

2004 Texas Democratic Party Platform

The Democratic Mission

United by a sense of purpose and recognition that elections do have consequences, Texas Democrats are working to elect public servants who practice the most fundamental democratic principle: that public policy decisions should be guided by honest, open debate about the best way to assure a better state and nation for our families and generations to come.

As citizens and patriots, we take seriously our responsibility to promote a full understanding and appreciation of the values and principles of the Preamble, body, and Bill of Rights of the United State Constitution. Texas Democrats believe we must work with people from all walks of life to make our communities stronger, safer, more just, and more secure. Our state and nation are strongest when government works for all the people and guarantees open and fair participation in the democratic process. We will steadfastly and vociferously oppose those who choose to rule instead of governing in the best interests of the people, who arrogantly abuse power for short-term gain to the detriment of the best interest of our state and nation.

Texas Democrats believe we should employ the common sense and wisdom of the people to preserve and practice proven ideas and polices that work, as well as new ideas that reflect our most enduring and sacred American values -- opportunity, responsibility, family and community, freedom and fairness. Our vision is clear. Texans deserve a state and nation that offer all people the opportunity to succeed, fulfill their dreams and utilize their talents for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Restoring the People's Priorities

Our fundamental beliefs and values have been threatened by the misplaced priorities and failures of Republican rule. Texas Democrats believe issues matter because public policy affects our daily lives. But the current Republican leaders' refusal to even allow an open process and debate in Washington and Austin illustrates their callous disregard for the people's priorities and anything other than their lust for partisan power.

Where Republicans say no to the needs of Texas families and serve the narrow interests of wealthy individual and corporate benefactors, Democrats work with Texans from all regions and all walks of life to provide opportunity for each succeeding generation. Where others seek policies that would have government impose their version of "family values" on everyone, we offer common sense policies that value all our families.

Unlike Republicans who cater to those who would privatize our schools, continue tax breaks for the wealthy few who ship our jobs overseas, deny our basic right to seek justice and fairness, and deny basic services to millions of Texans, Texas Democrats believe in:

- Equal opportunity for all Texans to achieve and succeed in their efforts to get a quality education, find a good job, buy a home, provide health care for their families, and exercise their right to participate in our democratic system and have their vote count.
- Quality public education that gives all Texans the opportunity to reach their potential.
- Rewarding honest hard work with a livable wage and a tax system that is fair to all taxpayers.

- Providing economic security for all hardworking Texans through better access to quality health care and child care, affordable insurance, prescription drug coverage, and comprehensive health care for every Texas child.
- Making neighborhoods and homes safer and more secure through the cooperative efforts of involved citizens and law enforcement officers equipped with the best available technologies to identify and justly punish dangerous criminals and protect the innocent.
- Preserving our precious natural resources, clean air and water, and our quality of life.
- A United States made strong and secure by moral, economic, and diplomatic leadership, as well as military might.
- Providing American workers and businesses, and especially small businesses, both the basic infrastructure and advanced technology required to succeed in a changing economy -- instead of sending jobs overseas.
- The right of all employees, public and private, to organize, collect dues, designate their income voluntarily to organizations and agencies of their choice, and to negotiate freely with their employers through their elected agents.
- Freedom from government interference in our private lives and personal decisions and full protection of civil and human rights.
- Separation of Church and State to preserve the freedom to pursue our beliefs.
- The benefits derived from the individual strengths of our diverse population.

Education

Texas Democrats believe in the essential importance of education to American democracy and economic opportunity, as the Texas Constitution has recognized since 1876. We believe in providing every child with a quality public education in a safe, secure school, as well as affordable access to the higher education and career education programs essential for good-paying jobs and a strong state and national economy.

As stated in the Texas Constitution, the Legislature has a duty to support "public free schools" and we support that commitment. Every Texas child should have equal access to an exemplary educational program that meets that child's needs and abilities, so all Texas children can develop and reach their maximum potential. While Republicans undermine public education by seeking to privatize education and unfairly shifting the financial burden onto local property taxpayers, Democrats believe state government must meet its constitutional duty to support public schools.

Texas Democrats have led the fight to improve student achievement and lower dropout rates, often over Republican opposition. Democratic initiatives like the 22-1 class size limit, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs and improved equity in funding have been cited in national studies for improving our children's education. Democrats have also authored legislation to improve education by helping retain and attract qualified, talented professionals in education.

The economy of the 21st century requires greater educational achievement for success, and standards were raised with bipartisan support. But now Republicans have cut critical programs and endangered our ability to meet standards essential to our economic future. The misplaced priorities and failed policies of the Republican leadership threaten our progress in many ways.

- Republicans proposed an "adequacy" plan that would provide only enough resources to make sure 55% of our students could pass standardized tests. Democrats demanded excellence, not mere adequacy. At our children's schools, a 55 is an "F". We can not afford to let Republican policy fail our children.

- Republicans abandoned the guarantee of having at least 85% of students in an equitable system, a commitment the state made to the Supreme Court.
- Children in property-poor districts, who are the vast majority in the state, receive over \$1,000 less per student on average than children in wealthy districts, although all districts are now short of funding due to Republican budgets. Regardless, the focus of the Republican response to our school funding crisis has been the elimination of "Robin Hood," which would provide thousands of dollars more per student to the 10% that make up wealthy districts at the expense of improving equity for 90% of our students.
- Republicans have pushed tax "relief" plans that would actually raise taxes for most Texans in order to reduce taxes even further in the few wealthy districts.
- Textbook funding has been cut in half, forcing students to meet new curriculum standards with old texts.
- Funding for special programs that help students master new curriculum standards has been slashed. As a result, too many students are not provided the programs and resources needed to make them ready for promotion to the next grade.
- Many children with special needs or disadvantaged backgrounds have the capacity to excel, but the Republican response has been to deny further assistance when these children reach bare minimum standards. Federal law requires that these children be served, but Republicans have blocked funding needed to meet federal mandates, shifting the burden to the states and local property taxpayers.
- Republicans eliminated funding for new projects from the Technology Infrastructure Fund, which was created by Democrats to close the gap in access to technology and internet resources in our schools, libraries, and medical institutions;
- In the 21st century, Texas needs far more college and university graduates than we currently produce; yet the Republican response has been to slash higher education funding and raise tuition to a level that many cannot afford.
- Republicans have cut grant programs, leaving many who succeed in higher education saddled with crushing debt as they start careers, families, and their adult lives.
- Too many old, overcrowded, ill-equipped and unsafe school buildings house a growing student population. Democrats established an equalized funding program to provide access to safe, adequate and modern facilities for all students. The Republican response was to cut new funding by 90% and eliminate new funding for the past school year.
- Worst of all, many Republicans have sought to replace public education with a totally privatized voucher scheme or to reduce available funding for public education by shifting some tax dollars to inequitable, unaccountable "pilot" voucher programs.

The most important factor in determining educational success is having qualified teachers in our classrooms. Texas faces a serious teacher shortage because teacher pay and benefits have not been competitive with the private sector.

- Despite pay increases passed by Democrats, Texas teacher pay is more than \$5,000 below the national average. The Republican response was a \$500 reduction in the health insurance stipend, the first teacher pay cut in modern Texas history.
- As a result of inadequate salaries, there is a perennial and growing shortage of properly qualified teachers, and too many students are taught by teachers required to teach subjects they are not certified to teach. The Republican response has been to lower certification standards, allowing people without training and appropriate qualifications to be considered "certified" teachers.

- Teacher morale and educational quality are further threatened by Republican proposals to eliminate class size limits, the minimum salary schedule, planning and preparation time and basic due process procedures, and a federal law passed by Republicans that eliminated retirement options for Texas teachers.

