***What We Heard at Joint Finance Committee***

**Rep. Stephanie T. Bolden and Sen. Ernesto B. López**

Last month, we were humbled to join our colleagues on the Joint Finance Committee as we began the state budget writing process for fiscal year 2023. While the majority of our time during the hearings was spent listening to financial presentations from cabinet secretaries, statewide elected officials, department chiefs and division directors, the final voices heard each day were the people we are privileged to serve: our fellow Delawareans.

What we heard from those who shared public comment was thoughtful advocacy and concern for the many challenges our state faces as we lift each other out of the greatest health and economic crisis of our lifetime. Shared most often were the strains placed on those at each end of life’s arc, our children and senior citizens. Significant staffing shortages at long term assisted living facilities and a disconcerting increase of Delaware babies born with low birth weights, particularly among our Black American and Hispanic residents, are just two of the many troubling metrics holding back the health and welfare of our must vulnerable. The pandemic has added increased pressure to an already difficult problem.

To this end, we both feel strongly that a more intentional and bipartisan focus be made addressing the chronic underinvestment of care to disadvantaged populations statewide. While each of us serve in separate legislative chambers, represent vastly different areas of the state, and are not in the same political party, we do share a clear-eyed understanding of the fact that no district boundaries exist when it comes to bettering the health of all Delawareans. To their credit, leadership in the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, our five state hospital systems, and local community health organizations, have done yeoman’s work in pulling us out of the deep end of this pandemic.

Now it’s up to us who were elected by the people we heard last month to shine a light on the health inequities faced by so many and, with smart and sustained funding, embrace the least among us who have suffered the most. In some cases, statutory requirements for fiscal support are unambiguous as they are with the McNesby Act, which both of us are committed to supporting. Fully funding competitive salaries for direct care support professionals through the McNesby Act will not only alleviate stress on the health system, but more importantly, reduce pressures on caregivers and families.

Throughout this work, we ask that you continue to share your voices so we may meet our constitutional obligation which we swore to uphold by freely acknowledging that the powers of our office flow from the people we are privileged to represent. While reasonable people, people of good conscious, can agree to disagree on the issues of the day, there is no disagreement on the importance placed in providing ample opportunity for our constituents to be heard. To that end, as the fiscal 2023 budget process continues through June 30, please continue to voice your opinion and share your thoughts at: JFC\_Public\_Comment@delaware.gov.

**Stephanie T. Bolden**

**Delaware House of Representatives**

**District 2**

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**District 6**