



# ***connection***

**January 2026**

## **From the President**

AAUW released its updated Strategic Plan in September, 2025. Think of a strategic plan as an organizations' road map – Who are we; What have we accomplished, What do we want to accomplish; and What is the best way to get there. It is an involved process and is intended to strengthen the organization's commitment to their mission. The Strategic Plan also serves as a guide for Branches to develop their own mission and goals. AAUW has provided Branches with a tool – The 5 Star Program, which is aligned with AAUW's Strategic Plan.

What will never change is AAUW's commitment to support equity for women and girls by creating opportunities for higher education. This is a lasting change and affords women the possibility of economic security. AAUW has identified the following three pillars as the pathway to achieve this mission. The Strategic Plan has been simplified. It also emphasizes the significant role Branches play in

striving for equity for women and girls.

### **Fund Higher Education**

- Provide grants and fellowships for women in underserved communities and underrepresented fields like STEM.
- Support women in academia and research.
- Build networks for alumnae to lead and expand AAUW's impact globally.

### **Remove Barriers to Success in Education and the Workplace**

- Champion legislation supporting paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, pay equity, and workplace harassment protections.
- Promote inclusive, safe, and accessible educational environments through enforcement of Title IX and other civil rights laws.

### **Strengthen AAUW's Reach**

- Support an effective network of states and branches through aligned strategies and initiatives like the Five-Star Program.
- Grow organizational sustainability through member engagement and impact evaluation.

Laura Desmarais

[aauwilpres@gmail.com](mailto:aauwilpres@gmail.com)



**Save the date . . . April 24-25, 2026 for this year's convention in Rockford.**

Rooms at the Hilton Garden Inn are \$146 for 1 king bed or \$164 for 2 queen beds. They include free parking, microwave, refrigerator, 50-inch HDTV, and complimentary WiFi. [More detail may be found here.](#)

The planning committee is working on securing national and local speakers, and planning social/networking opportunities. We expect registration to open in February. More specifics about the convention costs will be confirmed by the time registration opens.

We need your help . . . would you be interested in coming to Rockford earlier on Friday, before the convention begins, to visit the [Rockford Suffrage Plaza](#) and learn about the history and development of the plaza. Email [aauwilprograms@gmail.com](mailto:aauwilprograms@gmail.com) and let us know whether you'd consider it so we can determine if we have enough interested people to pursue this extra pre-convention social.

Regards,

Kathy Battee-Freeman (Springfield)  
Jo-An Takamoto-Sabonjian (Waukegan)  
Co-Vice Presidents - Programs

## **Public Policy**

As I write this, the news of ICE actions in many cities is still reverberating. Actions that undermine many programs and educational opportunities for women and girls continue. Advocacy and political action have never been more important.

While AAUW is non-partisan, we are political. We may not be mentioned frequently in news reports, but our voices are being raised in various ways in many places including:

### **U.S. Department of Education**

- o AAUW National authored the template of a sign-on letter for states to use to urge their U.S. senators to provide immediate Congressional oversight and to block the Administration's unlawful transfer of Department of Education (ED) roles, responsibilities, and funds to other federal agencies through interagency agreements. We appreciate all the members who are joining our letters to Senators Durbin and Duckworth on this matter. It is an excellent example of how AAUW works together at the National, State and local levels.

### **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

- AAUW opposed the Veteran's Administration action related to women's reproductive health care. See [AAUW's press release on the VA abortion ban \(12/23/25\)](#).

### **U.S. Supreme Court**

- AAUW joined an amicus ("friend of the court") brief in [West Virginia v. B.P.J. and Little v. Hecox](#) in support of students challenging their states' bans on transgender girls and women's participation in school sports. AAUW also joined partners outside of the Supreme Court on January 13 as Justices were hearing oral arguments on the case. This provides a good opportunity to remind you of the [AAUW toolkit](#) with tips on how you can engage in a local activation near you.

## **Legislation**

- On January 13 the DEFIANCE Act was passed in the Senate. Bill sponsor Sen. Richard J. Durbin, D-Ill., who sought and won unanimous consent to pass the bipartisan bill without a roll call vote, said it would give victims of explicit deepfakes "the tools to fight back against those who

would exploit them.” AAUW has strongly supported this action and will be working to pass similar legislation in the House.

To learn more about AAUW national actions visit [AAUW/News](#) .

In Illinois our legislature returns to session later this month, so we look forward to action there. In the meantime, we are preparing for our state lobby day that will be held in conjunction with the Women Employed Time to Care Coalition Lobby Day. Mark your calendar for March 25th and plan to visit the Illinois State Capitol with us. Details will be out shortly. It will be an interesting and informative day with a focus on winning Paid Family and Medical Leave in Illinois, as well as increasing awareness of AAUW.

