

LWVIL SOCIAL POLICY POSITION: CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Support for improved state and local services by Illinois state agencies serving children and their families.

Position in Brief: The League believes that the State should play the leading role in meeting the needs of children and their families. This responsibility applies across systems of care regardless of age or legal status. The State has the primary role in funding to ensure that quality services are equitably available throughout the state. The League supports a continuum of community-based services that strengthens and preserves families and fosters healthy growth and development of children. Prevention and early intervention should have high priority. The League supports a juvenile court system that provides opportunities for effective protection, treatment, and rehabilitation. Detention should be reserved for delinquent children who meet professional screening criteria and provided separately from adult programs. The League opposes the automatic transfer of children to the criminal court and the death penalty for children.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES (1967, 1972, 1977, revised 1996): The League believes that the State should play the leading role in meeting the needs of children and their families. This responsibility applies across systems of care regardless of age or legal status of the children.

Resources The League supports a continuum of quality services that strengthens and preserves families and fosters healthy growth and development of children.

Family-focused, community-based systems of care that emphasize prevention and early intervention should have high priority. The supply of affordable, quality child care should be expanded, with priority given to those in greatest economic need. For children whose needs cannot be met at home, foster homes, group homes, small residential treatment and correctional facilities should be available. Transitional and aftercare programs are essential parts of the continuum of care. Regardless of where children are being served, education is essential.

Shelter care and other services suited to their needs should be available to children whose cases are pending. Detention should be reserved for delinquent children who meet professional screening criteria and provided separately from adult programs.

The League supports a juvenile court system that provides opportunities for effective protection, treatment and rehabilitation; meets the individual needs of children and their families; and protects the rights of all affected parties. The court's effectiveness depends on several factors: judicial leadership, personnel with special training in juvenile matters, support services that allow judges to make informed decisions, probation services responsive to the special needs of children, courtroom procedures that reduce unnecessary delays, a wide range of available interventions, and an effective citizen presence. The League opposes the automatic transfer of children to the

criminal court and believes that a juvenile court judge should determine whether a case is considered in the juvenile court or the criminal court. The League opposes the death penalty for offenses committed by children.

Administration The State should have the primary role in funding to ensure that quality services are equitably available to children and families throughout the state. In order to protect funding and visibility, the child welfare agency should be separate from other human service agencies. The Governor's office should provide leadership to ensure that state agencies do the following:

- Communicate and cooperate with each other to provide coordinated services, clear guidelines for responsibility and information to the public about the availability of services;
- Develop long range plans which include coordination of local service delivery, provide for citizen input and review, and encourage local initiatives;
- Establish family-focused, community-based systems of care;
- Set and enforce program and personnel standards consistent with national accreditation standards;
- Encourage the recruitment, retention and training of sufficient numbers of qualified staff at all levels;
- Ensure that agencies are directed and staffed by qualified personnel regardless of political affiliation; and
- Evaluate programs and search for new methods to improve services.

Background From its inception, the League worked on reform issues relating to maternal and infant care, mothers' pensions and child labor. In 1963, LWVIL Convention delegates adopted a study to evaluate the structure and financing of Illinois welfare services to children and their families, dividing the work into three parts: the child in need of financial assistance; the child in need of protection; and the child and the courts. The timing enabled the League to take action not only on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, but to shape the modernization of the Juvenile Court Act, the first laws on child abuse, the newly created Department of Children and Family Services and to lay the groundwork for the Illinois Youth Commission to become part of a code department.

LWVIL Convention delegates added a study of day care in 1969. In 1971, the LWVIL board decided that it would be more appropriate to take action on behalf of the child in need of financial assistance under the LWVUS income assistance position adopted that year. Delegates to the 1975 LWVIL Convention called for a study of the level of services of state agencies serving children. The position adopted two years later pulled together three elements: a reaffirmation of state positions, concurrence with LWV of Cook County positions, and the new consensus on administration. In 1979, the LWVIL received a grant to develop a statewide juvenile court watching project.

The current position was approved at Interim Council in 1996 and ratified by local Leagues following review by a statewide committee. It rewords the 1977 position, incorporates recommendations of the Illinois Juvenile Court Watching Project and adds a statement opposing the death penalty for children.

LWVIL action The League joined as an *amicus* in *Artist M* (addressing the rights of children under the Federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980) and *White/Lawrence v People* (challenging a law having a disproportionate effect on minority youth). Monitored the *B H v McDonald* consent decree (a class action suit to improve services to children under the care of DCFS). Opposed an attempt to amend the Illinois Constitution in a way that would weaken laws that protect children.

In other action, the League:

- Celebrated the 1999 centennial celebration of the juvenile court. Julia Lathrop, second president of the LWVIL, was one of its founders.
- Spearheaded legislation authorizing Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to advocate in court on behalf of the child.
- Promoted family preservation by encouraging an array of prevention and intervention services that strengthen families rather than rely on foster and residential care.
- Urged Congress to reauthorize and fund the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.
- Took an active role in rewriting the Juvenile Court Act of 1987. A major effort to refine the Juvenile Justice Reform Provisions was followed by featuring state Senator Barack Obama at the LWVIL legislative briefing in 1998.
- Strengthened the rights of minors by working to raise the age of original juvenile court jurisdiction, protect the confidentiality of records and require legal counsel during interrogation by law enforcement.
- Supported measures that call for an individual review by the juvenile court before transferring a case to the criminal court or applying provisions of the Sex Offender Registration Act. Continued to oppose automatic transfer.
- Encouraged the development of alternatives to detention; opposed detention of non-delinquent children; opposed detention of juveniles in adult facilities; and participated in efforts to revise the County Juvenile Detention Standards.
- Advocated for the creation and expansion of Redeploy Illinois, a program that enables counties to develop community-based sanctions and services for juvenile offenders who would otherwise be incarcerated.
- Supported the Interstate Compact for Juveniles, a measure to regulate the movement of juvenile offenders received from, or sent to, other states.
- Acted to separate the Juvenile Division from the Department of Corrections. Joined with others on the Governor's Transition Team to develop recommendations for the Department of Juvenile Justice. Attempted to provide juvenile offenders with protections and benefits available to non-offenders.

The League is a member of the Juvenile Reentry Workgroup and the Detention Standards Task Force Steering Committee. The League monitors meetings of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission.

(See LWVIL Mental Health position and LWVIL Income Assistance position, pg. 71)
(See LWVUS Social Policy - Child Care and Early Intervention for Children at Risk positions).