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D'Amato makes surprise visit to symposium at SIPA

By Traci Mosser

Contributing Writer

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) called for more government initiative in the protection of children yesterday in a surprise visit to a symposium at the School of International and Public Affairs.

The symposium, celebrating 80 years of educational exchange between the five Nordic countries and the United States, was part of the Scandinavian Children's Festival, which is a series of events coordinated by the American-Scandinavian Foundation.

The Scandinavian countries, known for their innovative approaches to promoting the participation of children in society, have worked on legislation to ensure children's rights.

For example, Iceland will imple-

ment a law in January 1993 which will appoint a special child welfare council to act as the final authority in legal cases related to children.

Officials from the United States and Scandinavia, including Swedish Deputy Prime Minister Bengt Westerberg, spoke to about 100 people about the involvement of children in education, politics, and culture.

D'Amato, who opposes Democrat Bob Abrams for the U.S. Senate in November, said children who do not have a secure home environment often turn to the streets, and suggested schools provide viable alternatives.

"Today we have to go beyond what schools offered years ago, and provide a sanctuary, an oasis, a kind of nurturing environment that might be non-existent in the home," D'Amato said.

"I think we can make some changes, but not if the educational system preserves its bureaucracy. Schools should be sanctuaries, not employment centers," he added.

D'Amato said the shortage of government-sponsored prevention programs for drug abuse and AIDS is inexcusable.

"It's one thing to talk about how we need these resources, but it's another to stay in there and fight for the funding," he said.

Westerberg discussed the connection between children's rights and women's rights in his country.

"It's important to note that improvements for children have gone hand in hand with improvements for women," he said.

The three cornerstones of children's rights in Sweden are parental leave, child care, and finan-

cial benefits for families, according to Westerberg.

In Sweden, each parent is allotted a 90-day leave of absence during the child's first 18 months.

"Parental leave gives the infant the best possible start, and the parent can stay home knowing their job is still there. Now our goal is to have more fathers take leaves of absence," Westerberg said.

Because government grants fund over 90 percent of day care, the issue figures prominently in Sweden. In addition, financial benefits are given to families with children under 16 years old.

Marianne Takas of the American Bar Association's (ABA) Center on Children and the Law said it is unfortunate that the United States does not have parental leave, child care, or family financial benefits as foundations of its system.

"It's not that our families don't have values, nor is it that we don't value families. I think we do value families, it's that we don't do enough to act upon our values," Takas said.

Funding is the key to acting upon values, said Barbara Sabol, New York City commissioner of social services.

"In New York City, food stamp benefits translate to 73 cents per meal, per person. Over 560,000 children receive food stamp benefits, but we don't give them enough to provide families a real safety net," Sabol said.

The ombuds program in Norway is another significant social program for children, according to Else Sofie Gjesti, legal counsel to Norwegian children's ombuds officer. As a part of the program, the ombuds officer serves as an individual spokesperson to promote children's interests.