

DRUG POLICY

Support for a sensible policy regarding drug use in Oklahoma

The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVOK) believes that drug use should be considered a public health issue when it involves drug users, including people with severe substance use disorders (addicts), their families, and their communities. However, it becomes a criminal issue when it involves large-scale manufacturing, sale, and distribution of drugs under illegal conditions.

Methadone, suboxone, and other medications have proven effective in helping many people recover from severe substance use disorders (addiction). The LWVOK believes that drugs like these should be made available under medical supervision to anyone who can benefit from them, including inmates of jails and prisons.

The LWVOK believes that public health organizations should sponsor needle exchanges when health professionals recommend their use. This promotes the health and safety of drug users and promotes safe neighborhoods.

The LWVOK supports the development and funding of the following programs which should be beneficial in preventing the use of harmful drugs:

- educational programs, at schools and other venues, that inform people about the effects of drug use, particularly programs for parents and other caretakers and for children of any age who may be at risk,
- community mental health programs,
- the identification of groups at risk for drug use, and programs to assist these groups, including mentoring,
- programs, such as theater, music, art, and sports, that give young people alternatives to taking drugs, and
- programs to help communities develop economically and alleviate poverty.

People with substance use disorders are often socially isolated from their communities. This is especially the case if they have been imprisoned. Services, such as mentoring and job training, should be offered to people in jails and prisons. The LWVOK recommends development of the following supportive services to help these people become functioning and productive members of their communities:

- mentoring,
- job training,
- finding employment, including the use of individuals who act as bridges to potential employers,
- locating housing,
- receiving medical and dental care and health insurance, and

- designing community health programs to help remove stigma and stereotyping of people with substance use disorders.

The LWVOK supports the elimination of questions about criminal convictions on initial employment applications.

The LWVOK recommends that a drug be decriminalized when research indicates that the harm caused by prohibition of the drug is greater than the expected harm caused by decriminalization.

The LWVOK believes that a drug should be made legal for medical purposes if medical professionals deem that it has therapeutic benefits. Further, the League encourages research into the medical uses and effects of drugs.

The LWVOK advocates that the federal government should reclassify marijuana from Schedule One to a more accurate classification, thus facilitating research into its effects and uses.

The LWVOK believes that each state should decide whether or not it wants to legalize marijuana.

The LWVOK supports the decriminalization of marijuana. The LWVOK believes that programs such as drug prevention, drug treatment, and community reintegration should receive full funding through taxes. The money saved by not arresting and imprisoning drug users should be rechanneled into treatment programs and other programs to support the reintegration of drug users into their communities.

Concurrence approved 2017

BACKGROUND

In 2014, the Stillwater League of Women Voters voted to undertake a local study on drug policies. The League had a compelling reason for doing so. One of the Stillwater League members had a son who, years earlier, had developed a dependency on an illegal drug and was caught up in the criminal justice system, eventually dying while incarcerated. A committee to study drug policy was formed, and the group never forgot that drug policies have a real and sometimes devastating effect on our friends, families, and communities across Oklahoma and the world. The Drug Policy Study Group met for the first time in the summer of 2014. The committee took a broad approach, looking into various aspects of drug policy. Members carried out research, including a review of drug policy studies carried out by other state and local Leagues, and many speakers addressed the Stillwater League. The Committee completed its work in November of

2015, when the Stillwater League reached consensus on positions. Drug policy is a controversial subject, and the positions adopted by the Stillwater League represent a middle ground among members. That is, the positions were acceptable to those who participated in the consensus meetings, although for some League members, they did not go far enough toward decriminalization or legalization of drugs.

As the committee worked, they soon came to the realization that the formulation of drug policy is a daunting task. There is a wide range of drugs available. In addition, actual drug use varies, from occasional recreational use by adults, to consumption driven by severe dependence. Furthermore, the kind of intervention that is most useful for one individual may not work for another. The policies that the Stillwater League favors are similar to those favored by other Leagues, including LWV Hawai'i (2008) and LWV Charleston Area (2010), and they draw on information and recommendations from a number of organizations, including the American Medical Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The Stillwater League supports policies that are effective and humane and that provide the greatest possible safety for drug users and the greater community.

The Stillwater League of Women Voters submitted the position they had adopted on drug use, as well as extensive background notes, to the Board of Directors of the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma at its March 24, 2017, meeting. The position was accepted and placed on the agenda of the 2017 Convention to be considered for concurrence. At the 2017 LWVOK Convention on June 3, the position was adopted by concurrence.

After several unsuccessful years of attempting to bring medical marijuana to a vote of the citizens of Oklahoma, an initiative petition legalizing medical marijuana was brought to a vote as State Question 788. Prior to the vote, the LWVOK held an informational meeting in Stroud, Oklahoma, in order to learn more about the issue. At the end of the meeting, the LWVOK members present discussed the state question. It was determined that the language used in the League's position on drugs (specifically the sentence: "The LWVOK believes that a drug should be made legal for medical purposes if medical professionals deem that it has therapeutic benefits. Further, the League encourages research into the medical uses and effects of drugs.") allowed them to support passage of SQ 788.