Cost of heating bills; Cannot afford to buy a house.

Transportation: Cost of gasoline; Cost of car repairs is too high.:

What impact do these top three problem areas have on low-income families?

◆ **Health:** In 2006, the average annual cost of family health insurance was \$11,500, with the employee’s portion of the health insurance premium for family coverage almost \$3,000. According to the 2007 Couleecap Needs

Assessment, 40% of low-income households indicated that getting a job with health benefits is a serious or very serious problem for them. In Couleecap’s four-county area, approximately 11% of people are uninsured at any given time. The average charge for an emergency room visit is \$675; the average charge for a primary care visit at a clinic or physician office ranges from \$100 - \$150. The absence of health insurance can destroy a family’s economic well-being and even lead to homelessness. Getting or not getting health care has life-threatening implications.

Affording dental care is very difficult for low-income families as well. According to the needs assessment,

“My job has good health insurance, that’s why I stay there, but the hourly pay is very low.”

Comment from a low-income person responding to the survey

58% of low-income households indicated that the cost of dental care is a

serious or very serious problem for them. A very low percentage of Medicaid recipients in our area are receiving dental services. In 2005, only 18.7% of people on Medicaid received dental services primarily because of the lack of dentists in our area that will accept Medicaid recipients.

◆ **Housing:** According to the U.S. Census 2000, the median value of a house in Couleecap’s service area is as follows: Crawford County - \$75,100; La Crosse County - \$96,900; Monroe County - \$77,500; and Vernon County - \$73,400. According to the 2007 Couleecap Needs Assessment, 58% of low-income households indicated that the inability to afford to buy a house is a serious or very serious problem for them. Today, families can purchase a home with no down-payment from a multitude of mortgage companies, but these companies charge interest rates that are 2-3% higher than the prime interest rate and they also charge higher closing fees. Many of these families come to Couleecap two to three years down the road seeking assistance because they cannot afford their mortgage payments and are facing foreclosure.

Increasing energy costs play a substantial role in the financial pressures facing low-income people. 47% of low-income households indicated that the cost of heating bills is a serious or very serious problem for them via the needs survey. Energy costs for low-income households take a much bigger portion of the household budget than for higher income families. The average Wisconsin household pays 2.6% of its income on heating fuel, in contrast to households receiving fuel assistance, who use 10.6% of income for heating fuel. Families that receive fuel

assistance are at or below 150% of the federal poverty guidelines.

◆ **Transportation:** Transportation is a critical element for most people to get to work, go to school, reach needed services, and prosper. Many low-income families cannot afford to own a car and those that do often have older, unreliable cars and struggle to properly maintain their vehicles. A 2003 BTS (Bureau of Transportation Statistics) study found that the working poor spend nearly 10% of their incomes on getting to and from work. This compares to just over 2% for individuals earning \$45,000 or more annually, and 3.9% for all working Americans. For the 66% of the working poor who commuted by private vehicle, the expense of commuting is even more burdensome. Those individuals spent 21% of their income to get to and from work.

According to the 2007 Couleecap Needs Assessment, 42% of low-income households indicated that the cost of car repairs and/or cost of gasoline is a serious or very serious problem for them. Recently, one of Couleecap's program participants stated "Our transportation is starting to get unreliable. We don't have the money for repairs. If anything out of the ordinary happens to our car, our budget falls apart." When budgets fall apart, lives can fall apart. Families already struggling to survive can be severely affected by problems with transportation.

This article was condensed from a longer report by the staff of Couleecap. Contact Grace Jones at Couleecap for more information on the report and how to help people find ways out of poverty.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c) 3 charitable organization created in 1966 to fight poverty in the Coulee Region. The four-county service area includes Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. For more information regarding Couleecap, Inc. and its programs go to www.couleecap.org. Executive Director Grace Jones may be reached at: gracej@couleecap.org or 608-634-7366.

LEAGUE CONTACT INFORMATION

League of Women Voters of the La Crosse Area:
<http://www.lwvlacrosse.org/>

La Crosse Area League Phone: 791-1191

League of Women Voters of Wisconsin:
<http://www.lwvwi.org/>

County & State

La Crosse County web site (information on Board of Supervisors and Committees):
<http://www.co.la-crosse.wi.us/Default.htm>

State Legislative Hotline:
(800) 362-9472

Wisconsin State Legislature (including Wisconsin Blue Book): <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/>

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE LA CROSSE AREA

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Send correspondence regarding *La Crosse Wisconsin Voter* to the Editor, Anita Evans, at anitalarry@centurytel.net

Calendar for Jan. - Feb., 2008
League of Women Voters of the La Crosse Area

Brown Bag Lunch/Supper: Consensus on Immigration *Thurs., Jan. 10*
See inside for times and locations

CWV Board Meeting *Wed., Jan. 16 from Noon - 1:00 p.m.*

CWV Social *Mon., Jan. 28 from 5:15 - 7:30 p.m.*
Hosted by Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins, 2642 Hackberry Lane, La Crosse

Primary Election (see Voter's Guide at: <http://www.lwvwi.org>) *Tues., Feb. 19*

CWV Board Meeting *Wed., Feb. 20 from Noon - 1:00 p.m.*

Note: Contact LWV Board President or refer to the agenda for Board meeting locations. Board meetings dates and time are subject to change.



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