

Annual Report of the Cook County & MWRD Governments Interest Group of the League of Women Voters of Cook County May 2022 – April 2023

Note: previously this group was called the Budget & Structure Group. Earlier this year the name was changed to reflect that this Group focuses on these two governments and to be consistent with the names of the other interest groups.

This report covers only some of the highlights of the work the Group did regarding Cook County government. There is a separate report on what we did at the MWRD.

One of our more notable accomplishments this past year:

Increasing democracy by giving voters a say on who would represent them when vacancies occur: The Group met with Cook County Commissioners Britton and Suffredin in late 2021 to urge that vacancies in Cook County Board positions, as well as the offices of the Assessor, Clerk, Sheriff, and Treasurer, be filled in a similar way to a vacancy in the President's office. This resulted in two ordinances being passed in September 2022 by the County Board which provide that when more than 28 months remain in the term of those offices when the vacancy occurs, there will be a special election at the time of the next General Election for voters to fill that vacancy. In the meantime (and when there are less than 28 months remaining in the term), the applicable ward and township committee persons will vote to determine the replacement.

As a result of this effort by the League, voters in Cook County Commissioner District 1 will be able to vote for a replacement for Commissioner (soon to be Chicago Mayor) Brandon Johnson in November 2024.

The rest of this report is organized by the areas of focus for this Group contained in the Program that was approved at the May 2022 Annual Meeting of the League of Women Voters of Cook County.

County and MWRD government organization and oversight, including the independent inspector general, ethics, and compliance with the Shakman decision principles. Transparency and effectiveness of board operations. (Focus Areas 1 and 2)

- **Salaries of County Officials:** The League supported 10% increases in the salaries starting with 2023 (there hadn't been any increases in 20 years), including annual cost-of-living increases, capped at 3% annually, for the remainder of the 4-year term. However, the League opposed such cost-of-living increases beyond that without the Board having to take a vote prior to each new term. Some of you likely responded to the League's calls to action on this issue. While the "perpetual" annual increases were enacted, subsequently the League supported an ordinance that was passed which requires a review of officials' salaries every 4 years. This provides an opportunity to weigh in on future salary increases, including cost-of-living increases.
- **Performance measures for ARPA and Equity Funds' disbursements:** The League sent multiple letters to the Board urging that performance measures be established up front so that there can be an assessment of which programs being funded by the federal American Rescue Plan Act monies and by the County's own

Equity Fund are successful. Commissioners agreed, as did the President's office, which oversees the use of these monies.

- **Current status of Shakman cases:** The Assessor's office and Clerk of the Court's office have both been found by a Federal District Court to now be in substantial compliance with the tenets of Shakman: namely that hiring, firing, promotion, and salaries for all but a handful of approved political appointees must be done without regard to politics. Therefore, court oversight has been discontinued. The Cook County Clerk's office continues to be under court supervision, though the Clerk is seeking a termination of this. The Group will continue to follow what occurs.
- **Improving the transparency and effectiveness of Board operations:** The Group met with Commissioners Daley and Lowry (Finance Chair and Rules Chair) to encourage the Commissioners to slow down when making motions concerning the disposition of multiple agenda items (so the public can follow what is happening) and to return to in-person meetings (which we believe results in increased communication and therefore effectiveness). In-person Board meetings have resumed and we have observed that it is easier to follow what is occurring in Board meetings.
- **Inspector General:** The Group reviews the Cook County Inspector General ("IG") quarterly reports. The Group has sent letters to the Board urging that they encourage departments to respond timely to recommendations made by the IG because of the large number of recommendations outstanding. Since then, the interim IG has been successful in closing those cases, with many of the recommendations accepted. Patrick Blanchard, who was the first IG, retired in the fall of 2022, and the office's General Counsel has been serving as the interim IG. There is a task force that is charged with identifying and recommending 3 candidates from whom President Preckwinkle will appoint, with Board approval, the new IG.
- **Meetings with Commissioners:** One of the reasons the Cook County League has had success in its advocacy efforts is that the County officials have gotten to know the League and the League has gotten to know the officials. This Group has recently met with the 4 new County Commissioners elected this past November to do just that. The Group also plans to meet again with the other 13 continuing Commissioners.

Observing/reporting and assessing budget processes. (Focus Area 3)

- The Group organized League observers for all the Preliminary Budget Results of 2022 and Forecast for 2023 meetings last summer and all the 2023 Budget meetings in the fall. These meetings provide much information on the workings of the offices of all the elected officials in Cook County, as well as an opportunity to learn what concerns different Commissioners have. These meetings are another means of getting to know the officials. All the observer reports for these multiple meetings have been posted on the League's web site.
- Members of the Group also collaborated with the Forest Preserve Group to increase transparency in future budget books for the Forest Preserve.

Members of the Cook County & MWRD Group: Carolyn Cosentino, Diane Edmundson, Kathi Graffam, Betty Hayford, Karin Hribar, Amy Little, Priscilla Mims, and Cynthia Schilsky