League of Women Voters of the District of Columbia Honors
Restore the Vote Legislation Working Group

At its Annual Meeting in April 2021, the League of Women Voters of the District of Columbia presented the Linda Beebe Award for Making Democracy Work to Restore the Vote Legislation Working Group for their achievement extending the right to vote to DC residents currently incarcerated on felony offenses.

The award, which is presented annually to an exceptional individual and/or organization that works to improve democracy within Washington, DC, is named for the late Linda Beebe, President of LWVDC from 2015-2018, to honor her dedication to the League’s mission of engaging and educating voters, improving elections, and defending democracy within the District of Columbia. The award recognizes individuals, groups or organizations that are actively engaged expanding voting rights for DC residents; increasing local autonomy of the DC government; improving DC elections; and/or engaging and education of DC voters, all of which make our city strong, fair, vibrant and livable.

Restore the Vote Legislation Working Group members are At-Large Councilmember Robert C. White, Dexter O. Williams – former aide to CM Robert White, LWVDC Members Britte Van Tiem, Debbie Polhemus, Mary Case, and Susan Galbraith. They came together to implement the bill introduced by Councilmember Robert White in 2019 that would extend the right to vote to DC residents currently incarcerated on felony offenses. The bill passed in July 2020 and became law shortly thereafter.

Councilmember White’s staff reached out to the League in 2019 and a strong coalition was born. Inspired and guided by the leadership and expertise of Councilmember Robert C. White, the group sprung to action. Britte Van Tiem, a master’s student of criminal justice with experience working in the prison system in the UK, immediately began efforts to contact the approximately 4,500 incarcerated individuals through the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the DC Jail to let them know that they could register to vote and participate in the 2020 election and set the League up to serve as the hotline for voter questions.

Debbie Polhemus, a retired high school teacher, was volunteering with Spread the Vote Arlington, when she met DC residents in the Arlington Detention Center who wanted to register to vote. Among her contributions to the Restore the Vote Legislation Working Group was translation of correspondence with Spanish-speaking prisoners. Mary Case and Susan Galbraith also helped run the project, which was coordinated by LWVDC President Kathy Chiron.

Through the extraordinary efforts of this group, about 450 DC residents incarcerated for felonies had their rights restored and voted in the 2020 election.

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