

Proposal for “Digital Equity” Concurrence at LWFVUS Convention — with LWFVCT Positions on Broadband Access & Community Affairs, Public Access Media

Members of the Leagues of Connecticut, Georgia, New Mexico, New York, Tennessee and Vermont, along with the State League of Connecticut, ask other state and local Leagues to consider proposing concurrence at Convention (June 2022) with LWFV Connecticut’s “Digital Equity” positions: namely high speed internet access (broadband) and public, educational and governmental (PEG) access media.

This letter provides

- I. Rationale: Why This Concurrence Is Needed
- II. Find Out More: Link to Information on the Need for Digital Equity
- III. Proposed Concurrence Statement
- IV. How to Support This Concurrence
Specific language to use when completing the LWFVUS Program Planning Report (deadline March 1, 2022) and useful LWFV.org links on Planning Process.

Questions? Is your league willing to co-sponsor this effort?

Email Our Rural Affairs Caucus: lwfvrac@gmail.com

Thank you!

Pua Ford (LWFVCT), Beth Orford (LWFVGA), Judy Esterquest (LWFVNYS), Donna Seymour (LWFVNYS), Kathleen Stein (LWFVNYS), Akkana Peck (LWFVNM), Karen Wentworth (LWFVNM), Linda Maccabe (LWFVTN), Nicolas Anzalone (LWFVVT). Allen Gilbert (LWFVVT)

Additional Leagues Supporting the Proposal of this Concurrence:

State Leagues:

LWFV Connecticut
LWFV Vermont
LWFV Georgia
LWFV Maine
LWFV New Mexico
LWFV New York State

Local Leagues:

LWFV Coastal Georgia
LWFV Los Alamos, NM
LWFV Port Washington-Manhasset, NY
LWFV St. Lawrence County, NY

We’ love to add your League to the list. Please join us!

I. Rationale: Why a Digital Equity Concurrence Is Necessary

A. Broadband

Most state and local leagues do not have positions on digital equity and having a national position would allow them to advocate for digital equity at the state and local levels. No resources from the LWVUS would be required to enable state and local advocacy. To understand why advocacy is needed we must recognize the breadth of the need for broadband access. The Connecticut Position Study clearly stated this need:

High speed Internet—or broadband—means a fast Internet connection through cable lines, telephone lines, power lines, or by wireless technologies. Universal access is important because all consumers need fast, high-capacity connections to conduct business efficiently, to telecommute, to engage in political discourse, to communicate with their legislators, to use Internet telephone services, to get speedy access to e-mail communications, and to view live video or radio broadcasts.” (15)

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has intensified our awareness of this need. To the Connecticut list we would now add that universal access is increasingly essential:

- so that all students can access online or hybrid classes;
- so that all households have access to telemedicine and advanced diagnostics, especially in rural areas with few primary care doctors and fewer specialists;
- so that all residents have access to a wider range of local/national news and information than is currently available;
- so that workers can connect remotely from home.

All households need affordable access to a broadband connection with sufficient speed and bandwidth to allow a family to engage in all these activities simultaneously. Yet, in sparsely populated rural and poorer urban areas, internet service is often provided by a monopoly or at best a duopoly, leading to predatory pricing, cherry picking of customers, and much slower speeds. In short, the Covid-19 pandemic has only underscored the necessity of *Digital Equity*, the principle at the heart of the LWV CT position.

Three elements are needed for Digital Equity:

- **Access to Infrastructure:** Does everyone have access to high-speed internet? Can their residence or office connect to local high-quality infrastructure? Is there sufficient resiliency and reliability to make the service dependable?
- **Affordability:** Is the access affordable for all users?
- **Access to Devices & Know-How:** Are people capable of using their high-speed connection for basic needs as well as expanded opportunities? Do they have the devices (tablets, computers) and the skills needed to use them effectively?

The League of Women Voters has numerous positions supporting equitable access to education and healthcare; equal opportunity and pay in the job market; and equal access to the ballot box. In the contemporary world, Digital Inequity impacts all of these rights.

Furthermore, we know that Digital Inequity disproportionately affects people of color and other marginalized people and communities. Given the League’s paired priorities of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity and “Making Democracy Work,” we must demand that broadband access not be limited by zipcode or demographics.

B. Community Access and Statewide Public Affairs Media

The League of Women Voters believes that an informed citizenry is the bedrock of democracy. This belief leads us to require governmental bodies to protect a “citizen’s right to know” by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings, and making public records accessible. As early as 1994, the national League had urged the Federal Communications Commission to issue requirements for broadcasters to cover local public affairs.

In some areas, local Public, Educational and Governmental media (PEG) operations have worked for decades with state and local Leagues to provide voter education and information in debates, forums and discussion programs. As other media—newspapers, radio stations, commercial television channels—have consolidated, the nonprofit PEG channels are often the sole remaining sources of local information in the areas they serve. Like national broadcast networks, local PEG operations have also expanded their programming to internet streaming.

