



A weekly report from the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO

# Legislative UPDATE



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# Let the Budget Battle Begin

With one eye on the nation's shaky economy and the other on her upcoming election, Governor Christine Gregoire opened this year's Legislative Session insisting that lawmakers spend sparingly. Is her \$1.2 billion set-aside realistic? Critical budget and policy items are on the agenda this session that will protect working families from economic woes. Health care Reform. Unemployment Benefits. Family Leave. Initiative Reform.

The WSLC is following these and more pieces of legislation important to our affiliates and their members. We will attempt to keep you informed and up to date with weekly reports from Olympia.

## Breathing Life into Health Care for Washington

"What do we want?" "Quality, affordable, Health Care!" "When do we want it?" "NOW!"

That was the sound echoing on the Capitol Campus on Wednesday of this week as the Healthy Washington Coalition, the broadest, strongest and most comprehensive statewide group aiming to reform health care staged its first Lobby Day. More than 150 participants lobbied 27 district legislators imploring them to do the work needed to lay the ground work for getting all Washingtonians secure, affordable health care by 2009.

Inside, legislators were considering several health care bills including the Health Insurance Partnership Bill (HB 2537). This bill must be passed in order to get subsidies to small business owners to provide health care to their employees.

Michele Molten, a small business owner at Pike Place Market provided moving testimony as she recalled her dreadful journey through an illness without adequate health care. Michele told the committee, "This is my make-a-wish day and that is to have quality, affordable health care for all small businesses."

Representatives of association plans and an insurance broker testified against the bill. But many legislators seemed to like the idea of helping small businesses through the Health Insurance Partnership.

The House also heard HB 2549. The hearing of this bill allowed HWC to promote an expansion of the scholarship and loan program to encourage newly minted medical providers to practice primary care in underserved areas of the state. Legislator reaction was extremely favorable.

The creation of a Working Group to study specific health care plans to create quality, affordable coverage for all Washingtonians was intro-

## WSLC Legislative Conference will be Feb. 14

Leaders, staffers and rank-and-file members of WSLC-affiliated unions are invited to get a progress report on labor's legislative agenda at the Washington State Labor Council's 2008 Legislative Conference, from 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 14 at the Olympia Red Lion Hotel. As always, there will be a reception from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. the preceding evening on Wednesday, Feb. 13 at the hotel with many legislators and other state officials in attendance. The conference registration fee, which includes materials, lunch and one admission to the reception, is \$50. Get more information, including registration forms, at [www.wslc.org](http://www.wslc.org).

duced as HB 2536.

The working group would be tasked with examining 4 or 5 specific plans to determine the cost of each plan, the degree to which each plan would provide quality, comprehensive care and the impact of the plan on access to quality affordable care.

Rep. Eileen Cody (District 34) made it clear she would welcome a plan from the Republicans for the Working Group to consider.

Republicans were concerned about the make-up of the group as well as the openness of the dialogue. Cody stressed that the working group would travel around each district in the state to hear from citizens in order to understand the needs of Washingtonians.

It was agreed that a robust health care discussion is needed.

The Senate was considering two bills: SB 6241, the Prescription Privacy bill and SB 5261, the Insurance Rate Accountability bill.

Lonnie Johns Brown represented the HWC on the Prescription Privacy bill describing how pharmaceutical companies use data mining to access the prescribing records of doctors and then use that information to sell the doctors their products. Pharmaceutical companies said that using this information lowers research costs by targeting specific doctors.

Data mining companies testified that it was an "invasion of free speech" and that the selling of data helped them provide

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data for research institutions. That argument fell flat. Researchers can't afford data mining prices; they rely instead on info from Medicare and Medicaid which they get free.

Insurance Rate Accountability (SB 5261) brought a hostile reaction from Republicans. They can't imagine requiring insurers to justify rate increases in the individual market. And insurance companies came in with their guns loaded -- they should not be regulated -- even though their profits are skyrocketing and there is no accountability.

HWC is in strong support of both Senate bills.

## Family Leave Funding

When we left session last year we rejoiced that the Family Leave Insurance bill had been passed -- even if it was a watered down version. We at WSLC believe the family leave program is essential for our families and children. It will improve children's health and early learning, promote family economic security, and boost business productivity. There is no doubt a full paid family leave program will make children better students and workers, lower demands on state services, and lower health care costs for families, businesses, and the state.

