

Duluth students advocate for voting, register peers

Five seniors at Duluth East High School aim to get their 18-year-old classmates to register and vote in this and future elections.



The League of Women Voters sponsors five student Youth Civic Engagement ambassadors in the Duluth area each year. This year's student cohort consists of Leah Coleman, Juniper Kelly-Swing, Ewan Moe, Natalie Pitrago and Ola Okoro.

Teri Cadeau / Duluth News Tribune

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DULUTH — A group of five students from East High School are on a mission to make sure their fellow students, and the community at large, know their voting rights and are registered for the upcoming election. The students were selected as Youth Civic Engagement Fellows to promote voter registration and civic involvement for youth in area schools with the League of Women Voters Minnesota.

"Last year, Sue DeNio came into our AP world history classes and talked about the program, and we all decided it was a good idea to help the community and get everyone registered to vote and spread the word," said East senior Leah Coleman.

This is the third year the local League of Women Voters chapter has overseen this program. DeNio acts as advisor for the group, but she said they're the ones who come up with their ideas.

"I tell them they're required to do at least three outreach events, but we've already done more than that in just the few months they've been involved," DeNio said. "We started meeting in August and they all came in prepared with lists of ideas and knowledge about voting. I thought, let me just sit back and say yes."

The students put together a PowerPoint presentation about how and where to register and vote in the upcoming election and have presented it in their government and economics classes.



"I think people are more receptive because they know us, we're all pretty involved in the school," Coleman said.

"I know I reached out to a bunch of my fellow students and got them to come down to Chester Bowl to register when we were there for Fall Fest," said senior Juniper Kelly-Swing. "And we also gave out a lot of stickers which read 'I will vote' and that seemed to draw a lot of people in."

Each of the five students became involved in the program for different reasons: to get a better understanding of the election process, to be involved in government at a local level, or to spread awareness around voting rights. The last was a big motivation for seniors Ewan Moe and Natalie Pitrago.

A QR code poster sits on a post in East High School with voter registration information thanks to the Youth Civic Engagement Fellows with the League of Women Voters.

Teri Cadeau / Duluth News Tribune

"One thing we've focused on is a new law that passed over the summer that returns voting rights to ex-felons," Moe said.

"And we were running a table at Far West Fest in Gary-New Duluth and a person came over who said they'd like to vote but they have a criminal record, so they can't," Pitrago said. "And I was happy to let them know about that law change. He was so happy about that. Moments like that made me happy to be part of this program."

For fellow student Ola Okoro, the program is a way for her to encourage others to vote while she remains unable.

"I want to make people realize how lucky they are to get that opportunity," Okoro said. "I've lived here my entire life, but I can't vote because I'm not a citizen. So that opportunity to actually affect change in the community around you on a local scale, on a state and federal scale, is something I feel people should take advantage of. My parents are still going through the process, which is so lengthy."

One of the other goals of the program is to reach out to students not just at East High School, but at Denfeld and Hermantown as well. Typically, the program consists of students from each of those schools, but East had the only applicants this year. DeNio said she'd like to see more involvement at the other schools and the students have done outreach projects, such as tabling at the Hermantown Open House.

The short-term goal for the students is to get their peers registered by the early registration deadline, Tuesday, Oct. 17, by having them visit mnvotes.org. The group placed signs around the school in hallways and the main entrance with QR codes to allow them to quickly access registration and ballot information.



By [Teri Cadeau](#)