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For immediate release
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The League of Women Voters of Tennessee strongly opposes SB971/ HB1079 proposed legislation that seeks to impose civil and criminal penalties on voter registration drives. Though the legislation appears to exempt volunteers, many voter registration drives, especially large-scale efforts, are a blend of paid staff and volunteers. League President Marian Ott noted that Tennessee consistently ranks in the bottom 10 states as a percentage of citizens registered. This legislation would intimidate those who seek to organize voter registration efforts. Voter registration drives are particularly important in communities with low civic engagement rates. Ott stated this legislation would have a very negative and chilling impact on efforts to register citizens of color, youth and those living in poverty. She also noted that it is already against the law to submit fraudulent voter registration forms. The proposed civil penalties unduly target large registration efforts because the threshold for fines is based on an absolute number of “deficient” forms submitted rather than a percent.

The bill also seeks to regulate all communication promoting voter registration and engagement by requiring that such communication include a disclaimer that the promotion is “not made in conjunction with or authorized by the secretary of state”. While appropriate disclosures to avoid confusion among citizens as to the source of election information might be reasonable, the bill’s current language criminalizes lack of disclosures, is vague as to the requirements and is wholly out of proportion to the concern it seeks to address. For example, there is other language that could be used that is less chilling to the communications.

The League generally agrees with the Secretary of State on best practices for voter registration drives including training, timely submission of paper registration forms and maximum use of online voter registration. However, the League emphatically opposes criminal penalties for efforts that fall short of these best practices. Rather the League would encourage the Secretary of State to make training widely available for those seeking to register voters.

Another provision of the proposed legislation that the League opposes is banning poll watchers who are not citizens of Tennessee. President Ott noted that the League has done quite a bit of poll watching over the last several elections and thinks the state should be proud of how elections are conducted. Banning out of state poll watchers would not prevent the anecdotes of bad behavior at the polls mentioned as a reason for this provision. Regulations on poll watchers only govern behavior within the polling place out to the 100-foot boundary.

The League of Women Voters is the legacy organization to the suffragist movement and has a long and proud history of registering citizens to vote. This bill would seriously hinder the League's efforts and send the wrong message to communities under represented in our voting population. The League has recently signed onto a letter from the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law which enumerates many concerns about the legality of the restrictions proposed in this legislation. The League encourages the General Assembly to carefully consider this bill and seek positive measures to support and improve voter registration drives rather than penalize them.

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