

Junior Leagues of Florida State Public Affairs Committee
2007-08 Final Report
By 2006-08 Chair Melissa Fritsch
19 August 2008

As you know, the environment in Tallahassee was brutal this year due to the slowing economy and the necessary budget cuts forced upon the Legislature. The following is a summary of action on our priorities.

TOP THREE PRIORITIES:

1. Aging Out of Foster Care

While many other programs took a big hit, the funding for aging out programs was saved from a proposed \$18 million cut. Many thanks to all of you who raised your voices against the cut. It worked!

In addition to funding, Representative Glorioso continued his promise to make changes to the foster care system with his HB625. The bill amends a provision related to independent living transition services to provide a reference to “family foster homes” and “residential child-caring agencies” regarding authority to approve participation in age appropriate activities for children in out of home care. The bill also requires the Independent Living Services Advisory Council to include in the report due to the Legislature on December 31, 2008, an analysis of the system of independent living transition services for young adults who attain 18 years of age while in foster care prior to completing high school or its equivalent and recommendations for action by either the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF or department) or the legislature. The council is also required to assess and report on the most effective method of providing assistance to these young adults to enable them to complete high school or its equivalent by examining the practices of other states. Finally, the bill removes the disability of nonage of minors for purposes allowing youth aging out of foster care to secure utility services. (From the House Staff Report)

2. Booster Seat Legislation

First, let me start by saying that Charlotte Mather from the Ft. Lauderdale League is a phenomenal woman! She worked tirelessly on this issue in addition to her real job as a health care lobbyist. She personally ushered this issue through the halls of the Capitol and it ALMOST passed! Unfortunately, we just ran out of time. The house bill, sponsored by Rep. Gelber, did pass the House unanimously the last few days of Session. However, the bill was stuck in Senate Messages on the last day of Session and died. The good news is that it did have wide support in the Senate. Senator Posey and his aide, Russ Cyphers, deserve a big thanks for carrying this legislation for us since 2001. Senator Posey is leaving the Legislature this year and will be running for Congress. We wish him great luck. If this legislation is introduced again next year, I do believe that it will pass. Another thanks to Laura Donaldson, Vicki Lukis and Becker Holland for testifying at committee meetings!

3. Guardian ad Litem Funding:

Unfortunately, it was not the year to be promoting an additional \$10.1 million for the GAL program. In the end, the program did receive a budget cut, but it was not as substantial as originally proposed. The program is always in need of volunteers, so perhaps we could motivate our League sisters to sign on! This would certainly help until the budget situation eases.

OTHER PRIORITIES:

4. Kidcare - Cuts eliminated the \$1 million KidCare outreach program. The good news: the 10% cap for families who are not income eligible and pay the full premium cost was removed and \$29 million was approved to enroll 38,000 more children.

5. Childhood Obesity Prevention - legislation passed that requires 225 minutes of physical education each week for all middle school students. This is in addition to legislation passed the previous year requiring 150 minutes per week for elementary schools.

6. HPV Vaccine - no legislation passed this year related to the HPV vaccine. Legislation requiring that information regarding vaccines be sent home with all students entering 7th grade failed.

7. Girls Advocacy Project Funding - Despite heavy efforts to secure funding necessary to maintain the four juvenile detention center sites offering the GAP program (Orlando, Palm Beach, Miami and Ft. Myers), the Ft. Myers site had to close due to funding cuts. In a year of horrendous cuts to services, GAP was pretty lucky to be able to maintain 75 percent of its programming. Strong efforts by Senator Atwater and his staff along with Junior League members gave GAP the push it needed to enable the other three sites to remain open. And, a big thank you to the Junior League of Ft. Myers for continuing to offer services to the GAP girls this year!

8. Mental Health Services for girls in juvenile justice programs - while nothing specifically outlining increases or additions to these types of services for this specific population passed, changes were made to the Department of Children and Family Services that should help improve delivery of appropriate behavioral health services to all patients in need, including those within the Department of Juvenile Justice. These services include mental health and substance abuse treatment. Now that the process has had efficiency changes made, we'll need to focus our efforts in future years to adequate funding!

9. Qualified PreKindergarten Teachers - legislation that would require every voluntary PreK teacher to hold college degrees in early childhood education died in committee. Furthermore, funding was cut by \$49 per student.

10. Child Abuse Prevention - A good prevention bill passed this year - HB7007 was signed into law. This bill amends Florida's newborn safe abandonment laws to clarify that

a parent who safely surrenders a newborn is presumed to have consented to termination of his or her parental rights. The bill expressly prohibits a licensed agency from searching for or notifying the surrendering parent, unless there is actual or suspected child abuse or neglect. The bill also extends the period during which a newborn infant may be legally surrendered from three days to seven days, and requires hospitals to complete the birth certificate of a safely surrendered newborn infant without naming the mother under specified circumstances. Also, the bill replaces the term "abandoned" with the word "surrendered" throughout the relevant statutes to distinguish infants who are relinquished to a safe haven from children who are abandoned as a matter of child abuse.

Again, with the budget cuts every prevention program received its fair share of cuts, although subsidies to families wanting to adopt foster children was preserved. We have a tough road ahead of us in the next year or so and we all know that during tough economic times child abuse can increase. We will have to re-examine our legislative priorities next year to make sure that prevention remains high on our list.

When I joined the League 12 years ago in Sarasota, I received a phone call from my dear friend, Candy Legler. She was the Public Affairs Chair and she called to recruit me as a committee member. Since that time, I've chaired a Public Affairs Committee three times, served as a Council VP in charge of Public Affairs, served on the Executive Board of SPAC as Legislative Analyst, Chair-Elect and two years as Chair! The whole experience has been tremendous and has definitely set me on a path - perhaps for public office? Who knows what the future holds!

I want to thank all of you for your support and patience these past few years. And a special thanks (on most days!!) to the Junior Leagues of Sarasota and the Palm Beaches for nominating me twice to serve as Chair! But, most importantly, for your friendship. I am forever grateful to all of you.

Best of luck to the 2008/09 SPAC Board and delegates!

Sincerely,
Melissa Fritsch
2006-2008 SPAC Chair
& Sustaining Member of the Junior League of the Palm Beaches