

THE VOTER

Empowering Voters. Defending Democracy.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: PRAY FOR MINNESOTANS

By Holly Oppelt

I wanted to say something about what has been happening in Minneapolis, but I think the LWVUS and the LWVMN say it best. Pray for Minnesotans! Holly

ST. PAUL AND WASHINGTON, DC — The League of Women Voters of Minnesota and the League of Women Voters of the United States issued the following joint statement in response to the federal immigration enforcement and escalation of federal military activity in Minnesota:

“Minnesota is grieving and on edge. The growing presence and activities of federal immigration enforcement agents have terrorized, suppressed, and irreparably harmed our community. At a moment when Minnesotans deserve transparency, accountability, care, and calm leadership, the President has instead chosen to escalate fear by threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act and to place federal military forces on standby.

“The League opposes any illegal or unconstitutional use of the Insurrection Act, as positioning or threatening to deploy active-duty troops undermines public safety and reflects intimidation, suppression, and misuse of executive power.

“Minnesotans have endured profound trauma in recent years and have repeatedly shown that lasting safety comes from people power: communities coming together to reject hatred, violence, and mistrust, and to demand justice through democratic means. Militarization undermines that work. It escalates tension, erodes trust, and puts residents at greater risk.

“The League of Women Voters calls on Congress to exercise its constitutional oversight authority and investigate these threats of federal overreach. We urge the public to reject efforts to normalize the use of federal military force as a response to civil unrest or tragedy.

“The League stands with Minnesotans in affirming that democracy is built by the people, not imposed through fear or force. We strongly condemn any unwarranted federal immigration enforcement and military deployment or threat of deployment in Minnesota or anywhere in the United States.”

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Ames and Story County League Awarded \$500 Grant for Young Voter Registration Pilot Initiative by Linda Serra Hagedorn, Ph.D.

The League of Women Voters of Ames and Story County is pleased to announce that it has been selected to receive a \$500 grant from the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) as part of the 2026 Young Voter Registration Project. This competitive award recognizes the League's commitment to expanding voter registration and civic engagement among young people across Story County and will support an ambitious pilot initiative launching this spring.

A Strategic Investment in Young Voter Engagement

The LWVEF's 2026 Young Voter Registration Project, announced late last year, invited state and local Leagues throughout the country to submit proposals for funding voter registration activities at high schools, community colleges, and technical and vocational schools during the winter and spring of 2026. With awards ranging from \$500 to \$1,500 based on proposal quality and estimated reach, the Ames and Story County League's selection underscores the strength of its vision and the comprehensive scope of its planned activities.

The \$500 award comes at a pivotal moment for the Ames and Story County League. The organization has secured a substantial donor funding—a \$30,000 grant dedicated to comprehensive civics education and voter registration—and is channeling a portion of these resources into the creation of a professional Citizens' Manual for the State of Iowa, scheduled for completion in January 2026. The LWVEF grant will complement this larger initiative by enabling the League to launch an intensive, evidence-based pilot project in Story County, establishing best practices that will inform a statewide rollout in years to come.

The Story County Pilot Initiative: Comprehensive, Inclusive, and Strategic

Titled the Story County Pilot Initiative: Voter Registration and Civic Education Program, the project represents a deliberate effort to reach all young eligible voters in Story County, regardless of their educational pathway. Beginning in spring 2026 and continuing through June, trained League volunteers will visit all seven public high schools in Story County (including those in Ames, Nevada, Madrid, and surrounding communities), as well as the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) Hunziker Center and trade schools such as PCI Academy, which serves students in specialized fields like cosmetology.

This inclusive approach is intentional and reflects the League's understanding that voter registration and civic participation must be accessible to all young people, including those pursuing two-year degree programs, certificate training, and vocational careers. Students in trade and vocational programs often have fewer resources and less institutional support for civic engagement than traditional college-track students. By conducting activities at all educational institutions in Story County, the Ames and Story County League ensure equitable access to voter registration across socioeconomic backgrounds and educational pathways.

Continued...

Program Components and Activities

The pilot initiative will combine three core components designed to maximize impact:

- On-Site Voter Registration. Trained League volunteers will conduct voter registration events at each participating institution, targeting eligible students aged 18 and older. Volunteers will guide students through the registration process step-by-step, demonstrate online registration systems, explain Iowa-specific voting procedures, and answer questions about eligibility requirements. All activities will be conducted in a strictly nonpartisan fashion, welcoming students regardless of political perspective or prior civic engagement. The League will collect contact information from registrants (as legally permitted) to enable post-registration get-out-the-vote follow-up activities required by the grant.
- Interactive Civic Education Presentations. Presentations will be tailored to each setting, with high school programs running 10–15 minutes and covering how to register to vote, why informed voting matters, and the role of citizens in democracy. Community college and trade school presentations, which will be 20–30 minutes and flexible in format, will address the specific needs of working students and those juggling multiple responsibilities, while exploring how voting connects to issues affecting young people's lives—from education and jobs to climate, community safety, and housing.
- Distribution of Civic Education Materials. The newly completed Citizens' Manual for the State of Iowa will be distributed to participants, providing a valuable resource for ongoing civic learning and reference.