Given all that is happening. You may ask “What can I do to make a difference?” VOTE! Vote in the spring primary and the fall general election. Encourage others to vote. If you aren’t already, become part of the [AAUW Action Network and a “Two-Minute Activist.”](#)

To be better informed, participate in National and State AAUW webinars. Here are a few upcoming ones that may be of interest:

**AAUW Public Policy Zoom:**

Discuss what is going on in state and national politics, share what AAUW is doing including information on our State Lobby Day, and how we can encourage informed participation in upcoming elections. January 20 at 7 PM CT

**Advocacy in an Election Year: Staying Nonpartisan While Taking Real Action**

Thursday, January 29, 2026 | 2:00 - 3:30 pm CT

**School Boards: Take Action for Gender Equity:** February 12 at 7:00pm ET

[Register here.](#)

**Voting in Illinois: A Look into the Board of Elections**

Tuesday, February 24th 2026 7:00-8:00pm CT Hybrid

[Click here to register](#)

Thanks for your support of public policy efforts.

**Your voice. Your power. Your impact.**

Ken Olson and Karen Kortsch, Co-Directors of Public Policy

### Branch News

#### **Women Judges: A Necessarily Short History**

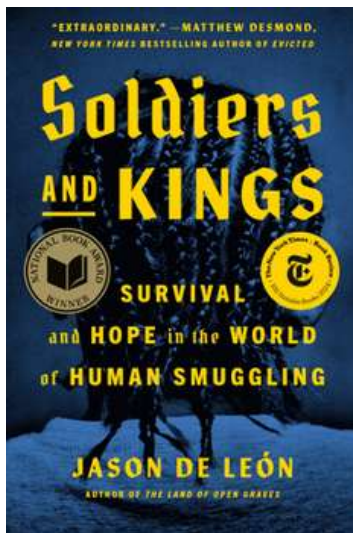
You're invited to this interesting Jane Addams AAUW branch Zoom program on Thursday, Jan. 22 7:30 pm Central Time.

Please register in advance for this meeting.

**Presented by Judge Bonnie Wheaton, Chief Judge of the Illinois 18th Judicial court.** Judge Wheaton will discuss the increase in women judges, both locally and nationally. You'll see a gallery of pioneering women lawyers and judges and learn whether having more women judges has affected court decisions and women's rights.

Bonnie Wheaton graduated *cum laude* from Carleton College, has an MSW from the University of Michigan, and graduated *magna cum laude* from Northern Illinois University College of Law and was #1 in her class. She was in private practice for 10 years before becoming an associate judge in 1988. She has been a circuit judge since 1990 and Chief Judge since 2023.

[Register](#)



Please join the AAUW Jane Addams Branch and Northwest Suburban Branch on Tuesday, January 27, at 4 pm for a discussion of *Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling* by Jason de León, winner of the 2024 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

"*Soldiers and Kings* takes us deep inside the lives of smugglers guiding desperate migrants across Latin America. One breathtaking scene follows another, rendered in vibrant, unsparing prose documenting grinding poverty and violence, but also young love and redemption. It will shock you, move you, and leave you changed."

Please register to attend. Guests are welcome!

Please note that we are changing the start time of our meetings. Beginning in February, book discussions will start at 7 pm Central Time.  
Next book discussions:

Feb 24: *The Wedding People* by Alison Espach  
Mar 24: *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman

Questions? Contact [Kate Skegg](#).

[Register](#)



AAUW Naperville Area invites you to a free screening of Zero Weeks, a documentary about America's paid leave crisis, on Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2026, at Ashbury Clubhouse, 3403 Lawrence Dr, Naperville, IL. Networking starts at 6:30, with the movie showing at 7:00 PM.

Refresh your understanding of the Paid Leave situation to help prepare for the AAUW State Lobby Day in March. We will follow the movie with a discussion of upcoming legislation for paid leave in Illinois and how we can support these efforts.

Most Americans agree that family comes first, but we are *still* the only developed country without paid leave. In one of the richest nations in the world, having a baby, a medical emergency, or an aging parent can be a trigger into poverty.

Weaving powerful personal stories with insightful interviews, ZERO WEEKS, explores America's paid leave crisis and the cost of doing nothing. ZERO WEEKS is a film by award-winning director, Ky Dickens, a female director with a track record of using her work to shift public opinion. To learn more or to view the film's trailer, visit [ZeroWeeks.com](https://ZeroWeeks.com).

Please contact [susanm414@gmail.com](mailto:susanm414@gmail.com) with any questions.

[RSVP for Zero Weeks](#)



# DIGITAL MEDIA: FACT OR FICTION? A Mini Workshop

Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2026  
7-8:30 PM on Zoom



Register:



As technology has evolved, it's become more important than ever to examine and verify digital media. Join **AAUW Naperville Area** on Zoom on Tuesday, February 10, 2026, at 7 PM for a mini workshop that will teach you how to protect yourself from scams, find truth, and combat disinformation.

[Register Now](#)

***If your branch has a program or recognition or an idea you'd like to share, please [email Jennifer Urish](#) by the 14th of each month.***

Our Mission: Gender Equity & Economic Security

Our Values: Intersectionality Inclusive Intergenerational Empowering

Our Focus: Economic Security Education Advocacy



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