INTRODUCTION

CHANGE. It's the buzzword of the new century. But how can you make it happen? How can your organization take steps to create a better community, a better world? The answer is by working with others. By collaborating. By recognizing that today's biggest problems affect everyone in our communities, and that we can find solutions if we work together.

It's no secret that America is changing from a nation with a large majority-white population to one where racial and ethnic minorities are moving closer to majority status, especially in certain regions and metropolitan areas. The results will affect the entire nation, in terms of the economy, politics, government priorities and voting districts, and so on.

- Today, 73 percent of Americans are non-Hispanic whites; 12.6 percent are African American; 10.5 percent are of Hispanic origin; 3.3 percent are Asian American; and less than 1 percent are American Indians, Aleuts or Eskimos.
- By 2050, however, the proportion of non-Hispanic whites in the U.S. population will drop dramatically--to 53 percent--while the Hispanic population climbs to 24.5 percent, the African American population to 13.6 percent, the Asian American population to 8.1 percent, and the population of American Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos to about 1 percent.

What this means for community organizations seeking to bring about lasting change is simple. It means it's time *right now* to recognize the demographic shifts that are under way in our communities and our country and to reach out to diverse audiences that can help us shape solutions for the common good. Our goal should be to create communities of inclusion--communities that work together and that reach across the lines of race, ethnicity and economics to build a better future.

Survey: Community Involvement, Voting Linked

Lots of good things come hand-in-hand with creating a community of inclusion. And one of them, according to a recent League of Women Voters survey, is a higher level of political participation. The March 1996 survey of voters and nonvoters across the country suggests that those who are involved in their communities are more likely to vote. More than two-thirds of voters (68 percent) reported involvement in two or more community organizations, including a union; a church or synagogue; a PTA group; or a business, civic and social club. The comparable figure for nonvoters was less than half (49 percent).

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION

Creating a community of inclusion can be a real challenge. It may mean stepping out of your comfort zone, creating new alliances, working with people you never considered working with before. It may mean ceding authority to others, backing out of the spotlight to give them credit and negotiating to find common ground. For all of us, it means

working to overcome the prejudice and the misunderstanding that for decades have divided Americans from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

What are the rewards of working with diverse partners? The more groups and individuals you work with, the more you're able to create community-wide support for your organization and its goals. And that can mean more volunteers, more members and more resources for your organization's programs, plus more of an impact on the issues you care about. Equally important, by reaching out you can show people that you're shaping solutions for the whole community—and not just for your members or for those who traditionally have been involved.

Here are some of the key things to keep in mind as you work to make your community a community of inclusion:

Know Your Community

It's hard to build a stronger community for the future without an intimate understanding of the kind of community you have today. A basic knowledge about local neighborhoods, community organizations, and the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic breakdown of the local population isn't enough. To succeed, you'll need to find out what people really think — What issues do they care about? What kinds of community activities are they involved in? What organizations do they belong to? Whom in the community do they trust most?

You'll also need to find out what individuals and organizations are already working on some of the issues you might want to address. Who's doing what? Are they effective? What problems have they run into? Were they able to overcome them? Are there any conflicts between different individuals and/or organizations that you should know about?

The best way to find answers to these questions is to get out and talk to people. Reading the local newspaper, as well as the community newspapers from the neighborhoods you want to reach, is an important step but it's not enough. In order to truly know your community, you'll need to get beyond the headlines to the people themselves. And that means building a network of neighborhood contacts, one by one.

Start out with your own members and board. Whom do they know in the community? What other organizations are they involved in? Use their understanding and their contacts to open doors. Then think about individuals with a special perspective on the communities you want to target—community center and social service agency staff, clergy, school officials and teachers, community group leaders.

Although it always helps to have an “in,” don't be afraid to call people cold. Tell them you want to meet with them—face to face—to get their advice. Tell them you want to know how you and your organization can become more involved in the community and how you can work together with them on issues you both care deeply about.

DON'T WAIT FOR THEM TO COME TO YOU! Attend meetings of one or more organizations in your targeted communities to learn more about their top concerns. What issues are they working on? Where do their agendas meet with yours? Call leaders of these groups about upcoming meetings, or look in the paper for meeting times and places. Let people know you're interested in learning from them and working together.

Choose Issues With Legs

Age, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status don't matter when it comes to what kind of community people want. No matter who they are or where the live, people want a community that is healthy and safe and that offers good jobs, good schools and good services.

