

STATE PUBLIC AFFAIRS UPDATE

National Issues

Senate Approves Appropriations Act Omnibus Spending Package

During February, a few NCJW SPA chairs (not yours truly) visited Washington for SPA training and called upon several legislators. The visitors discussed increased funding for certain government programs (Violence Against Women Act and Family Violence Prevention and Services Act). Subsequently, on March 10, the Senate approved a \$410 billion spending package that included, for the rest of the fiscal year, more than \$20 million in increases for implementation of these two acts. Coincidence? We think not!

More Omnibus Issues

The Senate, in the omnibus package, turned thumbs down on an amendment extending the D.C. school voucher program (NCJW did not favor the program; many advocated against it) and nixed an attempt to block funding to the United Nations Population Fund. Note that the Senate bill also contains a legislative fix to existing law that will restore access to affordable birth control; for more than two years a legislative error caused birth-control prices to soar. This correction will help low-income women.

Responsible Education About Life (REAL) Act—HR 1551/S 611

This bill works toward ensuring that young people have access to the unbiased and scientifically sound health information they need to make responsible decisions about sex. As of March 17, 2009, when the bill was reintroduced in both houses, there was no dedicated federal money available for comprehensive sex education, just abstinence-only funding, to the tune of a billion dollars thus far. The REAL Act would give grants to states to conduct age-appropriate and medically accurate comprehensive programs, as well as teach that abstinence is, of course, the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. If the act has not been passed as of this printing, readers should personally contact Senators Durbin and Burris and Representative Jackson.

Immigration Reform

Many of our immigration laws are outdated, and the current policy is to enforce them aggressively. But surely there is room for some compassion. Jewish families recall on Passover that they were once "strangers in a strange land." And nearly every group in America has had its own immigrant experience, often difficult. We are therefore encouraged to sign a petition to help the Progress by Pesach Coalition (action@ncjw.org) and thus send a message to the new administration.

Gender and Poverty Month

NCJW and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs have co-sponsored Gender and Poverty Month, whose purpose has been to raise awareness about how poverty

affects women. A national phone call on March 19 discussed the gender-poverty relationship within the federal budget and featured several speakers, including Sammie Moshenberg, NCJW's director of Washington operations, and Joan Entmacher, vice president for family security at the National Women's Law Center.

White House Council on Woman and Girls

NCJW was invited to the White House on March 11 for a ceremony creating this new organization. The council seeks to open opportunities for women and to eliminate the barriers that women still face.

Health and Human Services Supports a Bad Regulation

Since Feb. 1 an HHS rule has allowed health-care professionals to deny women certain services and information based on the providers' personal religious beliefs. NCJW believes that this rule compromises health care relating to contraceptive services and information. Our members and supporters have spoken out in opposition, loud and clear, along with many providers, patients' rights advocates and women's rights organizations. In response, President Obama in early March proposed eliminating the regulation. We shall see.

Stem Cell Research—Finally

On Mar. 9 President Obama set a new direction for America's science policy: He lifted the restrictions on federal funding for stem cell research.

Illinois Issues

Reproductive Health and Access Act (HB 2345)

NCJW is sending a letter to the governor asking for his support for HB 2345, a bill that would ensure access by Illinois citizens to comprehensive reproductive health-care services and education. Each of us is asked to send a letter to her state representative urging passage of the bill.

Voices for Illinois Children

This group is concerned about the potential scope of proposed state-budget cuts concerning children's welfare. It calls for the preservation of certain crucial priorities for children such as mental-health services, health insurance, early-childhood education, child-welfare supports and parent-coaching programs for families of at-risk youngsters.

Iris Blumenthal

Section SPA Chairperson