



# OBSERVER'S MANUAL

Encouraging Better Government

League of Women Voters® of Knoxville and Knox County

[www.lwvknoxville.org](http://www.lwvknoxville.org)

Laura Cole October 2009

## **Introduction**

Observer programs provide a valuable service to the community. They help ensure that citizens are aware of the decisions that impact their lives and they promote government transparency and accountability.

A local League observer becomes the eyes and ears of the League by learning how government works and observing, identifying and reporting issues that are relevant to the League and the community.

## **Mission**

*The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.*

## **Purpose**

This manual provides information and instruction to League members and citizens interested in learning more about government and public policy by forming an Observer Corps. Observers attend governmental meetings to learn more about the issues facing their community and are empowered to take action, if warranted. Observers also let elected and appointed officials know that someone is watching what decisions are being made and how they are being made.

## **Goals**

1. Follow community issues
2. Have a presence among decision makers
3. Ensure transparency
4. Engage members
5. Report out to the community

## Procedures

After the Board and the committee chair set priorities and individual league members are recruited and assigned as observers, the President sends a Letter of Introduction to the head of the agency. (See Appendix B, Sample Letter)

The observer learns the names and titles of elected and appointed officials. At the initial meeting, the observer (and any alternate) introduces herself/himself to the presiding officer and to the secretary or clerk. The observer always wears a League of Women Voters button while acting as an observer.

After the observer is assigned an agency to observe, the observer should become familiar with:

1. Purpose, organizational structure, legal basis of authority, governing rules, and procedures of the agency
2. Procedures, time/place, and availability of agenda/minutes for meetings, informal sessions, and public hearings
3. Provisions of Tennessee's Open Meetings Law applying to all public decision-making bodies with specified exceptions (See Appendix C).

The observer takes notes at the meetings as the basis for reports to the Corps Coordinator. Helpful supplements are newspaper accounts of the meetings, official minutes, websites, blogs, video and audio recordings of the meetings, and copies of ordinances and resolutions. The observer prepares the report on the Standard Report form and submits it to the committee chair as instructed on the Form (see Appendix D). Observers are encouraged to take other members to the meetings.

## Roles

1. The Board of Directors works with the chair to set priorities and identify the governmental units and agencies to be observed on a regular basis and receives and acts on information supplied by observers through the Corps Chair.
2. The Observer Corps Chair serves as the coordinator for observer activities and as the channel of communication between the observers, the recruitment coordinator, the Board and various chairpersons. (See job description, Appendix A.)
3. The Observer Corps Recruitment Coordinator assists the chair in recruiting efforts and training; and manages and tracks observers and assignments.
4. The Observers are members who regularly attend meetings of an official governmental body or agency, listen to and watch the proceedings, and report significant information to the Corps Chair.

## Distinction between Observing and Monitoring

There is a distinct difference between observing and monitoring. Observing is a passive function. An observer regularly attends a governmental meeting, listens and records the events or facts of the meeting, and reports to the organization but does not comment at the meeting without specific direction or permission from the Board of Directors. Monitoring implies action. A monitor is usually authorized by the organization's Board to speak on issues, ask questions, and recommend changes.

## Related Laws

Three major pieces of federal legislation codify the public's right to know:

1. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 1966
2. The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) 1972
3. The Government in the Sunshine Act (The Sunshine Act) 1976

Tennessee's Open Meetings Law, also known as the Sunshine Law states that "all meetings of any governing body are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times." As an observer, you are exercising the right to be present at any public meeting. (See Appendix C.)