Once you're able to identify the values and concerns that people and organizations in your community hold in common, then you'll be able to select issues everyone cares about—"issues with legs." And by selecting issues that transcend demographics—issues that unite rather than divide your community—you'll help break down the barriers of fear and mistrust that too often keep people and organizations apart.

So many issues cry out for attention in any community. The challenge is to select issues that are a priority both for your organization's members and for the community as a whole. The following questions will help you narrow the list of possible issues while identifying those that pose the greatest opportunity for community-wide involvement:

- What are the most urgent issues facing your community as a whole,—i.e., what issues demand attention NOW?
- What are the issues that most concern members of the groups you want to target—e.g., underserved citizens, youth?
- What issues offer your organization the greatest chance to collaborate with diverse groups or individuals in the community?
- What issues present opportunities for people to bring about real change and make the community a better place to live?
- What issues will benefit from your organization's special expertise or perspective?
- What issues offer the greatest chances to gain additional members, visibility or clout for your organization?

To find out what issues are of greatest concern to different groups in your community, you'll need to follow the steps outlined above for reaching out and initiating conversations with diverse audiences (see "Know Your Community"). Remember: new issues and new opportunities for collaboration will surface all the time, so it's essential to make your "issue outreach" a continuing priority, not a one-time event. In fact, you might want to organize a monthly or quarterly meeting with diverse groups in your community so you can identify shared concerns as they arise.

Form Partnerships

Joining with other groups often is the best way to broaden your organization's impact on issues that matter to the whole community. Choose partner organizations that are active in the neighborhoods and among the audiences you want to reach. If African Americans are a target, then a likely partner might be the local NAACP chapter. But don't stick only with the "usual suspects." Find out what organizations are active in the community, and explore their willingness to join together in a coalition.

Any group whose mission is directly related to the focus of your issue campaign is a logical choice. Working with organizations that represent your target audience is another important strategy. The key is to THINK BROADLY and to explore partnerships with groups that come at the issue from different angles and perspectives. Partners can come from all sectors of the community and can include civic groups, businesses, government agencies, colleges, universities and individual citizens. Some questions to consider in identifying potential partners:

- What individuals and organizations can help define the problem we want to address? Who has unique expertise or perspective on the issue?
- What population groups are affected by the problem? What organizations represent the interests of these groups? Which individuals have special credibility with these groups?
- What individuals and organizations can help develop solutions? Who will be responsible for implementing these solutions?
- Whose support will we need to address the issue effectively? What individuals and organizations might stand in the way of solutions?
- What organizations are known for achieving results in the community? Who has a track record of taking on important issues and getting things done?

Coalitions can be difficult to manage. Be sure not to spread responsibility and accountability too thin, but do involve a large enough group to get things done. Too often, important projects ride on the shoulders of just one or two people or organizations. Make it a TRUE COLLABORATION, but make sure all partners understand and are able to live up to their responsibilities. Member organizations of the coalition should be groups you can work with effectively; make sure you know they are organized for results.

ORGANIZE FOR ACTION! It's always best to assign responsibilities as part of the initial planning process, when everyone is committed and the sense of mission is fresh. Get people to state their level of commitment up front, and make it something they can always raise but never lower. Hold all partners to their commitments by distributing meeting minutes and/or assignment lists and by following up on everyone's progress at future meetings.

Recognize Why Others Get Involved

No matter how worthy your organization's cause, there's no guarantee that others will rally to your side. Other organizations in the community have competing priorities and only so much money and so many volunteers to go around. At the same time, people in the community may be stretched by work and family demands, as well as commitments to other organizations and other causes, that keep them from becoming more involved.

The key is to be flexible, to welcome any level of participation and assistance people can give, and then to try to hold people to their commitments. Equally important, to make sure people stay involved, try to create a sense of belonging for individuals and groups so they feel they're playing an important part in what you're doing. Good organizers, according to researcher Trena M. Cleland, focus not only on the political but the personal.

“To be effective, we must feel that involvement is meeting our needs to enjoy ourselves, to add more skills to our personal tool kits, to be valued for our contributions, to have 'kindred spirits' in our lives, and to be directly involved in tangible change,” Cleland wrote in an article for the quarterly, In Context, “People who are not otherwise attracted to political life will stay with a group if they experience it as a support and friendship network—in short, as a community.”

