

Victim Protection

One of government's chief responsibilities is to protect individuals from violence, especially those who are most vulnerable, and to punish perpetrators. Two bills that I wrote this session dealing with restraining orders and penalties for strangulation were signed into law by Governor Doyle.

◆ Wisconsin Act 127 makes harassment, child abuse and vulnerable adult restraining orders effective immediately after they are issued by the court. Before this law, offenders avoided court appearances to prevent being served with these types of restraining orders, enabling them to go on abusing or harassing their victim.

◆ "Angie's Law" strengthens the penalties for strangulation and suffocation. Before Angie's Law was enacted, Wisconsin law limited penalties for non-fatal strangulation and suffocation attacks to misdemeanors in most cases. Not only is strangulation a common form of domestic violence, many criminals use strangulation to attack their victim because it is only a



Governor Doyle signs "Angie's Law," which Sen. Lassa wrote to strengthen penalties for strangulation.

misdemeanor charge. "Angie's Law" allows prosecutors to charge attackers with felonies instead of misdemeanors as a recognition of the seriousness of the assault.

Consumer Protection

Over the years, I have worked hard to protect consumers from harmful products and questionable business practices. This session that work included children's products, cell phone companies and predatory lenders.

◆ The safety of children's toys and products was highlighted this past year with the recall of thousands of products. The Child Product Safety Act, which I wrote, requires childcare providers to regularly review children's products recalled by the Consumer Product Safety Commission and remove them from their facilities. The bill also empowers the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to fine retailers who routinely refuse to remove recalled products from their shelves.

◆ The Cell Phone Accountability and Liability Legislation (CALL) requires that cell phone companies refund any billing overcharges to customers. Currently, a number of cell phone companies only refund overcharges if a customer complains even when the company is aware of a technical malfunction.

◆ The Mortgage Privacy Protection Act is a new law I sponsored to provide consumers greater protection from predatory lenders who often use unfair or deceptive practices to collect information about potential loan applicants. It protects consumers from having their personal information, including home value, sold to third party vendors by credit reporting agencies.

Natural Resources

Wisconsin's natural resources are a precious inheritance that we must work to preserve. Along with enhancing our quality of life, our lakes, streams, air and soil are important to farming, tourism and Wisconsin's economy. By enacting policies that keep our air and water clean, reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, and focus on renewable energy sources, we can preserve Wisconsin's environment for future generations to enjoy. This session, the Legislature:

◆ Provided \$25 million to battle polluted runoff, Wisconsin's number one water quality problem.

◆ Funded a new Renewable Energy Grants and Loans program in the state budget through the Department of Commerce. The \$22 million allocated to this program will allow Wisconsin to invest in home-grown renewable technologies.



Sen. Lassa with Nancy Livingston of the Town of Big Flats, winner of the 2007 North Central Tree Farmer of the Year Award.

◆ The Senate passed the Great Lakes Compact, which would ban the export of water outside the basin of the Great Lakes. The Compact would also require states to begin recording water use and to implement conservation measures. This is an important step in preserving one of the largest bodies of fresh water in the world.

CENTRAL WISCONSIN REPORT

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE SPRING 2008

SENATOR JULIE LASSA

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Education

Every Wisconsin child, regardless of income, should have access to a quality education. Education is an investment that directly contributes to the economic success of students, benefits our economy, and attracts business to our state.

◆ The budget passed by the Legislature meets Wisconsin's commitment to fund two-thirds of K-12 education, investing \$11 billion in the education of our children while taking more of the burden off local property taxpayers.

◆ The budget also reflects our commitment to students attending technical colleges and the university. The Legislature added \$32 million in financial aid to the budget which triples our financial aid assistance by the end of this fiscal year. We also fully funded the University's Growth Agenda to expand enrollment and train our next generation of nurses, engineers, chemists, biologists and skilled workers. The Growth Agenda includes \$260,000 for UW-Stevens Point.

◆ It is shocking that there are more than 8,000 homeless students attending Wisconsin public schools. I introduced Senate Bill 495 this year to help school districts better identify and work with homeless children so they receive the help and education they need to succeed.

