

Connecticut Citizen Action Group Legislative Roundup



For The 2008 State Legislative Session

Health Care – As with our historic victory on campaign finance reform, the push for comprehensive reform often takes time and sometimes happens incrementally. Significant headway was made this past legislative session in the effort to set in place new foundations that will reshape our health care system to be more affordable, higher quality, and to cover all CT's citizens. Public pressure and the political will for real change in our health care system has never been stronger.



CT Health Care Partnership

Governor Rell vetoed the state's most important health care reform bill this session, known as the Healthcare Partnership Bill (HB5536). The bill, which passed overwhelmingly in the Senate and House, was opposed primarily by the health insurance industry. It would have increased competition in the marketplace by opening up the state employee health insurance pool to municipalities, non-profits and small businesses. We supported this legislation because it addressed one of the fastest rising costs for municipal taxpayers; health care for municipal employees -- a line item that has seen double digit increases in recent years. It also allowed individuals, small businesses and non-profits to take advantage of these savings by allowing them to opt in.

Contrary to claims by Gov. Rell and the insurance industry lobbyists, this plan would have allowed cash-strapped cities and businesses to benefit from the savings derived from economies of scale, increased purchasing power and lower administration costs. Many cities were expected to individually save over one million dollars each year without compromising the quality of care.

Racial Disparities in our health care

The “Commission on Health Equity” passed the legislature and was signed into law. While the causes of health disparities are complex, we know that racial and ethnic minorities in CT are more likely to lack health coverage, receive lower-quality care, and suffer from worse health outcomes. The Commission will attempt to address racial and ethnic health care disparities. We are pleased that the state of CT took action this session but recognize there is much more work to be done to address the racial disparities in our health care system.

Democracy –

Ethics

CCAG worked for passage of legislation that would have required individuals who lobby municipal officials to report themselves as lobbyists as is currently required at the state level. The legislation died in the GAE Committee.

Individuals who lobby at the municipal level have greater power to influence the outcome of policy and decisions of local government officials than they do at the state level because of smaller legislative bodies. There also exists a greater incentive for impropriety to occur at the local level based on the current lack of transparency that is provided when lobbying activities are not reported.

It's essential that Connecticut, at the least, do the bare minimum, and require individuals who lobby at the municipal level to register as lobbyists and are regulated like lobbyists.

In an era of million dollar presidential campaigns that skew the public focus towards federal issues, the significant and direct impact that local government has on citizens can often be overlooked.

By next year it's vital that the legislature acts by passing this municipal lobbying reforms so that public trust in local government is not undermined. The perverse incentives that exist for improprieties at the local level need to be challenged and addressed.

Environment -

Toxins

CCAG and supporters of The Coalition for a Safe & Healthy CT, an alliance of over thirty organizations working to prevent harm to human health and the environment from toxic chemicals, won passage of new legislation to protect children from lead and asbestos in their products. It also lays the ground work for future comprehensive toxic chemical reforms.



It was not an easy fight as the big chemical companies, the toy industry, and dozens of in-state retailers who poured large amounts of money into efforts to oppose toy safety legislation lobbied against regulations that protected children. This significant victory makes Connecticut one of a handful of states to restrict lead and asbestos and pave the way for new chemical safety laws that protect us all.

The two House Bills 5650 and 5025 together:

- ✓ Require the Departments of Consumer Protection, Public Health, and Environmental Protection to compile a list of hazardous substances found in children's products and corresponding safer alternatives
- ✓ Enable CT to take part in an emerging multi-state chemicals clearinghouse on safer alternatives
- ✓ Reduce the allowable level of total lead to 300ppm in products for children under 12. The Department of Consumer Protection can lower the 100ppm threshold by regulation if determined feasible. Lead in paint on children's products cannot exceed 90ppm by July 1, 2009.
- ✓ Ban asbestos in products for children under 16

Federal legislation able to solve this problem is far from passing, so CT needed to stand up to the special interests bent on continuing to sell unnecessary toxic ingredients- and toxic products- to the CT market.

In the absence of Federal protection, we will again be pushing ahead for legislation prohibiting other dangerous chemicals commonly found in household products.

Global Warming

In 2008 legislation passed that requires state agencies to strengthen the state's goals into mandatory pollution limits.

HB5600 mandates reductions in state greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2020 and 2050 and makes changes aimed at allowing CT to reach these goals. CT joined four other states in adopting mandatory state caps of GHG.



HB5600 requires state agencies to identify changes and improvements to meet state energy saving goals such as arming the Department of Transportation with the responsibility of identifying improvements in the state's transportation system that will facilitate a reduction in emissions.

Economic Justice

Minimum Wage Increase

The General Assembly overrode Gov. Rell's veto of an increase in the minimum wage on June 23rd. During the past eight years the gap between the poor and the wealthy is growing faster in Connecticut than in any other state in the country. Connecticut will now increase the wage from the current \$7.65 an hour to \$8 on Jan. 1, 2009, and to \$8.25 in 2010. The vote marked only the second time that a Rell veto has been set aside. In reality the minimum wage remains far from adequate given the cost of living in Connecticut. A living wage in Connecticut by most estimates would exceed \$17 an hour for many households with families.

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The legislative roundup is an update of the organizations legislative agenda.

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