

League of Women Voters and voter registration
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By Charlyne Berens

In general, Americans understand that voting is the primary way they can make their voices heard in the nation's democratic system.

"When I'm not represented and you're not represented, then we don't have a healthy democracy," said Jackie Egan of Lincoln, a member of the League of Women Voters of Lincoln-Lancaster.

But before a citizen can vote in an election in Nebraska or anywhere in the nation, that citizen must complete a voter registration form that lists name, address, and party affiliation. That's where volunteers can help.

Any individual can volunteer to become a deputy registrar by enrolling in about half-an-hour's worth of training at the Lancaster County Election Commission. But the League of Women voters has taken that to a new level.

"We've had an agreement with the League to do 'outside' voter registration for about 30 years," said Dave Shively, Lancaster County election commissioner.

Voters have always been able to register at the election commission's office, at 601 N. 46th Street, just south of the Lancaster County Division of Motor Vehicles. But reaching out to potential voters at a variety of places helps make it easier for people to sign up and claim their eligibility to vote.

The local League staffs between 30 and 50 registration events per year, said president Mary Boschult.

Volunteers go to grocery stores, libraries, community events and high schools. Under its agreement with the Election Commission, the League provides two volunteers – of different political parties – at each registration event.

In addition to helping people fill out the brief form needed to register, the volunteers offer official voter guides that explain Nebraska's voting system in more detail. For example, Shively said, Nebraskans who do not wish to register with a specific political party are registered as "nonpartisan," rather than the more commonly used term "independent." The guides also explain how primary elections and general elections work and that Nebraska does not require that voters provide identification when they go to the polls to vote.

Sometimes League members may show up at community events to promote registration and distribute forms. When they are not acting as representatives of the Election Commission, they

can also distribute information about the nonpartisan League itself and how it works to educate and inform voters, Boschult said.

That work began on a national and local scale just as the 19th Amendment, which added women to the voting ranks, was ratified in 1920. The League was formed to help the nation's newly enfranchised women exercise their responsibilities as voters and be fully represented in the U.S. democracy.

From the start, the League has been nonpartisan. It does not support or oppose candidates or parties. However, it does support public policy positions like campaign finance reform, climate change action, environmental regulation and others.

The Lincoln organization is 100 years old this February, Boschult said. Other local League chapters are in Omaha, Hastings and Seward. All of them include voter registration as one of their goals.

Any citizen 18 years old or older may vote once they register, but any person who moves to a new address, changes their name or changes their party affiliation must re-register.

In recent decades, Nebraska has expanded the number of ways people can register or re-register, Shively said. Since the 1990s, people have been able to register at the Department of Motor Vehicles when they are getting or renewing a driver's license. Since 2016, anyone who has a driver's license or Nebraska ID may register online at <https://www.nebraska.gov/apps-sos-voter-registration/>. People may also register by mail or in person at the Election Commission office.

But Shively said his office continues to appreciate the League's organized effort to staff on-site registrations around the community. No matter how many people actually register at a given event, "it's important that they have the *opportunity* to register," he said.

Egan said that's why she participates in the League's voter registration efforts: "I want every person to have the ability to express their opinion."

If you are interested in becoming a trained deputy registrar, please contact Maura Kelly, chief deputy commissioner, at the Lancaster County Election Commission Office, 402-441-7311, mkelly@lancaster.ne.gov.

If you would like to support or become involved with voter registration and/or other League of Women Voters programs, contact Mary Boschult, president, at 402-475-1411, 4600 Valley Road, Suite 306, Lincoln 68510 or via the League's website: <https://www.lwv.org/local-leagues/lwv-lincoln-lancaster>.