

Junior Leagues SPAC Set 2009 Legislative Priorities

The Junior Leagues of Florida State Public Affairs Committee (SPAC) has been the advocacy arm of the Junior Leagues of Florida for over 30 years, monitoring the state legislative process and addressing issues of political importance to the members of the Junior Leagues in the state.

The SPAC delegation recently met in Jacksonville to discuss current issues and determine three legislative priorities to advocate for in 2009. The group also identified other focus issues they will support through grassroots efforts designed to engage the members of the participating Junior Leagues.

Experts and leaders in the non-profit and government fields representing various causes and issues including foster care, cybersafety and education provided updates and information about specific issues within each field. SPAC delegates were also educated on the importance of SPAC, effective lobbying, advocacy and raising awareness about the issues of the day.

“It’s so important to support the community work of the Junior Leagues with advocacy efforts,” said Dorothy MacDiarmid, SPAC Chairwoman and a member of the Junior League of Boca Raton. “In these tough budget times, it helps to have another voice in Tallahassee for the women, children and families we serve.”

The Junior Leagues of Florida firmly support the following three legislative priorities to advocate for in 2009:

Booster Seats – To enact legislation that requires a child aged 4-7 years old to be in age appropriate child restraint system while riding in a passenger car. Studies show that children who are appropriately restrained are 28 percent less likely to die in motor vehicle crashes according to the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, 2006 and children using booster seats are 59 percent less likely to be injured than children using seatbelts alone according to the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Foster Care – Many Junior Leagues in Florida support foster care issues through their community projects, so it’s fitting that one of our priorities is to simply preserve funding and avoid further cuts for the foster care system, especially since Florida is one of the few states with matching federal dollars. Last year \$20 million was cut from the legislature’s budget. Many providers are working under budget and are working to privately raise one-third of their budget. With the successful new strategy of wrapping families at-risk in services and keeping children in the home combined with a shorter average length of time in foster care, the number of children in the system has been greatly reduced. Providers are hoping this success won’t be misinterpreted by legislators as a reason to cut funding, but rather to appropriate funding to prevention programs.

Girls' Advocacy Project (GAP) – Our goal is for funding to be continued for the Girls Advocacy Project program throughout the state within the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) budget. Currently GAP is funded 100 percent by the state and the appropriations request is \$350,000 with \$150,000 already included in the DJJ budget. Girls make up the fastest growing segment of Florida's juvenile justice system and Florida leads the nation in locking up girls, who are often sent to lock-up facilities because local intervention and treatment services are unavailable or because they are trying to escape abuse home environments.

The State of Florida boasts 24 Junior Leagues, with combined membership of more than 12,000 women. Each Florida Junior League that chooses to participate in the advocacy process will focus on these three priorities raising awareness and advocating for the causes from grassroots campaigns to meeting with legislators in Tallahassee.

Since their inception, the Junior Leagues of Florida have weighed in on various topics including bicycle helmets for children under 16, the Environmental Growth Management Act of 1995, the '911' Emergency Medical System, child abuse, domestic violence, juvenile justice and education.

During the conference, SPAC conference delegates also assisted the Junior League of Jacksonville with Kids in the Kitchen events, part of an Association of Junior Leagues International, Inc. initiative to educate children and families about the importance of nutrition, healthy eating habits and exercise, at the Jacksonville Public Library downtown and the Museum of Science and History.

For more information about the Junior Leagues of Florida's SPAC efforts, visit the website www.jlflspac.org.