

League of women voters faces new challenges

By KATIE KERWIN

A pile of laundry awaiting ironing and a stack of dirty dishes used to be the main competition the League of Women Voters faced in vying for a member's time.

But lately a career and a paycheck have been luring away many women who used to devote time to volunteer political participation.

The organization must learn to adapt itself to a changing membership. Pay O'Hare told representatives to the league's state convention Saturday at the Northfield Hilton in Troy.

"Many women in their early child-rearing days are looking forward to going back to school or to their career," said Ms. O'Hare, a league state board member.

"It's no secret that membership has dropped in all kinds of volunteer organizations — men's organizations too," she said. "Our membership is down, though it's not drastic."

The league's goals and projects are much the same as when the group was founded almost 60 years ago, Ms. O'Hare said. Formed after women gained suffrage in 1920, the league has always proposed legislation and policy, provided voter information services, and lobbied, publicized and petitioned for its stands. Only the scope of interests has changed, broadening with the concerns of its members, she said.

But while the league's programs remain the same, the membership has altered in recent years.

"NOW MORE and more women are working, going to school and finding opportunities in all kinds of fields that were closed to them before," Ms. O'Hare said. She is quick to add that discouraging such a trend is the last thing on the league's mind.

"Adapting to the times is a positive thing, not a problem in itself." But the increasing number of women deciding to go back to work causes league officials concern, she said.

"We won't have the reservoirs of women who joined because they were going batty at home and felt the need to get out once in a while to something with some intellectual stimulation," Ms. O'Hare commented. "A certain number of them would become hooked on it."

The league may still draw in the

working woman, but she usually has less time for volunteer activities, Ms. O'Hare continued. League operations have traditionally included time-consuming studies of policy areas, she noted. Members often attended several meetings per month and spent additional time on research.

"That's hard sometimes for women who are working, keeping house and doing all the other things women feel obligated to do," Ms. O'Hare said. "We have fewer members now who want to attend more than one meeting a month."

Finding leaders is also becoming tougher, she said. Almost none of the league offices are paid positions. "It's hard for league organizations to get officers, because it does require a large amount of time and effort."

Changes in membership that the league is now promoting also increase the proportion of working members, Ms. O'Hare said. Participation in the formerly all-women's group is now open to men. "We're expanding our minority membership," she added.

"The minority member is more likely to be a working member, and so is the male member."

Diversifying its recruiting is one way to ease the crunch, she suggested. "We're trying to get more students and retired senior citizen members who have more time to participate."

Retired women may also have more to contribute from their working experience, Ms. O'Hare said. "They have a good breadth of vision and a grasp of issues because they have been out in the employment world."

CHANGING MEMBERSHIP trends have already had an impact on league work, Ms. O'Hare said.

"I don't think it has affected quality as much as quantity. Traditionally, each local group has devoted time to each state and national program and some local ones. Now they're opting to drop some of them."

She urged local chapters to streamline projects and get the best use out of members' time. State leaders recently held a retreat seminar to consider the league's future. Ms. O'Hare said she hoped to stimulate similar discussion on the local level across the state.

"Local leagues may want to have their own retreat day or future

seminar," she said. Discussion might include "which of our many roles are more important to ourselves and to the community," she said.

"Some say, 'Maybe we want less programs, fewer issues,'" Ms. O'Hare added. "I think, though, having a broader program allows them to pick and choose."

Adapting to changing membership needs can mean simple adjustments, Ms. O'Hare said. Groups can plan more evening meetings, business lunches, or breakfast meetings to accommodate members' work schedules.

"Other possibilities include setting up study committees in different ways from the past — maybe making them smaller," she said. Seeking more feder-

al grants so the league can pay assistants is another option, she added.

Ms. O'Hare said she thinks the league can adapt to suit its membership without losing its identity as a participation and service-oriented organization.

"I don't think we will ever turn into the type of membership organization where you just turn in your dues and there's nothing else to do. And it won't become a single-issue organization — the league is much broader than that."

"But I think we're going to be looking more and more to a different kind of member."

THE WORKING MEMBER may have less time to offer, but her experience will be an asset to the league, Ms. O'Hare said.

"Very often the woman in school or a career has got her mind going in directions that make it possible for her to accomplish a lot in a little time," she said. "She may be well-informed because of her experience in job or school."

"The working woman may have a more vital participating attitude than those at home feeling they have all the time in the world." That member may be more aware of the impact of public policies and be motivated to participate in influencing them, Ms. O'Hare said.

"She may know how valuable voter information is to the electorate or how important lobbying on issues is," she continued. "That person may be willing

to share the qualifications of her work or the expertise of her education. She may also be a better financial contributor."

Ms. O'Hare may be a good example of the new member the league is now thinking in terms of. She is chairman of the Detroit commission preparing a report for the federal court on implementation of the school desegregation plan. Ms. O'Hare is on the board of trustees for New Detroit, Inc.

A member of the Detroit league chapter, she has been active on the state level. At the convention Saturday, Ms. O'Hare was elected vice president of the state organization.

In between it all, she said she finds a little time to practice law.

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