

**April 2013 Guidance on Opportunities:
Using a “Study” as an Engagement/Leadership Development Tool**

APPRECIATIVE ICEBREAKER

Focusing on an “Issue with Legs”

- What does the term “issue with legs” mean to you?
- What are the characteristics of an issue that has “legs”?
- How do these “legs” relate to organizational development?
- In your League experience, how successful is League in pursuing “issues with legs”?
- What is the role of the larger community in defining these issues?
- Who defines these issues in your League?

GUIDANCE

When members are asked about what they value most about League, they often respond that it is the opportunities to learn. One of our trademark ways of learning in League is through the study process. Like so much of our work, studies offer great opportunities for visibility, outreach and leadership development. This month’s guidance will focus on using a local study as a vehicle for organizational development.

Before looking at any specifics, there are a couple of “myths” that should be debunked.

- Leagues cannot do any educational work on an issue unless they have a position. This is false. If there is a “hot” breaking issue in the community about which the League does not have a position, then the League can certainly facilitate a dialogue or hold a town hall meeting about the issue. We can don our “trusted convener” hat and help the community to better understand what might be at stake. With that said, Leagues should try to focus on their self-identified priority issues when possible. Presumably, they were made priorities for a reason!
- Leagues can only use positions adopted at that level of League. This too is false. Leagues can use state and national positions to move forward with action in their community as long as there is member understanding and agreement of the issue and the position. For example, LWVUS has a position on the gun control/safety. This issue does not have to be independently studied by each state.

The Key Steps of the Study Process

It is important to remember that the study process is a *cooperative effort* between the local League leadership team and the study committee. It is the leadership team's responsibility to monitor the entire process to ensure that the membership is able to come to consensus in an unbiased and nonpartisan atmosphere.

1. What to study?

Members chose an issue to study at the Program Planning meeting. Optimally, the members at the meeting should write the Focus and Scope. (Focus is the statement of the main topic for study and Scope explains the extent and limits of the study.) The League board/leadership team chooses the recommended program items for the annual meeting. (If the Focus and Scope have not already been written then they should write it for the annual meeting presentation.) The members at annual meeting adopt the local program, including any studies.

Ideally, the study is advanced after careful consideration of the following questions:

- Is this an issue of pressing community concern?
- Is this an area of member interest?
- Does this build on League strengths?
- Is there likelihood for action/visibility/success?
- How could it help to build our League?
- What (if anything) might we give up to focus on the study?

2. Who does the work?

The board/leadership team finds a local study chairperson. The board/leadership team and the local study chairperson recruit members for the study committee and set the date for consensus meeting. The local study chairperson with the study committee sets up the timeline, organizes and gathers research information, shares

issue information with the members, maintains an unbiased approach to the study, and prepares for the consensus meeting presentation.

The critical question that can be asked at this phase is: *Who else?*

- Who else can serve on the committee (from within or outside the League)?
- Who else can we engage (community organizations, experts, institutions) as we work on the study to not only learn but showcase League?
- Who else can we mentor during this process?

3. What's in it for *ME*?

Information. Fun. Personal growth. Camaraderie. This is the phase where members (and others in the community depending on how and where information is presented and shared) get to learn about the issue from the study committee through articles in bulletin, information forums, tours and other means.

This phase of the study process requires us to think about a different question: *How else?*

- How else can we engage our members?
- How else can we engage the public, other organizations and the media?
- How else do we share all the great learning (and tremendous work) that has gone into creating the study materials?
- How else do we showcase the learning opportunities in League?
- How else do we show how this issue relates to the concerns in our community?

4. How are opinions heard?

The study committee writes the consensus questions and the board approves the questions, which are sent to the members at least two weeks before the consensus meeting. The study committee develops an outline for the consensus meeting, which will include the highlights of their issue research. A discussion leader oversees the consensus meeting to ensure there is constructive consensus discussion using the consensus questions. A recorder keeps accurate notes of the consensus meeting discussion. There is a wrap up meeting for formulation of the position statement by the study committee using the consensus reached by the members.

While process is important, it is not rigid.

- What ways are there to gather opinions outside of the in-person meeting, such as through an online survey or via social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter?
- What are the leadership development opportunities that could be offered to emerging leaders?
- How can new technology be employed at the meeting to help better understand the opinions of those gathered?
- In what new and dynamic ways can the research be presented?

5. How do we have an impact?

The board/leadership team decides if consensus was reached by the members at the consensus meeting, reviews and approves the position statement, and adopts the position. The board may take action on the position immediately after they adopt it as a new local position. The members reaffirm all local positions at each annual meeting.

This is the time to celebrate! The League has a new position on an issue of importance to the community!

- How can we let the community know? The media? Coalition partners or allied groups?
- How do we appreciate the work of the study committee?
- What new leaders emerged during this process and how do we keep them engaged? How do we build on our strengths and assets?
- And, most importantly, how do we make an impact with this new position?