

# Senator Judith Zaffirini



## Reports to the Families of District 21

### Dear Friends:

We need each other. This is the lesson of 2020-21, which will be etched in our memories forever. Faced with a global pandemic that has claimed far too many lives, a devastating winter storm that left millions without power and a fraught and challenging election, Texans have come together like never before. We are reminded that working alongside, rather than against, one another helps us prevail over even the mightiest of obstacles.

Every story of tragedy or disaster was countered by dozens more about neighbors helping each other, caring for their communities and giving what they could to assist those in need. Times like these inspire and remind us that the ties that bind us are much stronger than the forces that would divide us—a fact I certainly hope we remember in the years ahead.

It is my pleasure to serve such honorable, charitable and compassionate persons in the Texas Senate. You are the reason I never miss a vote, pass bills big and small and work diligently with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Together we can forge a fairer, stronger and more prosperous Texas.

Every person in each of the 18 counties stretching from the Rio Grande to the Colorado River and from the Port of Corpus Christi to the Valley contributes to the diverse landscape and rich culture that comprise Senate District 21. Although we are separated



*Working alongside one another helps us prevail over even the mightiest of obstacles.*

– Senator Judith Zaffirini

suggest legislation. My staff and I embrace our mantra, which I learned from the Ursuline nuns: *Serviam!* (I shall serve!)

My prayer is that the Lord will continue to bless us all with grace and good will, family and friendship, love and joy and health and happiness as we collaborate to forge a better world for future generations.

May God bless Texas!

*Judith Zaffirini*

Judith Zaffirini

State Senator, District 21

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by many miles, we are connected by our shared priorities: keeping our precious families healthy and safe, equipping our students for success by providing them with an excellent education and building a state in which we all can thrive.

This newsletter, which summarizes the 87<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session that concluded on May 31, 2021, is a testament to what is possible when we work together to solve problems. It is a nonpolitical reminder—equal parts progress report and call to action—of the power of unity, collaboration and compromise. As always, I welcome your participation and encourage you to contact me to share your perspectives, highlight concerns in the district or even



THE FIRST MEXICAN AMERICAN HIGHWAY PATROL OFFICER in Texas, Vicente Ramirez of La Salle County celebrates with family and friends at the Texas Capitol. Senator Judith Zaffirini presents him with Senate Resolution 325 to honor his lifetime of achievements.

## Foundation for Legislative Success Built During Interim

“Not at all,” Senator Judith Zaffirini responded when asked if the pandemic hindered preparations for the legislative session. “It provided countless opportunities to collaborate with local officials, to listen to the needs of our mutual constituents and to transform problems into legislative solutions.”

When businesses were forced to lay off employees, for example, unemployment insurance (UI) became a top constituent issue. “My staff and I quickly responded to an immense backlog of UI claims by undergoing training to assist the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) with cases,” she said. “The insight we gained inspired us to develop multiple bills to improve the process.”

While processing cases, Senator Zaffirini and her staff repeatedly noted constituents’ inability to contact TWC regarding the status of their unemployment claims. Accordingly, she passed Senate Bill (SB) 2099, which guarantees that claimants inquiring about their benefits will receive a timely return phone call or email from the agency. She also passed SB 1801, which diversifies the acceptable methods for Texans to repay overpaid unemployment benefits, improving the process for correcting payment errors and fraud.

In March, 2020, TWC’s process server backed out of its contract, leaving the agency unable to serve notices of assessments

on employers who failed to meet their tax obligations. To ensure TWC could pursue these collections actions effectively and efficiently, she passed SB 695, authorizing the agency to serve notices via certified mail.

Despite new and heightened responsibilities during the public health crisis, Senator Zaffirini continued her long-standing tradition of being the first senator to pre-file legislation. On Nov. 9, 2020, the first day of pre-filing, she filed 34 priority bills. Among them was SB 40, which authorizes health professionals regulated by the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation to practice via telehealth even after the pandemic. It was inspired by constituent support for remote medicine, which is more accessible and flexible than traditional appointments.

“Constituents have inspired some of our best legislation,” she said. “Working with them during the interim to address their issues during session is as productive as it is rewarding.”



ENGAGING WITH STUDENTS IS VITAL to representing all persons in Senate District 21, including students such as (L-R) Leonel Ramirez and Ivan Ybañez from Jim Hogg County.

