

JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Support for a modern, efficient court system accountable to the people

The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVOK) believes the appellate defense system in Oklahoma must be maintained at a level that guarantees all United States constitutional rights to defendants. In addition, the system should be adequately funded for indigent defense in each legislative budget. The money should be paid as a function of the executive branch at a level of appropriation that assures the Defender Division will operate in a timely, diligent, and efficient manner to carry out all of its responsibilities. The appellate defense system should rely on legislative appropriation to the executive branch for attorney fees for indigent defendants charged with first-degree murder. The LWVOK is opposed to the practice of paying attorneys from local court-generated fees or the state judicial fund.

The LWVOK does not support the state assuming the maintenance and utility expenses incurred by the district courts in each county courthouse.

The LWVOK believes that as a public policy body, the members of the Council on Judicial Complaints must be chosen in a manner guarantees that the council is independent of any political and special interest. The Council on Judicial Complaints should be accountable to the public by reporting the actual outcome of judicial complaints from the public, using objective criteria that protect privacy concerns yet adequately and fairly describe how each complaint was addressed.

The LWVOK believes in the merit selection of all the judiciary. As long as there are judicial elections in Oklahoma, there should be a means of accountability to the voters. Therefore, the state rules for conducting all judicial elections must encourage the widest possible dissemination of information about the judicial system and the qualifications of judicial candidates. Information on judicial elections should be disseminated through the media. The LWVOK strongly endorses the objective evaluation of state judicial performance for purposes of public information.

The LWVOK favors alternative dispute resolution methods and their expanded use. The LWVOK encourages evaluation of the effect of these methods on citizen satisfaction, court caseload throughout the state system, and the increase or decrease in court-paid personnel.

The LWVOK opposes all appearances of female gender bias in the state courts, as evidenced by observable unequal treatment of female judges, attorneys and litigants, and measurable effects that preconceived biases about women have on court cases and the people involved. The LWVOK believes a survey study of female gender bias in Oklahoma courts should be conducted, with the state courts providing subsequent educational efforts for court personnel and judicial officials.

Consensus approved 1993

BACKGROUND

This position is the result of a 1992-1993 study of the structure and jurisdiction of the Oklahoma court system by a LWVOK judicial study committee that drafted an **Oklahoma Guide to the Courts** as part of its work. After the position was approved by consensus at the state convention in 1993, the LWVOK board established the judicial study committee as an action committee to examine possible legislation and court rules to implement the LWVOK position.

The committee recommended the following plan for Oklahoma:

- that state courts and the LWVOK jointly plan a statewide conference for 1994-95, to include the state judiciary and court personnel, law schools, bar association, state special interest groups, students, and law-related groups, that reflect broad demographics of the state;
- that some mechanism be built into the conference design that would continue the participation and enthusiasm engendered by the conference,
- that evaluation of the judiciary be developed within the administration of the courts instead of through the legislature, and
- that the Oklahoma Supreme Court undertake long-range strategic planning for the courts.

In 1994, the State Judicial Institute awarded the LWVOK Citizens Education Fund a grant of \$19,850 to conduct public meetings relating to state courts. The grant proposal called for an in-kind match by the Oklahoma state courts for \$21,050 for time and travel of the judiciary and court personnel at the meeting sites. Included in the grant were funds to print 1000 copies of the technical guide, **A Citizens' Guide to Oklahoma Courts**.