

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.” 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.

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.

In 2018, the legislature pushed through reforms that will remove roadblocks and give people with felony convictions- a chance to lead productive lives after incarceration. First is Legal Financial Obligation (LFO) reform, which will 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) will

allow judges to give some rehabilitated felons a certificate making them eligible for certain occupational licenses.

In keeping with a national trend, the legislature also embraced juvenile justice reform by dramatically limiting the scope of Washington's "automatic decline" law. Previously, this law required judges to send 16 and 17 year olds to adult court if they were charged with certain crimes. Under the new law, only those charged with the most serious offenses will be automatically prosecuted as adults. The new law also limits which juveniles are eligible for prosecution as adults at the court's discretion after a hearing. Finally, the maximum age of confinement in a juvenile facility was raised from 21 to 25, which will reduce the number of youth transferred to adult prisons.

This year, we will keep an eye on 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 percent) of inmates in Washington are serving life sentences—11.3 percent are serving life with parole; 8 percent 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 for cash bail reform in Washington will increase fairness, integrity, and effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

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.

Contact Information: Amy Davis, (360) 427-1956, adavis@lwvwa.org (Economic and Social Justice); and Heather Kelly, (415) 516-1201, hkelly@lwvwa.org (Criminal Justice)