

NCJW ISSUES IN THE 2007 TEXAS LEGISLATIVE SESSION: MOSTLY GOOD NEWS!

The regular session of the 2007 Texas Legislature adjourned on May 28. During the 4½ month session, NCJW State Public Affairs lobbied on behalf of our priority issues: presenting testimony, appearing at press conferences and signing onto press statements, phoning, writing, and faxing letters to key elected officials. And our network of NCJW member advocates throughout the state provided invaluable grassroots voices, contacting lawmakers in response to action alerts. A summary of how our issues fared:

Children:

- **CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Plan)** – The CHIP restoration measure, strongly supported by NCJW, passed! It is estimated that the reforms included in the bill will add nearly 128,000 children to CHIP enrollment. This increase would represent significant progress though still short of the total enrolled prior to the stringent "reforms" enacted in 2003. Under the new law, most families will be allowed to submit paperwork once a year instead of every six months, and to deduct some child care expenses from their income calculations. In addition, asset limits and exemptions will be increased for most families. The new law also restores language from Texas' original 1999 CHIP law requiring a community-based outreach program which includes contracts with community-based organizations and requiring that outreach be conducted in English and Spanish. Finally, the 90-day delay in coverage that since 2003 has been imposed on long-uninsured children, newborns and children whose CHIP renewals or transfers from Medicaid were botched due to CHIP contractor failures or under-staffed Medicaid offices has been eliminated.
- **Child welfare and protective services** – Pre-k was expanded for children in the foster care system ensuring that kids who have been abused, physically assaulted and/or neglected have a leg up before Kindergarten. In addition, for mothers who are incarcerated, an infant care and parenting program was passed that will ensure that bonding occurs between mother and child during this critical time and that women in the program receive parenting skills.

One of the major issues this session was overhaul of the Texas Youth Commission after disclosure of allegations of sexual abuse of inmates by staff. Legislation was passed. Key measures of the overhaul include creating strong investigative powers to address claims of abuse, establishing a family "bill of rights," improving staff-to-inmate ratios, and prohibiting courts from sending youths convicted of misdemeanors to state detention centers.

- **Early care and education** – There's also much to celebrate in the early care and education arena. Approval of the state budget brought funding for major priorities for early child care and education. Cuts to pre-k services, originally called for at the beginning of the session by the Legislative Budget Board, were restored. Funding to the tune of \$35 million was also secured to continue pre-k services through the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM), to increase reimbursement rates to child care providers in three major state programs serving at-risk children, and to improve recruitment, retention and quality of early childhood education professionals.

In addition, Communities-in Schools, Texas' largest and most effective dropout prevention program, was mandated to serve pre-k through high school, indicating lawmakers understand that dropout prevention begins in pre-kindergarten.

Civil and Individual Rights:

- **Immigration** – The good news here is the death of all of the bills filed that would have denied services or imposed restrictions on immigrants. These proposals, which died without even receiving committee hearings, included denying US born children of illegal immigrants access to state services and in-state tuition and imposing fees on money transfers to Mexico and Central and South America.
- **Rights of Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered Persons** – Again good news in that no measures that would have further restricted these persons' rights saw the light of day. But, regrettably, proposals that would have forbidden discrimination on account of sexual orientation or gender, gender identity or gender preference in insurance coverage, by public educational institutions, and by employers died.

Separation of Religion and State:

- **Vouchers** – Schemes aimed at diverting public funds to private education were resoundingly defeated in both the House and Senate: During debate on the state appropriations bill, House members voted 129-8 to bar public funding for private school vouchers. Thanks to all NCJW activists whose response to action alerts helped bury two voucher bills in Senate committees: One measure would have drained millions of dollars from public school special education budgets to provide private school vouchers for students with autism. This bill was described by NCJW coalition partner Texas Freedom Network as a “Trojan horse” that would have been a first step toward broader and costlier voucher programs. Another bill that never saw the light of day would have created a massive pilot voucher program in the state’s largest urban school districts.
- **Stem Cell Research** – NCJW’s work with coalition partners to promote and protect medical research into embryonic and adult stem cells had the happy result of preventing any bill barring embryonic stem cell research from reaching the House or Senate floors. Even attempts to bar public funding for this promising form of medical research failed to pass.
- **Religious Freedom** – One harmful bill, the so-called “freedom of religious expression” act that promotes organized prayer and other religious activities in public schools, passed by a close vote in the waning hours of the session. Supporters of this bill rejected an “ameliorating” provision prohibiting schools and students from using such expression to discriminate against those who don’t share the same religious beliefs. ...On the good news side, a bill requiring all public high schools to teach classes about the Bible was enacted but with safeguards advocated by NCJW coalition partner Texas Freedom Network that include stronger protection for the religious freedom of all students, training for teachers, and sound curriculum and textbook standards. In addition, the bill as passed no longer requires schools to teach Bible classes. The nearly unanimous votes for the revised bill were stunning defeats for far-right groups.

Access to Reproductive Health:

- **Reproductive Health Care** - Although there were a couple of close calls, all of the bills filed that would have imposed additional burdens on Texas women seeking abortions and/or on abortion providers died. The most egregious of the defeated measures included: the so-called “trigger ban” that would have made all abortions illegal in Texas if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned; a bill that would have imposed onerous, intrusive reporting requirements on abortion patients and providers and would have put at risk the job security and personal safety of judges who hear judicial bypass cases; and one that would have required a woman seeking an abortion to review with her doctor the ultrasound image of the fetus. ...On the other hand, some good bills that never made it out of committee included “contraceptive equity” that would have required all insurance providers to include contraceptive coverage in their health benefit plans; and a measure that would have removed from the informed consent to abortion statute the currently required *misinformation* that having an abortion increases one’s risk of contracting breast cancer.
- **Sexuality Education** - Unfortunately, several measures supported by NCJW that would have reduced the incidence of unwanted pregnancies also died. The Texas Prevention First Act would have expanded access to preventive health care services through education and outreach, required schools to inform parents about the content of the school’s sex education program and required that contraceptive use be taught in terms of accurate success and failure rates. This measure received a surprising and gratifying level of support in the House, where it was actually scheduled for a vote when time ran out.
- **Women’s Health and the state budget** - Finally, the state budget brought both good and bad news for proponents of women’s increased access to preventive and reproductive health care: New language was added to the rider passed in the 2005 session that diverted \$20 million away from proven providers of preventive health care and resulted in 33,000 fewer women receiving family planning services; the new language restricts the state health department from implementing the rider if it would adversely affect the number of women who receive family planning services. But the “alternatives to abortion” rider enacted in 2005 remains intact. This provision allocates \$5 million to agencies that provide no medical services and do nothing to prevent unintended pregnancies. In fact, it has been documented that during a two-year period, the agencies served only 1400 women with the \$5 million in funds.