The best way to reward people's involvement? CELEBRATE SUCCESS. Make a habit of thanking people and organizations for their participation. Throw a party. Alert the media about your coalition's achievements. And, by all means, *don't forget to share the spotlight by giving credit to your partners and directing the media to them*. Making people feel good about their participation now will prepare the way for continued involvement in the future.

Working in coalition with other organizations inevitably means you'll be sharing the spotlight, so it's important to accept that you won't always be the top dog. As long as you are getting your share of the credit and your coalition is achieving results, that's what counts.

Check Your Sparkplugs

No organization can expect to walk into a community where it hasn't had a presence before and instantly earn the people's trust and respect. What you need are “sparkplugs”—a term organizing experts use to refer to people with the credibility, the energy and the motivation needed to get others in their community to bring about change.

Sparkplugs aren't necessarily the same people you'll approach to find out more about the community you want to target (see “Know Your Community,” above). They can be anyone people trust, anyone they see as “one of their own.” That can include local business executives, politicians, radio and TV personalities, professional athletes, ministers and more. Sparkplugs don't have to be well known in the community, however. If you want to reach young people in your area, for example, it's best to have students making your case. And, if you're talking about children's issues, you'll want energetic parents and teachers on your side.

Your coalition partners should be able to help you identify and recruit sparkplugs who can help with your outreach. Whatever you do, get input from the communities you want to target. You don't want to go in assuming you have the right person and then learn that people in the community think he or she is a sellout or just plain dull.

Find The Right Forums

Just as important as the partners and the sparkplugs you choose are the forums you use to get your message out. When you're thinking about using the media, for example, it's essential to look beyond the mainstream outlets and to consider the many media organizations that cater specifically to diverse segments of the population. These include Spanish-language media and other broadcast and print organizations targeting specific groups, including radio stations, cable TV channels and community newspapers.

Other forums to consider in reaching out to diverse groups include college and university campuses, churches, community centers, social service agencies, neighborhood fairs and festivals, and more. Organize events in the community you want to target and not across town. To make people comfortable about coming out and being a part of your campaign, you'll need to go to your target audiences instead of making them come to you.

Watch Your Language!

Words matter. Whether targeting your outreach to minority groups, youth or other segments of the population, language is critically important. Make sure you translate your message and/or materials into the appropriate language for your target audience. If you are working with youth, you've got to make things hip and conversational or kids won't listen. You might also want to consider printing your materials in Braille or using sign-language interpreters at your events.

Of course, what you say to your target groups is as important as how you say it. And again, the message may vary based on who you're talking to. No matter the issue, your goal should be to address your audience's chief concerns. If you're talking about the importance of voting, for example, you might want to remind young people about the government's role in education and student financial aid. And if the issue is the environment, your message in an inner-city community might focus on the location of polluting industries.

The best way to make sure you're using the right language and the right messages for your audiences? Test everything. Convene a focus group of the people you want to target so you can get their reactions and their input. If that's not doable, circulate drafts of your materials and messages for people in the community to respond to. With this kind of input up front, you'll know you have the materials and the messages you need to make things happen.

DON'T WAIT. EVALUATE!! At the end of your coalition project, be sure to take time with your partners to assess how things went. Think about both your successes and your failures. Consider these questions: How effective was your coalition? What mediums of communication worked best? Did you encounter any cultural barriers? What event formats were most effective? What did you gain from the experience? Put your answers on paper so you're able to shape future efforts that are even more successful.

Don't Give Up

Building a community of inclusion doesn't happen overnight. Over the years, too many of us have grown too accustomed to working in our own worlds, on our own issues and according to our own customs and rules. As a result, it's going to take time to get people in our organizations to adapt and to accept once and for all that we can't do everything on our own. And it's going to take time to build trust in minority communities after so many years of isolation and prejudice.

The best way to view your outreach to diverse partners in your community is not as an end point but as an ongoing process. You may need to approach a community several times before you develop enough credibility as someone people feel they can work with. You need to stay involved, week in and week out.

Your efforts may be rebuffed at first, but persistence will help you succeed. It is when you stay involved in a community over the long term that people will begin to believe you're sincere in your intentions to work with them. As one member of a minority community told a League of Women Voters audience: “We want to touch, see and feel you after the election is gone.”

