

Advocates lay out top women's initiatives

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Aug 16th, 2019 @ 9:47pm

<https://www.ksl.com/article/46619467/advocates-lay-out-top-womens-initiatives>

SALT LAKE CITY — Local advocates from a range of women's organizations laid out issues affecting Utah women and girls relating to children's rights, immigration, housing security and domestic violence at the Utah Women's Policy Conference on Friday.

"There are just so many different things that make up what is needed when we talk about equality for women," said Marina Lowe, legislative and policy counsel at the ACLU of Utah. Lowe said one of the biggest issues working Utah women face is child care, adding that she had to arrange child care for her own children in order to attend the panel.

Aside from finding affordable childcare, Lowe called for the progression of women's health care.

"There are other areas where women's equality needs to advance when we talk about health care, that includes access to contraception and to other reproductive rights," she said.

Representatives from organizations like the ACLU of Utah, Comunidades Unidas, Voices for Utah Children, Utah Domestic Violence Coalition, and the Utah Housing Coalition voiced their group's legislative updates and policy initiatives at the conference during a panel organized by YWCA Utah.

Despite the variety of fields and populations they represented, most leaders seemed to agree their issues are interconnected.

"Access to affordable quality child care," Anna Thomas said. "It's a crisis everywhere."

Thomas, a senior policy analyst at Voices for Utah Children, said the organization focuses on serving kids of color, kids living with disabilities and LGBT children. Focusing on historically marginalized children, she said, "brings the community forward."

"I would like to see the state of Utah talking about accessibility of child care, right along with affordable housing," she said, adding that it is "critical to the stability of individuals and families."

Currently, what's concerned Thomas is seeing a "devastating" participation of children of immigrant and refugee families in health care programs, due to ongoing verbal and policy "attacks" on immigrant communities.

Maria Montes, community engagement and advocacy coordinator of Comunidades Unidas, said the nonprofit provides resources for Latinos in the community to overcome systematic policies that could act as barriers for Latino populations.

"We are really at the forefront and center of immigrant rights work that is taking place in Utah," she said.

She added that immigration is an intersectional issue affecting both women's and children's rights.

Montes said she'd like to see the end of collaborations between county jails and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Oftentimes she sees the effects of how the detainment of a man, who might be the family's sole breadwinner, negatively impacts other members in that family.

Because of that, Montes said the majority of people who seek their services are mostly women who might not understand their civic rights.

“When that happens we see an impact not only in the structure of the household, but a change in the child’s well-being and the mother’s well-being,” Montes said.

Utah Domestic Violence Coalition, said she’s seen more willingness in legislators and policymakers to fund some of their work to raise awareness surrounding domestic and sexual violence, issues she described as preventable public health issues for Utah women.

She said the organization has worked to gather data from the Utah Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding domestic violence, which “clearly illuminated” data on domestic violence homicides.

“Domestic violence homicide in Utah is very concerning and it has been for 20 plus years,” she said.

Oxborrow has spoken with legislators who have known someone who’s experienced domestic violence and “want to do something about it, but they don’t often know what.”

When that’s the case, she said it’s important to be prepared with data to make a point and present possible solutions.

She said it took the coalition about nine years to pass an amendment to Utah law that would make strangulation a felony.

“Before it passed ... we were able to articulate some of the significant data points that strangulation is, in fact, one of the highest predictive factors in intimate partner homicide,” she said.

Erin Jemison, director of public policy at YWCA Utah, said housing security is one of the issues the organization wants to start focusing more on because it impacts not just domestic violence survivors, but families headed by single women and women living below the poverty line.

Tara Rollins, executive director of the Utah Housing Coalition, said housing is no longer viewed as shelter, but instead as an “investment,” or something to be included in a portfolio.

“It’s been very hard to break through that, to get (legislators) to fully understand that our economy is hurting because we don’t have housing,” she said, “We focus so much on tourism.” She said two years ago, the organization was able to pass a bill to create a commission focusing on housing affordability.

“Things are moving forward, but we all need to continue to talk about our need of housing and whether it’s for seniors, if it’s for domestic violence, if it’s for single women,” she said.

Rep. Jennifer Dailey-Provost, D-Salt Lake City, said the top issues she believes Utah women face is pay inequity and lack of access to affordable child care.

She also added that more conversations about women’s reproductive health is warranted.

“Reproductive autonomy and reproductive health need to stop being politicized,” she said.

Resources for victims of domestic violence

- The Utah Domestic Violence Coalition has a statewide, 24-hour hotline for victims of domestic violence at 1-800-897-LINK (5465).
- The Division of Child and Family Services offers counseling, teaches parenting skills and conflict resolution and can connect the family with community resources. Their goal is to keep children with their family when it is "possible and safe," according to their website. Visit dcfs.utah.gov/questions/ or call 1-800-323-DCFS (3237) for resources or to report child abuse or neglect.
- The Christmas Box House acts as a temporary shelter for children and can provide them with new clothing and shoes, among other services. Call the Salt Lake office at 801-747-2201 or the Ogden office at 801-866-0350.