

Seize the Day Initiative Weekly Update April 15, 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: Confronting Structural Inequality/ Comprehensive Immigration Reform

The April 9 *New York Times* front-page article reporting that President Obama intends to move immigration reform this year evoked a flurry of responses and activity on both sides of the debate. While some say that the NYT overplayed the story, the Obama administration has consistently talked about starting movement on immigration reform in the first year but not necessarily passing a bill in 2009. The *Wall Street Journal* also reported that Rahm Emanuel is now a backer of immigration reform; Speaker Pelosi, Senator Reid and Senator Schumer have also signaled their support.

The anti-immigrant lobby has already begun a campaign to intimidate the President and top leaders and put a stop to reform but immigrant rights advocates and allies quickly mobilized to express support for the President's plans. The reintroduction in the Senate of the DREAM Act, which would provide a path to citizenship to immigrant students bound for college or the military, was an important initial test of the **Center for Community Change's** text messaging system and a barometer of readiness for the reform struggle ahead. Frank Sharry of **America's Voice** said "The version of immigration reform that is likely to be debated this year will focus primarily on cracking down on bad actor employers who violate immigration, labor, and tax laws, combined with the legalization of workers and families already contributing and living here in the United States. This approach will lift wages for American and immigrant workers alike, enhance tax fairness and boost revenues, and create a level playing field for honest employers." (Maria Teresa Rojas, Senior Program Manager, Equality and Opportunity Fund)

Advancing the Hardest Issues: Criminal Justice Reform

Color of Change, a national online advocacy organization, took steps to broaden support for Senator Jim Webb's National Criminal Justice Commission. Color of Change, established to enhance civic engagement and amplify the advocacy voice of the African-American community, sent out a national action alert to its hundreds of thousands of online members to inform them of Sen. Webb's bold legislation and call for letters, emails, and phone calls to publicly thank him. Color of Change noted that such praise will show other politicians that when they take risks and step out on critical issues, like criminal justice reform, that the public is supportive and will stand with them. Color of Change has not been funded by OSI to date but is being recommended for Seize the Day Fund support for public education efforts on criminal justice and structural inequality issues, not for direct or grassroots lobbying.

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. was passed by the Senate on March 27th and the House on March 31st. Along with the Green Jobs Act and millions in federal recovery funding for green collar job training, work and climate mitigation projects, this Act, which is expected to be signed by the President, will help bring to scale efforts to ensure that stipended service opportunities extend to groups that are often excluded, including specifically people returning home from prison and other residents of high incarceration communities. (Lenny Noisette, Program Director, Criminal Justice Fund)

Equity in Economic Recovery

Many OSI grantees and OSPC partner organizations continue to lack access to the halls of power, but recent stories from the field show that some progress is indeed being made. Just one year ago, members of the **National Training and Information Center (NTIC)**, a national network of local organizations working in low-income and people of color communities and an OSI and Seize the Day Fund grantee, attempted to get a meeting with Ben Bernanke to talk about the foreclosure crisis. He declined. NTIC then brought 500 people from across the nation on yellow school buses to his home, but no one answered the doorbell. When they went to his office at the Federal Reserve the next day, he agreed to a meeting a month later and NTIC – one of the lead groups in the fights for the Home Mortgage Disclosure (HMDA) and Community Reinvestment Acts (CRA) some 30 years ago – has built a relationship with Bernanke ever since. The organizing network brought eleven grassroots housing activists to meet with Bernanke and three of the other four Federal Reserve Governors last month and delivered policy proposals that will: 1) make the bank bailout more transparent; 2) increase the data provided under the HMDA to support a more robust early warning system; and 3) overhaul accountability measures such as the CRA to include explicit racial justice safeguards. After this meeting, Bernanke agreed to get outside of the Beltway and the reach of the bank lobbyists and to hold field hearings in ten cities to hear firsthand about the struggles of everyday Americans and their recommended solutions. OSI support does not fund NTIC direct or grassroots lobbying. (Bill Vandenberg, Program Director, Democracy and Power Fund)

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE Updates

Advancing the Hardest Issues: Criminal Justice Reform

The National Right to Counsel Committee released its much-anticipated report at a Washington news conference on Tuesday, April 14th. The bi-partisan committee, sponsored by the **Constitution Project**, and funded in part by OSI, was created in 2004 to examine the ability of the American justice system to provide adequate counsel to individuals in criminal and juvenile delinquency cases who cannot afford lawyers. *Justice Denied: America's Continuing Neglect of Our Constitutional Right to Counsel* details systemic failures and recommends twenty-two urgently needed reforms to fix them. The report should provide additional support for federal intervention on this issue, already begun by hearings by the House Judiciary Committee last month.

Advancing the Hardest Issues: Confronting Structural Inequality/ Comprehensive Immigration Reform

To advance public education and participation on immigrants' rights and immigration policy efforts, OSI finalizing a package of grant recommendations totaling \$7.5 million that are designed to capitalize on the current opportunity for immigration reform. This is the first set of grants to be made out of the special \$15 million allocation that George Soros approved last fall for the 2009-2011 immigration reform effort. (Maria Teresa Rojas, Program Manager, Equality and Opportunity Fund)

Economic Recovery and the Future of Journalism

On April 7, OSI grantee **Free Press** convened a "Policy Roundtable on Saving Journalism" attended by Laleh Ispahani and Lori McGlinchey from the Transparency and Integrity Fund. While the crisis is undeniably an economic issue, exacerbated by shifting revenue streams, new forms of content creation, and new methods of distribution, the meeting focused on policy prescriptions to address the problem. The participants, academics, journalists and a staffer of Senator Dorgan's, discussed new economic models for journalism and concentrated on the role that government might play in supporting this vital democratic institution. Participants discussed examining models that hold the most promise, identifying current policies that could hinder new models from emerging, and researching new policies that could best support the future of investigative journalism, beat reporting, and quality news in America. Free Press is hosting these panels in three other major cities and at the conclusion will publish a white paper with policy solutions. (Laleh Ispahani, Program Director, Transparency and Integrity Fund)