COMMUNITIES OF INCLUSION CASE STUDIES

Community Coalition Boosts Voter Turnout In Low-Income Utica Neighborhood

The 1996 post-election headline in the *Utica Observer-Dispatch* said it all: “Voter Turnout Down in County, But Up in Cornhill.” Cornhill, a low-income, minority neighborhood near Utica, New York's downtown area, had been the target of a comprehensive get-out-the-vote effort organized by the League of Women Voters of the Utica-Rome Metropolitan Area.

The fact that voter turnout was up in the Cornhill neighborhood and surrounding Ward 5 was a surprise to many in the Utica area. Ward 5 is known to outsiders primarily for its high drug and crime rates; most of the murders in Utica occur in Ward 5. It is an area where there are a large number of homeless, where many families live in old, dilapidated and dangerous homes, and where absentee landlords are known for fleecing social service clients and for ignoring the city's all-too-frequent warnings about code violations.

Recently, however, the League and others have come to recognize many positive things about Ward 5 to counter the long list of negatives. A strong church group in the area, for example, works to mobilize people to fight crime and the decay of their neighborhood. Neighborhood block associations have formed. Citizens have united to clean up area streets and parks. And a variety of organizations have begun to come together to provide needed services, as well as community centers where people can gather safely to work on problems or just to talk.

Says Mary Q. Chapin, president of the local League: “What has been needed most is to

instill a sense of pride and hope and a realization that by working together, the residents of this area can make a difference."

Instilling that sense of pride and hope became the goal of the local League's 1996 GOTV effort. Chapin and her LWV colleagues knew going into the project that working in a neighborhood such as Cornhill would be a challenge for the League. "We really wondered how we could make a difference" Chapin said. "We had no financial assistance to offer, and the fact is we were seen by members of the community as a group of middle-class white women. Their obvious response was, 'What do they (League members) care about us?'"

But the League persisted in its determination to help the residents of Ward 5. Before submitting a proposal for a targeted GOTV project in the area to the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF), Chapin organized several meetings with leaders of key Ward 5 organizations. It was at these meetings that the League realized it could put together something with real impact. "The meetings were very positive, and we felt we got a green light from some very important people in the community," says Chapin. "And we realized that we could work through these people and others to produce a turnout that voters in the area could be proud of."

Working *through* its partner organizations became the League's paramount GOTV strategy. "If these people said we were OK, then we were," Chapin says. "If these people asked them (Ward 5 residents) to register to vote, they would." The League felt that the people living in Ward 5 would have to do most of the work to get out the vote, or the project wouldn't fly. Creating a broad coalition of trusted neighborhood and community organizations would be the key to success.

After receiving funding for the project, the League expanded its contacts in the community and, in August 1996, convened the first meeting of its grassroots GOTV coalition. Coalition partners included the local NAACP and YWCA, the Million Man March Committee, Corn Hill People United, local churches and service agencies, and many others. Working together throughout the fall, the coalition set out to register voters and educate area residents about local, state and national issues.

As a result of all this hard work, the League and its partners were able to draw record numbers of minorities, low-income people and youth to the polls. A preliminary estimate from the local Board of Elections put voter turnout in District 5 at 54 percent, well over the national average and a huge jump in turnout for the area.

According to a post-election editorial in the *Observer-Dispatch*, "A good deal of the credit for this region=s voter turnout is due to the Utica-Rome League of Women Voters, whose ambitious efforts to register new voters and get them to the polls no doubt contributed to the success." The newspaper specifically cited the League's work with its coalition partners in District 5.

The combination of the coalitions success and the favorable attention the effort received

throughout the Utica area has led coalition members to start strategizing about how they can build on what they accomplished in 1996. Commented Fran Williams, a member of both the NAACP and the LWV, “This has been a wonderful effort. The coalition must be continued.”

Broward County Campaign Urges Low-Income Parents To Cast A Vote For Kids

In Broward County, as in other communities across the country, poverty and political involvement traditionally haven't mixed. According to the 1990 census, more than 10 percent of the county's residents—about 140,000—are living in poverty. Many of these people live in neighborhoods where politics might as well be a foreign language.

“People in these neighborhoods are out of the information loop,” explains Priscilla A. Hawk of the LWV of Broward County. “Most of them have no idea who their elected representatives are. As a result, their elected representatives don't come to their neighborhoods because they feel it's a waste of their time; these folks don't vote.”

