



NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA HAS: FIVE QUESTIONS FOR ELEANOR SOBEL

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THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, February 15, 2013.....Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood, is one of a handful of Democratic committee chairs in the Republican-dominated Legislature. Senate President Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, tapped her to lead his chamber's Committee on Children, Families and Elder Affairs, where she's the moving spirit on a bill that would tighten protections for the residents of assisted living facilities.

She's also the vice chair of Senate panels on Ethics and Elections, Health Policy and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

After a career in teaching, Sobel was elected to the Hollywood City Commission in 1992 and the Broward County School Board in 1996. She served in the House from 1998 to 2006 and has been in the Senate since 2008.

The News Service of Florida has five questions for Eleanor Sobel:

Q: So your domestic partnership bill is finally going to get a hearing Tuesday.

SOBEL: Well, it's been about four years since I thought that individuals who are gay or heterosexuals who are living together should have the same rights as married people in terms of financial situations, funerals, personal situations, hospital visits.

That bill was referred to my committee. The Senate president gave me the green light, in essence, to hear that bill because it was sent to my committee immediately, the first stop. So he's willing to listen to the dialogue, that conversation in terms of these issues. I think it's a very important bill, and I hope it passes out of my committee and that we can address this fairness issue.

To me it's a fairness issue. We have the Defense of Marriage Act here in the state of Florida that gays and lesbians cannot get married. But this is not about getting married. This is about civil union, about registries, about a lot of people who would benefit from equal protection under the law.

Q: You've said the assisted-living facilities reform bill is one of your top legislative priorities.

SOBEL: There's a crying need to improve enforcement, to raise the standards, to protect our seniors who are living in these facilities that have grown to about 3,000 in the state of Florida. And it's very unique to the state of Florida. A lot of people say, 'What are you talking about, an ALF?"

The enforcement has not been there by the Agency for Health Care Administration. They have the tools, but they haven't used them. We have strengthened enforcement in the bill. We have raised the standards for facilities that have people with mental health issues. We have given AHCA the ability to shut down a place immediately if there's a problem. I hope this is the year.

I'm working real hard to make it happen that we could also protect these vulnerable people by also creating a web site that would allow people to evaluate where they're going to put their loved ones, because people don't know. They just don't know.

Many years ago we established a public web side with a grading for nursing homes. I've heard that nursing home site gets thousands of hits. I hope the same thing will happen with the ALF web site that will come up, so people could compare and know which ones have been cited in the past and for what.

We also strengthened the ombudsman's role. There's been a lot of issues about ombudsmen losing their strength and their independence, and we put that back in through this bill.

Q: An ALF reform bill has passed the Senate before, but the House wasn't interested. Last year the providers, arguably, killed that bill – are you concerned that will happen again?

SOBEL: I think that's always something that can happen. There's always a defense when you have an offense. I hope we can address their concerns.

We're working real hard on getting the House up to speed. We need to do something. I think it doesn't look good for the House if they do nothing. We're still working on getting a House sponsor. I'm not at liberty to say, but I think we have a really, really good sponsor.

Q: Any prediction on what this Legislature will do about the Affordable Care Act?

SOBEL: We're not going to set up the exchange right now. I think we're going to let the feds do that. I believe we're so far behind, we need to let them do what they know how to do best, and we're not there yet.

I favor the expansion. It's billions of dollars at the end of the day, and it's our taxpayer dollars. We need to help these people. I think there's a moral element to this as well. At the end of the day, we'll have healthier people in the state of Florida, and they will be able to contribute to our economy.

They're taking money away from the hospitals to pay for this extended coverage, and the hospitals are still going to pay, even if we don't take the extended coverage. Other states will benefit with our tax dollars, and I think the people of Florida deserve to get what they pay for. Our tax dollars need to be used here, right in Florida.

There may be some glitches in the Affordable Care Act, but that's to be worked on in the future and we need to move ahead. Many Republican governors have signed on, and it would be the right thing to do in the state of Florida, to expand Medicaid.

Q: What does it say to you about the dynamics of this chamber that the Senate president, a staunch conservative, would give you a committee chairmanship?

SOBEL: We come from different backgrounds in terms of geography – he comes from North Dakota and lives in the Panhandle. I come from, as you can tell, Brooklyn, and I represent Broward County, which is one of the more progressive and liberal counties.

What we have in common is that we believe in finding solutions, working hard, and we both served on educational bodies. He was superintendent of schools and I was on the school board of Broward County. We have worked together on health care issues, and he has a very strong health care background...I put my husband through medical school, and I've lived through the trials and tribulations of physicians.

We have more in common than our differences. So we have become friends, and I believe both of us want to do what's best for the people of Florida. The question is, "How do we get there?"

He also gave a couple of other Democrats committee chairmanships. I think what it says is: he's trying to be different than the federal government. And he's not digging in to a philosophy – again, trying to come up with solutions to very, very difficult problems and getting input from both sides of the aisle.

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