I was proud to work with the Wisconsin Rapids Public School District on this issue. The District received an award from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHYC) for its work on behalf of homeless young people, focusing on violence prevention, healthy-relationship development, tutorial assistance, and poverty awareness. The NAEHCY award is given annually to one school district nationwide that is making a difference in the lives of homeless children and youth. Congratulations to Wisconsin Rapids for serving as a model for other school districts in Wisconsin and across the country.

◆ As the global market becomes increasingly important to our state's economic viability, we must prepare our students to be able to work effectively with foreign employees and business partners. Currently, only about one-third of students study a foreign language. Legislation that I wrote establishes a grant program to enable schools to phase in world languages instruction in grades one to six when it is easier for individuals to learn and retain language skills. Businesses and corporations can also donate to the program so more schools and students can participate.



Sen. Lassa with Madison Elementary School students on their recent visit to the State Capitol.

CENTRAL WISCONSIN REPORT

LEGISLATIVE
UPDATE
SPRING
2008



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JULIE LASSA
STATE SENATOR

Dear Neighbor,

With the 2007-2008 Legislative Session at an end, I'd like to brief you on the work my colleagues and I in the Wisconsin Legislature have done to address the issues you care about: the economy; health care; tax fairness; consumer safety; and clean government.

As we enter a time of great economic uncertainty in which working families are feeling the pinch of spiraling prices and stagnating income, it's more important than ever that state government play a vigorous role in promoting both economic development and economic justice. As Chair of the Economic Development Committee, I will continue to work with my colleagues and Governor Doyle in growing and diversifying Wisconsin's economy.

The most important part of my job is keeping in touch with my constituents. I held 35 office hours this legislative session, and I encourage you to attend future listening sessions throughout the district. Much of the legislation I introduce comes from ideas brought to me by constituents at these get-togethers, as well as from your calls and emails. Your input allows me to better express your thoughts and concerns in Madison and helps to improve state government and our community.

It has been a great honor to serve you in the State Senate; thank you for giving me the tremendous opportunity to represent our community.

Best wishes,



Julie Lassa
State Senator

8002 Senator Lassa Committee Assignments

- Chair – Committee on Economic Development
- Vice-Chair – Committee on Agriculture and Higher Education
- Joint Committee on Finance
- Joint Legislative Audit Committee
- Committee on Campaign Finance Reform, Rural Issues and Information Technology

Economic Development in Central Wisconsin



Our state and nation face hard economic times. Prices for groceries, gas, and health care continue to rise while incomes stagnate. During my first term as Chair of the Economic Development Committee, I worked to strengthen our local economy by helping our communities develop, attract, and nurture the kind of private sector initiatives that create good, family-supporting jobs.

As I met with Central Wisconsin business leaders to discuss the challenges they face, one common concern was the difficulty of recruiting the skilled workers they need, such as welders and others with advanced manufacturing skills. Similarly, I heard from workers who want to go into the health care field, but must sometimes wait seven or eight years before they can enroll in the education programs they need.

Wisconsin Invests Now

Recognizing the needs of employees and employers, my colleagues and I introduced Wisconsin Invests Now (WIN), which invests in existing state resources to maximize immediate job growth. The package:

- ◆ Creates a Technical College Incentives Grant Program that gives our tech college system the resources to train the workers that businesses say they need to prosper in our state.
- ◆ Increases financial aid for students who attend technical colleges so they can afford to learn the skills employers want.
- ◆ Boosts the State Highway Rehabilitation Program and Major Highway Development Program to provide current and new businesses a solid infrastructure to get their products to market.
- ◆ Expands child care assistance to middle income families to relieve some of the burden of working parents.
- ◆ Increases the Renewable Energy Grant & Loan Program to provide grants to new and existing businesses to expand renewable fuel production.

Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin

The “buy local” food economy is one of the most rapidly growing and important economic, social and cultural opportunities in agriculture today. Supporting the growth of locally grown and processed food positively impacts farmers, communities, consumer nutrition, the environment and Wisconsin’s economy.

That is why I wrote and Governor Doyle signed into law the Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin Initiative, to create new and stronger markets for local agriculture. The program will educate Wisconsinites, tourists and businesses about our abundance of great local food

products, and develop distribution systems that will help meet the increased demand for locally-produced vegetables, meat, dairy, fruit and other products.

- ◆ Developed in cooperation with farmers, non-profit organizations, food businesses, and state agencies, Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin creates a Regional Food System Development program, including competitive grants that will provide much-needed financial support to help local farmers and communities propel the growth of the regional food system.



