

Zonta Club
of Sanibel-Captiva
P.O. Box 1244
Sanibel, FL 33957



February 28, 2008

The Honorable Burt L. Saunders
Room 418, Senate Office Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Senator Saunders,

On behalf of the 75-member Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva, I am writing to request your support for three 2009 budget initiatives proposed by the Governor that seek to:

- (1) Reduce recidivism by increasing substance abuse treatment funding**
- (2) Divert troubled youth from the juvenile justice system**
- (3) Improve access to quality and affordable health care for the uninsured**

A budget is a statement of priorities and we are delighted that the Governor has put these important human service issues at the top of his list. **These small investments will not only provide services for citizens in need, but will actually save money.** We urge you to support legislation to make these initiatives a reality.

First, I would like to introduce you to Zonta, and then explain why we support these three important initiatives.

What is Zonta?

Zonta International is a global service organization of professional women working to advance the status of women both locally and globally. The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva has been very active in the Lee County/Ft. Myers community in support of improving women's lives through grants, service, and advocacy. As part of these efforts, we have partnered with several local organizations, including Southwest Florida Addiction Services (SWFAS) and the PACE Center for Girls and, beginning this year, we are partnering with community groups focused on improving health care access.

(1) Reduce recidivism by increasing substance abuse treatment funding

The Governor's substance abuse and juvenile justice proposals represent a new policy direction that is most encouraging—investing in prevention and diversion strategies is a much better approach than building more and more jails. We believe it is good policy on three fronts:

- Most effective treatment for individuals,
- Best way to foster safe communities (due to lower recidivism rates for offenders who receive needed treatment),
- Most effective way to reduce overall government (and taxpayer) expenditures.

Lee County's recent experience illustrates the problem facing many communities in Florida. On the day it opens this summer, a new \$53 million jail will be operating at capacity and the community is faced with financing yet another very costly jail in the not too distant future. Clearly, local communities need to look for ways to reduce the growth in our inmate population, including keeping people out of the criminal justice system through diversion and prevention programs.

As part of our partnership with SWFAS, we have been longtime advocates for adequate substance abuse and mental health services in Florida, and particularly in Lee County. We are gratified that some progress is beginning to be made at the local level, but much more needs to be done. The Governor's proposal is a

wise investment—the \$28 million initiative will result in a first year savings of as much as \$277 million in costs, reflecting a reduction of new prison beds needed.

(2) Divert troubled youth from the juvenile justice system

We know that diversion programs for troubled youth are a wise investment. Lee County’s 2006-07 initiative to reduce juvenile delinquency commitments resulted in reducing the county’s rate by 26 percent, which saved the state \$3.4 million. **Spending \$1,700 per youth on a community-based program is much more efficient than spending \$35,000 per youth in a juvenile commitment program.**

We’re pleased that the Governor responded to the recent Blueprint Commission on Juvenile Justice, which recommended an increase in community-based interventions for girls. Judge Seals from the 20th Judicial Circuit spoke to our Club last year and emphasized the unique problems facing juvenile girls (especially the high rate of sexual and physical abuse) and the need for tailored solutions. As a result, we have now partnered with the PACE Center for Girls program in Lee County, which provides non-residential delinquency prevention programs for girls. With the Governor’s initiative, more girls can receive these needed services.

(3) Improve access to quality and affordable health care for the uninsured

We are concerned about the “perfect storm” health access crisis facing our community, with its disproportionate impact on women and children. Lack of access to affordable health care has reached crisis proportions, with Florida having one of the highest uninsured rates in the country. Currently, about **one in every three non-elderly residents in Lee County lacks health insurance—one of the highest rates in Florida.** The Governor’s proposal to add 46,000 additional children to the Florida KidCare program is a step in the right direction. The Governor’s budget also proposes \$64 million to support a new three-year pilot program to provide preventive and primary health care services to the uninsured and underinsured in a few of the hardest hit communities. While this new program sounds promising, it does not seem wise to take funds away from programs currently serving this population in safety-net hospitals, as the Governor’s budget proposes. If such a pilot program is to be undertaken, the counties with the highest uninsured rates, such as Lee County with a 30% rate, should be included.

In summary

The economic downturn in Florida and its impact on State and local revenues, along with the recent passage of Amendment 1, make it imperative to find ways to cost-effectively meet the needs of the citizens of Florida. **All of these initiatives are wise investments that will reduce overall costs for government and its taxpayers and, at the same time, improve the quality of life for Floridians.** That is the kind of “win-win” outcome that we need to meet the challenges of our growing state.

If you have any questions, please contact me at letournd@peoplepc.com. Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

/s/

Linda Robison, President-Elect
Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva