

Seize the Day Initiative Weekly Update March 31, 2009

The following are recent updates from OSPC and OSI on operational activities related to the Seize the Day initiative.

OPEN SOCIETY POLICY CENTER Updates

Advancing the Hardest Issues: Criminal Justice and Drug Policy Reform

There has been a flurry of activity on Capitol Hill related to criminal justice and drug policy reform. On March 26th Sen. Webb introduced legislation calling for the establishment of a national criminal justice commission to "undertake a top-to-bottom review of our entire criminal justice system" and to offer recommendations for reform. It specifically directs the commission to review "current drug policy and its impact on incarceration, crime and violence, sentencing, and reentry programs." The bill has 13 original co-sponsors, including Sen. Specter and Lindsey Graham. Gene Guerrero will be meeting with Webb's staff next Monday. That same day the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security held a hearing on indigent defense which creates an opening for a new era of federal concern for the right to counsel. (Gene Guerrero, Senior Policy Analyst, OSI-DC; Lenny Noisette, Program Director, Criminal Justice Fund)

The House Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations Subcommittee is holding a hearing on April 1st on Justice Reinvestment with US Programs grantee the Council of State Governments testifying. On the same day Congressman Danny Davis (D-IL) is organizing a "Second Chance State and Local Reentry Initiative Symposium." A bipartisan group of eight Representatives will speak at the symposium, along with state officials from Texas, Illinois, Wisconsin, New York City, Maryland and Michigan. (Lenny Noisette, Program Director, USP Criminal Justice Fund)

This week also marks the beginning of a month-long series of lobbying activities organized by OSPC on the crack-powder cocaine sentencing disparity, including a letter-writing campaign, a national call-in day, targeted op-ed placements and in-district congressional meetings. The campaign will culminate on April 27-28 when OSPC will help bring 50 "grass-tops" leaders from targeted states to Washington, D.C. to urge their congressional delegations to support eliminating the sentencing disparity. (Nkechi Taifa, Senior Policy Analyst, OSI-DC)

Advancing the Hardest Issues: Climate Change

In late February-early March, 12,000 young people swarmed Washington, DC, for Power Shift, the largest global warming gathering and demonstration in the nation's history. Sponsored by OSI grantee Energy Action Coalition, the convention culminated with more than 360 lobbying appointments with congressional lawmakers and staff and a protest at the coal-fired Capitol Power Plant, despite a late winter snow storm that snarled

the entire East Coast. Time magazine's web site noted the multicultural makeup of the groups of activists, which African-American students from Washington, Hispanics from West Chicago, Native-American activists from North Dakota, and Christian evangelicals. OSI's grant to Energy Action Coalition, to be considered for renewal later in 2009, supports only the public education aspects of its program. (Nancy Youman, Deputy Director, U.S. Programs)

Foreign Affairs Funding

The President requested \$53.8 billion in foreign affairs funding for FY10 which represents a 9.5% increase from the last Bush request. Both the House (\$48.5b) and Senate (\$49.8b) budget committees cut the request. It is essential to get at least the proposed \$53.8 billion if we are to stand a chance of increasing funding for the Global Fund and other emerging needs, particularly around food and water. Many groups have been active in support of the President's request, including the One Campaign, the US Global Leadership Campaign, InterAction and Friends of the Global Fight. Senators Kerry and Lugar will offer a bipartisan amendment to restore the international affairs budget to the requested level. Chairman Berman of the Foreign Affairs Committee has also strongly objected to the House cut and is urging Speaker Pelosi to intervene. (Zoe Hudson, Senior Policy Analyst, OSI-DC)

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE Updates

Advancing the Hardest Issues: National Security and Human Rights

OSI continues to lead a coalition, which includes many OSI grantees, that seeks the establishment of a Presidential commission of inquiry to examine and make recommendations on the handling of post 9-11 detainees. Following Mark Danner's reporting on the ICRC's findings of torture at CIA black sites, a number of major newspapers published editorials supporting the call for a commission of inquiry. Last week, the Post ran an op-ed piece by Thomas Pickering and William Sessions, both part of the group of prominent individuals we pulled together who issued a statement in February calling for a commission. Despite the growing media attention generated in part from an OSI-funded communications firm, this issue remains challenging and we do not yet have strong indications of how the Administration will decide to address these concerns. We have met with the White House on the issue and recently provided them with follow-up suggestions about how a Commission might be structured. (Wendy Patten, Senior Policy Analyst, OSI-DC; Nancy Chang, Campaign Manager, USP National Security & Human Rights Campaign)

Ensuring Transparency, Equity, and Accountability in Economic Recovery Efforts

On March 26, Reps. Brad Miller (D-NC), Mel Watt (D-NC) and Barney Frank (D-MA) introduced the Mortgage Reform and Anti-Predatory Lending Act (HR 1728). The bill targets a variety of problems related to predatory lending and incorporates several provisions that housing groups and consumer advocates have long been pushing for. The

bill also authorizes HUD to spend \$35 million annually for three years to fund legal services in foreclosure-related matters. Specific policy recommendations made by three OSI grantees--the Center for Responsible Lending, the National Center for La Raza, and the National Consumer Law Center--were included in the proposed bill. (Raquiba LaBrie, Program Director, Equality and Opportunity Fund; Solomon Greene, Senior Program Officer, Neighborhood Stabilization Initiative)

Advancing the Hardest Issues: Climate Change

OSI Grantee the Alliance for Climate Protection, led by Al Gore, is embarking on a major public education and organizing campaign under new leadership. Alliance CEO Cathy Zoi has been nominated to be the Assistant Secretary for Efficiency and Renewables in the Energy Department, and she will be replaced as CEO by Maggie Fox, formerly of America Votes and the Sierra Club. In addition, the Alliance has hired Steve Hildebrand, most recently of the Obama presidential campaign team, to run a state-level Repower America public education and organizing effort to promote federal global warming solutions. There is likely to be both c3 and c4 activity. OSI's previous grant to the Alliance lapsed on Jan. 31, 2009. Discussions among George Soros, Al Gore, OSI staff and key members of the Alliance team about future support from OSI and/or George Soros will be scheduled in April. (Nancy Youman, Deputy Director, U.S. Programs)