So where does FLI stand now? Last year a task force was assigned to iron out the details. They were to find solutions to funding the program, decide which agency will administer the services, address the impacts on the Unemployment Insurance system and make suggestions for administrative efficiency. They did their job with the exception of recommending who funds the program in the long run; that work is still ahead of us.

This week HB 2665 was introduced to make the task force recommendations law. We like some aspects of the bill better than others. We would have preferred that Labor & Industries administer the program rather than the Employment Security Department. But regardless, we firmly believe the FLI program, like other social insurance programs, must be in the domain of the public sector not the private sector.

We support the provision of the bill that exempts employers being charged for unemployment benefits for temporary workers when they are brought in to cover employees who take FLI leave. When the worker returns and the temporary worker is laid off the UI safety net should be there but the employer should not be charged for the experience related to that layoff. We strongly oppose making any other changes to the benefits provision of UI.

The bill is silent on funding although the Task Force recommends funding out of the General Fund through the next two years. It is time to generate the political will to fund FLI.

Passing HB 2665 will take us one step closer to full implementation of our Family Leave Insurance program with the first benefits to be paid to eligible WA workers in October of 2009.

## The Gorilla Doth Protest Too Much

Washington professional initiative profiteer Tim Eyman appeared at Friday morning's House State Government and Tribal Affairs Committee dressed in a gorilla suit. He, along with a group of his initiative groupies, showed up to testify against a package of

initiative accountability bills we have been promoting since 2007.

Why is Tim Eyman so steadfast against these reforms? It may have something to do with the fact that a full signature check of his Initiative 917 in 2006 revealed major irregularities in his signature gathering. He failed to qualify for the ballot in 2006 because his petitions were full of duplicates at a rate never seen in our state's history and that rubber signature stamps were used.

Professional signature gathering is a growing cottage industry in our state. For the most part, people engaged in this industry come from other parts of the country to gather signatures on a "pay per signature" basis on measures aimed to dismantle our state and local government. We value the ability of our citizens to address issues of concern using the initiative process. But, enough is enough. It's time to shed some light on this industry.

This package of legislation would require signature gatherers to sign petitions they circulate, would require firms engaged in professional signature gathering to register with the PDC and would require those independent signature gatherers to register as well. And, to address public safety concerns, no individual convicted of fraud, forgery, identity theft or who has been convicted of a sex crime may engage in signature gathering.

Washington State has a proud history of public disclosure. What is Tim Eyman worried about? If his business, and it IS a business, is on the up and up, show us. Me thinks he doth protest too much.

## Interpreting the Moral Stance

Translators and interpreters are part of one of the fastest growing and critical industries to our growing immigrant population. But according to HB 2050, a bill heard this week in the House Commerce and Labor Committee: these essential workers will be denied unemployment insurance. We at the WSLC think this is just flat out wrong and unfair.

The changing demographics of our state have created a profitable industry that is grown exponentially. These employers can well afford to pay UI taxes to those workers who provide critical services to our immigrant worker population. What we need to be doing is growing the supply of translators and interpreters by making these jobs good family wage jobs, not by making these jobs less attractive. WSLC opposes HB 2050.

### Bills, Hearings and WSLC positions

**UI COMPENSATION FOR LOCKED OUT WORKERS** - SB 6327/HB 2769 - **PRO** There is a Senate hearing @ 10 am, Monday 1/21 in SHR 4. In the House there is a hearing on Tuesday 1/22 @ 1:30 pm in HHRC.

**WA HEALTHY PARTNERSHIP** - SB 6221 - **PRO** Senate Hearing Monday 1/21 @ 1:30 pm in SHR 4.

**PRESCRIPTION PRIVACY BILL** - HB 2664 - **PRO** There is a House hearing @ 1:30 pm, Monday 1/21 in HHR D.

**CITIZEN WORKING GROUP ON HEALTH CARE** - SB 6333. **PRO** There is a Senate hearing @ 8:00 am, Wed. 1/23 in SHR 4.

**FAMILY LEAVE INSURANCE** - SB 6280 - **PRO** Senate Hearing Thurs. 1/24 @ 3:30 pm in SHR 4

**SERVICE CHARGE NOTIFICATION** - HB 2699 - **PRO** House Hearing on Friday, 1/25 @ 2:30 in HHR C.