The Democratic Goal: An Excellent Public Education for Every Child

Texans believe our children come first. To make our state's education policy reflect that number-one priority, Texas Democrats believe we should:

- Guarantee every child the educational resources, programs, and services necessary to succeed, recognizing the need to develop skills suited to the new information-age economy;
- Continue strides toward universal access to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten;
- Provide sufficient resources for students with special needs or challenges to learn to the maximum of their ability in mainstream or the least restrictive environment, including students who live in districts with declining enrollment or fast growth;
- Enforce and extend class-size limits and construct sufficient classroom space to provide a better, more disciplined learning environment by ending overcrowding;
- Commit necessary resources to early-intervention programs so every child can read at grade level;
- Commit necessary resources to count dropout rates accurately, lower dropout rates, and reclaim dropouts with programs tailored to their needs;
- Guarantee that every class has a teacher certified to teach the subject of that class;
- Raise teacher pay and protect and enhance a quality state paid health insurance program for every educational employee;
- Provide sufficient state funding for all education costs to equalize the ability of all communities to offer an exemplary program, without passing the burden to local property taxpayers while reducing reliance on "Robin Hood" recapture equitably;
- Establish a 100% equitable school finance system;
- Improve our accountability system by relying on a more complete assessment than just one standardized test score;
- Involve parents in education with appropriate, innovative programs, such as letting parents choose public schools that best meet the needs of their children;
- Ensure teacher and parental input into local educational decision-making;
- Strongly encourage the recruitment and training of teachers who reflect the state's diversity, because education is enriched through diversity;
- Respect and safeguard the rights and benefits of education employees, so we can recruit and retain our best;
- Support multi-language instruction that allows English-speaking children to learn a second language and reject efforts to destroy bilingual education;
- Oppose any form of private school vouchers because vouchers would drain resources essential to guarantee a quality public education for all our children;
- Oppose incentive pay programs linked to standardized test scores that would force a competitive model on an education system that depends on collaborative efforts to help all children excel;
- Oppose efforts to eliminate or weaken state standards and accountability designed to assure all children a quality education, including the creation of so-called "home rule" schools or districts;
- Oppose efforts by right-wing extremists to censor textbooks;

- Demand that federal funds flow as promised to pay for federal education mandates such as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act; and
- Support the continued enforcement of Title IX protections to provide gender equity in all public educational institutions.

Safe Schools for Every Child

Texas Democrats believe protecting students, teachers, and other school personnel from acts of violence is a fundamental responsibility. We support swift and fair enforcement of disciplinary standards. Teachers must be supported when they exercise their right to take a disruptive student out of the classroom. Students referred to disciplinary and alternative education programs should be provided strong academic instruction and not just be warehoused in low quality programs. School campuses and functions must be weapon-free and drug-free.

Post-Secondary and Adult Education

Texas Democrats believe all Texans should have the opportunity to attend public universities, community colleges, and technical schools, and we support innovative approaches to ensure diversity in every Texas institution of higher education.

- Texas Democrats developed the Texas Tomorrow Fund to allow families to pre-purchase college tuition and created the Texas Grants scholarship program to make college a reality for many students. Republicans broke that promise by slashing higher education funding and raising tuition rates at most colleges and universities by 20% or more, causing the Texas Tomorrow Fund to close enrollment and severely curtailing opportunities for families trying to secure their children's college education.
- Texas Democrats passed the law to assure admission at Texas universities for students who graduate in the top 10% of their class to provide opportunity for students from rural and inner city schools, but now we must fight Republican efforts to repeal that law.

Texas Democrats pledge to:

- Support restoration of funding cut in 2003 so that tuition and fees may be rolled back to affordable levels, expansion of the Texas Grants Program to reduce the debt burden on our children; adequate compensation, security, professional status, and benefits for all faculty; and research funding to spur economic development;
- Support public/higher education partnerships to enhance pre-K through 12 education and teacher preparation;
- Support the role of community colleges in providing lifelong educational opportunity;
- Encourage enhanced support of both Prairie View A&M and TSU and higher education opportunities in South Texas and all border communities;
- Support sufficient funding to have a flagship research and teaching university in every region of the state to provide benefits essential to a healthy economy for all Texans;
- Condemn intolerance on Texas campuses and encourage universities to develop and offer culturally diverse curricula, student activities, and student recruitment policies that promote understanding and tolerance; and
- Support efforts to place a voting student regent on the appointed Board of Regents of each state-supported four-year institution of higher education.

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State Fiscal Policy

Government exists to help us achieve as a community what we cannot achieve as individuals. Texas Democrats have worked to make state government operate efficiently and effectively and remain at the forefront of efforts to protect the interests of Texas families in our state budget.

With a strong Democratic hand shaping both state policy and the national economy, just a few short years ago Texas had the largest state budget surpluses in state history.

Those surpluses were used both to ease tax burdens on Texas families and to enhance vital state services that enable Texas families to prosper.

Under Republican rule, our state budget has become such a source of peril for Texas families that one newspaper editorial called it a "tax on humanity." Texas has one of the most unfair, regressive tax systems in the nation. The poorest Texans pay a far larger portion of their income on state and local taxes than wealthy Texans. Instead of adopting a fiscal policy that asks all Texans to share responsibility for funding essential state services, Republican budget writers chose instead the short-term political rhetoric of "no new taxes," while actually shifting the tax burden to local governments and imposing billions in user fees, tuition hikes, toll roads, and proposed sales tax increases that fall on hard-working Texans.

Under Republicans, the state responded to an economic downturn by cutting vital state services. Public schools, college scholarships, access to the Children's Health Insurance Program and affordable health care, environmental programs, and investment in small businesses – all have been jeopardized by Republican failures.

The casualties of Republican state fiscal policy included:

- 160,000 children who have lost health coverage under the state CHIP program;
- 750,000 active and retired teachers, school employees, and their families forced to pay higher health-care costs;
- thousands of Texans who have lost mental health services;
- thousands of other Texans who have lost adult or child protective services or nursing services they need to maintain their independence, dignity, and productivity; and
- a wide range of businesses and industries hit with new fees.

Irresponsible Republican budget policy has refused to acknowledge the need for sensible investments to benefit future generations of Texans, forcing all Texans to pay for their negligence. Their misplaced priorities have postponed the day when state finances will again be sound, supported by fair and reliable revenue sources that keep pace with the basic needs of our growing population and expanding economy.

State fiscal policy is directly impacted by federal budget and economic policy, and with full Republican control in Washington, D.C., Texans have also suffered while state Republicans meekly acquiesced to Republican federal policies that shortchange Texas.

Our state government and local communities cannot afford reckless Republican federal budget policy that adds to the nation's debt, spends the entire Social Security surplus over the next five years, and makes no guarantee that funding for critical programs like

health care, education and veterans benefits will be available after 2005 – all to extend or make permanent trillions in tax cuts that benefit only the wealthiest Americans.

Texas Democrats believe the following goals should guide state fiscal policy:

- Reform the state tax structure to ensure reliable sources of revenue to meet the demand for state services that strengthen Texas families as our population grows;
- State tax reform should reduce the disproportionately large tax burden now placed on average Texans;
- The state should keep overall tax burdens for Texas families low by broadening and leveling the state revenue structure to make sure that everyone contributes a fair share to support of necessary public services;
- The Texas Legislature should pass and ask Texans to approve a constitutional amendment banning a sales tax on food and medicine;
- State government should not shift undue responsibility for funding state-mandated programs to local property taxpayers;
- Funding must always place priority on delivery of vital services while minimizing administrative expenses of state government; and
- When federal economic policy directly causes fiscal hardships for State governments and impairs the delivery of essential services to the public, the federal government should provide transfer payments to the States to balance the equation. When federal policies mandate expenses for state and local governments, and their essential functions, the federal government should not leave those mandates unfunded.

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Security for Our Families

In the same way we support responsible efforts to provide security from terrorism and a strong military that works with our allies to ensure peace and provide national security, Texas Democrats support these initiatives to ensure security for Texas families. By denying access to basic services under the guise of "government reorganization," the Republicans have undone successful, cost-effective Democratic programs that provided easy access to state services that are essential to millions of Texans.

Social Security

Texas Democrats believes we must keep the promise of Social Security strong and certain for those who have worked and contributed to the system all their lives. Social Security should continue to be the foundation for working American's income security. Private savings accounts and other pension programs should be additions to the guaranteed Social Security benefit, not a substitute for any portion of it. We oppose Republican federal budget plans that spend down and undermine the Social Security Trust Fund, including proposals to carve out private savings accounts, which would drain trillions of dollars and threaten our country's most popular program. We adamantly support immediate repeal of the "government pension offset and windfall elimination provisions," which reduce Social Security benefits for teachers, police officers, firefighters, and others who receive public pensions.

Retirement Security

In addition to Social Security, millions of workers have invested in public or private pensions to secure their retirement income. Texas Democrats support measures to:

- Provide strong and effective legal protections to secure the investments of workers in public or private pensions to honor the principle that a lifetime of honest work should be rewarded with adequate retirement income; and
- To improve corporate governance to enhance confidence of all stakeholders in the private enterprise system.

