

LWVPA Registers Voters at Elmwood Correctional Facility

By Kathy Miller, co-chair of Voter Services for LWVPA

On two Friday afternoons in May, a group of LWVPA volunteers helped a total of 50 women at the Elmwood Correctional Facility in Milpitas register to vote. It was an amazing and rewarding experience. This is the story of how we came to be involved with this project and what it was like to register voters inside a jail.

In April, the Santa Clara County Office of Women's Policy (SCOWP) asked the County Leagues if any of us would be able to help with voter registration on the women's side of our county jail in Milpitas. I boldly responded that the Palo Alto League would be interested. I knew that we had active volunteers aplenty who would step up for this new and unusual activity.

To better understand how VR in the jail would work, SCOWP staff members arranged for a conference call that included Registrar of Voters staff, numerous rehabilitation officers from the Elmwood facility, and me—and I had plenty of questions! How many women are in the facility? 400. How many are serving time for felonies? Most are there for lesser crimes. And what residence and mailing address would inmates use on the form? How would they be educated about what's on the ballot?

Based on what I learned during the call, I created a flow chart for volunteers to follow—a tool that was helpful during our visits.

Before going to Elmwood, each League volunteer (Jean Lythcott, Jane Moss, Ellen Forbes, Lynn Melena, and I) had to submit personal information and receive a clearance to visit. When we arrived, our security briefing included this takeaway message: If you are taken hostage, we will not trade prisoner releases for your life! Since no one has been taken hostage at a California jail since the 1970s, we weren't terribly concerned, but it did give us pause!

On May 4, we registered women in the minimum-security area. After entering through a small room with locked doors on both ends (a precaution against escapes), we were led through a courtyard to a classroom space. The guards then brought two separate groups of women to register. When Jeannie spoke about the 100-year history of the League, you could see the women's eyes light up. And when they registered to vote, they were clearly pleased with themselves.

On May 11, we visited the "special management" inmates, many of whom have mental health issues. This time, we were in what I would call a "cell block"—an open space with two levels of cells around the outside. The atmosphere was a mix of very strict security and caring concern for the women under their charge. The guard let women out of the rooms one at a time to come work with us one-on-one. There were about eight of us to help them, including several volunteer jail monitors and the four of us Leaguers. I think we all felt touched by the connections we made with these women and were glad to have given them a sense that their opinions still matter in the world, no matter their present circumstances.

If further opportunities like this come our way, I think the Palo Alto League will jump at the chance to sign up again. This work matters.