## General Guidelines for Observers:

- Become familiar with the organization, officials, functions, and operations of the agency observed including whom to contact for additional information and the procedures to use for asking questions.
- Be interested in local governmental processes, policy formulation, and citizen's concerns.
- Be familiar with the organization's programs and positions.
- Assimilate and interpret proceedings and provide objective summaries of controversial issues.
- Identify any problems, proposals, and actions that might be significant in future program development.
- Report on actions that might affect other municipalities in the area.
- Exercise discretion and tact at meetings; keep in mind the pressures and demands made on officials and the observer's role.
- Be courteous and appreciative of help offered.
- Attend meetings regularly, arrive on time, and stay through the entire meeting.
- Refrain from speaking at the meetings except to seek clarification or information or present a prepared official statement on behalf of the organization **unless instructed to do so by the President or a Vice President.**
- Avoid pursuing personal interests or participating actively in the meetings, i.e., do not ask to appear on the agenda; do not give personal opinions to officials or the press, or in any other way indicate sympathy with or opposition to an official action or a citizen position.

## **What Observers Watch For:**

### **1. Identity of Meeting and Participants**

- a) Type of meeting, e.g., regular, special, informal, or public hearing
- b) Members of the Council, Commission, or Board who are present or absent
- c) Principal administrative officers or staff present: City manager, county administrator, school superintendent, fiscal officer, attorney or legal counsel, etc.
- d) Media coverage
- e) Size and composition of audience, e.g., students, lobby groups, observers from other organizations, individual citizens with special interest

### **2. Content and Substance**

- a) What items were approved or disapproved, postponed, or otherwise considered and disposed of that are of interest to the organization? THIS IS THE HEART OF THE OBSERVER ACTIVITY! If possible, relate each item to the League's positions and program areas and identify any that deserve immediate attention for possible action.

### **3. Physical Facilities**

- a) Is the building/room adequate in size and accessible to the disabled?
- b) Can the proceedings be heard? Can the officials be seen?
- c) Are the accommodations for the audience comfortable and clean with adequate lighting and ventilation?
- d) Are non-smoking rules followed?

### **4. Conduct of the Meeting**

- a) Are the proceedings formal or informal? Does the presiding officer have the meeting under control? Are officials attentive and alert?
- b) Does there appear to be adequate discussion of issues? Do decisions appear to be "cut-and-dried"?
- c) Are visitors treated with respect and courtesy? Do speakers have ample opportunity to present their complaints/requests?
- d) Is the atmosphere generally welcoming and friendly?

## **Appendix A**

### **Job Description for the Observer Corps Chair**

1. Serves as the focal point for directing the activities of the organization's observers at meetings of public agencies and the subsequent use of their reports in local, state and national programs.
2. Works with Recruitment Coordinator to recruit and manage observers and assignments. Trains and advises observers and assists in finding alternates or substitutes (see sample flyer, Appendix E).
3. Reviews guidelines or manual, instructions, standard letters, and standard reporting forms to make sure they are current.
4. Provides observers with current organization positions and programs.
5. Recommends to the Board the specific agencies and groups to be visited and observed, and maintains a current list of their names, where and when they meet, and their official personnel.
6. Reviews and edits observers' reports and submits significant items to appropriate officers and chairpersons for their information and action as necessary.
7. Summarizes Observer Corps findings and performance for the local organization newsletter.
8. Develops Observer Corps as an effective device to strengthen communication between public bodies and the organization and maintains a high level of visibility of the organization.
9. Performs other related duties as may be assigned by the League Board or President.
10. Ensures that observers are provided the necessary tools, e.g., reporting forms, I.D. badge/button, Observer's Manual, etc.

## Appendix B

### Sample Observer Corps Announcement Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

The League of Women Voters Knoxville/Knox County has recently revived its Observer Corps to help further our mission to actively participate in government, increase our understanding of major public policy issues and educate our citizens on what their government is doing. The League plans to send an observer to the meetings of \_\_\_\_\_.

The observer's role is to listen but not participate in the proceedings. The observer will take notes and submit a report to the League. Through this mechanism, the League is kept informed on community issues and trends and is better able to fulfill its aim of increasing political responsibility and interest in government.

The member designated as an observer will introduce herself or himself to the presiding officials. Any assistance you can give such as introductions, notices of special meetings and public hearings, advance copies of agendas, minutes of meetings, material for public distribution, changes in time and location, cancellations, etc. will be appreciated.