Long Term Services and Supports

Texas Democrats support long term services and supports that promote independent living in the most integrated setting possible for the elderly and the chronically ill and disabled people of all ages. This network of services should include community-based attendant services, in-home health care, adult day care and hospice care. We support:

- Creation of a national attendant services program where the money follows the person;
- Transition of our long term care system to a focus on home and community care services;
- Coordination of support services, including personal assistance services, respite care, home delivered meals, transportation, homemaker assistance, and caregiver services;
- Providing choice in decisions about where elderly, chronically ill, and disabled Texans live and receive support services;
- "De-medicalization" of services to contain costs and allow greater individual control;
- Regulation for board and care homes, stringent inspections of nursing homes, state-supported hospitals and schools, and strict enforcement of laws governing facilities to ensure safety, cleanliness, nutrition and quality health care for the elderly and disabled;
- Policies that prevent persons with disabilities and older Texans from being forced into nursing homes and other institutions because of the lack of community service options;
- Coordination of accessible, affordable, integrated housing with support services to provide people with disabilities and older Texans suitable, appropriate living conditions; and
- Provision of sufficient resources to provide for those in need of institutional care.

Access to Affordable Insurance

The skyrocketing cost of insurance coverage places an excessive burden on both individuals and businesses. Texans pay the highest homeowner insurance rates in the nation, almost double the national average. Governor Perry and Republican appointees failed to stop insurance rate hikes of over 50%, and allowed insurance coverage to be scaled back, leaving working families and employers threatened with a greater risk of catastrophic losses that can devastate a lifetime of earnings, leaving selected groups of Texans without access to coverage needed to secure their homes, persons, motor vehicles, and health care needs.

Republicans broke their promise to reform homeowner's insurance laws and to reduce rates by 12-18% and failed to deliver meaningful insurance reform. Today, Texans continue to pay the highest rates in the nation, and although the Texas Department of Insurance claims the average homeowner's insurance rates have dropped a meager 4%, rates for many Texans have continued to rise. Texas Democrats believe the Legislature and state regulators must take more aggressive steps to roll back insurance rates and improve access to affordable insurance for all families. Texas Democrats believe legislators and regulators must take aggressive action to roll back insurance rates,

expand coverage, and improve access to affordable insurance through the elimination of credit scoring, redlining, and other discriminatory practices.

Nutrition and Hunger

Texas Democrats support public and private endeavors to prevent hunger and improve Texans' nutritional health. Texas needs a strong nutrition safety net, including the Food Stamp program, the Women's, Infants and Children (WIC) program, and other nutritional programs that are vital to maintaining this safety net for children and elderly Texans. We believe that private organizations alone cannot adequately address the problem and that government has a role to play in the administration and delivery of nutrition programs. Texas' dismal ranking among the states in the number of people experiencing hunger is unacceptable. We support the use of improved technology to increase program efficiency, but the needs of clients must be at the forefront of any efforts to streamline service delivery.

Child Care and Child Support that Strengthens Texas Families

Texas families should not have to choose between the jobs they need and the children they love. Affordable, quality child care is good for parents, good for children and vital for the Texas economy. Texas Democrats believe the private sector can do more to improve the availability of affordable child care and we propose the following initiatives to help parents succeed at home and at work:

- Corporate tax credits, property tax cuts and entrepreneurial assistance to help Texas businesses invest in child care. We also support programs that pool local, nonprofit and private dollars to attract the maximum available federal child care matching funds for Texas;
- Expansion of after-school child care services to improve the safety of child care, the use of quicker, more effective criminal background checks for child care workers, and the provision of better information to parents so they can make informed child care decisions; and
- Targeted tax credits and limited grants for investment in caregiver retention, staff training and educational equipment as well as scholarships to train the next generation of quality child care professionals and continue to improve the quality of child care.

Every Texas child deserves a loving family to provide for their financial, emotional, and developmental needs. Texas Democrats believe in promoting strong families through policies that support:

- Strong child support enforcement through increased field staffing in the Attorney General's office, complemented by workforce development and programs that help low-income, non-custodial parents take responsibility for their children's needs;
- Initiatives that promote healthy, cooperative relationships between parents - married and unmarried - through relationship counseling, mediation, and parenting education to promote the beneficial involvement of both parents in raising their children; and
- Collaborations between state agencies and community-based organizations that provide services for "fragile" families. The Welfare to Work program – which attempted to address this problem – recently expired, making it more difficult for non-custodial parents to obtain access to workforce development programs.
- An increase in the federal child tax credit.

- Efforts to assure all Texas children have the benefits of a loving family and the secure home they deserve by providing sufficient staff for child protective services, and enhanced support for adoption and foster care.

Choice and Family Planning

Texas Democrats believe in every American's right to privacy and the right and responsibility to make sound, healthy personal choices for ourselves and our families without fear of unwarranted government intrusion. In the face of state and federal Republican policy proposals designed to intimidate and traumatize women, as well as Republican threats to use judicial appointments to attack fundamental rights, the Texas Democrats:

- Trust the women of Texas to make their own decisions about personal matters, such as when or whether to bear children. No government, no politician, and no bureaucrat should interfere in an individual's private and personal decisions;
- Will work to guarantee every woman the right to have access to and to make personal decisions regarding the full range of reproductive choices, including bearing healthy children and preventing unintended pregnancy;
- Believe we must decrease the rate of adolescent pregnancy and the alarming number of pregnant teenagers dropping out of school -- both of which increase the number of Texas children living in poverty. We must provide child care to allow teenage mothers to continue their education; and
- Encourage comprehensive, responsible, age-appropriate sexuality education with an abstinence-based component to replace taxpayer-funded abstinence-only education programs initiated by Republicans that have proven ineffective in delaying sexual activity and preventing sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies.

Housing

Secure, accessible and affordable housing, available without discrimination, is essential to giving families a sense of community, self respect, and dignity. Texas Democrats are committed to making the dream of home ownership and clean, safe rental housing a reality for more Texas families by:

- Encouraging federal, state and local agencies to work together to broaden the reach and increase effective access to housing opportunities, housing rehabilitation programs, financial education, and down payment assistance that fits the needs of both rural and urban Texas;
- Eliminating all discrimination in the financing and insuring of homes, including lending practices that prey on the trusting, the uneducated, the poor, the elderly; and colonia residents;
- Increasing the number of Section 8 housing vouchers and the availability of low cost financing for new and affordable rental housing.

Homelessness

Developing an effective solution to the problems related to homelessness requires a strong commitment to public-private partnerships and coordinated state, federal, and local efforts. In addition to the acute problem of homelessness among the mentally ill and their families, runaways, and other populations that typically make up a large share of the homeless population, the impact of Republican economic policy has left many families just one rent check or mortgage payment away from homelessness. In fact, Texas leads

the nation in home foreclosures. The diverse needs of the homeless population demands a well-coordinated response if we are to properly address the issues involved in a common sense manner. Texas Democrats are committed to ending homelessness by:

- Removing barriers, and increasing access to services that support progress toward self sufficiency; and
- Increasing the availability of services used by people and families that fit the needs of both rural and urban communities.

Consumer Protection

Texas Democrats support the protection of consumers and families from dangerous products and unfair and discriminatory business practices. Texas consumers should have a high degree of certainty and an understanding of their rights under laws that are enforced uniformly. Texas Democrats believe we must protect:

- Texans from unscrupulous telemarketing, price fixing and the sale of goods;
- Services that prey on individuals, especially children, the poor, the elderly and persons with disabilities;
- The rights of Texans against insurance companies, HMOs and drug companies that deny Texans the coverage they need;
- Senior citizens from consumer and insurance fraud and nursing home abuse; and
- Protection of consumer rights in dealings with multinational corporations that do business in Texas.

Expanding Economic Opportunities for all Texans

Texas Democrats believe the best program to end poverty and welfare is a job that pays a livable wage. Government assistance should be a transitional effort to help people take responsibility for their own lives and become productive members of society. Both those who receive public assistance and those who foot the bill for that assistance have a responsibility to find ways to quickly and permanently move needy families from welfare to self-sufficiency. A society that emphasizes personal responsibility must also strive to create jobs, reward work and provide infrastructure that encourages people to work and to rear children responsibly.

