

Advocates seek women's rights

GROUP WILL MAKE A LOBBYING TRIP TO SACRAMENTO MONDAY

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A coalition of women's rights advocates is thinking really big. At a Saturday leadership conference sponsored by 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Mothers, participants called for universal health care, more paid family leave and laws that would bar discrimination against employees with dependents.

They also talked about what they see as the need for paid sick days, increased welfare benefits and other regulations that would dramatically expand the role of government in the workplace.

"We don't think it's fair to make people choose between their families and their paycheck," said organizer Cathy Deppe. "We want to be responsible parents and responsible workers."

About 25 women planned for a Monday lobbying trip to Sacramento, where they have scheduled appointments with 13 elected officials.

And they were cheered on by Assemblywoman Sally Lieber, D-Mountain View, who offered her office as home base while they visited the state Capitol.

"You could flash backward to 1996 or 1986 and the mindset in Sacramento and Washington would be much the same today as it was then," Lieber said. "When something happens, there is no flexibility of elasticity in the safety net to allow women to take care of their families."

The women - and a handful of men - held their 4 1/2-hour conference at the San Jose office of the Service Employees International Union Local 521 on Zanker Road.

Lieber predicted a statewide universal health care proposal would be on the November 2008 ballot.

"We need a system of care that covers everybody," Lieber said. "No questions asked."

Diana Spatz, a former homeless single mother and drug dealer, accused Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of trying to slash the budget for social programs.

"Welfare is a safety net for battered women," said Spatz, now executive director of Lifetime, a non-profit that helps low-income parents return to school. "I see this incredibly coercive system that gets paid to cut women off from the system."

Spatz urged the women to take an ambitious agenda with them to Sacramento.

"I pay more in taxes now than I used to make every year on welfare and selling dope," she said, wearing a shirt that said "Would Jesus Cut Welfare?"

Kim Kruckel, the Legal Aid Society Paid Family Leave coordinator, said about half a million babies were born in California last year - but only 150,000 parents took advantage of paid family leave.

"If we really want a country where people can balance work and family, we need to make the law better so it is more accessible for more people," said Kruckel, noting that her group would aim to get 12 weeks of paid family leave next year, instead of the six weeks available now, and to have 100 percent of pay covered, instead of 55 percent.

Noreen Farrell, an attorney for the women's group Equal Rights Advocates, argued for a law that would prohibit discrimination against workers who have to take care of families.

"There's some great laws we'd like to get passed," she said, "and it's really done one letter at a time."

Several participants said the meeting was energizing.

"Women get empowered from seeing other women who are active," San Jose resident Charlotte Casey said. "They're inspired by their stories and their wins."

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