In 1996, the LWV of Broward County set out to give poor people more of a voice in government by capitalizing on parents' concern for their children's future. In a program called “Parent Empowerment for Children,” the League and its coalition partners urged parents to “cast a vote for your child.”

“Our goal was to pinpoint the concerns of the people we had targeted,” says Hawk. Residents of the targeted communities, she explains, could identify with the issues the League was talking about—from day care to children's health to education. They could see that getting actively involved in politics was a way to improve their living conditions, Hawk says.

To insure the program's success, the League forged partnerships with community agencies that provide services to poor children and their families, including day care centers, community health agencies and a crisis helpline. One of Parent Empowerments most innovative activities was a training workshop for social service agency staff. More than 50 individuals from a variety of agencies attended to learn how best to educate their clients about voting.

To make sure the empowerment message was heard by as large an audience as possible, the League partnered with several churches serving poor and minority communities in the county. The League also teamed with the Broward County public library system, which made Parent Empowerment information available at all of its 24 branches throughout the county. In other activities, the League arranged for students in two of the targeted neighborhoods to take voting information home to their parents.

The League's community partnerships were based on the idea that a project such as Parent Empowerment can't just barge into a community; someone at the neighborhood level needs to open the door. “We went into these neighborhoods and identified one person or several people whom the community trusted,” Hawk explains, noting that the

League's community contacts included school officials, ministers, and community center and social service agency staff.

“These people then invited us into the community and could vouch for us,” Hawk continues. “Getting the invitation first is key. You can't just walk into these areas and say, 'we're going to empower you.' That won't work.”

Hawk and her troops blanketed their targeted areas with information, workshops and other activities in the months leading up to the 1996 election. “Whenever we could get on the agenda, we made our pitch.” says Hawk.

Together with its coalition partners, the League registered voters and distributed information about politics and voting at events including youth fairs, church picnics, homeowners' association meetings, a neighborhood multicultural celebration and even a Mary Kay meeting. The county supervisor of elections, another eager partner, allowed Hawk to borrow a voting machine for use at League events so people could see firsthand how easy it is to vote.

As election day approached, the League engaged in intensive door-to-door canvassing in targeted neighborhoods and made hundreds of phone calls to remind people to vote. The result of all the hard work? In the League's targeted areas, voter turnout was up by between 15 and 20 percent; two precincts saw increases of more than 50 percent.

Hawk hopes that by making Parent Empowerment a continuing project, the League will see still higher turnouts in its targeted communities in the future. “It's a continuing battle because people in these poor neighborhoods rent and move around a lot,” she says. “There are always newcomers who need the information and the encouragement that a project like ours can provide.”

Another reason for the keeping Parent Empowerment going is the Leagues own credibility in the community. “People feed on the poor,” Hawk says. “They develop programs and get money to do certain things, and then they're out of there before you know it.” On the other hand, if a project or an organization can develop staying power through its contacts in the community, people start to understand it's there for the long haul. “And then you have something money can't buy: the trust of the people you want to help,” says Hawk.

Oklahoma League Teams With Tribes To Get Out The Native American Vote

To many Native Americans in Oklahoma, they are “the other elections,” the times when non-Native Americans go to the polls to elect local, state and national leaders. And, while the state's Indian population has been known to turn out in large numbers to vote in tribal elections, their participation in the other elections has been abysmally low. Precise figures are not available, but the state election board confirms that Native Americans consistently have the lowest voting rate of all ethnic groups in the state.

Tribal leaders in Oklahoma are setting out to change all that. “These tribes know that little by little their own authority and their own funding is going to be chopped away if they don't get their members to vote in general elections,” observes Carol Woodward, President of the LWV of Oklahoma. According to Woodward, the combination of the tribes' interest in mobilizing Native American voters and the League's interest in getting underrepresented populations to the polls made for an exciting and fruitful statewide collaboration in 1996.

The Oklahoma League's interest in targeting Native Americans for a comprehensive get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drive in 1996 was driven in part by numbers. Oklahoma has more Native Americans as a percentage of the overall population than any other state. More than 36 tribes are headquartered in the state, and many more are represented among the state's Native American residents. The League sensed that there was enormous potential to boost voter turnout in this large and vibrant community of Oklahoma residents; the numbers could only go up.

Another attraction in targeting Native Americans for a voter mobilization effort was the tribal organizations. “They offered a natural inroad for us to reach out to this community,” says Woodward, noting that the League's first step in implementing its 1996 GOTV effort was to approach several tribal organizations and to offer the League's assistance in getting out the vote.