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Health Care

Texas Democrats believe that every family deserves access to health care they can count on and a health care system that puts family health security first. Health care is not a privilege reserved for those able to pay for it; it is a right for all people. Access to affordable health insurance should be guaranteed for all Texans.

The current system of providing health care to Americans is failing, as evidenced by the fact that 44 million Americans have no health insurance and a larger number has inadequate coverage. Texas has the highest rate of uninsured among all 50 states. Immunization rates among Texas children are also among the lowest in the country. Even those fortunate enough to have good insurance are spending an inordinate amount to pay for such coverage. The result is that Americans pay more for health care than citizens of any other industrialized country.

Our nation has attempted to create a "universal" system of health care by expecting employers to provide health insurance coverage as an employment benefit. This has resulted in a system that imposes massive administrative costs while generating huge profits for insurance companies. As a result, our country has extremely high per capita health care costs in comparison to other industrialized Texas Democrats support a true universal system of health care that provides quality coverage.

The state must make every effort to secure all federal and state funds and waivers to maximize the amount of federal tax dollars returned to Texas to provide health care. Small businesses and the people who work in them should have access to affordable and dependable health coverage. And Texans with chronic illnesses should have access to coverage through the high risk pool.

A Patient's Bill of Rights

Texas Democrats passed a Patient's Bill of Rights to ensure that all Texas families have the right to choose the doctor they want for the care they need. Medical decisions regarding all effective treatment options should be made by medical doctors in consultation with their patients, not insurance company accountants or government bureaucrats. Families have the right to know all of their medical options, not just the cheapest. Democrats worked to pass legislation that guaranteed Texans the right to choose their own doctor, secured a woman's right to choose her own OB-GYN, and gave consumers the right to sue HMO's for denying necessary care. Democrats also opened the doors of MD Anderson and other premier cancer care facilities to all Texans.

Protecting Medicare and Medicaid

Texas Democrats support programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, that maintain the health care safety net for vulnerable Texans. Texas Democrats denounce the devastating and short-sighted cuts in Medicaid benefits, which have resulted in the loss of billions of federal health care dollars to Texas and shifted the financial burden for providing health care to local taxpayers. We support restoring the Medicaid cuts and re-establishing our local and state partnership to maximize funds for Medicaid programs that assure coverage to families, pregnant women, infants and children, as well as people with disabilities and senior Texans.

Texas Democrats also believe our state and federal government should crack down on hospitals and health care providers who file fraudulent Medicare and Medicaid claims that cost billions of tax dollars a year. The needs of the vulnerable must not fall victim to the greed of a few.

Prescription Drugs

The recently-enacted Republican Medicare prescription drug program places profits for drug companies over the health care needs of our seniors. In fact, the new law specifically prohibits the government from negotiating for less expensive prescription drug prices, including importation from other nations. In other countries, many drugs sell for as little as 5 to 10 % of prices charged to American patients, despite being manufactured and packaged in the U.S. by the same pharmaceutical companies before being exported, yet many Americans must make choose between filling prescriptions and other basic needs. We support replacing the unnecessarily complicated prescription drug program with a program that is easy to understand and that provides Medicare recipients with real and substantial savings on their prescription medications. Texas Democrats oppose any effort to prohibit individuals from buying lawfully prescribed drugs from buying lawfully prescribed drugs from other countries.

Children's Health Insurance

Texas Democrats proposed, fought for, and passed the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) that provided health coverage for over 500,000 Texas children. However, when Texas Republicans gained control of the legislature, they terminated CHIP coverage for approximately 160,000 children and reduced the benefits package for the remaining 340,000 children. In addition, another 300,000 Texas children will not receive Medicaid coverage because of new restrictions and barriers Republicans created to make eligibility for children more difficult.

We believe health care coverage should be secured for all children in Texas. We support the utilization of all federal funds, which have been set aside specifically for Texas children, and we oppose the redistribution of those funds for the benefit of children in other states. We also support the simplified application process and restoring the policy to provide 12 months of continuous health care coverage for all programs that provide coverage for uninsured children, including restoration of coverage cut by Republican legislators. We support applying for and securing federal waivers and using existing state and local resources to allow more working Texas families to enroll in CHIP. We support vigorous outreach efforts to secure access to all available health insurance programs for our children.

Many parents whose children are eligible for Medicaid and the CHIP lack health insurance. Many of these parents work part time or for small businesses, and either do not have access to health care coverage or simply cannot afford the high premiums. We support Democratic proposals to allow these parents to enroll in the programs for which their children are already eligible, recognizing that children are more likely enrolled in programs if their parents are eligible too.

Mental Health Services

Family preservation and personal dignity is maintained by enhancing the mental health of individual family members, yet state budget cuts passed by Republicans will deny or substantially reduce critical mental health services to thousands of Texans. Texas Democrats support:

- Comprehensive mental health services provided at parity with other health services;
- Expansion of community centers, home services, and school-based programs that assist children with emotional and traumatic problems;
- Appropriate acute in-patient services for victims of trauma;
- Expansion of programs to deal with Alzheimer's and related illnesses and their caregivers;
- Full restoration of the mental health benefits for Medicaid and CHIP recipients; and
- Efforts to prevent privatization of services that reduces the quality of care.

Expanding Opportunities for People with Disabilities

Texas Democrats support choices that promote full and productive lives and initiatives affording equal opportunities to the physically, developmentally and the mentally disabled or impaired. We support full and vigorous enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

HIV Education and Services

Texas Democrats support increased education initiatives and services to address the HIV epidemic, including increased access to treatment and therapy that improves quality of life and encourages return to the workforce.

Shortage of Medical Practitioners

Republicans have failed to increase medical school enrollment in Texas to keep up with the state's growing population. Republicans likewise have failed to address shortages of nurses, physician's assistants, and nurse practitioners. Texas Democrats support increased opportunities for medical education in Texas.

An Affordable Health Delivery System in Rural Texas

Texas Democrats support improving access to a functioning and affordable health delivery system to provide health care in critically underserved rural areas. We support:

- Incentives to recruit and retain physicians and other medical practitioners who will practice in rural areas, such as scholarships and forgiveness or interest rate reductions for loans used for medical education;
- Grants and zero-interest loans for public hospitals in rural areas;
- Programs that bring medical technology to rural areas, including telemedicine and telepharmacy;
- A fairer, more equal system for Medicare reimbursements to rural hospitals;
- Policies to encourage doctors to practice in rural areas and keep rural hospitals from closing;
- Improved emergency care systems that provide access to medical care facilities, especially trauma care;
- Utilizing nurse practitioners and physician assistants in underserved areas; and
- Transportation systems to deliver patients to facilities and mobile facilities to patients.

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Growing the Economy, Creating Good Jobs

To fulfill the promise of equal opportunity, we must cultivate a high-performance economy that rewards entrepreneurs and workers alike for contributing to the prosperity and quality of life of all Americans and Texans. To that end, we must put an end to policies that encourage American companies to seek offshore tax shelters and outsource American jobs at the expense of hard working Americans. Developing the full potential of the Texas workforce, through the creation and retention of good private-sector jobs, remains essential to our economic security. We support:

- Trade policies that consider Texas' interests in generating jobs, affording dignity to working people, and protecting the environment. While encouraging global trade that meets these goals, we oppose practices that subvert these goals, such as child or slave labor, unconscionably low wages, and environmental degradation. We condemn Republican trade policy that promotes and celebrates the "off-shoring" or "outsourcing" of skilled jobs at the expense of highly trained American workers;
- Economic development policies that promote entrepreneurship, especially by fostering the independent initiative of small businesses that enlist the talents of Texas workers to create new goods and services;
- Economic development policies that enhance productivity through the application of computer and information technology;
- Research and development of environmentally-sound alternative energy systems that offer economic opportunity and help achieve energy independence;
- Health-care programs that make it affordable for small businesses to provide health insurance for their employees;
- Preference for American and Texas products and local markets, and protection for local wage standards in government contracts;