If you have any questions or would like to send notices of meetings, please contact Barbara Nicodemus, Observer Corps Chair at 865 688-4694 or send an e-mail to [observer@lwvknoxville.org](mailto:observer@lwvknoxville.org).

Sincerely,

Jamey Dobbs  
President  
League of Women Voters Knoxville/Knox County

## Appendix C

1. Tennessee's Open Meetings Law, also known as the Sunshine Law states "all meetings of any public body are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times."
2. A public meeting must meet three conditions:
  - It is prearranged.
  - It discusses public business.
  - It is attended by a majority of the public body's members.
3. For more detailed information, consult Tennessee Open Meetings Act, Tennessee Code Annotated (TCA) 8-44 101-108 at [www.legislature.state.tn.us](http://www.legislature.state.tn.us). Access by clicking **Legislation** on home page then **Publications** then **Tennessee Code** on right of page then **Search** for **8-44-101**. Individuals outside of Tennessee should contact their local legislature for more information

## Appendix D

### Observer Reporting Form

Feature Evaluated	Yes	No	Comments
Meeting started on time?			
All members present?			
Members attentive?			
Did members appear to have done their "homework?"			
Were members courteous to each other and the public?			
Agenda sent/posted 72 hours before?			
Agenda items clearly described what was to be discussed?			
Adequate opportunity for public input?			
Was there an appearance that some action items were discussed in closed rather than open session?			
Was background information available to the public?			
Facilities adequate? (room size, lighting, ventilation, speakers audible, accessible to handicapped)			

Were any issues on the agenda relevant to LWV positions or programs?

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Do you recommend League action on any of these issues?

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Other Concerns?

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Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D (continued)

### LWV KKC Observer Corps Reporting Procedure

- \_\_\_\_\_ Forms are available on the LWVKKC web site. Completed forms should be mailed\* or e-mailed ([observer@lwvknoxville.org](mailto:observer@lwvknoxville.org)) to the Observer Corps Committee Chair within 5 days of the meeting.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Report any urgent matter to the Corps Committee Chair or the LWV President immediately (example: an action in direct opposition to the League positions).
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Provide to committee chair a copy of the agenda, handouts, or other material collected at the meeting ONLY if the information relates to items of importance to the League.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Any additional information / comments can be written on the back of the form (if handwritten) or added to an e-mail transmission.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Each observer should retain a copy of any reports and attachments submitted to the Observer Corps Committee.

**\*Mailing address:**

**Barbara Nicodemus**

**4016 Sam Cooper Lane**

**Knoxville, TN 37918**

## **Appendix E**

### **Sample Recruiting Flyer for the LWVKKC Observer Corps**

By attending public meetings of various local governmental agencies, the Observer Corps keeps our elected officials aware of the League's interest in local government. By reporting on these meetings in our newsletter or on our website, the Corps helps all League members be informed citizens.

Each observer regularly attends the public meetings of a city council, county commission, school board or other elected/appointed bodies, which make decisions affecting our daily lives. An observer is a listener--not a participant--and interprets and summarizes the debates and decisions. The observer also identifies issues, proposals and actions that bear upon League program items or that might be significant in future program development, and alerts the League's Board. If so instructed by the President, an observer may present a prepared official statement on behalf of the League before the elected body.

If you would like to learn more about the Observer Corps or how to become an observer or an alternate, please call the Observer Corps Chair Barbara Nicodemus at 865-688-4694, or Recruitment Coordinator Robin Brown at 865-691-5489, or send an e-mail to [observer@lwvknoxville.org](mailto:observer@lwvknoxville.org).

## References

### **Observing Your Government in Action**

League of Women Voters of the United States, 2007  
[www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org) (Home-Project-Openness in Government)

### **Observer's Manual**

League of Women Voters of the Greater Dayton Area, 1999  
[www.lwvdayton.org](http://www.lwvdayton.org)

### ***Open Meetings Law Tennessee Code Annotated 8-44 101-108***

[www.legislature.state.tn.us](http://www.legislature.state.tn.us) (Home-Legislature-TN Code-Search 8-44-101)