

Florida's Broken Unemployment System

After spending most of 2020 assisting thousands of constituents who were frustrated in their attempts to access unemployment benefits, fixing Florida's broken unemployment system was one of my top priorities heading into the 2021 Session. I filed SB 910, which would have increased the weekly benefit amount and the number of available weeks. While that bill did not receive a hearing, SB 1906, a bill I co-introduced, did. This bill increased the weekly benefit amount by \$100, provided an additional two weeks of benefits, decreased the number of hoops a claimant had to jump through in order to claim benefits, and would have made it easier for certain claimants to qualify for benefits.

While the Senate unanimously passed SB 1906, the House refused to consider any of the provisions in the bill, ultimately causing us to fall short on our goals of increasing benefits, decreasing red tape, and fixing the broken system. However, the Legislature did pass CS/CS/HB 1463 and made additional investments to update and modernize the Department of Economic Opportunity and the Reemployment Assistance system, in a effort to ease claimant issues.

Looking Forward to 2022

There is much work to be done, and I am already at work on organizing my top priorities for the upcoming 2022 session in January. I will continue to keep my promise to fight for the preservation of Florida's natural environment, protect and support equal rights for all, strengthen public education, tackle increasing insurance rates, and make our community a safe and prosperous place to live and work!

SENATOR LINDA STEWART

2021 LEGISLATIVE SESSION NEWSLETTER

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A Message from Senator Stewart - Dear Friends and Neighbors, We are getting ready to start the 2022 Legislative Session, and I wanted to share some of the great work we accomplished during the 2021 Legislative Session.

My focus was fighting for the core principles that you've entrusted me to represent. I worked on bills to protect our most vulnerable citizens, strive for equal rights for women and the LGBTQ community, and to preserve our environment.

Budget Overview

The legislature is only required to pass one bill each session — the General Appropriations Act. Putting together a year in advance budget is always complicated, trying to balance fiscal responsibility with meeting the needs of all Floridians. That was especially true this year, as the spread of Coronavirus threatened our citizens' health and our state's economic well-being. In a year where we thought we would have to make really tough decisions and deep cuts, we were able to develop and pass a budget just over \$100 billion.

Budget Overview continued

Part of this historic budget was made possible by our federal counterparts, who passed the American Recovery Act, allocating billions of dollars to help states through the pandemic. This budget included billions for the environment – funding to combat sea level rise, convert septic tanks to sewers, acquire land for Wildlife Corridors,



clean up efforts at Piney Point, and \$8 million for the restoration of manatee habitats. In education, we set aside \$750 million for maintenance and construction for K-12 and higher education – as well as bonuses for teachers. We continue to deliver on our commitment to address homelessness by allotting \$46 million for those experiencing homelessness and helping to identify and provide access to services for extra support they so badly need and deserve.

District 13 in the Budget

An important part of the budget process is securing specific appropriations for various organizations and projects in our district and community. While originally over \$2 million dollars were set aside for specific organizations in central Florida, the veto process removed all but one of these projects.

The \$350,000 secured for Devereux's Services for Dual Diagnosis, will provide funding for healthcare services to individuals with mental health disorders in combination with developmental disabilities.

While the veto pen struck most of our budget items, such as funding for the Zebra Coalition and the Orlando United Assistance Center, I have committed to working with all of our previously sponsored organizations in the coming session to secure funds in the next fiscal year.

Legislation Passed

Bills are extremely difficult to pass. Ideas often need a lot of work, and sometimes even great bills can get bogged down in the process. Anytime we pass a bill, it is a big deal, and I am very proud that I was able to carry three very important pieces of legislation across the finish line this session!



SB 1002/HB 673—Gail's Law:

This bill requires the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to create and maintain a statewide system for tracking sexual assault evidence kits from the point of collection through the criminal justice process. The bill empowers survivors by giving them the option of receiving real-time updates on the status of the evidence in their case.

The bill is named for Gail Gardner, a survivor and Orange County resident, who waited in fear and anxiety for more than three decades to receive the results from her sexual assault kit.

SB 252/HB 1287—Child Safety Alarm Act:

This bill requires child care providers to install a safety alarm in vehicles used to transport children. The alarm would alert the driver to prevent children from being left behind in the vehicle. I first filed this bill in 2017 after the death of 3-year-old Myles Hill in Orlando, and I'm so thankful the legislature finally passed it this year. This bill will truly save lives.

SB 1176/HB 855—Barber Services:

This bill allows licensed barbers to offer services outside of brick-and-mortar barbershops. The Legislature previously granted this flexibility to cosmetologists, and the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need to expand how consumers are able to access services.

Gunshot Exhaust (SB 1194):

Over the past year, my office heard from many constituents who were concerned with "gunshot" exhaust modifications that allow a car exhaust to mimic the sound of gunfire. I was able to add an amendment to a piece of legislation, significantly increasing the penalties for illegally modifying a car's exhaust system, this will give law enforcement the tools to deter this type of activity which has been terrorizing our communities.