- A meaningful increase in the federal minimum wage, to at least \$7 per hour, aimed at giving all workers the ability to live dignified lives, while enforcing the law Texas Democrats enacted in 2001 to make sure the state minimum wage for farm workers keeps up with increases in the federal minimum wage;
- The guarantee of overtime pay now under assault by Republican efforts to weaken federal overtime pay protections;
- Competition and accountability in state government, but we oppose wholesale privatization schemes that result in less competition, less accountability, and inadequate delivery of services;
- Measures to ensure that companies receiving government economic development subsidies actually deliver what they promise in terms of jobs;
- Programs for rapid and comprehensive retraining of workers impacted by layoffs and for improving and updating the skills of workers seeking career advancement;
- Programs that train those entering the workforce to acquire skills and allow them to participate in the economy without pitting these new entrants against other workers in a drive for low wages;
- A strong technology-development program, led by a strong space program that features revitalized manned space exploration and the benefits provided by the Hubble Space Telescope and other programs that serve as a catalyst for productive investment in scientific research essential to our economic and national security in a competitive global economy;
- The right to a diverse and safe workplace, free from injury and exposure to harmful materials, plus meaningful sanctions against employers who knowingly or negligently expose workers to injury or death;
- A workers' compensation system that provides affordable coverage for employers, meaningful compensation to injured workers, the right of those workers to choose their own doctor, incentives for employers to retain injured employees, and due consideration for the rights of workers within the legal system;
- The right of all employees, public and private, to organize, collect dues, designate their income voluntarily to organizations and agencies of their choosing, and to negotiate collectively with their employers through representatives of their choice;
- A prohibition of the hiring of replacement workers for employees who are on strike;
- The freedom of a democratic majority of employees in a workplace to choose union representation by signing cards authorizing a union to negotiate on their behalf, with mediation and arbitration for first contract disputes and with penalties that serve as a true deterrent for employers who violate employee organizing rights;
- The right of unions to engage in political activity free from partisan attempts to limit the ability of unions to participate in the political process;
- Freedom from discriminatory employment practices, including support for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act;
- Restoring the statewide job bank and utilizing U.S. Department of Labor data on the demand for occupational training;
- Equal opportunity for the public to invest in any private ownership of public facilities, including sports facilities;
- Prohibiting improper use of "no bid contracts" and diligent enforcement of fair bidding procedures to provide the best overall value for all government contracts for goods and services, including those contracts that involve assistance to foreign nations;
- Improved regulation of banks, utilities, and insurance carriers and aggressive enforcement of Anti-Trust Laws to ensure public trust in government licensed and regulated entities central to the success and stability of the economy;

- A prohibition of policies and insurance scams, including those commonly known as "dead peasant" policies, that leverage state retirement funds into windfall profits for Republicans and their corporate cronies; and
- Maintaining provisions of copyright laws that provide for "fair use" of copyrighted material, including that material used to research issues of public interest.

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The Environment

We recognize that clean air and pure water are essential to protecting public health and the State's economy. Democrats have acted to reverse the years of neglect by Republican Governors and legislators, but today, as the future of the global environment hangs in the balance, we again face the threat of cynical policies proposed by the most dangerous, anti-environment administration in history. We will work to preserve the public health, economic viability, and the quality of our environment for future generations.

In recent years, Texas Democrats authored legislation ending the Republican voluntary program that permitted dirty industrial plants to continue to violate modern health standards. We passed legislation to protect Texas drinking water supplies from waste at giant factory feeding operations, and Democrats led the reform of the major Texas environmental agency (TCEQ) to increase the rights of Texans to contest new pollution sources in their neighborhoods and provide stricter regulation of plants that repeatedly violate environmental laws.

Democrats will make reducing the number of asthma cases caused by air pollution a high priority. We support policies that will clean the air of Texas cities with strategies that will result in smarter and cheaper pollution reductions, using choice and markets where appropriate, rather than Republican ideas such as requiring lawn mowing during the heat of the day and lowering speed limits. To clean the air and to protect children's health, we support:

- The Clean Air Act and oppose Republican plans to weaken the provisions requiring new and modified plants to meet modern health standards;
- Clean up of coal-burning power plants, including mercury reductions;
- Requiring 20% of the State's electricity to come from Texas based, non-polluting renewable energy such as wind and solar;
- Incentives, such as tax rebates, to reward Texans who purchase clean automobiles;
- Incentives to encourage the purchase of energy-efficient and water-conserving appliances;
- Rewarding those who reduce pollution from automobile by choosing to drive less with programs such as mileage based insurance;
- An increase in energy efficiency programs that simultaneously reduce air pollution from power plants and save Texans money;
- State legislation that will protect pregnant women and their fetuses from brain damage causing mercury by requiring power plants and other industrial facilities to reduce mercury emissions and oppose Republican efforts to weaken and delay mercury standards; and
- The repeal of S.B. 1265, the Criminal Polluters Protection Act signed into law by Governor Perry, which severely interferes with the ability of local officials to prosecute criminals that poison our children's air and water.

Rather than the Republican denials and delays that lead to further loss of wildlife and lack of access for ordinary Texans to natural areas, we support:

- The park acquisition program recommended by Texas Tech and Texas A & M Universities.
- The use of incentives such as safe harbor agreements to provide incentives and regulatory certainty for those who voluntarily protect endangered species on their lands; and
- Increased funding for national and state parks.

An adequate supply of safe, clean water is essential to the health and economic future of Texas. Rather than subsidizing boondoggle water projects that provide little water at great taxpayer expense and do nothing to assure the safety of our aquifers and groundwater resources, we support:

- Comparing the cost and benefits of proposed large new reservoirs with that of other alternatives;
- Implementing aggressive water conservation and reuse practices;
- Protect our Texas bays, estuaries, in-stream flows, and wetlands in Texas and support policies that safeguard environmentally safe offshore reefs, to preserve maritime resources and fisheries that enhance commercial and recreational fishing and hunting, and related industries;
- Acquisition of open spaces and easements for water conservation;
- Repeal of provision in state law which block local ordinances that provide enhanced water quality protections;
- Effective state regional water planning to ensure water quality for future generations and state legal support for groundwater conservation districts; and
- Effective regulatory protections regarding transmission of highly explosive materials through pipelines passing through densely populated and environmentally sensitive areas.

We also support:

- Replacing the current Republican environmental commissioners who favor the Governor's big contributors in permit and enforcement cases with regulators who will instead use science and the facts;
- Requiring polluters to pay for the cleanup of abandoned toxic waste sites rather than impose the costs on the taxpayers as Republicans have legislated;
- Enhancing State registries for birth defects, cancer, and greenhouse gas emissions;
- Eliminating the "volume discount" for big polluters, which is unfair for small business and encourages greater levels of pollution;
- Environmental siting rules that protect poor and minority communities;
- "Right to know" laws, food safety regulations, and strong regulation of pesticides and oppose Republican efforts to weaken these health and safety protections;
- More State and Federal funds to address border environmental problems, including construction of water and wastewater treatment systems and oppose Republican to short change the border;
- Programs to reduce the threat to our children caused by indoor air pollution, including toxic mold, at our State's schools;
- Expanded testing of fish and shellfish for mercury and other contaminants and public notification of health risks; and
- Proper management and regulation of landfills that threaten community health.

We oppose:

- The establishment of nuclear waste sites in Texas that will line the pockets of big contributors to Governor Perry and saddle the State with large future liabilities without ensuring adequate safeguards for the disposal of nuclear waste and its transportation through Texans communities.
- State policy that would effectively sanction the depletion of limited state water resources by "water wildcatters."

Public Safety

The Texas Democratic Party believes all Texans are entitled to be safe and secure, free from the fear of violence. The guilty must be justly punished for the crimes they commit, the innocent must be protected, the rights of victims must be ensured, the accused must be assured due process under law, and public safety officers must be strongly supported. In addition, restitution must be made to victims and society. These principles should be enforced in urban and rural areas, inner cities and suburbs, and without regard to the ethnic make up of a community.

Texas faces an imminent crisis in prison space unless we reduce the number of people we send to prison by using prevention, education and alternative sentencing programs for non-violent offenders. We can either spend money preventing people from becoming criminals or spend even more money building more and more prisons. Texas has more people in prison than any other state, including California, with an incarceration rate of 692 per 100,000 population, compared to a national average of 480; 455 in California, and 343 in New York.

