

State Public Affairs Committee Enjoys Another Successful Year

By Melissa Fritsch, Chairwoman, Junior Leagues of Florida SPAC

It seems odd to be receiving a year-end report in August, but that's what happens when you have to wait for legislation to be signed! Your State Public Affairs Committee enjoyed another successful year, albeit a tough one. This year brought many challenges, including a new leadership team at the Capitol headed by a new Governor and a tough fight for legislative dollars.

We started the year off with meetings in Tampa and Orlando to begin the yearly process of developing our legislative agenda. Our agenda was finalized at our Annual Fall Conference, hosted by the Junior League of Boca Raton. Lastly, we descended upon Tallahassee in March to put voice to our agenda.

As a training organization, the Junior League strives to educate our membership first and foremost. To this end, we provided training on Constructive Debate, Effective Advocacy, How to Speak to Your Legislator in Five Minutes or Less, Life in the Day of a Foster Child, Education Issues Legislative Update, HPV and Cervical Cancer, and The History of the State Public Affairs Committee. We also learned about the different projects being done by Leagues across Florida.

As an advocacy organization, we developed 3 legislative priorities, a total of ten legislative issues and an action plan. Here is an update on each of these issues, in order of priority (priority being determined by vote at our Fall Conference).

1. ***Young Adults in Foster Care – advocate for changes to the Road to Independence Act to assist young adults emerging from foster care.*** Legislative changes this session include the development of a pilot program that will allow foster care children to receive driver's licenses. Other changes include allowing foster care children to maintain access to health insurance through the age of 20. While this was good news for child advocates, the funding news was not so good. It was determined that the cost to help these children transition was just over \$18 million; however, just over \$1 million was appropriated.
2. ***Booster Seats – require booster seats for children until their 8th birthday.*** SPAC partnered with several organizations this session to see this legislation through, including the Children's Campaign, The Children's Trust, Miami Children's Hospital, the Florida Medical Association, The Florida Pediatric Association, and others. We began this effort by meeting with Speaker Rubio in his district office early in the process. Elaine Fusco, Junior League of South Brevard, spearheaded this effort and was constantly traveling the state to brief legislators and attend committee meetings. We also hosted a Child Passenger Safety Awareness Day at the Capitol in February, which included a press conference and an appearance by Lt. Governor Kottkamp. Despite our efforts, the bill got caught in the political process and died in Committee the last week of session. This has been a battle for nearly seven years now and we will not give up. There was tremendous support for this legislation on both sides and we thank Representative Altman, Senator Posey and Senator Wise for filing booster seat-related legislation on our behalf.
3. ***Guardian ad Litem – advocate full funding for the program.*** Our partnership with the Guardian ad Litem Office started off on a good note this year. First, Carol Bryant of the Junior League of Tallahassee was appointed to the Statewide Board of Directors for the program. Second, I received the 15th Judicial Circuit's Community Advocate of the Year Award at the Statewide Conference last fall. I accepted the award on behalf of SPAC. In legislative news, the Guardian ad Litem program enjoyed a hefty increase in funding during the 2006 Legislative Session, so the program did not see an increase in funding this year. Legislation did pass allowing the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office to create

a direct support organization, which will allow the program to raise funds. Currently, there are more than 10,000 children in Florida without a guardian ad litem to represent them.

