

Update of WPG Priorities 2009

Monday, March 23, 2009

Today marks Day 35 of the 40-day 2009 session of the General Assembly. The session is anticipated to conclude on Friday April 3. Many of the most important pieces of legislation to be addressed this session remain unresolved, including the FY 2010 Budget, unemployment insurance, foreclosure relief, transportation funding and reorganization of the Department of Transportation governing structure, reorganization of the Department of Human Resource, and others. The WPG is advocating for the legislature to address the needs of Georgia's women and girls in a very challenging environment. Raise your voice to make a difference now!

Working to End Violence Against Women:

- *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*
 - **HB 582** – Chairman Wendell Willard and 43 co-signers from both parties introduced groundbreaking legislation that recognizes that children who are prostituted for profit are victims and should not be criminally prosecuted. HB 582 has been assigned to the House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee, and a hearing will be held this summer to address this Bill.
 - WPG stands with the broad and growing coalition of organizations supporting the legislation introduced by Senator Renee Unterman and members of her Commercial Sexual Exploitation Study Committee. The Bills that remain available for passage this session include:
 - **SB 69** expands the people who are required to report commercial sexual exploitation beyond parents and caretakers. SB 69 has passed the Senate and is in the House Judiciary Non Civil Committee for a hearing this morning, where it is expected to pass.
 - **SR 506** would create a Senate Study Committee to address the mental health issues precipitating and found in children who are commercially sexually exploited.
- *Domestic Violence*
 - Tough budget times are no time to cut the lifeline for victims of family violence. The House passed the FY 2010 Budget last week with partial restoration of funding cut for domestic violence shelters (\$200,000), and rape crisis centers (\$100,000).
 - WPG is speaking up against the threat of cuts to legal services funding in the FY 2010 Budget for low-income victims that are essential to leave their abusers.
 - WPG opposed the proposal in **HB 228** to end the Commission on Family Violence that has played an essential role since 1992 in reducing violence against women in Georgia and this provision was not included in the version that passed the Senate Government Oversight Committee this week.. (Another version of the DHR reorganization, **SB 222** contains no proposal to eliminate the Commission on Family Violence. It is in the

House Appropriations Committee.) We also support **HB 385** that eliminates the “sunset” provision (end date) for the Commission that passed the House and is now in the Senate Government Oversight Committee.

Advocating for Transparent, Fair and Responsible Spending and Tax Policies

The House Passed FY 2010 Budget Addresses Significant Concerns

The House passed the FY 2010 Budget last week, including restoration of significant funding that had been cut for the following areas critical to women and girls:

- \$8.5 Million was restored of a total \$10 Million cut to TANF funds for family planning and teen pregnancy prevention initiatives;
- \$2.5 Million in grant-in-aid to Public Health Departments was restored (eliminating 3.5% across-the-board cut); and
- \$250,000 in state funds was appropriated to the Department of Community Health to pursue a long awaited federal Medicaid waiver for family planning services that would draw down federal funds for family planning services for low income adult women with a 90/10 matching rate.

In addition, most of the \$30 Million proposed to be cut for school nurses statewide were restored, leaving only a \$1 Million cut. The addition of \$12.5 Million to fund 3,000 new Pre-K slots was retained. The House recognized an addition of \$27 Million in added childcare funding from the federal stimulus package (out of a total of \$82.8 Million available to Georgia). \$14 Million in federal stimulus dollars were also recognized for child support services to increase support paid to families, as well as \$1.1 Million in federal stimulus dollars for Georgia’s food banks.

With good news about restoration of federal Medicaid stimulus dollars for Medicaid purposes, and elimination of provider reimbursement rate cuts, concern nonetheless remains regarding the failure to fund enrollment growth for Medicaid that is anticipated in the coming months due to increased joblessness (\$150 Million).

