

Community women listen, learn and lobby

By Andrea Waxman
of The Chronicle staff

Wisconsin State Senator Dave Hansen (D-Green Bay) was moved by the words of Hillel found in Pirke Avot (The Sayings of the Fathers).

Hansen quoted the Jewish sage after receiving an award from Dr. Lucy Rosenberg on behalf of the Jewish community, in gratitude for his leadership in the legislative fight for mental health parity.

“If I am not for me, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?” Hansen read from the event program.

“I would like to see those words in every office in the Capitol,” he said, as he lamented the divisive tenor of state and national politics. “Working together for good public policy is key,” he said.

Hansen was speaking to a group of some 90 members of the Jewish community, 58 from Milwaukee, approximately 25 from Madison and a few more from La Crosse and Baraboo, on Tuesday, March 13.

The group, all but a handful of whom were women, had gathered in Madison for the 2007 Jewish Community Legislative Day, which took its theme —“If not now, when?” – from Hillel.

The bi-annual event, scheduled to coincide with the legislature’s alternate year budget process, is part of the Jewish community’s overall strategy for advancing its policy agenda, according to Barbara Beckert, assistant director of the Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations.

The purpose of the event is to “put our values into action” by learning from our legislative leaders and policy makers and advocating for issues important to our community, Beckert said.

To that end, during the bus trip from Milwaukee to Madison, she explained some principles and strategies for effective advocacy and briefed participants on the four top priority issues the community is focusing on this session.

Those are: expanding long term care services and ensuring Medicaid funding; increasing access to health care; supporting targeted divestment in Sudan; and maintaining quality public education.

Beckert encouraged participants to follow up by contacting their legislators, who say that if they receive even six letters about an issue, they will take notice.

Representing a range spanning several generations, participants expressed a variety of motivations for attending.

Julie Lookatch and Robyn Eiseman of Mequon and Jen Friedman of Fox Point, all members of the National Council of Jewish Women attending for the first time this year, came with concerns about public education.

Lookatch, who has recently served on a task force in the Alliance for Strong Mequon Thiensville Schools, said inequities in school funding are hurting the North Shore schools.

Lookatch pointed to cuts in programs for the gifted, arts, and physical education, as well as increased class sizes and an inability to guarantee excellent teachers’ continued employment.

“It’s really hard to complain when you look at what’s going on in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” but knocking down the stronger schools doesn’t help the weaker schools and the legislature shouldn’t “tie our hands about what we can do,” she said.

“I wanted to see these politicians; I wanted to see their faces,” said Friedman, who is the president of NCJW-Milwaukee Section.

“As young mothers, we need to use our voices to educate our peers,” she said, emphasizing the importance of standing together as one community.

Rosenberg came to advocate for children, she said. A former child psychiatrist, she said that when she retired some 10 years ago she promised herself that she would advocate for children; especially for their mental health, for kids in foster care, and for children of mentally ill parents.

“We can’t make a difference unless we make legislative changes,” Rosenberg said. “We must talk to the people who represent us so they will truly represent us. Then we can be a significant force.”

For many, the day was a chance primarily to learn.

Joyce Altman, a member of the MJCCR board, participated in the day because, she said, the issues are compelling and affect all of us. “Just [acquiring] knowledge leads to accomplishment.”

The day was sponsored by the Edie Adelman Political Awareness Group and the Presidents’ Conference of the Women’s Division, Milwaukee Jewish Federation; Hadassah-Women’s Zionist Organization of America; Jewish Family Services; MJCCR; Madison Jewish Community Council; NCJW-Milwaukee Section and the Wisconsin Jewish Conference.