

Tallahassee Strategy Conference Informs and Inspires SPAC Delegates

The SPAC delegates at the February 10th Winter Conference and Public Policy Strategy Session were treated to presentations by a series of policy experts and two distinguished members of the Florida Senate.

The event, convened by SPAC Chair-elect Jenay Iurato, was organized with the assistance of Legislative Analyst Charlotte Mather and "official friend of the League" Jack Levine for the purpose of giving delegates a clear picture of the goings-on at the Capitol with a focus on the three SPAC priorities for 2009.

Budget consultant Glenn Robertson painted a "not so pretty picture" Florida's revenue forecasts, asserting that even with access to dollars generated by the Federal Stimulus package, there are great needs for investments in health, education, public safety and a range of family services which will go unmet unless the Legislature looks seriously at additional revenue sources. He cited Florida's low rankings in areas where we should be excelling (health insurance for families, high school graduation and environmental protection) and made the case for greater investment in programs that have proven their worth for cost-avoidance. "If advocates can prove that their priorities make both budgetary and humanitarian sense, they are more likely to get a positive response from governmental leaders," Robertson said.

Mike Cusick, CEO of the Florida Coalition for Children www.flchildren.org and Deborah Moore of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program www.guardianadlitem.org both presented key information on the value of improving our state's Foster Care system from both the preventive and quality of services angles. The vital link of planning for foster youth transitions to adulthood was emphasized. Another excellent source of youth transitions information is the Eckerd Family Foundation www.eckerdfamilyfoundation.org.

Linda Alexionok representing the Children's Campaign, Inc. www.iamforkids.org emphasized the vital importance of bringing a diverse group of voices representing the business, civic and community sectors into the advocacy arena. "The agency providers who perform excellent services are not the most powerful advocates unless their voices are bolstered by community leaders who have direct access to public officials." Citing polling numbers that reveal voter's willingness to support good prevention and quality intervention services, Linda gave credit to the Junior League for its strong support of GAP, assisting girls in the delinquency system, and the tradition of blending direct volunteer action with public policy advocacy.

A special guest, Audrey Schiebler, one of Florida's true child advocate heroes and Junior League member since the 1960's shared her thoughts about how vital it is to nurture a new generation of civic leadership. Both she and her husband, Dr. Gerry Schiebler, a renowned pediatrician and advocate, were instrumental in the founding of Guardian ad Litem and Children's Medical Services to assist the youngest Floridians facing serious medical conditions. "Never think that today's problems cannot be solved. Creativity and

commitment are always timely, and there is no better organization for women to channel those talents than Junior League," said Audrey.

She remains active and services on the Board of the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida www.ounce.org. Doug Sessions, CEO of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, a public-private partnership shared his thoughts on the critical need to invest in Healthy Families and other programs that avoid more costly interventions later.

State Senators Nan Rich of Broward County and Thad Altman of Brevard County were lunch speakers who advocated their respective priorities in concert with SPAC's key issues. Sen. Rich asserted that foster children and teens in the delinquency system benefit greatly from advocates who understand that access to health, mental health, education and life skills are essential for success.

Sen Altman, the key sponsor of the League-supported Booster Seat legislation, asserted how important it is for parents/caregivers to know how to save their children's lives and prevent injury by utilizing safe restraints in vehicles. Both of the senators complimented the hard work of League members and asked for extra efforts during this challenging year ahead.

In all, SPAC delegates were given a toolkit of resources to share with their colleagues at home. Each of the organization's websites provides additional information and key strategies for honing skills for effective advocacy in the months ahead.