4. ***HPV Vaccine – educate League members about the vaccine and continue research on the issue.*** Two bills were introduced during session that would have required the Florida Department of Health to add the HPV vaccine to the list of required school entry immunizations. Both of these bills died. SPAC worked hard to educate members on the benefits of the vaccine, including hosting speakers at our Spring Conference in Tallahassee. In addition, we partnered with Women in Government and the Florida Cancer Control & Research Advisory Council in Tallahassee last March at the HPV & Cervical Cancer Florida State Briefing. This briefing was held at the Capitol. I spoke at this event on behalf of the Junior Leagues of Florida.
5. ***Childhood Obesity – increase awareness of this health crisis, promote programs that increase physical activity and nutritious food choices.*** The leader in this initiative is the Junior League of Greater Ft. Lauderdale! Their delegate, Heather Moraitis, really stepped up to the plate and traveled the halls of the Legislature promoting this issue. Legislation passed this year that requires a minimum of 150 minutes of physical education each week in elementary schools. While it is loosely described in the new statute, we believe it is definitely a good starting point and will continue to work on this issue.
6. ***Child Abuse Prevention- promote and advocate for programs aimed at preventing child abuse.*** Several pieces of legislation passed this year that will help reduce child abuse. First, a bill requiring a reorganization of the Department of Children & Families passed. This should make it easier to track cases and increase efficiency in the Department. Other bills aimed at providing further protection from sexual predators passed, including revisions to the Jessica Lunsford Act. Furthermore, the *Keeping Children Safe Act* passed that strengthens the conditions of supervised visitation. The Legislature also created a Chief Child Advocate, renamed the Office of Child Abuse Prevention to the Office of Adoption and Child Protection and created the first Florida Children’s Cabinet.
7. ***Affordable Housing – advocate for full funding of the Bill Sadowski Trust Fund, a state fund used to assist with the development of affordable housing.*** Affordable housing legislation did pass this year that creates more incentives for workforce housing and requiring certain counties to adopt plans by next summer outlining possible sites for workforce housing.
8. ***Juvenile Female Offenders/Gender Specific Programming – continue advocating for funding to train DJJ staff on gender specific programming and for statewide expansion of projects similar to the Girls Advocacy Project in Miami.*** Faced with a last minute funding crisis during the end of the legislation session, we partnered with the Children’s Campaign and several other organizations to find funding to save the Girls Advocacy Project, a program that provides direct intervention services to girls in juvenile detention centers. Without funding, the programs would have closed July 1st. Thanks to a last minute effort by Representative Adam Hasner, the program’s expansion funding was fully appropriated. This program, brought to SPAC’s attention by the Junior League of Miami several years ago, has now expanded to three additional counties and is being supplemented (in both funding and volunteers) by the Junior Leagues of Ft. Myers, Orlando and the Palm Beaches. Also, Vicki Lopez Lukis, a SPAC Executive Board Member, was nominated by SPAC and received the 2007 Faces of Courage Girls Advocacy Award by the Florida Network of Youth & Family Services. Lastly, SPAC

also joined forces with the Eckerd Family Foundation in support of its “A Vision and Core Values to Promote a Balanced Juvenile Justice System in Florida.”

9. ***Domestic Violence – continue to advocate for programs that prevent domestic violence and programs that assist victims.*** Legislation passed this year that allows a victim of domestic violence to take up to three days worth of time off to deal with issues arising from domestic violence, provided that the company employs more than 50 people and the employee has been there at least three months. Additional legislation passed creating a crime of domestic violence by strangulation, a third degree felony.
10. ***Internet Predators – research issues related to Internet safety, including protecting children from online predators.*** Carol Bryant, Junior League of Tallahassee and SPAC Board member, also works in the Attorney General’s Office. She kept us abreast of the Cybercrimes Against Children Act of 2007, which successfully passed into law. Not only does it stiffen penalties and provide more jurisdiction to prosecute crimes, but it also requires registered sexual offenders and predators to register their email addresses and instant message identifications when they register with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

In other efforts, SPAC partnered with the Florida Department of Health, Division of Health Access and Tobacco, Office of Injury Prevention, and all but one Junior League in Florida to distribute bicycle helmets to children. Each participating League will distribute between 75 and 200 helmets to children in their communities. This was a natural partnership as SPAC was instrumental in the passage of bicycle helmet requirements years ago.

We also continued our outreach by participating on other Boards around the state. Becker Holland, Junior League of Gainesville and SPAC Board member, participated in two groups this year on SPAC’s behalf, including the Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking Task Force and the American Heart Association’s Tobacco Education Task Force. Becker also spoke on my behalf at the Florida League’s President/President-Elect Conference held in Gainesville last spring.

I am honored to serve with such a brilliant group of dedicated volunteers and value the friendships I am making. Our 2007-year is well underway. Two meetings were held this summer – in Tampa and Orlando – where we furthered our education, started the process of developing a three to four year strategic plan (thanks to the donated services of Jack Levine and Advocacy Resources) and began discussing next year’s Legislative platform. We meet again at our Fall Conference, hosted at the Renaissance Vinoy Hotel by the Junior League of St. Petersburg, where we will also award our annual Berta Blecke Outstanding Advocacy Award and our first Legislator of the Year Award. Then, we will take our issues to the Capitol in March where we plan on changing things up a bit by hosting Junior League Day at the Capitol in lieu of a formal conference (more info to follow later). With budget cuts looming, we expect some hard-fought struggles this coming Session, but we know that with the caliber of women in the Leagues across Florida we will fight a good fight! Thank you all for your continued support!

Many thanks,
Melissa Fritsch, Chairwoman
Junior Leagues of Florida State Public Affairs Committee