Although many families still do not feel safe in their own neighborhoods, violent crime has decreased overall and Texas Democrats have led efforts to make the Texas criminal justice system tough yet fair. Since 2002, Texas Democrats have:

- Passed legislation, following difficulties with the DNA evidence testing and operations in the Houston Police Department Crime Lab, to require the Texas Department of Public Safety to establish an accreditation process for crime laboratories, including DNA laboratories, that conduct forensic analyses of physical evidence for use in criminal proceedings;
- Passed legislation to clarify the standard of proof with regard to post-conviction access to DNA testing of biological evidence;
- Passed legislation to specify that sexual contact between an employee of a long-term care facility and a resident constitutes sexual assault; and
- Passed the Tulia bill allowing 14 innocent people from Tulia who had been wrongfully arrested, convicted and imprisoned as a result of a rogue undercover operation targeting African-Americans to be released on bond while awaiting a decision by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. Pardons were later granted to 35 people who were convicted of drug charges in the Tulia scandal based on the testimony of an undercover agent who was later charged with perjury.

Juvenile Justice

We believe prevention is the best solution to juvenile crime, but juveniles must be held accountable when they break the law. The juvenile justice system must teach young people drawn to a life of crime at an early age that they will be held accountable and responsible for their actions. Texas has more people under the age of 18 held in state prisons than any other state. Every Texas child who ends up in the criminal justice

system represents a failure of public policy and a disgraceful lack of responsible state leadership. We must create safe neighborhoods, good schools and stable jobs with livable wages for the parents and caregivers of our children, so Texas children do not end up wasting their lives in prison and ruining the lives of crime victims. We support:

- Teaching responsibility to nonviolent juvenile offenders through programs such as boot camps and restitution centers;
- Harsh penalties for adults who intentionally or negligently allow handguns and other weapons fall into the hands of unsupervised juveniles;
- Increased funding for the state prison system's 83,000-student Windham School District, as well as all other public school districts in Texas, because education and job training are the keys to ensuring children leave the prison system and do not return;
- Drug prevention programs in our schools and communities, including school-based clinics to provide our children with access to drug counseling, education and outreach programs that stop drug addiction before it begins;
- Mandatory background checks of adults working with juveniles in crime and drug prevention programs;
- Severe punishment of individuals or groups who corrupt our children by recruiting or enticing them to commit crimes; and
- Programs that help high-risk kids stay in school and stay positively involved in their communities.

Adult Corrections

To continue the fight against crime in the effort to make our streets and our homes safer, Texas Democrats support tough and smart policies, including:

- Ensuring the availability of sufficient secure prison space to prevent release of violent offenders and revisiting sentencing guidelines for non-violent and property offenders;
- Ensuring that prisons are staffed by professionally trained and well-compensated corrections officers;
- Rewriting the relevant Texas criminal code provisions to take into account modern understanding of severe mental illness and to broaden the legal definition of insanity to ensure that the public is kept safe while allowing treatment for mentally ill inmates. The state's mental health policy should ensure that people receive treatment before their illnesses cause them to commit violent crimes;
- Restoring funding to and re-establishing the Criminal Justice Policy Council to provide professional data and analysis of criminal justice policies in Texas;
- Opposing the further privatization of Texas prisons and mandating a pay scale comparable to public prisons for prison guards at existing private prisons;
- Reducing recidivism rates by increasing rehabilitation and re-entry programs, with special emphasis on reducing the high rate of functional illiteracy and drug use among people released from prison, including the reversal of policies that deny student loans and grants to those having who have completed sentences for drug felonies;
- Sensitive treatment for the victims of crime and stronger emphasis on compensation to crime victims by the criminals themselves;
- Strong enforcement of the James Byrd, Jr., Memorial Hate Crimes Act;
- Severe punishment for repeat and violent offenders, including longer sentences for major drug dealers;
- Using video monitoring at all Texas prisons and other innovative steps to avoid abuse and mistreatment of prisoners by both prison employees and other inmates;

- Doing away with deferred adjudication and probation for sex offenders;
- Ensuring proper oversight and regulation of crime labs, especially labs that process DNA evidence, to assure proper analysis of all DNA evidence, including timely analysis of evidence from medical rape kits and entering such evidence in a computerized database;
- Placing more police officers on the streets in underserved areas;
- Increasing the amount of federal grant money obtained through the Edward Byrne Law Enforcement Assistance Program used for drug treatment and drug court programs, homeland security operations, and crime lab upgrades, and prohibiting the use of these funds by problem-plagued regional narcotics task forces, such as the one responsible for the wrongful arrests and convictions of so many innocent people in Tulia.
- Crime prevention programs addressing drug and alcohol addiction and other root causes of crime and stressing the need for educational opportunity;
- Effective supervision of parolees and probationers, with a certainty of sanctions for serious parole violators, and effective treatment programs for all parolees;
- Tough anti-stalking laws and laws to protect witnesses and parties from harassment and retribution;
- Eliminating disparity in sentencing for crimes that involve distinct but similar types of drugs, such as crack cocaine and powder cocaine;
- Allowing incarcerated offenders and their families to remain in regular telephone communication at normal commercial rates in order to help inmates and their family members maintain strong family ties, thus reducing recidivism rates;
- Stronger enforcement of Texas' DWI laws;
- Stronger enforcement of laws pertaining to and punishment of white collar and corporate criminals;
- Establishing an "Innocence Commission" to examine only cases of innocent people who were wrongfully convicted and imprisoned and propose corrections in the system to reduce the number of unnecessary wrongful convictions and recommend a process for the prompt release of individual found innocent.
- Ending racial profiling in searches and traffic stops by regional drug task forces and requiring them to collect the same data as other law enforcement agencies in Texas. Continued vigilance by all law enforcement agencies to end racial profiling, especially by ensuring reporting of racial profiling data;
- The right of every person to be tried by a jury that broadly reflects the ethnic makeup of the community, including legislation to eliminate the disgraceful practice of using all-white juries in cases involving accused who are people of color.
- Expansion of community anti-crime programs and re-prioritization of the War on Drugs to more effectively keep drugs out of our schools and our communities; and
- Improved pay and benefits for law enforcement and corrections officers who put their lives on the line every day.

Sexual Assault and Family and Domestic Violence

Sexual assault and family and domestic violence are violent crimes that disproportionately harm women and children, and because they often involve a cyclical, generational pattern, entire communities suffer as long as these crimes continue to be perpetrated. We support:

- Strong enforcement of Texas laws to hold offenders accountable and increase the likelihood that victims will come forward to report these crimes;
- Policies and programs that encourage advocacy, support, and safety for victims and their families;

- Early prevention efforts focused on youth to decrease the incidence of sexual and domestic violence prior to victimization;
- Training programs for law enforcement, prosecutorial, judicial, health care, mental health and education professionals in Texas to promote increased understanding of and improved response to the crimes of domestic violence and sexual assault;
- Public education programs that teach problem-solving and communications skills; and
- A strong statewide initiative to reduce the alarming increase of child abuse and neglect through investment in effective early prevention programs.

Capital Punishment

When capital punishment is used, the people must be assured that it is fairly administered. The Texas death penalty system has been severely criticized by major Texas newspapers, religious leaders, and the appellate courts. On May 18, 2004, Governor Perry even refused a 5-1 recommendation made by his Republican appointees to the Board of Pardons and Paroles, who asked him to commute the death sentence of a person with mental illness to life in prison. Texas Democrats extend our deepest sympathies to all victims of crime and especially to the family members of murder victims, and we strongly support their rights. We believe reforms will improve the administration of justice in Texas to protect the innocent and bring the guilty to justice.

In the modern era, Texas has executed more than 320 people – by far more than any other state in the nation. The frequency of executions and inadequacies in our criminal justice system increase the likelihood that an innocent person will be executed. In order to promote public confidence in the fairness of the Texas criminal justice system, Texas Democrats support the establishment of a Texas Capital Punishment Commission to study the Texas death penalty system. During that study, we recommend a temporary moratorium of executions pending action on the Commission's findings. The commission's report should include recommendations to correct any problems or inequities found in the administration of the capital punishment in Texas, including consideration of the following reforms that are supported by Democrats:

- Life without parole, to give juries the option of sentencing offenders convicted of capital crimes to life without the possibility of release or parole;
- The right to be properly represented by counsel, to ensure that every person accused of a capital crime, regardless of income, race or the county of jurisdiction, has equal access to qualified trial and appellate attorneys, including the establishment of an Office of Public Defenders for Capital Cases;
- Use of DNA technology to remove legal barriers to allow the proper use of all available technologies to insure guilt or innocence before executions are carried out;
- A ban on executions of people who commit offenses as juveniles;
- Allowing death penalty appellants to argue racial discrimination using sentencing statistics, to ensure that no Texan is sentenced to death because of race;
- Procedures for implementing the Supreme Court's 2002 ban on executions of people with mental retardation;
- Banning execution of the mentally ill and providing juries with sentencing options in such cases, including life without parole;
- The right to consular notification, to provide non-US citizens arrested in Texas their right under international law to contact their consulates; and
- Requiring the Board of Pardons and Paroles to meet in person to discuss and vote on every case involving the death sentence.