Woodward says she was surprised at the extent to which the tribes already were planning a stepped-up effort to encourage members to go to the polls in November 1996. She recalls going to her first pow-wow—an event sponsored by the Chickasaw Nation in October 1996—and seeing commercial-quality signs encouraging people to vote, as well as an actual voting booth display where tribal staff and volunteers were registering voters. To help the tribe in its GOTV work, the League offered some of its own materials—posters, T-shirts and door hangers featuring a drawing by a Native American artist along with the message, “Use Your Native Voice! Vote.”

Exchanging materials with the Chickasaws and other tribes was just one aspect of a multifaceted collaboration that the League forged with tribal leaders throughout the state. One of the League's key strategies was to work with tribal newspapers to disseminate information about the election and voting. Customarily published by tribal governments, these newspapers go to every enrolled member of the tribe. They proved to be a great resource for getting the League's nonpartisan information about the candidates and the issues—as well as practical, how-to guidance on watching debates and other issues—out into the Native American community.

In other activities, the League participated in several tribal pow-wows throughout the fall, staffing a booth of its own to distribute voter information, sell T-shirts (at cost) and register people to vote. “The pow-wows were a lot of fun,” says Woodward. A couple of the tribes were so impressed with the League's willingness to come to their events and help them achieve their goal of getting out the vote that they requested information on

how to form their own Leagues.

Woodward says that the key to the League's success in working with the tribes was a "go-slow approach." "Its too often the case that organizations come in from outside and tell these groups that this is something they ought to do," she says. "The alternative—and it's a much better approach—is to respect what these communities already have in place and to ask what you can do to help. It's hard sometimes to be so gentle, but it's much more rewarding in the end."

Conclusive numbers aren't available on voter turnout among Oklahoma's Native American residents in 1996, but Woodward is certain that the League and the tribes had an impact. This is only the beginning of a long partnership, she says. "Obviously, the tribes want to keep this going so they can start to see steady gains in voter turnout in every election."

From the League's perspective, the relationships that were forged with tribal leaders in 1996 offer an important new resource in addressing a wide range of issues throughout the state. For example, the Oklahoma League recently started work on a comprehensive study of the quality and quantity of water in the state. An important issue is Indian water rights.

"Now all we have to do is raise the phone," Woodward says, "and we know where we can get the information and the help we need."

San Mateo League Reaches Out Aggressively, Creates Broad-Based Community Coalition

The get-out-the-vote coalition organized by the League of Women Voters of Central San Mateo County in 1996 gave new meaning to the term "diversity."

Seeking to reach out to members of communities that traditionally have been underrepresented at the polls, the League organized a broad-based coalition of community organizations representing each and every targeted group. Contacts with the Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Center and the local NAACP chapter provided inroads into the African American community. To reach Hispanic residents, the League teamed with the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, Hispanos Unidos and other groups. Asian Americans were represented in the coalition by the Japanese-American Citizens League, the Organization of Chinese Americans and the Filipino American Women's Network. Other coalition members spoke on behalf of youth, the elderly and people with disabilities.

According to the League's project manager, Judi Steele, it was the first time the League had worked with many of these groups. "It seemed we were always waiting for them to come to us, as opposed to getting out there and going to them," she says.

Getting all of the coalition partners to come to the table and work together, Steele recalls,

was a long and careful process. First, the League had to reach out into the community to learn which organizations might be interested in working together, and which groups would be the League's best contacts in targeting specific communities. An important resource in this fact-finding effort was the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center, a community nonprofit that had already worked with many of the League's potential partners. Center staff helped the League draw up a list of possible contacts, whom the League then pressed for additional suggestions.

“Once we really started following up on all of the leads we had, we realized there was great potential here,” says Steele.

After an initial round of telephone contacts, the League went into the community to visit all of its potential partners. “We went to them because we wanted to go there and show we were interested in hearing from them. What are they doing? What do they think we should do? How can we get something going?”

The League's approach to all of the groups was the same. “We wanted to make sure they didn't think we were coming in from outside and saying we had all the answers,” Steele notes. “We framed it as an effort to learn how we could all work together to get people to the polls so we weren't duplicating efforts and so we could all be as effective and as efficient as possible.”