Sen. Lassa and DATCP Sec. Nilsestuen testifying in support of her Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin Initiative.

- ◆ The program will create excitement around Wisconsin food by developing eight Food and Culture Tourism Trails throughout the state. These trails will showcase, brand and promote each region’s unique products, ethnic heritage and generate more agricultural tourism.
- ◆ According to the most recent figures, Wisconsin consumers spend over \$19 billion on food products annually. This initiative’s goal is to keep 10 percent of those dollars in-state, creating a \$2 billion boost to the state’s economy.

Local Economic Development Assistance

I secured \$375,400 in the budget for economic development grants for twelve local communities within the 24th Senate District. These communities were negatively impacted when the Department of Revenue reduced the assessed value of manufacturing facilities within their borders. The grants are to be used for economic development to help these communities grow jobs and their property tax base.

Communities benefiting from the grants are: City of Wisconsin Rapids; City of Marshfield; City of Stevens Point; Village of Whiting; Village of Vesper; Village of Port Edwards; Village of Friendship; Village of Biron; Village of Amherst Junction; Town of Plover; Town of Remington; and the Town of Auburndale.

Plover Korean War Memorial

The Korean War Memorial in Plover is a fitting memorial to those men and women who gave their lives during that war. The causeway and island structure have problems with erosion and cement damage caused by the fluctuating levels of Lake Pacawa as well as the freeze/thaw cycle. I secured \$165,000 in matching grant money to permanently refurbish this important memorial. We owe it to our veterans to make sure that this visual reminder of their sacrifice is well maintained.

Government Cleanup and Consolidation

State grants, loans, and tax credits are effective economic development tools that foster new businesses and help existing businesses thrive. It is vital, however, that we get the best “bang for our buck” by avoiding duplication and carefully monitoring programs to ensure that businesses produce the results we’re paying for.

I developed with my colleagues two bills with these goals in mind. The first bill which was signed into law, eliminates unfunded, inactive or duplicative programs within state agencies. It requires each of the state agencies that administer economic development programs to submit an annual report of the location and type of each job created or retained in the state as a result of the program. The law includes a “clawback” provision for businesses that fail to meet the terms of the grant program if there are no extenuating circumstances.

The second bill would eliminate and consolidate into one program the five zone-based tax credit programs that are scattered across the state. These zones have been important economic development tools; however, each program has different criteria, different geo-

graphical zones, and segregated allocations, which limits the state’s flexibility in meeting the needs of businesses who want to expand or relocate to Wisconsin. By consolidating the zones, we can be more efficient and effective in investing Wisconsin’s limited economic development resources.

Downtown Wisconsin Act

I reintroduced the Downtown Wisconsin Act (DWA), a comprehensive economic development package that is designed to revitalize central business districts across the state by combating many of the barriers affecting downtown development. DWA:

- ◆ Directs the Dept of Tourism to promote travel to certified downtowns and Main Street communities.
- ◆ Requires state agencies to consult with local communities on proposed highway projects to avoid harming downtowns.
- ◆ Provides incentives to rehabilitate historic buildings.
- ◆ Assists communities in reconstructing business districts that are destroyed or severely damaged by major disasters.

World Languages Elementary Education Bill

As the global market becomes even more important to our state’s economic viability, we must prepare our students to be able to work effectively with foreign employees and business partners. This bill establishes a grant program to enable schools to phase in world languages instruction in grades one through six. Fostering an appreciation for world languages at an early age will not only help our students learn and retain languages easier but will help them be more competitive in the global economy. Businesses and corporations can also donate to the program to help it thrive and expand.

Good Government

Wisconsin has had a proud history of being on the forefront of ethics and government reform. It’s time for Wisconsin to resume its historic role as a leader in making government work for the people. Fortunately, there are growing signs in the Legislature that reform is on its way.

- ◆ Wisconsin Act 126, which I wrote, creates a fraud, waste and mismanagement hotline where state employees and the general public can call anonymously 24 hours a day to report misuse of state funds. Twenty-five other states have already adopted this type of hotline; one success story is Ohio, which has received 639 reports of fraud in the first six years of its program, and reclaimed \$16.1 million for the state treasury. The toll-free number for the hotline is 1-877-FRAUD-17 (1-877-372-8317).
- ◆ I introduced two bills this session to nail shut the “revolving door” between government and special interests. The first bill prohibits any legislator from accepting a job as a lobbyist for 12 months after leaving office. The second bill prohibits members of the state Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities, from being employed by any person or group subject to PSC regulation for one year after leaving the Commission.