- *Revenue Initiatives Needed to Close the \$2 Billion plus Budget Gap in Georgia*
 - WPG continues to advocate for **HB 39** that would increase the tax on cigarettes by \$1 per pack generating \$450 Million per year, deterring thousands of teenagers from smoking, saving millions in public health care costs (\$9 per pack) caused by smoking, and providing revenues for vital services. It did not pass out of the House.
 - Millions of dollars in tax cuts continue to pass the General Assembly while programs for women and girls are slashed. **HB 481** provides corporate tax credits for hiring unemployed persons and eliminates incorporation filing fees at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars per year in revenues.

Transparency and Accountability for Special Interest Tax Breaks:

- A Tax Expenditure Report would allow legislators to see the “cost” of these special interest tax breaks to the state budget, just as they see the cost of direct appropriations for programs now. This kind of transparency would allow policy makers to evaluate whether these tax breaks serve the public interest as intended and scale back excesses that do not meet the test. Tax revenue loss in FY 2009 and FY 2010 from tax breaks enacted from 2005-2008 alone exceeds \$625 Million. Senator Greg Goggans’ **SB 206** provides a Tax Expenditure Report for Georgia. It passed the Senate and is pending in the House Appropriations Committee.

Protect Access to Health Care

- Protect funding for health programs (*see above*) and oppose efforts to limit access to PeachCare for Kids or Medicaid benefits or impose obstacles to care.
- Protect funding of the family planning Medicaid waiver proposed by the House passed 2010 budget (*see above*).

Reproductive Health:

- **SB 169** as introduced provided that an embryo is a human being, limited in vitro fertilization options and banned embryonic stem cell research with Georgia embryos. In its Senate passed version, SB 169 bans the use of embryos created in Georgia for stem cell research. It is pending in House Science and Technology Committee. **HB 388** would make Georgia the first state in the country to recognize the right to “adopt” an embryo and defines “rights and responsibilities for an embryo.” It is pending in the Senate Judiciary Committee.
- **SB 223** would create a permanent legislative Women's Reproductive Health Legislative Oversight Committee. It is pending in House Judiciary. There is concern that the focus and structure of this Committee would make it a continuing tool for anti-choice activity aimed not at preventing unintended pregnancy and reducing the need for abortion, but at limiting women’s access to reproductive health options and services.
- **SR 156** urging Congress to oppose the Freedom of Choice Act (which has not been introduced in this Congress) did not reach the Senate floor, while its House counterpart (**HR 334**) passed (but with only a one vote margin).

Supporting Economic Security Measures: Unemployment Insurance, Fair Wages, Leave for Small Necessities, and Foreclosure Relief

Unemployment Insurance Reforms:

The Women’s Policy Group has been the leading advocacy organization for unemployment insurance reform in Georgia for nearly a decade, increasing access to benefits for low wage and working women. Women tend to be hardest hit by unemployment because their jobs pay less, they have fewer resources to fall back on, and are more likely to have children dependent upon them. Women are more likely to be

locked out of the unemployment insurance system due to antiquated rules and barriers to coverage

This week brought more bad news for workers in this State with another new record high rate of unemployment of 9.3% for last month – exceeding national unemployment rates for the 16th month in a row. With over 445,000 Georgians out of work and only one third receiving unemployment benefits, the need to pass critically important unemployment insurance legislation take on increased urgency. HB 581 would bring much needed reforms to Georgia’s unemployment system to help low wage, part time and working women, and draw down more than \$556 Million in federal stimulus dollars. The effect would be to help bolster Georgia’s unemployment system, stabilize local economies hard hit by unemployment, and help workers who lost their jobs through no fault of their own while they look for new jobs.

WPG supported **HB 581** passed the House 153-0, but it is now stalled in the Senate with only 6 days remaining in the session. Critical elements of this Bill include:

- Needed reforms to remove obstacles to unemployment insurance for part time workers (more than two thirds of whom are women trying to balance work and family obligations) and provide unemployment insurance for people leaving declining industries get the retraining they need to join expanding industries.
- Extended benefits for unemployed Georgians who have exhausted their unemployment benefits to temporarily receive full federal funding for extended benefits for 13 weeks (likely to increase to 20 weeks if Georgia’s unemployment rate remains above 8% for another month). This would help 87,000 Georgians (totaling \$315 Million in unemployment benefits) through 2009.

