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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS EDUCATES CITIZENS, LAWMAKERS ON CORRECTIONS ISSUES

■(GIT) If there is anything on which lawmakers, the governor, other officials and the public agree, it is that corrections issues will be on the front-burner during the next legislative session.

In keeping with its goal of providing citizens and lawmakers with facts free of partisan or other influences, the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma launched a series of discussion groups to address the corrections crisis.

"We did this because we felt the citizens of Oklahoma needed to be involved in the understanding of the issue and in providing input for solutions," said Trish Frazier, executive director of the Oklahoma league.

The discussion series found immediate success in some 16 communities, drawing in hundreds of participants. "The response," Frazier said, "was simply overwhelming."

PROVIDING A FORUM

Everybody has an opinion about corrections, said Frazier, and most people are more than willing to share. The League's study circle program provided just the forum for that exchange of ideas.

"We had more than 80 people turn out in Weatherford," Frazier said. "That, by far, is the largest representation for a community that size. In Muskogee, there are 50 to 60 people involved and in Tulsa and Oklahoma City there are literally hundreds."

The format of the study circles has been simple, Frazier said. During the groups' first meetings, discussions focused on what those participating felt and believed the goals of the state's criminal justice system should be. From there, the groups were led into a discussion of how those goals compared to the facts about the corrections system. The final study circle meetings will focus on various alternatives that could be implemented to reach those goals.

"It's interesting sometimes," Frazier said, "because during a meeting you'll see an average citizen sitting beside a police officer who is sitting beside a judge. They're each listening to what the other has to say, so you have the police officer and the judge learning what the public wants and you have citizens learning what the police and judicial system are doing. It can be extremely educational."

Such exchanges are important in light of anticipated changes in the criminal justice and corrections systems, Frazier said.

"I think everyone agrees that we are going to see some major changes over the next few years, and that those changes are going to come at the state level, as well as the local level. Involvement like this, this kind of dialogue, gives local authorities the chance to see what their citizens think they should be doing."

PRESENTING THE FACTS

Frazier laughs when she talks of the nonpartisan approach utilized by the League in its presentation of information. Facts, she said, rather than interpretation or manipulation, are the cornerstone of the League's efforts.

It was that belief that led Frazier and another member of the League to write a 40-plus-page book called *Balancing Justice: A Citizen Fact-Book on Oklahoma's Corrections System*.

The League started out with the idea of doing a fact sheet about the corrections system. "That developed into a pamphlet and the more work we did and the more information that we gathered, it became apparent that we were looking at much more information."

The book, which is presented to study circle participants after their first meeting focusing on the goals of the criminal justice system, addresses every aspect of the state's corrections program, including.

"After the study circle participants discuss the goals of the criminal justice system and have had time to review the fact book," Frazier explained, "we want them to compare that information to what they said the goals should be and see how the system stacks up."

The information contained in the book, Frazier stressed, is nonbiased, based on work

with the Department of Corrections and others involved in the corrections system.

AIDING THE LEGISLATURE AND THE PUBLIC

Ultimately, Frazier said, the point of the study circle effort on corrections is simple: To influence public policy.

"It's not that we want any one particular plan adopted," she explained, "but it's that we want our lawmakers, as well as our citizens, to take a serious look at the system and give serious consideration to ways to address its problems."

Frazier points to the opening question posed to the panels as an example — What are the goals of the criminal justice system?

"When was the last time you heard a legislature ask that question or make a statement about the system's goals?" she asked. "It doesn't happen very often. Instead, you have one law passed one year and another passed another year and neither of them may be considered with a specific goal or plan in mind."

Frazier said the recommendations generated by the study circles will be passed on to lawmakers for their consideration. That, however, is not the most important aspect of the program, Frazier added.

"More than anything, the point of this is to inform the public about the situation involving the corrections system and to inform them about the alternatives that exist. That way when a proposal is advanced at the legislature, whether the citizen is for it or against it, they will feel comfortable calling their representative or senator and expressing their opinion. That is the most important thing that we can do."

The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma has long established itself as a nonbiased and nonpartisan source of information about important issues facing the state and its citizens. By embarking on a major program to educate the public, lawmakers and other leaders about the criminal justice and corrections system of the state — a likely area of intense consideration during the next legislative session — the League is once again living up to that long established standard.

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