State public affairs channels on cable television and the internet provide the same transparency for state government as C-SPAN does at the federal level and as a PEG station does at the local level. Some examples are [Connecticut Network](#), [the Florida Channel](#), [The Illinois Channel](#), [Wisconsin Eye](#), and [TVW](#) in Washington State. ([The California Channel](#) was another such entity, now defunct.)

However, as community access and state public affairs organizations expand to internet conferencing, the digital divide continues to widen, with rural and poor urban customers unable to stream or participate in governmental meetings. This adds yet another reason for the League to advocate for universal access to broadband service.

We therefore urge the League of Women Voters U.S. to join the growing national movement for digital equity by concurring with the LWV CT position on internet and public media access.

II. Find out more: <https://www.lwvnm.org/broadband/> and <https://www.lwvnm.org/broadband/background.html>

III . Proposed Concurrence Statements:

Universal High Speed Internet Access (Digital Equity) for All Residents of the United States

The League of Women Voters believes that high speed affordable internet access is an essential service that should be readily available to all U.S. residents and businesses. National, state and local government policies should support broadband, wireless, and other means of high speed internet deployment throughout the nation. Efficient, high speed, affordable access to the internet for all U.S. residents in their homes, schools and workplaces--regardless of geographic

location or neighborhood demographics--is a necessity for assuring equal access to local and state government, for maintaining openness and transparency in government activities, for communicating with legislative leaders, for engaging in political discourse, for competing in the global marketplace, and for assuring that voters receive the information they need to participate in our democracy.

The League of Women Voters supports making high speed internet access available to all residents of the United States, without charge, through schools, libraries, and other secure public buildings.

Community Access and Public Affairs Media

The League of Women Voters believes that community access media – for Public, Educational, and Governmental programming (PEG) – must be adequately protected, promoted, and funded, regardless of the provider of media services. Statewide public affairs programming must be adequately protected, promoted, and funded by state legislatures and available to all residents, regardless of the provider of media services. Government should provide opportunities for citizen participation in decisions regarding community access, or PEG media.

Access to public affairs programming through modern media communication is essential to the public interest and to League of Women Voters’ mission and purpose-- to protect civil liberties, to ensure open, transparent government, and to promote the public’s right to know. To protect the public interest, high quality PEG transmission and PEG availability on basic service tiers and on the internet are essential.

IV. How to Support This Concurrence

- 1. Get on your League’s agenda and ask for their support** — specifically we’d like them to ask the LWVUS Board to make this Concurrence a recommended item for Program Consideration at the 2022 LWVUS Convention; note this does not mean committing your delegates to vote for it.
- 2. If your League decides to support this, please also complete the LWVUS Program Planning Report Survey (see note below) using the specific language in the box so they know exactly what you are recommending in the fewer than 300 words allotted to answering either**

“Question 7 (online form) or 10 (pdf version): Would you like to recommend another program item, in addition to the Campaign for Making Democracy Work ®? (Yes/No)” or

“Question 12 (online form) or 15 (pdf version): Please provide anything else you would like to share on Program Planning.”

Please copy this language into box #7 or #12 of LWVUS Program Planning Report Survey:

We ask that the LWVUS Board make the “Proposal for Concurrence at LWVUS Convention with the LWVCT positions on Universal High Speed Internet Access (Digital Equity) for All Residents of the United States, and Community Access and Public Affairs Media” a recommended item for Program Consideration at the LWVUS Convention.

Concurring with this position at Convention would give the LWVUS a much needed position on what is now usually termed “broadband access” without

requiring any outlay of resources by either local or state Leagues or LWVUS. It will support our DEI efforts by enabling all Leagues to advocate for Digital Equity, and it will support the Campaign for Making Democracy Work by enabling advocacy for the public's access to local and state government activities via digital and other community access and public affairs media.

*Note: Each League may complete the LWVUS PP survey **once** (online only) and, once started, the **form cannot be edited and it may time out.***

Here's a link to a pdf version of the survey (for planning your answers):

<https://www.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021%20Program%20Planning%20Survey%20%28003%29.pdf>

The link to the Program Planning Leaders Guide: https://www.lwv.org/league-management/policies-guidelines/leaders-guide-lwvus-program-planning-2022-2024?utm_source=League+Update&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=10212021

Here's the link to the online Survey: : <http://s.alchemer.com/s3/2021-Program-Planning-Survey>

Submission deadline: March 1, 2022.

Email questions: progplan@lwv.org

3. Again, please let us know if we can add your name to the list of Leagues who support putting this concurrence on the June agenda, by emailing lwv.rac@gmail.com