Helping to Balance Work and Family:

- Working women are half of today’s workforce, but the workplace too often continues to ignore the needs of these workers. WPG supports efforts to increase and strengthen the state minimum wage (**HB 290**), and allow for leave (paid or unpaid) for workers to take up to 24 hours per year off from work to attend mandatory school conferences or take an elderly family member or child to a doctor’s appointment (**HB 37**). However, neither Bill moved out of their House Committees this session.
- **HB 173** completely rewrites the law on covenants not to compete in Georgia – an area of Georgia law that had previously favored workers. It will be heard in the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.
- *Childcare Support for Working Families:* WPG is continuing to advocate for Georgia to avail itself of the federal stimulus funding of \$82.8 million in federal funds for childcare subsidies. This includes \$72 million to expand funds for child care subsidies to help low income families pay for quality child care needed to support work, and \$10.8 million in funds to improve program quality. Georgia is

currently serving only 54,000 children each month on average – only a small portion of the 300,000 eligible children under age 6 living in families below 150% of the federal poverty level (under \$26,000 income per year for a family of three). There are no “strings” attached, and no requirement for matching state dollars. In order to receive these funds Georgia has a limited window of opportunity. The Governor must act **before** April 3, 2009, certifying that Georgia will use these funds and create jobs and promote economic growth.

- *There is an indication that Georgia will accept these funds in that \$27 Million in stimulus dollars for “time limited” child care services were recognized in the House passed version of the FY 2010 Budget. It is unclear how to account for the rest of the available dollars. WPG supports numerous needed reforms of the childcare subsidy program that these dollars could be used for that would dramatically increase access to services for low-income families. These reforms are within DHR’s power to address.*

Responding to the Foreclosure Crisis:

Georgia has one of the highest rates of residential foreclosure in the country and women are overwhelmingly more likely to be the targets of the subprime loans that are driving those foreclosures. In order to begin to address urgent needs of women facing the foreclosure crisis and begin to prevent the recurrence of some of the worst abuses that led to the crisis, WPG supports:

- **SB 57** was initially an omnibus Bill that provided modest reforms across the board. [Link to WPG fact sheet on SB 57 as introduced](#). Now broken into several smaller Bills, the Senate passed substitute to SB 57 bans pre-payment penalties for subprime loans, requires that mortgage brokers act in good faith and in the best interest of their clients, and that residential loans cannot be made without a reasonable determination of the person’s ability to pay backed up by documents verifying income and debt. The legislation does not, however, include assignee liability. SB 57 passed the Senate and is in the House Civil Judiciary Committee.
- **SB 141** addresses the problem of foreclosed properties not being maintained and causing entire neighborhoods to decline. The Bill requires that the foreclosing bank promptly file the deed following foreclosure so that the county or city can know whom to hold accountable if the property is not maintained. Fines are assessed if the deed is not timely filed within 30 days after foreclosure, escalating from \$250 after 30 days to \$5,000 after 90 days. Local governments will be able to use these fees to provide for code enforcement, public safety or community development purposes. It also provides 30 days’ notice of the pending foreclosure to the occupants of the property, so that innocent tenants may have more than a week following foreclosure to move. SB 141 passed the Senate and is in the House Judiciary Committee where it is facing significant challenges.

ACTION STEPS:

Speak up for women and girls in Georgia! Your voice makes a difference!

Please contact your legislator today and express your position on the issues that are important to you! To identify your legislators and how to contact them go to Project Vote Smart at www.vote-smart.org.

Also contact:

Governor Sonny Perdue at 404.656-1776 or www.gov.ga.gov

Lt. Governor Casey Cagle at 404.1656-5030 or www.ltgov.ga.gov

House Speaker Glenn Richardson at 404.656-5020 or glenn.richardson@house.ga.gov

For more information, contact:

Stephanie Davis, WPG Executive Director at Stephanie.davis@earthlink.net

Elizabeth Appley, WPG Legislative Counsel at eja@appleylaw.com