Each participating institution will host a branded "Voter Education Day" or similar event, elevating community visibility and fostering student engagement.

Building a Model for Statewide Impact

The Story County pilot is deliberately designed as a foundation for scaling statewide. By focusing intensive effort and resources in Story County during spring 2026, the Ames and Story County League will document outcomes, measure success, and identify lessons learned. These findings will directly inform the League of Women Voters of Iowa's larger statewide initiative in subsequent years, utilizing the full scope of donor funding to expand voter registration and civic education across Iowa.

This pilot project embodies the League of Women Voters' core mission: empowering citizens through voter registration and civic engagement. The Ames and Story County League invites members and volunteers to participate in this exciting initiative. Together, we will help young Iowans register to vote, understand their power as citizens, and engage in the democratic process.

For more information about volunteering or supporting the Story County Pilot Initiative, please contact the League of Women Voters of Ames and Story County.

IOWA SAFE SCHOOLS V. REYNOLDS

LWVIA and One Iowa filed an amicus brief in the US Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit supporting affirmance of a district court decision enjoining a LGBTQIA+ book ban and “don’t say gay” law in the state’s schools. The brief argued (1) the book ban illegally mandated the removal of books from shelves based on their viewpoint; (2) that the “don’t say gay” law would hurt LGBTQIA+ students and their families; and (3) that the laws were enacted as intentional discrimination.

Go here to read more information about the brief and the timeline that of event that led to this filing. Or copy this URL and paste it in your browser: <https://www.lwv.org/legal-center/iowa-safe-schools-v-reynolds>

CELEBRATING THE LWV OF SOUTHEAST IOWA



By Martha Wolf

The LWV of Southeast Iowa is the youngest chapter in Iowa. A small group of women met with Holly Oppelt and Sue Johannsen in 2021 and became an officially recognized chapter of LWVUS in 2022. Although we hit the ground running, there have certainly been ups and downs, tough work and disappointments, and sometimes even a no show!

We now boast a membership of over 60, but like many other leagues, finding takers interested in leadership roles, or young people making commitments, is some of the most frustrating and worrisome tasks of keeping a league healthy and functioning.

LWVSEIA works hard providing educational programs (LGBTIQQ+, water quality, AI, clean energy, etc.), as well as registering voters. This past year, we have enjoyed discovering our “Socials”. Every other month or so, we have a member offer their home (or a friend’s home) to us for an evening (5-7:30pm). It is a gathering of members, and potential members for networking, wonderful hors d’oeuvres (think your favorite recipe or one you always wanted to try), and drinks all provided by members. There is also (a little time) to discuss upcoming work, action items, legislative advocacy and questions. I think we all feel lighter, and even joyful, perhaps, when we head home.

And now, onto an Artificial Intelligence program at the Burlington Library where the speaker has just called in to say he has Influenza A! Plan B in the works ~ ZOOM to the rescue.

DOES IOWA'S UPDATED BOTTLE BILL SERVE IOWANS—OR BEVERAGE DISTRIBUTORS

Laura Schreiber of Bleeding Heartland published an article on January 6, 2026 that asks: Does Iowa's updated bottle bill serve Iowans—or beverage distributors? Read the full article [here](#).

Or copy this URL and paste it in your browser:

<https://www.bleedingheartland.com/2026/01/06/does-iowas-updated-bottle-bill-serve-iowans-or-beverage-distributors/>

LEGISLATIVE SESSION BEGINS

The Iowa Legislature started its 100-day session on January 12, 2026, welcoming four new legislators after a record-breaking year of special elections. LWVIA lobbyist Amy Campbell outlines what is ahead with the legislative session. Go here to read the rundown: <https://lwvia.org/2026-iowa-legislative-session-begins/>

Track bills in the legislative: You can track the legislative bills [here](#). Or copy this URL and paste it in your browser: <https://www.ialobby.com/billtracker/lwvia>

JOIN AMY CAMPBELL FOR BI-WEEKLY LOBBYIST CALLS

LWVIA lobbyists will provide quick updates and answer your questions in a series of new 30-minute Zoom meeting designed to keep members and their lobbyists connected throughout the session. While these sessions are free, you will need to [register](#) in order to get the login. This is to prevent Zoom bombing that has become so frequent. The zoom calls will be held every other Thursday, 6:30-7:00 p.m. and will be recorded and posted here in our blog.

