

# Government Relations Coordinator Report to the AAUW of Michigan Board

October 23, 2015

## 98<sup>th</sup> Michigan Legislature

The November 2014 election produced a more conservative Michigan Legislature with over one-third first term legislators due to term limits.

In the 110-member House, there are currently 61 Republicans and 46 Democrats, including 25 women (16 Dems, 9 Republicans) and 82 men. There are three current vacancies caused by the expulsion of Rep. Cindy Gamrat (R-Plainwell), the forced resignation of Todd Courser (R-Lapeer), and the voluntary resignation of Brandon Dillon (D-Grand Rapids) to become the Michigan Democratic Party Chair. These three will likely be replaced by people of the same party at the special election in March because of the make-up of their districts. All the House Republicans, including the women, are anti-choice joined by at least two Democratic men (Darany - Dearborn and Kosowski - Westland).

In the 38-member Senate, the Republicans control the chamber 27 to 11. There are still only 4 women (3 Republicans, 1 Dem) with the noticeable absence of Democratic Senate Leader Gretchen Whitmer, who was termed out. Again, all Republicans are anti-choice giving them more than the 2/3 needed to override vetoes or put measures on the ballot.

A very bright spot is the further development of the Progressive Women's Caucus (formerly the Democratic Legislative Women's Caucus) made up predominantly of progressive legislators, staffers, organizations, and individuals. It is ably led by Rep. Winnie Brinks (D-Grand Rapids) with Task Forces dedicated to Women's Health, Pay Equity, Domestic Violence, and Economic Security. I am an individual member.

## Priority Issues

At this writing, over 5,016 House bills and 578 Senate bills have been introduced plus several dozen constitutional amendment resolutions. I am following nearly 300 bills or resolutions related to AAUW's 2015 - 2017 Public Policy Program adopted at the June 2015 AAUW national conference. Briefly, the Biennial Action Priorities are:

- To support a strong system of **public education** that promotes gender fairness, equity, and diversity;
- To achieve **economic self-sufficiency** for all women;
- To guarantee **equality, individual rights, and social justice** for a diverse society.

## New Public Acts

Governor Rick Snyder has signed 159 bills so far this year. Of interest to AAUW are new Public Act 3 and PA 4 to abolish county gun boards and make it easier to get a concealed pistol license. These bills were **opposed by domestic violence prevention advocates** since gun violence is a leading cause of female mortality in domestic disputes. Approval of these bills was connected to deals made during the roads financing negotiations in lame duck session of 2014 to gain the last vote needed in the Senate to put the roads fix measure on the May 2015 ballot.

In June, the Governor signed PA 53, 54 and 55 that would allow religiously-affiliated **child placement agencies to discriminate against potential adoptive or foster parents** based on the sincerely held religious beliefs of the child-placing agency. This has the effect of excluding LGBT, divorced or single people, or unmarried couples from eligibility to foster or adopt children by over 40 percent of the child-placing agencies in Michigan.

In June, the Governor also signed PA 56 which **reduces a whole family's welfare benefits** if a child under 16 in the household is truant from school.

On June 30, the Governor signed PA 105, the Local Government Labor Regulatory Limitation Act. It **prohibits local units of government from establishing mandatory wage, benefit, and leave time requirements**. An earlier version of the bill also prohibited stronger civil rights protections than federal or state law, potentially invalidating LGBT protections in 38 Michigan communities. The final bill also grandparented in current local laws concerning paid sick leave or higher minimum wage.

## **Bills With Hearings**

Choose Life License Plate - The Michigan Senate has approved SB 84, a Choose Life license plate bill. It would divert \$25 from the proceeds of buying the plate to a Right To Life controlled fund. is now in the House Transportation Committee. Sales of Choose Life license plates in other jurisdictions have raised more than \$21 million nationwide, indicating that there would be considerable demand for the plate in Michigan and significant money raised for anti-choice messaging and organizations such as crisis pregnancy centers.