When the League had received commitments from a core group of partner organizations, it organized a planning meeting; representatives from 25 organizations attended. The meeting agenda laid out the goals of the session as follows:

- Clarify how groups are working to promote citizen involvement and voter turnout.
- Discuss how groups can work together for success.
- Gain support for upcoming involvement efforts.

During the planning meeting, representatives of the groups discussed their current efforts to register, educate and motivate potential voters and detailed the resources—including materials and expertise—that they could share with the coalition. Each of the coalition partners then committed to undertaking a variety of activities to reach its constituency with the GOTV message. These included: scheduling focus group meetings of potential voters; recruiting citizens to participate in an October 1996 town meeting organized by the League; and publicizing GOTV activities, including a series of candidate forums, in organization newsletters and other communications.

In the weeks leading up to the election, coalition members registered voters, organized phone banks and door-to-door canvassing, distributed voting information by mail and at neighborhood meetings and events, and held issue forums and debate parties to get people interested in the election and the issues at stake. By working in coalition, the groups were able to share telephone and voter lists, coordinate canvassing and other neighborhood activities, share issue materials, and more. Equally important, in working together for the first time, the partners created the basis for lasting partnerships that will

allow them to address shared concerns more effectively in the future.

“I was surprised to find that many of our coalition partners had the same issues as our organization,” says Pearl Morris of the NAACP. “What we have in common is more than our differences”

After the election, the League invited all of the project partners to an evaluation meeting where representatives of the different groups offered numerous suggestions for building on the coalition's 1996 successes. A key outcome of the meeting—held at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Center—was a commitment by the group to stay together and to meet on a quarterly basis to discuss continuing collaborations. “We all felt like a family when the project was over,” says Steele. “It would have been a shame to break up this wonderful group.”

Las Cruces Effort Targets Recent Immigrants With Information On Registering, Voting

In the 1990 census, 56 percent of the residents of New Mexico's Dona Ana County identified themselves as Hispanic. Although many of these individuals have been residents of New Mexico for generations and have a strong tradition of participating in politics and elections, a significant number became U.S. citizens following enactment of federal immigration reforms in 1986. These newer citizens, according to Win Jacobs, President of the League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces, often feel “detached from the mainstream” and isolated from the processes of democratic government.

“Many of these people are farm workers who live in small communities south of the city of Las Cruces,” Jacobs explains. Housing in these communities—called colonias—is blatantly below standard. Residents live in mobile homes on lots that were subdivided by their previous owners and sold without suitable infrastructure. Many families in the colonias have no running water and have to pilfer electricity by running an extension cord to a central utility pole serving several other homes. It is estimated that as many as 40,000 people live in colonias in Dona Ana County.

Viewing this population as a natural target for a voter registration and education effort, the LWV of Greater Las Cruces in 1996 teamed with the nonprofit Colonias Development Council (CDC) to get out the vote among colonias residents. Among other activities, the CDC operated a continuous voter registration drive out of the organization's offices in the two largest colonias in the county. The League supported the effort by providing training in voter registration procedures and Spanish-language educational materials on voting.

The League's work with the CDC was just one aspect of a broader effort to boost voter turnout among all Hispanic residents of Dona Ana County. Focusing first on the issue of voter registration, the League enlisted volunteers from the CDC and another Hispanic organization, Image de Las Cruces, to help sign up nearly 650 mostly Hispanic residents at 14 different sites in Las Cruces and the surrounding area. Registration sites included

grocery stores, a food bank and the offices of the New Mexico Health Department. The League's Hispanic partners played a vital role by providing Spanish-speaking interpreters at all sites.

“I registered voters at three sites where most of the people registering were Hispanic citizens, and most were receiving some type of public assistance,” says League member and project organizer Marni Leverett. “I asked why they wanted to vote, and the prevailing reason was their uneasiness about welfare reform and how it might directly affect them and their families.”

The League backed up its voter registration activities in Hispanic communities with a Spanish-language Voters Guide explaining all the major issues at stake in local, state and national elections. In addition to distributing copies through the Colonias Development Council, the League made the guide available to various institutions and agencies serving the Hispanic community, including a large child care organization, an elementary school and a food bank.

As fall wore on, the League worked with Image de Las Cruces and other organizations to sponsor two candidate's forums, as well as a phone bank operation to contact new voters. When election day finally arrived, 95 percent of the new registrants who were contacted by the League reported voting. And, while turnout in many of the targeted colonias remained low, six of these communities bucked the national trend and reported increases in turnout.