## Zaffirini Passes Health Care, Education Bills

“Accessibility, accountability, affordability, availability and excellence are critical standards for health care and for every level of education,” Senator Judith Zaffirini said. “Both are rights that should be afforded to all Texans, not only to the privileged few.” These issues, especially as they impact the very young, the very old, the very poor, persons with disabilities and veterans, are the hallmarks of her legislative agenda.

A particularly passionate champion for students in early childhood and higher education, she sponsored and passed House Bill (HB) 725, which allows out-of-state children in the Texas foster care system to attend free pre-kindergarten; and HB 700, which awards college credit to foster children who complete the Preparation for Adult Living Program. What’s more, her Senate Bill (SB) 1019, which disaggregates college student loan data demographically, including by race and by gender, clarifies the status of student loan debt in Texas and empowers lawmakers to target interventions to alleviate financial burdens for the more than 3.3 million Texans with student loan debt.

“Early education is incredibly important for a child’s

development,” she said. “It is the best predictor of success in higher education, which is needed more than ever to excel professionally.”

Senator Zaffirini is equally committed to protecting the elderly and persons with disabilities. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, she passed SB 930, which makes the number of cases of a communicable disease in nursing homes and long-term care facilities public information. Following the widespread power outages caused by Winter Storm Uri, she passed HB 1423, which mandates annual inspections of nursing homes to assess their emergency preparedness and access to generators.

“These unprecedented events highlighted shortcomings that could endanger residents of many facilities,” the senator said. “SB 930 and HB 1423 will improve safety and bring peace of mind to families whose loved ones are in long-term care.”

To further improve access to health care for Texans, she passed HB 780, establishing a statewide bone marrow donor recruitment program; HB 428, mandating health plan coverage of ovarian cancer screenings; and HB 119, prohibiting organ

transplant donor discrimination based on disability.

“I always am delighted to advocate for legislation expanding our most basic right to quality health care,” she said. “These bills will make Texas families healthier, happier and more prosperous.”



CONSTITUENT FEEDBACK YIELDS THE BEST LEGISLATION. Senator Judith Zaffirini prioritizes working with constituents such as (1) Joseph Neal from Live Oak County and (2) Coastal Bend College President Dr. Justin Hoggard, who testified for her Senate Bills 1544 and 959, respectively.



VIDEOCONFERENCING CONNECTS US, EVEN WHEN WE ARE APART. Senator Judith Zaffirini meets with constituents (L-R) Sheri Mitzel, Atascosa County; Max Lars, Travis County; Sandy Oaks Mayor Micki Ball, Bexar County; and Nacona David, McMullen County.

# Senator Judith Zaffirini Passes 106 Bills Reflecting Broad Range of Issues

The Senate's highest bill-passer for the fourth consecutive session, Senator Judith Zaffirini passed 106 bills through the Republican-controlled Legislature in 2021.

"We addressed diverse issues such as health and human services, public safety, justice and the judiciary, business and commerce and local issues," she said. "This wide array reflects our determination in taking on every challenge and advocating for all persons in Senate District 21."

## Increasing Access to Justice

Her agenda included passing 16 bills increasing access to justice for all. She prioritized, for instance, the wellbeing of persons who, due to the effects of aging, disability, disease or injury, need a legal guardian to manage their daily affairs.

"Guardians are supposed to protect persons under their care," Senator Zaffirini said, "but too many shamefully abuse and exploit those entrusted to them." She has passed 23 guardianship bills since 2015, including five in 2021 that create specialized guardianship courts (House Bill [HB] 79); strengthen the Guardianship Abuse, Fraud and Exploitation Deterrence program (Senate Bill [SB] 692); and enact additional reforms.



LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERSHIP IS CRITICAL during a pandemic and other emergency events. (1) Receiving the Star of Texas Award for officers injured in the line of duty are (L-R) Officer Claudia Ivette Cormier, Hays County; Captain Wesley Hensley, Travis County; and Chief Luis Farias, Duval County. (2) Those recognized by Senator Judith Zaffirini in the Texas Senate include (L-R) Sheriff Jim Stewart, Sandra Tackitt and former Sheriff Joe Tackitt of Wilson County; and Karnes County Sheriff Dwayne Villanueva.

Because every Texan is entitled to equal treatment under the law, she passed HB 3009, requiring courts to appoint a bilingual custody evaluator for parents who do not speak English; and HB 290, authorizing the use of existing funds to provide representation to indigent criminal defendants.

Senator Zaffirini is equally invested in improving efficiency within the judicial system. She passed SB 41, which restructures the civil court costs and fees system and builds upon her SB 346 (2019), which reformed the criminal fees system. She also passed HB 4344, requiring the State Commission on Judicial Conduct to investigate and resolve complaints timely.