Religious Freedom Restoration Act - SB 4 is Michigan's version of the RFRA bill that created quite a stir in Indiana when major corporations objected to it. SB 4 would create a strict scrutiny standard for government to justify enforcement of any law affecting an organization with a sincerely held religious belief differing from the law. It gives religiously affiliated as well as private companies protection from civil rights laws. The bill had a well-attended hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee but two Committee Republicans oppose the measure so there were not the votes to report it out. The bill might have the votes in the full Senate to discharge it from the Committee however. The Governor says he does not support the bill without adding sexual orientation and gender identity protections to the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act. But the bill has far broader implications such as supporting companies who want to deny contraception coverage from their health plans.

DV and SA - Eleven bills related to domestic violence and sexual assault have had hearings, including bills to relax parole and probation standards that Attorney General Schuette opposes. On October 15, the House easily passed a six-bill package of domestic violence bills, HB 4476 – 81. Notable is HB 4479 that would increase penalties for assault of a pregnant woman and HB 4478 that would establish penalties for harming an animal belonging to the person seeking protection from domestic violence. The bills are now in Senate Judiciary Committee.

STEM - SB 169 and 170 to establish a STEM endorsement for a high school diploma have passed the Senate. Similar bills in the House, HB 4284 and 4285, have had hearings in the House Education Committee but then were re-referred along with the two Senate bills to the House Workforce and Talent Development Committee. If passed, we would be the first state to have such a designation.

Shared Time - HB 4594 and HB 4790 to expand shared time participation and reimbursement to private school kindergarten programs have passed the House and had a hearing this week in the Senate Education Committee.

Third Grade Reading - The third grade reading bill that would hold back students who cannot read by the end of third grade, HB 4822, passed the House 57-48 and is now in the Senate Education Committee. Members of the AAUW of South Haven branch attended the hearing in House Ed Committee on September 17 and put in cards opposing the bill on behalf of their branch. Great activism!

Dower Rights - Senate Judiciary Committee recently reported out SB 558, 559 and 560 that would abolish dower rights in Michigan statute. Dower rights are the only place in our Michigan Constitution (Article X, Sec. 1) where women are mentioned and a right to property protected.

At common law dower is a wife's right, upon her husband's death, to a life estate in one-third of the land he owned. After her death, the property would then devolve to the husband's other heirs, usually sons. Michigan's Estates and Protected Individuals Code is the current regulatory framework for decedents' estates, including spousal inheritance rights. With marriage equality now the law of the land, Michigan's

dower rights law would likely be struck down under equal protection concepts. Michigan is the only state with dower rights in its probate statute according to testimony.

Representatives of the Real Property Law Section and the Probate Estate Planning Section of the State Bar of Michigan spoke in favor of the bills but the Family Law Section of the SBM opposed as did Michigan Poverty Law Program. The Michigan Bankers Association, the ACLU, the Michigan Probate Judges Association, and the Michigan Realtors supported the bills. The State Court Administrators Office was neutral on the bills. Dower rights were some of the early achievements of the first wave of feminism. I am still analyzing whether I should recommend support or opposition to these bills.

Coercive Abortion Bills - I testified in writing and orally on our behalf in House Criminal Justice Committee on September 22 about HB 4787 and 4830, the bills that would establish a new felony-level crime called coercing a female to have an abortion against her will. We argued that the bills were not even-handed in addressing all forms of reproductive coercion and there were already laws banning coercion and discrimination based on pregnancy. The bills were reported out on a party-line vote on September 29 and are now ready for House floor consideration, which we expect at any time since this is a high-priority Right To Life item.

I worked with Janet Watkins to do an email blast to our whole database in Michigan, about 3,900 addresses, urging them to contact their own legislator with a standard or self-composed message using the Salsa tool. Salsa matches their voting address to the correct Michigan House member.

Ban on D and E Abortions - I testified in writing and orally on our behalf in House Criminal Justice Committee on October 13 concerning HB 4833 and 4834 that would amend Michigan's partial-birth abortion ban to also criminalize dilation and evacuation abortion. D & E is the safest method of abortion between 13 and 18 weeks of fetal gestation. It is used in 95 percent of cases of pregnancy terminations and miscarriage management for the affected women. Doctors would have to induce labor if D & E is not available, increasing health risks, pain, time, and costs.

I worked with Janet Watkins to do an email blast to our database with addresses in Committee member's and the bill sponsor's districts, 89 addresses. We had composed a standard message with the option to add their own words, using the Salsa tool. Fourteen sent a message and 3 used their own language in their message.