Looking ahead, Jacobs says the League looks forward to working with the CDC and other local Hispanic groups on a continuing basis. In particular, the League has partnered with the CDC for a study of local water supplies, both quality and quantity issues. “In the best League tradition, we're trying to keep the noise level up on these issues. We want to help bring the problems in these communities to light.”

Fort Worth Public Housing Community Embraces Politics, Voting

With encouragement and support from the League of Women Voters of Tarrant County, residents of a local public housing community spent the months leading up to the 1996 election knocking on doors and persuading their neighbors to go to the polls.

Early in 1996, the local League established a partnership with the residents of the Butler Place community to conduct voter registration and education. The key to the partnership was the recruitment of several young and enthusiastic residents who employed the most effective tactic there is for getting out the vote: face-to-face contact.

“What made the project successful is that we recruited some of the residents to become members of the League,” observes the local League's president, Cindy Crain. “And, they were the ones who knocked on doors and got people out to vote.”

One of the Butler Place residents who was recruited by the League was Sandra Nixon.

“I've been pushing people, pestering them to get out there and vote,” Nixon told a local newspaper. “If they can take 15 minutes to go to the grocery store, they can take 15 minutes to come up here and vote.”

Early on in its work in the Butler Place community, the League realized that residents needed better information about candidates and issues. As a result, the League adapted its standard voters guide to make it smaller and more customized to the community's concerns. The League's “mini-voters guide” featured only the electoral races that people from Butler Place and two other public housing developments actually saw on the ballot.

An important part of the project's success was the League=s partnership with a group of Butler Place residents who came together after the Million Man March to get out the vote among their African American neighbors. Calling themselves MOB—for “Men of Butler” and “Mind Over Body”—the group succeeded in working with the League to produce Butler Place's largest voter turnout ever. Many members of MOB are now members of the League as well.

Another get-out-the-vote activity organized in 1996 by the LWV of Tarrant County was a bus tour to Selma, Alabama, site of a series of protest marches in 1965 that convinced Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. In October 1996, 16 Fort Worth residents—nine African Americans and seven whites—took an inspirational four-day trip to explore the history of minority voting rights in the United States and to reflect on the hard-won struggle for the right to vote.

Rickie Clark, a young African American who helped the League with both the bus trip and the GOTV work in Butler Place, says he was impressed at the sincerity and the staying power of the League's efforts in local minority communities. “When you are working in the black community, you have to be consistent, and I think everybody saw that the League was consistent. You can't just come in and do your thing and leave. We want to touch, see and feel you after the election is gone,” Clark says.

Lwv, Campus Groups Join To Register Hampton University Students And Promote Absentee Voting

The African American students at Hampton University were the target of a special 1996 get-out-the-vote effort organized by the Hampton/Newport News League of Women Voters. A historically black institution of higher learning, Hampton has a student body of more than 3,000 students from across the country. The fact that the university's students hail from points near and far gave the League's project a special focus. The goal was to help students register in their home states and then cast absentee ballots come Election Day.

“Young people are among those who are least likely to vote,” says Hiewit Senghor, the Hampton University student who served as project director for the League. “But we found that if you approach them with the opportunity to register and vote, they'll get

excited and they'll do it."

As a first step, the League met with several different campus-based student organizations to discuss how best to register students and get them interested in the upcoming election. Within a week, the groups had set up registration booths all over campus and were using the national voter registration form to sign people up.

"The publicity was awesome" says student Kristen Vincent. "Everyone on campus knew about the voter registration campaign. I was exhausted the day I worked the booth; it seemed like people kept on coming."

The League and its on-campus partners then set out to organize a week-long program of election-related events to pique student interest in voting. Activities during "Civic Week" included a kickoff rally and several evening forums spotlighting key issues in the election. In other activities, the League recruited student volunteers to go door-to-door to register voters in a federal housing development in Newport News.

According to Senghor, the impact of the effort on the Hampton University campus was "overwhelming." After the election, students already were talking about how to improve the campaign the next time around. In addition, students were exploring the formation of several political and issue-oriented organization on campus, including Democratic and Republican student groups and an organization to address environmental issues.

"The effort created a lot of attention and sparked a lot of discussion on campus to disprove the idea that young people are apathetic and don't care," says Senghor. "We saw that they cared. They just need to be given the opportunity to participate."

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