Sen. Lassa shakes hands with Governor Doyle after he signs her Fraud Hotline bill into law.

Taxes

Over the years the state’s tax burden has shifted unfairly onto the shoulders of working individuals and families. In 1971, homeowners paid 50 percent of property taxes collected in Wisconsin. Today, that share is 69 percent. In contrast, corporate income taxes paid have taken a downward spiral, from 14 percent in 1977 to just 7 percent today. My colleagues and I have been working this session to restore fairness to our tax system.

- ◆ The infamous Las Vegas Loophole allows corporations to avoid paying Wisconsin income taxes by setting up “dummy subsidiaries” in states like Nevada that don’t collect corporate income taxes. The corporations then transfer their profits from Wisconsin to the “dummy subsidiaries” until they owe little or no state income tax. The subsidiaries often consist of nothing more than a mail box in Las Vegas. I co-authored a bill to close this loophole to ensure that corporations who do business in Wisconsin pay their fair share of state income tax. It’s fair to our taxpayers and it helps to level the playing field for main street businesses.
- ◆ Many senior citizens in Wisconsin rely mainly on Social Security checks for their income. I voted to eliminate state tax on Social Security; beginning this tax year, Social Security income is exempt from Wisconsin taxes. This will help put more money in the pockets of Wisconsin seniors who live on fixed incomes.
- ◆ Currently, the Wisconsin Constitution requires that all property be treated the same when it comes to taxation. I sponsored a constitutional amendment which would create an exemption to Wisconsin’s Uniformity Taxation Clause so property tax relief can be directed at the primary residence of homeowners.



Sen. Lassa presents Mayor Halverson an economic development check to help grow the local tax base.

- ◆ My colleagues and I introduced a constitutional amendment called HOPE, the Home Owners Property Tax Exemption. HOPE exempts the first \$60,000 of a home’s value from the school property tax, reducing the average property tax bill by \$569. The state would pay the schools additional aid to make up for the loss in revenue.
- ◆ The state budget increased the student tuition tax credit to \$6,000 for eligible students in tax year 2009, helping more working families afford high quality, accessible education for their kids.

Health Care

A main focus this legislative session was to increase access to health care in Wisconsin. Individuals and families should not be one illness away from bankruptcy, or have to choose between paying their mortgage or taking their child to the doctor. I worked with my colleagues to bring the need for comprehensive health care reform to the forefront on the Senate floor.

- ◆ BadgerCare Plus is a new program that offers access to comprehensive, affordable health care to working families and pregnant women in Wisconsin. The program premium is based on family income and is for children under 19 years old and families in Wisconsin who need health insurance.
- ◆ Total health care spending this year in Wisconsin is projected to be \$42.3 billion – increasing to \$76.9 billion during the next decade – an increase of 82%. Senate Democrats introduced Healthy Wisconsin as a measure to drive down costs and make health insurance more affordable for all Wisconsinites. It is estimated that Healthy Wisconsin would save state and local governments, and thereby taxpayers, \$1.3 billion per year alone.

While Healthy Wisconsin did not become law, it began an important discussion about possible solutions to rising costs.

- ◆ I wrote legislation called Healthy Kids Dental to allow the State of Wisconsin to contract with a private dental insurer to cover children and pregnant women on Medicaid and BadgerCare. Currently, there are significant waiting lists of over a year or two for individuals who need to see a dentist. The Healthy Kids Dental is modeled after a Michigan law which increased patient access to dentists by 140%.
- ◆ Every year in Wisconsin about 200 children are born who are deaf or hearing impaired. Most insurance policies do not consider cochlear implants and hearing aids as medically necessary despite the positive health, educational, and social benefits to the child. I authored a bill to require insurance companies to provide hearing aids and cochlear implants for children under the age of 11. Not only would this bill reduce the amount of special education services that these children need and save taxpayers about \$2 million a year, it would greatly benefit these children in terms of improved quality of life and help them achieve their greatest potential.