For More Information - For detail on the bills mentioned here and to find your legislators, go to [www.michiganlegislature.org](http://www.michiganlegislature.org).

## **Other News**

Human Trafficking Update - A comprehensive bi-partisan legislative package of bills about human trafficking was passed in 2014, and took effect in early 2015. One of the bills became PA 325 of 2014. It created a standing Human Trafficking Commission within the Department of Attorney General. Commission members were appointed by the Governor in March 2015 to represent various groups and public officials. The Michigan Human Trafficking Commission is required to meet at least four times per year, usually in Lansing. Meetings have been held April 22, June 25 and October 13. The Commission's purpose is to assist state and local government in addressing human trafficking.

There are three human trafficking bills introduced this session. SB 257 would create an address confidentiality program for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking. HB 4622 provides for personal protection orders for victims of human trafficking. HB 4056 requires posting of signage produced by the Human Trafficking Commission. None have had hearings.

State Net - National AAUW has acquired a subscription to Lexis Nexis State Net. Staff in national office has identified key words for searching bills to identify the ones they want us to follow. There are various report formats for the identified bills. It is potentially a very powerful resource for bill tracking if we can

fine tune the key words a bit more. Right now I review newly introduced bill descriptions every day and mark the bills in the Gongwer bill tracking subscription service.

Redistricting - The Redistricting Collaborative has met many times over the last few years. It has heard from a number of experts, pollsters, and others about redistricting and gerrymandering. The League of Women Voters of Michigan is doing forums throughout the state trying to educate voters on why we need redistricting reform through a citizen-led redistricting commission. A ballot measure may be in the offing. Contact the LWV to arrange a forum for your branch.

Paid Sick Leave Petition Drive - The initiated law petition drive to pass a statute requiring employers to provide earned paid sick leave sponsored by the Time To Care Coalition is now collecting signatures. Forty percent of employees in this state do not have earned paid sick time available for their own or their family's sicknesses. You can find out more at [www.mitimetocare.org](http://www.mitimetocare.org) where you can learn about the proposal and order petitions to circulate.

Pay Equity - The Equal Pay Day Coalition is meeting by phone to plan the April 12, 2016 national Equal Pay Day events in Lansing. At the last meeting, we had Rep. Marcia Hovey-Wright, Chair of the Progressive Women's Caucus Pay Equity Task Force, tells us about her efforts to get Republican support for the bills. Rep. Hovey-Wright recently sent a letter to the chairs of the Committees where the bills have been referred, again asking for a hearing since there has been no movement on any of the pay equity bills in the six months since their introduction. The Governor's office has not been interested in advancing the bills.

Choice Coalition - We participate with the Choice Coalition, which is composed of representatives from Planned Parenthood, ACLU, Northland Family Planning Clinic, American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and NOW. It meets frequently by phone or in-person to strategize about reproductive rights bills. I attended a media conference sponsored by Planned Parenthood with several legislators to draw attention to the sex education and contraception package of bills that have not moved. Those two things are the key to reducing unintended pregnancies and therefore elective abortions.

MDSAVPTB - I attend the monthly meetings of the Michigan Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention and Treatment Board held in Lansing. It advises the Director and staff of the Office that administers the federal and other grants that go to DV and SA programs around the state.

PWC Influence - On October 6, the Progressive Women's Caucus had a media conference calling for action on their domestic violence bills, HB 4411, 4412, and 4413 along with their Senate look-alike bills. Ten days later the Republicans moved their own package of DV bills, none of which contain employer or landlord mandates like these bills do.

AAUW Conference Calls - I have attended three national AAUW conference calls/Webinars on public policy issues. I also attend many other organizationally sponsored Webinars on relevant topics.

AAUW of MI Facebook Page - I have been posting many times a week about our issues on the AAUW of Michigan's Facebook page. I always take pictures at legislative hearings and post on our page as to what happened at the hearing. "Like" us and encourage your chapter members to do the same.

Mi Action Network - On the AAUW of MI Web site, Janet has created a special navigation key and page for a MI Action Network where public policy and legislative matters can be featured. Take a look! The navigation key is at the top of the page. We've put the two written testimonies there and links to other important information AAUW of MI activists might want to know.

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