"This bill culminates seven years of determination to increase judicial accountability," the senator said of HB 4344. "Improving these operations guarantees more Texans their constitutional rights and makes our courts fairer and more equitable."

## Protecting Survivors

Recent high-profile cases highlighted what many Texans have known for far too long: Sexual assault and harassment are pervasive in our culture, and words of condemnation are not enough to address this crisis. Accordingly, Senator Zaffirini advanced legislation to protect survivors of sexual assault and harassment and deter future bad actors.

On her third attempt, the senator passed SB 45, which provides that sexual harassment by any employer, regardless of how many persons they employ, is unlawful. (Previous law offered legal protections only to employees of companies of 15 or more.)

"Feeling safe and respected at work is a basic standard that, unfortunately, is not always met," she said. "SB 45 empowers workers to speak up about harmful conditions and creates more inclusive professional spaces in which everyone can excel."

The senator also sponsored and passed bills to extend the statute of limitations for reporting sexual harassment claims to the Texas Workforce Commission from 180 to 300 days (HB 21); ensure protective orders are enforced adequately and issued timely (HB 39); and bar the use of polygraphs for survivors and allow them to have advocates with them during investigative interviews (HB 1172).

"Survivors are more likely to seek help when they know the system has mechanisms in place to protect them," Senator Zaffirini said. "These bills will increase opportunities for them to find safety and healing and will incentivize reporting."

## Preventing Exploitation

Financial exploitations are particularly insidious crimes that cripple victims economi-

cally. There are few legal protections or preventative efforts, however, to help them.

Before Senator Zaffirini passed HB 4477, for example, Adult Protective Services (APS) could not request holds on financial accounts when it suspected exploitation until the bank reported suspicious activity. HB 4477 eliminates this restriction, permitting APS to act earlier.

What's more, coerced debt is an increasingly common form of domestic abuse that substantially limits victims' economic self-sufficiency or prevents their leaving abusive relationships. The senator passed HB 3529, which amends the definition of identity theft to include coerced debt, thereby allowing survivors to access additional resources.

Another third-attempt success was her SB 43, which closes loopholes that allowed predatory wrap mortgage lending practices to defraud unsuspecting homebuyers.

"Persons suffering from financial exploitation and abuse require resources and protections, as do survivors of other types of crimes," Senator Zaffirini said. "These bills will provide additional means for Texans to maintain their economic independence free from pernicious criminals."



RECEIVING THE LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FROM LULAC COUNCIL 12 offers an opportunity to honor friends, including Lupita and Sergio Ramirez of Zapata County.



PUBLIC SAFETY REQUIRES NOBLE PUBLIC SERVICE. Senator Judith Zaffirini thanks (L-R) Seguin Police Chief Terry Nichols and Seguin Fire Chief Dale Skinner, who risk their safety every day to ensure ours.



CALDWELL COUNTY AND LOCKHART LEADERS visit the State Capitol to discuss shared priorities with Senator Judith Zaffirini.

## Zaffirini, Constituents Address Local Issues in District 21

“No issue is too big or too small for us when it comes to meeting constituents’ needs,” Senator Judith Zaffirini said. “We welcome opportunities to be responsive and helpful in resolving any issue.”

Requested by local officials to bolster economic development, Senate Bill (SB) 1216, for example, allows the City of Portland in San Patricio County to hold a local election to expand eligibility for retail alcoholic beverage permits; and House Bill (HB) 4374 safeguards homebuyers in Caldwell County by restricting the use of contracts for deed. To promote economic development in Senate District 21, Senator Zaffirini passed SB 696, allowing Atascosa County to levy a hotel occupancy tax to construct a civic center and arena for agricultural, livestock and rodeo events.

She also passed bills creating three special districts in Travis County: HB 4646 establishes the Creedmoor Municipal Util-

ity District; HB 4650 creates the East Central Travis County Conservation and Reclamation District No. 1; and HB 4647, which passed as an amendment to HB 4627 by Rep. Scott Sanford, R-McKinney, creates the Mustang Ridge Municipal Utility District. These bills address the need for large-scale, permanent improve-

ments in rapidly growing Central Texas.

“Constituents sometimes encounter problems that require legislative powers to resolve,” the senator said. “Although narrow in scope, each of these bills is important to district residents, and I am delighted to provide state assistance whenever possible.”



EMMA ESCOBAR AND FIDEL SALAZAR serenade Senator Judith Zaffirini after she receives the Legislative Achievement Award from the Texas Library Association.

