

Children's ADVOCATE

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Parents fight CalWORKS grant cuts

By Jean Tepperman

Governor Schwarzenegger proposed big cuts to the state budget last January, but by May "he had made deals with all of the big players," recalls Anita Rees, program director for Low Income Families Empowerment Through Education (LIFETIME), an organization representing low-income parents. The problem was, "we weren't big players!" The governor was still insisting on cuts to programs for low-income families.

But a few months later, he signed

a budget with no cuts to CalWORKS grants, even a cost-of-living increase for welfare families. In addition, he agreed to legislation that ended the two-year limit on education for parents on CalWORKS.

What caused this turnaround?

One obvious factor was the announced opposition to welfare cuts from powerful Democratic Party leader Sen. John Burton. But advocacy by low-income parents themselves was also key, says Burton's chief fiscal policy advisor

Diane Cummins: "It's important for the legislators to see the people who will be affected. They are the most articulate and they dispel the stereotypes."

"Shirts Off Our Backs"

LIFETIME started the year by bringing 150 parents, children, and supporters to the Capitol January 12 to protest proposed cuts that would "take the shirts off our backs."

"We had parents from all over the state come together," says LIFETIME member Tina Howerton. "We rehearsed what we were going to say and made T-shirts with messages. Then we put up a gigantic clothesline at the state Capitol and hung up 200 T-shirts. It was the first time we've ever done anything that big."

Then "throughout the spring and summer," Howerton adds, "we were up there almost every week with different groups of parents, with our children, with our stories." Tactics included:

Visits to legislators—LIFETIME members were frequent visitors to both the Sacramento and the district offices of their local representatives, says LIFETIME member Dawn Love. They also visited other key legislators, especially "people on the (budget) committees (who) make the decisions."

This "personal interaction with a member (of the legislature) or their staff" is the tactic with the most impact, says Christian Griffith, consultant for the



LIFETIME member Vivian Hain and daughter Jasmine at a protest at the Capitol.

Grassroots Snapshot

Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Health and Human Services.

Testimony at hearings—January through July, “we continued to have a presence at each of the CalWORKs budget subcommittee meetings,” says Rees. “I just introduce myself,” says Love, who has testified at many legislative hearings, “and tell them how the cuts will impact my family.”

Personal letters—Parents all over the state, says Rees, wrote letters showing how their families’ budgets would be affected by the proposed 5 percent cut in the CalWORKS grant—“what they couldn’t pay for any more, like food, gas, clothing.”

Press coverage—With the huge clothesline (and advance calls to reporters) LIFETIME attracted press attention. So the TV cameras were rolling when a group of parents and children camped and chanted in front of the governor’s office demanding a meeting. At a press briefing later in the year, LIFETIME and the California Partnership, a coalition of organizations advocating for low-income families, displayed cases of baby food and boxes of diapers to show the real needs that wouldn’t be met if welfare grants were cut.