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## Giving Thanks and Taking Action

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The days are getting shorter, but the future looks bright for women and girls. This year Chicago-area organizations have made impressive breakthroughs on seemingly intractable issues. As Thanksgiving nears, let's take time to be thankful for the progress we've made in 2011.

I'm thankful for young women's health and dignity. In June, the [ACLU of Illinois](#) helped keep the [Parental Notice of Abortion Act under injunction](#) when it came up in court. If ever enforced, the 1995 law would require physicians to contact a parent of any patient under age 18 seeking abortion services, a humiliating and often dangerous requirement. Most young women talk to a trusted adult about unplanned pregnancy, and those who don't often have a good reason, including fears of homelessness, forced pregnancy or violence. Read more in a [policy brief \(PDF\) by the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health](#).

I am grateful for healthy schools and affordable college education. In Chicago, [recess will be mandatory in all public elementary schools](#) by fall 2012, thanks to pressure from mothers and grandmothers trained by [Community Organizing and Family Issues](#). Members of COFI's POWER-PAC group [recognize recess's role](#) in improving children's health as well as sharpening their focus and reducing disciplinary issues in the classroom. In higher ed, the [Illinois DREAM Act](#) makes ours the first state to create a scholarship program for immigrant students -- both documented and undocumented. [Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights](#) notes that two-thirds of undocumented youth come from households living under 200% of the poverty line (currently \$45,000 a year for a family of four), making this financial aid essential.

I give thanks for women's freedom from violence. The Illinois Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act allows women to vacate prostitution convictions if they were victims of trafficking. Many women enter the sex trade unwillingly and cannot find a way out with felony prostitution on their records, which can stand in the way of employment as well as housing, education and parental rights. As the [New York Times reported in August](#), the [End Demand Illinois Campaign](#) (led by [Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation](#)) supported the bill as part of its goal "to hold pimps, customers and traffickers accountable for the sex trade, while supporting its survivors."

While we should take a moment to pause and give thanks for these victories, a moment is all we can afford to spare. As a feminist, I know there is always more to do and no time to waste. The current veto session in Springfield includes two bills with the potential to transform women's and girls' health and safety.

House Bill 1958 will prohibit the use of shackles, leg irons and other restraints on women in Cook County who are pregnant or in postpartum recovery. Illinois became the first state to ban the shackling of women in labor more than 10 years ago, and this bill -- [currently in the Senate Criminal Law Committee](#) -- is a logical next step. The [fact sheet \(PDF\) by Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers](#) includes heart-

wrenching stories that are too significant to ignore. In addition, House Bill 3027 proposes a common-sense update to sexual health education: teach public school students in grades six through 12 health facts that are scientifically accurate and age appropriate. That's all, [despite claims of doom and gloom from opponents](#), who prefer abstinence-only curricula that propagate lies and belittle young women. Schools should provide messages of abstinence along with honest, complete information. Planned [Parenthood Illinois Action has more details and an action alert](#).

While we've made significant progress, I know policy and systems change take long-term work and investment. I'm grateful to be part of a community that is working not just harder but working smarter, across issues, collaboratively, collectively and comprehensively.

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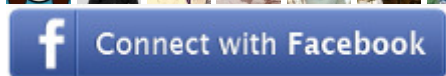
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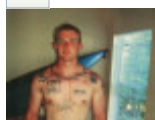
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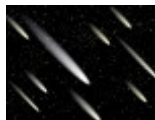
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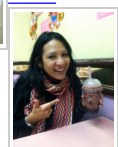
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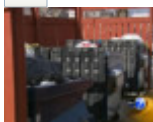
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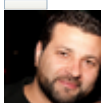
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