



SEIU 503 members join a coalition of supporters in the State House gallery in a special session lobby day in Salem.

Legislative Session Very Special for Several SEIU Constituencies

The special off-year state legislative session in Salem in February was very special for several SEIU 503 constituencies thanks to intense and well-targeted lobbying on behalf of members as well as excellent leadership from key legislators.

Advertised as an experiment to gauge whether Oregonians might benefit from having the biennial Legislature meet annually in the future, the month-long session delivered big-time for child welfare and mental health employees in the Department of Human Services as well as Adult Foster Care providers.

Oregon State Hospital workers received \$1.8 million in immediate funding for more staff and \$4.87 million in earmarked money to pay for additional front-line staffing with another \$150,000 set aside for a study of community mental health placements.

"When staffing is inadequate, treatment suffers," Donell Chapman, new president of the state hospital workers' sub-local, told a legislative review committee. "We want to emphasize that adequate staffing includes the need for many different types of workers. Our members include line staff, social workers, custodians, psychologists, and security workers just to name a few... We believe a well funded mental health system [also] must include good community based care."

Another DHS study mandated by the Legislature in February requires the development of a long-term plan for the future of services for elderly Oregonians. It was championed by Sen. Bill Morrisette (D-Springfield) and Rep. Jean Cowan (D-Newport), who were lauded by advocates for exceptional leadership and commitment throughout the process.

Adult foster care providers won \$6.88 million towards funding for their first contract as union members. These funds would be spread among a variety of providers including relative care

providers, care providers for the developmentally disabled, and care providers for seniors and the developmentally disabled.

The Legislature also added \$2.5 million for Social Service Assistants and case managers, requesting that DHS come up with a way to fill all 78 SSA positions that had been slated for elimination.

These gains were especially encouraging because state economists reduced anticipated revenue forecasts in light of the national and regional downturn shortly after the start of the session. This eliminated a portion of the funds legislators initially anticipated using to plug holes in under-funded state programs.

"We've been able to build on progress we made in the 2007 session and set the stage for additional work in 2009," said Barbara Casey, SEIU 503 member who chairs the local's Citizen Action for Political Education committee. "How well that carries over, of course, will depend on how many worker-friendly candidates we can help elect to office this year."

Casey praised members and staff who worked with such allies as AARP, the Oregon Association of Area Agencies on Aging and Disabilities and the Oregon Health Care Association to persuade legislators of the human needs involved and the long-term economic benefit to the state in raising Medicaid rates and increasing funds available to compensate adult foster care providers.

One especially effective tool was a lobby day organized by the Coalition for Seniors & People with Disabilities, bringing hundreds of Oregonians to Salem for strategy sessions, lobbying, and testimony before committees.

Five-Year Plan Focuses on Quality, Engagement, Growth and Politics

The SEIU 503 Board has unanimously adopted a five-year strategic plan that envisions progress for the local and the American labor movement in four areas—improving the quality of members' jobs and the services we provide, increasing member engagement in union activity, growing the local, and further enhancing political power.

The plan details a series of steps in each of these areas and goes on to list a dozen new initiatives specific to Local 503 designed to advance these goals. In short, these initiatives would

- improve service quality via pilot projects, training, communication and bargaining;
- place more emphasis on career ladders for all members through programs like the training we worked with the Homecare Commission to establish for homecare members;
- explore joint labor-management workforce development programs;
- realign local resources by exploring the possibility of negotiating longer contracts and doing more coordinated, multi-employer bargaining;
- simplify leadership paths for members to encourage meaningful participation;
- make SEIU 503 Community Action Centers effective vehicles for member engagement;
- engage new employees with a timely and inviting orientation process;
- work jointly with our International union to help spur growth throughout the country, including states where the labor movement is currently weak;
- expand CAPE participation with more member interactivity;
- use education, mentoring, and volunteer participation to identify and support member leaders;
- promote responsible investment of our pension funds by educating members and political leaders; and
- expanding door-to-door political outreach to care providers, and then possibly others.

The strategic plan emanated from a visioning process undertaken by an intensive two-day retreat in Welches last fall with the full Board of Directors and much of our staff.