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Rural Texas and Agriculture

The unprecedented mid-decade Republican redistricting debacle not only disadvantaged Democrats - it also devastated rural representation in Congress by eliminating rural districts for purely partisan purposes. This could not have come at a worse time for rural Texans. Rural population trends are increasingly elderly as younger generations move to urban and suburban areas, putting tremendous pressure on rural health care, businesses, schools and infrastructure.

Texas Democrats understand the obstacles rural parts of our state are facing, be it the loss of good jobs or insufficient long-term drinking water supplies. We are committed to providing the necessary tools for rural Texas to meet the unprecedented demand on its resources and working to maintain good jobs for those who prefer to live in rural Texas.

- We will not leave a single stone unturned in our efforts to ensure a safe and adequate water supply for rural Texans that balances the needs of farmers and ranchers with those who live in communities around the state.
- Rural communities must be freed from the burden of too many unfunded mandates from our federal government. Texas Democrats will work to undo the damage being done by dishonest and irresponsible spending, exploding deficits, raiding trust funds such as Social Security and the ballooning national debt. Our national leaders should balance the federal budget – as was done in the 1990s – and protect the country without raiding Social Security or cutting farm programs, rural education, transportation, rural development, and small business loans; cuts in that hurt the rural economy most.

Agriculture is unique because it is necessary for our survival, is important to domestic and international trade, is vulnerable to forces of nature, and lacks control over pricing for its products. We must maintain the world leadership role of Texas farmers and ranchers by:

- Demanding that TDA devise an effective marketing plan to assist food and fiber producers in selling their products, including training in the use of computers and the internet for Texas agricultural producers;
- Encouraging large numbers of family farmers and ranchers to produce food and fiber to ensure a stable market and decrease dependence on imports;
- Supporting federal farm legislation that establishes minimum price support levels and economic protections for family farmers engaged in agricultural production, because a stable agricultural economy is an investment in our state and nation's safety and security from foreign dependence;
- Preserving the proper use of agricultural use property tax exemptions.

Untold opportunities to restore and protect vital farmlands for clean air and water and wildlife benefits are being squandered as the Republican-controlled Congress repeatedly provides insufficient funds for four key conservation programs in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Accordingly we urge proper and adequate funding of the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetland Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.

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Protecting Democracy: Election and Campaign Reform

The democratic process depends on the faith of the voters that their votes have been accurately counted in a fair and impartial election conducted under the rule of law. That faith has been shaken in recent years by numerous abuses, including: government-sponsored purges of legitimate voters, voter intimidation, problems with inaccurate voting systems, the illegal use of corporate money to secure Republican control of the Legislature, and the unprecedented abuses of mid-decade redistricting effort by Republicans who used the offices of state and federal government for partisan purposes to deny voters an effective choice in elections for Congress.

Texas Democrats support changes in state and federal law to protect our democracy from Republican campaign activities that violate our core democratic values, including:

- A renewed commitment to enforcement of the Voting Rights Act and the right of all Texans to participate in the political process, including accurate instruction in the use of voting systems to ensure no voter is denied their right to vote due to language barriers or new and confusing voting systems;
- The fundamental right of all eligible voters to cast their ballots and have their votes counted in a system that is free from intimidation; comprehensive ethics and campaign finance reforms to assure full reporting and disclosure of campaign finance, lobbying, and other activities that influence the operation of government; including all sources of money that influence elections;
- a prohibition of corporate expenditures intended to influence elections;
- a constitutional prohibition of mid-decade redistricting unless ordered by a court that found a districting plan in violation of legal or constitutional standards;
- protections to prevent the abuse of the legislative process and agencies of the state and federal government in redistricting efforts that place partisan considerations above all legitimate redistricting principles;
- Full voter participation in all elections, including continued selection of Party nominees through primary elections;
- the continued election of judges, while working toward meaningful judicial campaign finance reform and the election of a more diverse judiciary;
- legislation to forbid state constitutional amendment elections from being held at times other than November of even-numbered years;
- effective reforms to prevent important public policy decisions, including gubernatorial vetoes and appointments, from being effectively “sold” in return for large campaign contributions;
- effective reforms that diminish the influence of wealthy special interests in the democratic process without hampering the ability of political parties to engage in legitimate activities to deliver their message and get out the vote;
- enactment of legislation providing for public financing of general election campaigns for elective office at the local, state, and federal levels;
- Streamlined reporting and disclosure of campaign contributions;
- Limits on campaign contributions provided they are accompanied by meaningful provisions that would limit campaign spending and avoid unintended consequences that could harm candidates who play by the rules;
- Legislation to provide the Texas Ethics Commission with the authority to fully enforce the laws under its jurisdiction as specified by the Texas Election Code;
- Reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission to prevent using federal licensing of broadcast stations as a restraint on free speech;
- A requirement that electronic voting systems deploy a voter verifiable paper printout to ensure that our votes are counted and can be accurately recounted

and a certification and selection process for voting systems that is open to public review, testing, and analysis;

- Revisions in the “Help America Vote Act” to prevent the all-too-frequent practice of purging of qualified voters by state and local governments based on arbitrary criteria that disproportionately deny the right to vote to people of color;
- The adoption of rules and procedures that encourage open and fair debate and accountability in the legislative process; and
- Enforcement of the prohibition against the use of extraordinary sums of state tax money to lobby members of the Legislature.
- Support for funding of voter education programs that promote voter participation in Texas.

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Rights and Freedoms

Full protection and equal opportunity under the law remain bedrock values of Texas Democrats. We believe every Texan and every family has the right to participate fully and equally in American society and enjoy its benefits and freedoms. The Constitution is intended to protect freedoms, not to be used as a tool to restrict freedoms or dictate social policy by forcing states to discriminate against groups of their own citizens based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. Free debate and discussion and the enforcement of civil rights have kept this country strong for more than 200 years. It is wrong to write discrimination into the Constitution of the United States or the Texas Constitution. We pledge to:

- Fight all forms of discrimination;
- Enforce laws prohibiting sexual harassment;
- Promote the right to privacy;
- Support policies that protect the confidentiality and privacy of an individual's personal, medical, and financial records - in both paper and electronic formats;
- Work for the immediate repeal of provisions of the Patriot Act that are inconsistent with the letter or spirit of the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution;
- Protect every state employee's right and duty to provide factual answers to the public in response to requests for information on matters of public interest;
- Support efforts to eliminate secrecy in government by fully enforcing the people's right of access to governmental records and information on matters of public interest;
- Reject efforts to arbitrarily censor materials in public libraries and efforts to censor textbooks to reflect narrow ideologies and discriminatory or sectarian beliefs;
- Support Native American nations' rights to self- identification and self- rule; and
- Preserve and enforce all state and federal disability rights laws, including vigorous enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

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Access to Justice

The Republicans rewarded their wealthy corporate contributors by enacting the most dangerous assault on the rights of individuals to seek justice in Texas history. Under the guise of medical malpractice reform and a misleading campaign that barely secured the

passage of "Proposition 12," the Republicans turned our Courts over to the wealthy insurance companies and corporate interests at the expense of the people. Texas Democrats call on Texans to demand that the Legislature to overturn this gross injustice. To that end, we support:

- Open access to the court system for all Texans, as guaranteed by the Texas Constitution, including the right to fair and impartial jury trials and respect by the courts for jury verdicts;
- Protection for Texans from any unreasonable limitations on access to the court system, including unilateral imposition of mandatory arbitration proceedings;
- Affordable and efficient access to justice for all Texans through the ability to join together to seek redress for personal injury and property damage;
- Improved access to a full range of legal services to assist low-income Texans;
- The full protection of due process of law for all Texans in all circumstances; and
- The unimpeded right to redress grievances to the government and report crime to the authorities, a right denied by Governor Perry's veto of the Anti-SLAPP Bill.

