

UNCOMPROMISING SENATOR CHAMPIONS HER CAUSE: KIDS FIRST-TERM SENATOR LABORS 16-HOUR DAYS FOR KIDS' SAKE

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The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: Feb 28, 1994. pg. D.1

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Delpha Baird -- mother of nine, grandmother of 35 -- came to Utah's Senate four years ago as a rebel with a cause she knows well: children. It's an area to which she has devoted a great deal of time and energy during her 63 years, and she is passionate about continuing in her quiet, but doggedly tenacious style. Seated at her front-row desk in the Senate chamber -- the only cubicle consistently adorned with fresh carnations or roses -- the Holladay senator is all business. She's at the Capitol by 7 every weekday morning, after rising at 4 and taking a brisk three-mile walk. Wearing her signature glasses -- half-frame reading spectacles with a pearly chain around her neck -- she scrolls through files on her laptop computer. There are plenty to track. In the current session, Baird has filed 28 bills -- more than any other legislator on the Hill. The vast majority deal with issues related to children, though she also delved into property-tax modifications and programs for the disabled. "I came here for children and families. I'm committed to that," said Baird. She turned to politics after a long history of volunteer work in the LDS Church's Primary program in Utah and abroad -- while her husband worked around the world as a church architect.

In the early '80s, after her children were mostly grown, Baird pursued a special-education degree at the University of Utah. After graduating, she became involved in the Hinckley Institute of Politics and was appointed as an intern for the governor's office in 1986. The experience convinced her to run for a seat in the Senate, and though she lost her first bid, she won her second in 1990. She's been prolific ever since in presenting legislation ranging from a prohibition on candy-cigarette sales to initiating gang-prevention programs. At the top of this year's priority list are several bills that would make sweeping changes in the state's child-welfare system. Solving Problems: She has introduced legislation that would move the guardian ad litem system -- a program providing legal representation to children victimized by neglect or abuse -- into its own office under the direction of Utah's Judicial Council. It also calls for appointed attorneys in the three largest court districts to represent child clients full time. Her massive child-welfare reform bill -- almost 200 pages -- calls for expanded training of employees in the Division of Family Services (DFS) child-protection and foster-care programs, puts a monitoring and accountability process in place, and puts the burden of deciding whether a child should be removed from its home on a team of specialists rather than a single caseworker.

Both bills stem from criticisms that have been festering for years, but which didn't generate much political action until Baird joined the cause. After seeing things she considered problematic, Baird and Sen. Eldon Money, a Spanish Fork Democrat, requested a legislative audit of the child-protection, foster-care and guardian ad litem systems.

That audit also came on the heels of complaints about treatment of children in the state's custody by San Francisco's National Center for Youth Law. Last year, the law center filed a federal class-action lawsuit based on many concerns shared by Baird. Donna Brown, director of Network Against Child Abuse and a "next friend" for some young plaintiffs named in the lawsuit, remembers Baird offering her support to a effort for change two years ago. Several involved women, including Brown, took a child brain-damaged by abuse and languishing in the foster-care system to the Legislature. "Baby X" was one example of system failures, they said. "Ever since then, Sen. Baird has been committed. If there's a problem with an individual child, she'll get involved and work for the kids," Brown said. On the floor of the Senate last week, in fact, Baird introduced one of those children -- a teen-age boy who has been in foster care for more than 10 years. He greeted the diminutive senator as a close friend, wrapping her in a bear hug outside the Senate chambers. Last year, under suspicious circumstances, the teen was hospitalized in a coma for more than five weeks, Baird told her colleagues. She visited him at Primary Children's Medical Center at least every other day. In the meantime, she prodded DFS officials for answers about what happened and what plans they were making for the boy's future. "Delpha is not a person who has to be reminded to be recommitted for a child," Brown said. "Without her, there really would be an abyss for some of these kids." But her persistence and what Baird sees as resentment over the large number of bills she has introduced have ruffled some party feathers in recent months. Disagreement with the governor over how to address management concerns in the Division of Family Services brought rumors of fellow Republicans working to thwart her chances for re-election. But Gov. Mike Leavitt called those rumors "preposterous" and said he will support the Holladay incumbent and only Republican woman in the Senate. "I don't understand where that rumor came from, or why it persists," Leavitt said. "We have disagreed on things, as I suspect I will with every legislator. But she's an incumbent senator -- a Republican senator -- and I intend to be supportive of her candidacy."

Baird likewise has heard the rumors and is frustrated that House bills almost mirroring hers on child-welfare reform are advancing more rapidly. "I feel like I'm being punished for having so many bills. But every single one of them is critical. None of them is frivolous," Baird said. Commitment: As one who would rather see more ideas than fewer on the table, Sen. Millie Peterson said she doesn't resent Baird's two-dozen-plus bills. But the West Valley Democrat, and Baird's only female colleague in the Senate, also pointed out that Baird is one of the few able to work "more than full time" as a legislator. Indeed, Baird figures she works 12-16 hours daily, attending meetings of the many committees and task forces on which she serves, working on new legislation, and taking calls from constituents.

Peterson's biggest criticism -- other than Baird's being a Republican -- is that sometimes she "seems to become so involved that she distorts the issue and doesn't see the other side as easily." An unwillingness to do much "politicking" may be to Baird's detriment, added Peterson, also a first-term senator. But if there are any "games" involved, Baird said she isn't interested. "I try and stay clear of those. I came up here to work for children and families. To me, politics is the farthest thing from my mind . . . Political games cannot be played with children's and people's lives."