## Collaborative Leadership Essential to Achieving Priorities

The legislative process is intended to make it difficult to pass bills.

To reach the governor’s desk, a bill must have enough initial support to be referred to a committee, withstand questioning in committee and maintain its integrity despite amendments and substitutes that could change it substantially. If it overcomes these obstacles in its originating chamber and earns enough votes from lawmakers, it advances to the other chamber, where the process begins anew.

Because passing a bill is something of a minor miracle, to what does Senator Judith Zaffirini, who has passed more bills than any other legislator for four consecutive sessions, more than 1,270 during her legislative career and more than any legislator in the state’s history, attribute her success?

“Prioritizing bipartisanship in the House and the Senate is key,” she said. “It’s a team effort, and I am thankful for strong relationships with legislators who share my constituents’ goals, regardless of party.”

During the 87<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Senator Zaffirini worked



SAN PATRICIO COUNTY OFFICIALS, including (L-R) former Commissioner Alma Moreno, County Clerk Gracie Alaniz-Gonzales and former Commissioner Nina Trevino, meet with Senator Judith Zaffirini as she travels throughout Senate District 21.

with 60 state representatives—40 percent of that body—to advance legislation. She specifically partnered with those from Senate District 21 to pass bills that benefit their mutual constituents.

Rep. Richard Raymond, D-Laredo, for example, carried two of her bills, including Senate Bill (SB) 884, which transfers The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio’s Laredo Campus to The UT System. A longstanding advocate for improving quality of life in colonias, the senator carried House Bill (HB) 1301 by Rep. Ryan Guillen, D-Rio Grande City, which diversifies services

offered by their self-help centers and mandates a study to improve services to these low-income areas. Her SB 1745, authorizing an interim legislative study about colonias, was passed as an amendment onto his bill. She carried two House bills for Rep. John Kuenpel, R-Seguin, and one for Rep. John Cyrier, R-Lockhart.

“Every member defines his or her own role in the Legislature. Some favor advancing party-line items, while others concentrate on blocking them,” she said. “Most of us are determined simply to pass bipartisan, common-sense legislation for all Texans.”

*We're here to help you and your family. Please contact us if we can be of assistance.*

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# Senator Zaffirini Earns Legislative, Professional Honors

Maintaining a 100 percent career-long voting record that is unique not only in Texas, but also nationally, Senator Judith Zaffirini cast her 65,000<sup>th</sup> consecutive vote during the 87<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session. She is the second-highest ranking member and highest-ranking female and Hispanic member of the Texas Senate.

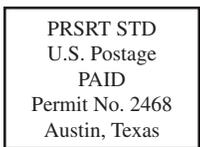
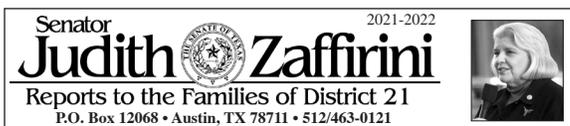
“Because the Texas Legislature meets for only 140 days every

other year, we must use that time meaningfully,” the senator said. “Never missing a vote exemplifies my dedication to representing the families in Senate District 21 and to ensuring the Legislature passes bills that reflect their needs.”

In naming her to its “All-Star Team” as an “overachiever” and “sponsor of the most bills that cleared the Legislature in 2021,” *Capitol Inside* wrote, “Zaffirini

has been a fixture on the best legislators list throughout the past two decades first and foremost as a function of unrivaled productivity.” Editor Mike Hailey added, “Zaffirini made it look easy again by passing legislation that few if any colleagues opposed because it was always crafted for the entire state without regard for red or blue.”

The Texas Psychological Association, Texas Nurses Asso-



ciation, Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, and Donate Life Texas all named Senator Zaffirini their Legislative Champion, and LULAC Council 12 honored her with a Lifetime Achievement Award. She also was the Professional Communication Contest Sweepstakes Winner for the National Federation of Press Women and its state affiliate, Press Women of Texas, having won 15 national and 41 state awards, respectively, for



**FAMILY FIRST!** Known as “Ma Z” to her darling grandsons, Asher (4) and George (2), Senator Judith Zaffirini prioritizes her family.

her press releases, speeches, advertisements and videos that collectively have been viewed more than 350,000 times.

Of all these titles, however, her favorites are wife, mother and grandmother. “What I wish and hope for my family is what I wish and hope for yours,” Senator Zaffirini emphasizes. “That’s why I strive to be a responsive, effective and engaged legislator who always acts in the best interest of Senate District 21 families.”