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Religious Freedom

The Texas Democratic Party believes religious freedoms are guaranteed by the state and federal Constitutions and calls upon government to scrupulously honor every Texan's right to religious freedom while respecting the separation of church and state. Many Democrats hold political views that are motivated by deeply held personal beliefs. No political party and no extremist group hold an exclusive lock on such beliefs. We recognize the importance of religion and prayer in the lives of Texans and support every individual's right to practice his or her own beliefs without imposing them on others.

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Homeland Security

The State of Texas should work in conjunction with local and federal governments to ensure the highest possible level of security for the communities, infrastructure, and assets of the State of Texas, despite federal funding cuts for the "first responders" who serve on the front lines of the war against terror. Texas Democrats support:

- a greater level of support from the state and federal governments to relieve the burden on local governments of training and preparing first responders;
- prioritizing the increased protection of vulnerable entities in the state, such as chemical manufacturing facilities, ports, and agricultural and industrial sites;
- an emphasis on strengthening border security through appropriately trained customs and immigration officials rather than military personnel; and
- safeguards to prevent the imposition of policies that would violate or conflict with the Bill of Rights and the U.S. Constitution.

Veterans

State and federal policy should demonstrate respect for the sacrifices made by military veterans by ensuring a smooth transition from military to civilian life and providing benefits to honor their service. We commend Texas Democrats who are leading the effort to overcome the Bush Administration's proposal to cut the Veterans Affairs budget.

by \$910 million in 2006 and their successful effort to end the "widow's tax" on the families of over 200,000 veterans. Texas Democrats support:

- efforts to facilitate professional licensing for skills learned during military service including programs like Troops to Teachers;
- efforts to provide job training for veterans;
- adequate and affordable health insurance coverage and health care services for veterans and their families, including mental health care services;
- programs to encourage and support veterans and their families to obtain higher education, such as expanding the Hazlewood Act to permit veterans who have not fully utilized their entitlement under this act to pass on any remainder of the unused credit hours to his their children; and
- the right of veterans groups to utilize charitable gaming to the same degree as profit-making gaming entities may be allowed by the State of Texas.

Supporting the Men and Women of the Military

Texas should demonstrate its support for military families and communities. We insist that our military members on active duty and in the Reserve receive fair pay and allowances. They must be the best organized, trained, and equipped fighting force. We encourage city, county, state, and federal elected officials to review present benefits and determine how they can be enhanced. Texas Democrats support:

- programs that assist families of deployed service members in managing difficulties created by longer and more frequent deployments of Guard and Reserve personnel, such as counseling, debt service delays, tax deferrals, and basic needs assistance;
- initiatives to financially assist families of service members who suffer an extended loss of employment income due directly to extended or repeated deployments;
- the efforts of military communities to generate and utilize revenue and incentives to prevent and recover from base realignments and closings;
- interstate cooperation to enable the successful transition of families from one state to another, including public school education, job searches, and health care continuity;
- efforts to prevent predatory lending practices targeted at military personnel and their families, such as payday loans and sale-leaseback transactions;
- A prohibition of a military draft absent a congressional declaration of war, and an end to practices that change deployment and other terms of service for existing military personnel in the middle of the game and amount to a draft in disguise; and
- The right of female soldiers and dependents to have the same access to full range of reproductive choices and related services that are provided to others.

National Service

Building on the successful AmeriCorps model, Texas Democrats support a national service program that would involve 500,000 young Americans within a decade, through a program funded by eliminating subsidized, guaranteed profits for banks making student loans, including:

- 75,000 young people helping educate children in troubled schools;
- 25,000 young people improving our homeland security;
- 100,000 young people serving in other critical areas, from building affordable housing, to helping seniors live independently, to keeping our water and parks cleaner;
- 100,000 young people preparing toddlers for school;

- 100,000 young people helping children learn to read; and
- 100,000 young people helping older students find the path to college.

Immigration

The Texas Democratic Party recognizes the responsibility of the United States to secure its borders. Legislation and policies must effectively respond to the current state of affairs without compromising national security.

The United States has been, and always will be, the land of opportunity. The immigrants who come to our state and nation not only renew this idea of opportunity, but also strengthen our nation's spirit and economic well being, especially in Texas. In that spirit, Texas Democrats support immigration policies that ensure economic opportunities for all individuals and businesses, strengthen families, and protect people against discrimination and violations of their civil liberties and human rights.

We continue to oppose measures that would limit our state's ability to provide for the health, education, safety, and welfare of our people, including immigrant members of our communities, and we oppose efforts to turn state agencies into branches of immigration enforcement. Immigrant bashing, scapegoating, and the unfair retroactive use of petty criminal history are not only misguided, but inevitably polarize our society while failing to solve problems. Since its founding, our nation's strength has been its diversity and our future success depends upon it.

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Foreign Policy

Texas Democrats believe America draws its power from the trust and respect of other nations, not only from the might of weapons. American foreign policy must be based on the same values that made our nation a beacon of hope, decency, justice and morality. America created and led global alliances to guarantee the survival of freedom through two World Wars, the Cold War, the Gulf War, and recently in Bosnia and Kosovo. American leadership in the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations has been fundamental to international cooperation for human and economic development and for security.

In 2001, America was attacked by enemies of freedom and democracy - the international terrorist group known as Al Qaeda - in a heinous act that was a crime against the American people and all humanity. With the concern and respect of the rest of the free world, we launched a war on terror with an understood national goal that the intentional targeting of innocents would be forever eliminated. Today, that immense reservoir of good will has been drained, the war on terror has been misdirected, and we have failed for three years to bring our attackers to justice. Those responsible for these failures should be held accountable.

All Americans recognize that Saddam Hussein was an odious dictator, and none mourn his defeat. But Americans also recognize that we have always believed that the end alone is never sufficient; and that the means must be equally virtuous. The Bush administration's case for going to war has been built on false pretenses and those deceptions must be fully exposed. Weapons of mass destruction have not been found in Iraq. Links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were claimed by the administration, but the bipartisan commission investigating 9-11 said it found no credible evidence that Iraq and Al-Qaeda "cooperated on attacks against the United States." The U.S. policy of

not launching pre-emptive strikes, absent evidence of an imminent threat, must be restored.

Texas Democrats stand by all the men and women of our armed forces, as well as diplomats and others in the service of our country who are often placed in harm's way. We believe the advice, wisdom and experience of our professional military officers, which have been subordinated to the rigid worldviews and political concerns of those in the current administration, must be central to successful military policy in Iraq and elsewhere. We are committed to developing a clearly-defined Iraq policy based on a respect for sovereignty and international cooperation with our friends and allies rather than a go-it-alone policy that threatens to undermine a legacy of generations of American leadership that secured a safer and more just world. Our hope and desire is that our troops come home from Iraq as soon as possible, through an exit strategy that does not destabilize the region and place more lives in danger.

Texas Democrats believe America must create a new era of alliances for the post 9-11 world; modernize our military and diplomatic organizations to meet the threat of terrorism while cooperating in an international effort to eliminate weapons of mass destruction; use to the fullest our nation's diplomatic, intelligence and economic resources; and secure our full independence and freedom through forward thinking policies designed to free us from dependence on the resources of any nation or region, including Mideast oil.

Texas Democrats recognize that lasting stability in the Middle East depends upon a true, mutually respectful peace with safe and secure borders and governments dedicated to peace and democracy for Israelis and Palestinians. We affirm our long-standing policy that such a peace must result from direct negotiations between willing and responsible partners. Texas Democrats call for an end to all preaching and teaching of hatred and intolerance and for the withdrawal of support from agencies and programs that promote hatred. America must not dictate a solution, but we must be prepared to assist and encourage actions that lead toward peaceful coexistence, and we note with dismay the current administration's lackluster efforts to encourage those who seek a lasting peace in the Middle East.

America can be made stronger and regain confidence and trust among the nations of the world by acting to ensure respect for human rights and restoring America's leadership role in the international community. The United States must comply with U.S. and international laws banning torture and maltreatment of prisoners. Our Declaration of Independence urges "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." Our foreign policy must reflect that core value by promoting policies that addresses urgent needs of the world community and minimizes the potential for hatred and conflict.