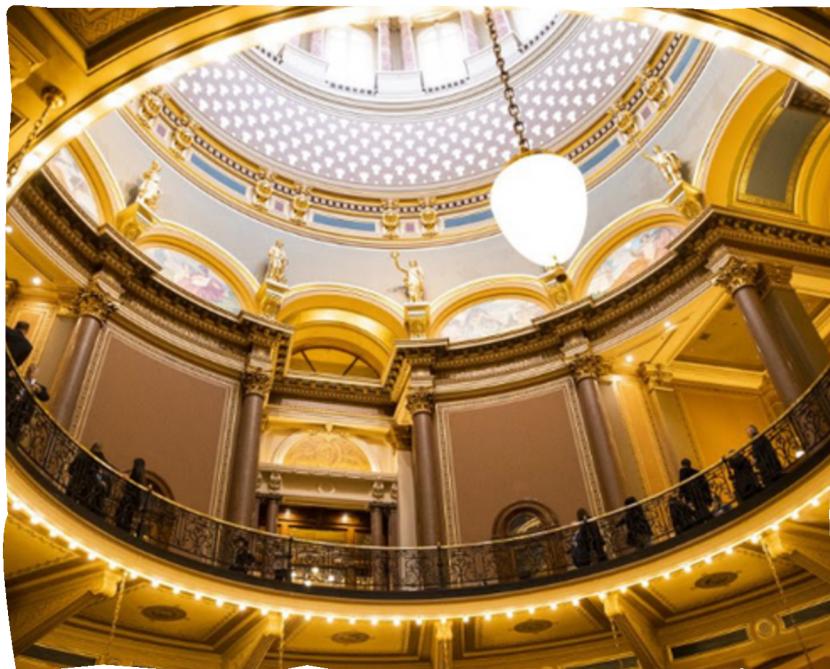
You can copy this URL and paste it into your browser to *register*:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/rjtzmlVAROWdUagur-vlFQ#/registration>

Here are the upcoming dates for these Zoom calls:

- February 12 (6:30-7 pm)
- February 26 (6:30-7 pm)
- March 12 (6:30-7 pm)
- March 26 (6:30-7 pm)
- April 9 (6:30-7 pm)
- April 23 (6:30-7 pm)

**LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: BOOKMARK THE POLICY BLOG
UPDATE YOUR EMAIL CONTACTS LIST**



LWVIA lobbyist Amy Campbell provides updates on legislative activities on the LWVIA website at <https://lwvia.org/news/>. Recent 2026 posts include:

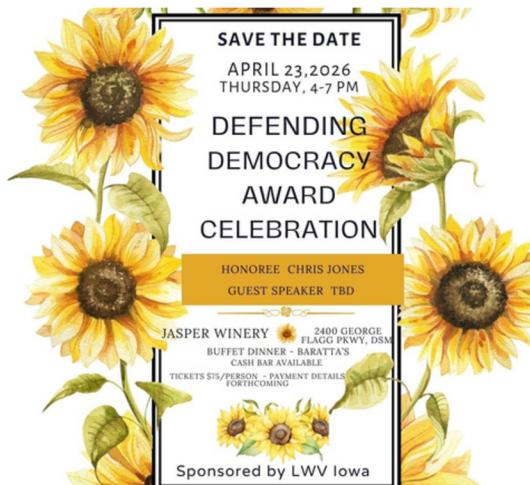
- ·Legislative Session Begins
- ·Get Ready for 2026
- ·Governor Reynolds Creates Nuclear Tax Force

Bookmark the web page where these blog <https://lwvia.org/news/>.

When a blog is updated Amy Campbell sends out an email to LWVIA email subscribers. The email comes from this email address: info-ialobby.com@shared1.ccsend.com Be sure to *add this email address to your contacts lists so Amy's emails don't end up in your spam or junk filters*. Don't miss out on important legislative news.

*Together,
we make a
Difference*

SAVE THE DATE FOR THE 2026 DEFENDING DEMOCRACY AWARD CELEBRATION



The League of Women Voters of Iowa is awarding Rita Bettis Austen the 2026 Defending Democracy Award. The Award is given to an individual or organization who exemplifies leadership in our mission to protect voters and maintain free, fair elections. The Celebration in Des Moines April 23, 2026, is the only fundraising event for the LWV of Iowa. Please join us at the Jasper Winery to honor Rita Bettis Austen.

Rita is the Legal Director of the ALCU of Iowa, where she has proudly worked since 2011. As Legal Director, she oversees the legal program's efforts to promote and protect the basic rights and freedoms of all Iowans through litigation. She has brought cases championing voting rights, freedom of speech and religion, racial justice, gender equality, reproductive freedom, LGBTQ equality, immigrants' rights, fair sentencing for juveniles, and the rights of the accused. A partial list of the cases she worked with the LWVIA include:

- Blocking Discriminatory Voter Purge of New Citizens
- Protecting Absentee Voting during the COVID Pandemic
- Helping end felony disenfranchisement policies in Iowa
- Advocating against Iowa's Voter ID laws

Rita is a 2010 graduate of the University of Iowa College of Law, where she was editor in chief of the international law journal *Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems*, and clerked for the national ALCU Reproductive Freedom Project in New York, as well as Justice for Our Neighbors in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She is licensed to practice law in Iowa, New York, and Louisiana.

The one accomplishment she is incredibly proud of is her twin boys who were born in 2023 to Rita and her soulmate Joe, a civil rights attorney.

Rita Bettis Austen is an Iowan who advocates the League of Women Voters' mission empowering voters, defending democracy through her everyday actions.