

STATE SENATOR • GILDA Z. JACOBS • 14TH DISTRICT

Jacobs Press Release

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Fighting for Michigan's Children *Op-Ed Piece*

One of my most important tasks as a legislator is to make sure that the laws we make and the policies we enact protect Michigan's children. Children are our most vulnerable citizens because they can't really take care of themselves, so they rely on the adults in their lives to provide for them. Some families are strong and loving, while other families face serious troubles and need the help that the state and other community agencies can offer. In these troubled economic times even the best of families can find it hard to keep up with their children's needs when the adults don't know from one day to the next if they will keep their jobs.

I am honored to be a member of the Child Welfare Task Force created last spring in the Department of Human Services. This task force allows us to look at the programs that Michigan currently offers, see how they are or are not working, and look for ways to improve the services we offer families and children. Together with a group of committed individuals from private and public agencies, legislative leaders, advocacy groups and parents and children who have experience with the system, I believe that we can bring positive change to Michigan's child welfare system.

This task force is co-chaired by Patrick Babcock, who was director of what was called the Department of Social Services from 1987 to 1991, and Carol Goss, president and CEO of the Skillman Foundation. The task force is charged with four principal priorities, including: developing the guiding principles underlying the child welfare system; reviewing and assessing current federal and state standards on outcomes; recommending measurable outcomes for all child caring agencies, both public and private; and recommending action steps for state government to achieve these outcomes.

More than ever in these uncertain times, families in crisis need to know that they can rely on state services, and children need to know that we are all looking out for them. Together with my colleagues, we will look for the best reforms we can make to meet the needs of Michigan's families.

Last year I was able to join with my Senate colleagues to pass a bipartisan package of bills that gives the Michigan Department of Human Services and the courts new guidelines for terminating parental rights, granting parenting time, creating permanency

plans, and appointing legal guardians. These changes will help everyone do a better job of focusing on doing what is best for children in foster care.

Public Act 201 (SB 670), for example, requires a child placing agency to notify the court and the guardian ad litem for a child before a change in the child's placement is made. The agency would have to give a reason for the change, give the number of times the child's placement has been changed, say if the change requires a change in school for the child, and say if the change would separate or reunite siblings or affect sibling visitation.

We know that children feel more comfortable when they know what to expect. Moving out of foster care and into a permanent home as quickly as possible is going to help them do better in school and in relationships in their new homes or with their families. I am very happy that these laws are now on the books and being used to make life better for some very vulnerable children who need our help.

In the new session this year, I will be reintroducing the mental health parity bill that I introduced in the 2007-2008 session. This bill will require insurance companies to cover outpatient mental health services at the same level that they would cover any other outpatient health services. Treating mental health issues in children and adults is just as important as treating any other illness. Families should not go without this treatment because of the cost. It is only right that insurance companies also cover mental health care.

Children bring all of us so much joy with their spirit, their questioning minds, and their ability to love us no matter what. Regardless of a tight state budget or a shaky U.S. economy, we simply cannot do anything less than our best for them. I will continue my efforts to ensure that Michigan has the best programs in place to help our children grow up safe, healthy, and prepared for the future.

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Senator Gilda Jacobs represents the 14th Senate District, which includes Farmington, Farmington Hills, Ferndale, Hazel Park, Huntington Woods, Lathrup Village, Oak Park, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak Township, Southfield and Southfield Township. She is the Minority Vice Chair of the Campaign & Election Oversight, Families & Human Services and Finance committees. She is a member of the Economic Development & Regulatory Reform and Health Policy committees. She can be reached toll-free in Lansing at 1-888-937-4453.