



2019 ISSUE PAPER: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Position statement

The League of Women Voters of the United States believes “that the federal government shares with other levels of government the responsibility to provide equality of opportunity for education, employment and housing for all persons in the US regardless of their race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation or disability. In order to promote self-sufficiency for individuals and families, the LWVUS supports policies and programs designed to prevent or reduce poverty.”

Summary of Issues for the 2019 Legislative Session

How can we improve the lives of individuals, children, and families in Washington State? The following proposed legislation, policies, and programs reflect a part of the direction our advocacy will take in the 2019 legislative session. The issue of social and economic justice is huge, and its tentacles reach far and wide, requiring a lot of work. Our goal is to stay focused on calling for measures to create an equitable system to ensure that all Washingtonians have equal opportunity to get ahead.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

More Washingtonians will struggle to meet basic needs if wages continue to stagnate while costs of education, medical care, housing, child care, and student debt outpace inflation. We will look for legislation to strengthen labor standards which include promoting and protecting a living wage, strengthening laws against discrimination in hiring, pay and promotion, and providing accessible, affordable, high-quality child care. An earned income tax credit will provide a significant boost for working families who earn modest wages. The employee anti-retaliation act would make it unlawful for employers to take adverse action against employee labor or unpaid wages complaints. Considered wage theft, this especially hits undocumented workers and families.

POVERTY PREVENTION

Reforming our regressive tax system so that poor people in Washington are no longer taxed at a rate 6 times more than the richest 1 percent will create a more sustainable source of revenue for our crumbling infrastructure including adequately funding education. We will continue to monitor policies that support food assistance grants, temporary assistance for needy families, services for clients with disabilities, housing and essential needs, homelessness programs, state workforce benefits, and family services.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Individuals in Washington facing re-entry to their community after incarceration encounter barriers that keep them and their families in a cycle of debt and poverty for decades.

We will not give up in pushing for reforms that will remove roadblocks and give ex-felons a chance to lead productive lives after incarceration. First is Legal Financial Obligation (LFO) reform, which would slash interest rates (now at 12%) and define conditions when courts cannot impose LFOs and when courts cannot jail people who can't pay. Second, the Certificate of Opportunities Act (CROP), which would allow judges to give some rehabilitated felons a certificate making them eligible for certain occupational licenses. Third, the Washington Fair Chance Act also known as “ban the box” prevents private businesses from immediately asking applicants about their criminal history. Felons would have a chance to explain their convictions if they're otherwise qualified for the job.

We will also keep an eye on other policies designed to positively impact those seeking opportunities for rehabilitation. According to the Brennan Center, a majority of states have cut both crime and incarceration over the past decade, yet the United States remains the world's number one jailer. Almost one in five (19.3%) of inmates in Washington are serving life sentences—11.3% are serving life with parole; 8% are serving official life without parole (half of those were sentenced under the three strikes law). A closer look at the state's Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 would reveal inconsistencies in sentencing and ongoing scrutiny could lead to Community Review Boards promoting a chance at parole and rehabilitation.

Pretrial detention in the form of money bail for persons accused of low-level crime in Washington is another basic inequity in the justice system that is being addressed by the ACLU in our state. Ninety-five percent of the growth in the overall jail inmate population in the U.S. since 2000 was due to the increase in the number of people in jail awaiting trial. Poor people, people of color, and people with certain disabilities are disproportionately affected—leading to loss of income, possible loss of employment and housing, disruption of prescribed medications, and stresses on one's family—all indicators of debtors' prisons. Advocating reform of bail practices in Washington will increase fairness, integrity, and effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

A law known as "automatic decline" sends juvenile defendants to adult court if their cases meet certain criteria. Unfortunately, the practice eliminates the opportunity for a judge to consider mitigating circumstances before subjecting a juvenile to adult court thus denying the youth a chance for rehabilitation within the juvenile system. The State Supreme Court affirmed sentencing must reflect the difference between children and adults. We believe it's now up to the legislature to support youth sentencing reform.

Lastly, the League advocates for evidence-based and humane reforms to mass incarceration—a failed system. The cost of its failure is both economic and human. We must continue the national dialogue to fix it.

The League is interested in supporting policies and legislation in 2019 to strengthen the social and economic safety net of those individuals and families in need. Stay tuned this year as we advocate for legislative solutions that address the root causes of poverty, unfairness in our system of justice and unequal opportunity.

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