

Seize the Day Initiative Weekly Update April 29, 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: Drug Policy Reform

The “Crack the Disparity” National Month of Advocacy has been a coordinated coalition campaign led by OSPC to support the complete elimination of the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, a policy change that is supported by the President and Vice-President. Activities have included a national call-in day and letter a day campaign to the Hill, in conjunction with sign on letters from the religious, civil rights, and academic communities. This week, on April 27- 28, over 60 grassroots leaders from targeted states came to Washington to lobby their congressional delegations in support of the policy change. A hearing on the issue is being held in the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime on April 29, at the time of this update, with witnesses from the DOJ, U.S. Sentencing Commission, a police chief, a former DEA director, and an impacted person. A hearing in the House Judiciary Crime Subcommittee is scheduled for May. (Nkechi Taifa, Senior Policy Analyst, OSPC)

Nomination Fights

The nominations of Dawn Johnsen and Harold Koh remain up in the air. Koh’s nomination as the top lawyer for the U.S. State Department is widely seen as secure (and Yale Law School has begun a Dean search as a result) and after a cordial Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on April 28 his nomination could be moved next week. Johnsen’s nomination for Assistant AG for the DOJ Office of Legal Counsel, however, is still at significant risk, with conservatives taking strong action against her and Republican Senators citing her past work on reproductive rights as justification for their opposition. While several OSI grantees that are involved with judicial nominations, including the **Alliance for Justice**, **Constitution Project**, **Leadership Conference on Civil Rights**, and **People for the American Way**, are working hard to support Johnsen’s nomination, they are concerned that the issue is not getting the attention it deserves. The groups in particular worry that should Johnsen’s nomination be defeated, it will make it virtually impossible to confirm any judicial nominee with a clear pro-choice background. (Tom Hilbink, Program Officer, Transparency and Integrity Fund)

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE Updates

Advancing the Hardest Issues: National Security and Human Rights

On April 21, OSI and 18 human rights, faith-based, and justice organizations launched a campaign to urge President Obama to appoint a commission to investigate torture sanctioned by the Bush administration. The campaign was launched within days after DOJ declassified and released key legal opinions supporting the use of torture on CIA detainees, and shortly before the Senate Armed Services Committee released a largely

unredacted version of its report detailing the abuse of detainees held in U.S. custody. The coalition's website, www.CommissionOnAccountability.org, calls on Americans to sign an online petition asking President Obama to establish an "independent, non-partisan commission to examine and report publicly on torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees in the period since September 11, 2001." As of mid-morning on April 29, the online petition had 8,868 signatories. Attached is an April 20 memo on the efforts of OSI-DC and the grantees of the OSI National Security and Human Rights Campaign to seek accountability for torture. (Nancy Chang, Campaign Manager, National Security and Human Rights Campaign; Wendy Patten, Senior Policy Analyst, OSI-DC)

Advancing the Hardest Issues

As President Obama completes his first 100 days, many OSI grantees will join the Sunday morning pundits to assess how the new administration has fared. Among the first reviews is from the **Institute for Policy Studies**, a long-time, multi-issue progressive identified think tank. In the IPS report, Obama scored decently, rating a "7" (out of 10) and receiving high marks for his rhetoric but mixed reviews for his actions. IPS lists the following achievements and disappointments in international and domestic policy:

International Policy

Top Three Achievements

1) Executive orders on closing Guantanamo and ending torture; 2) declared commitment to nuclear abolition; and 3) more respectful tone and more diplomatic approach coming from the White House.

Top Three Disappointments

1) Increase in troops sent to Afghanistan; 2) increase in military budget by 4%; and 3) falling back on the IMF to bail out the global economy.

Domestic Policy

Top Three Achievements

1) Pushing through a sizable stimulus package; 2) signing into law a children's health care bill that the Bush Administration twice vetoed; and 3) significant investments in green jobs and clean technologies.

Top Three Disappointments

1) Financial bailout that has put taxpayers on the line for "mega-billions" while failing to jumpstart lending; 2) waiving the stricter rules on the appointment of corporate lobbyists (such as the appointment of Raytheon's William Lynn at the Pentagon); and 3) refusal to participate in the United Nations conference on racism in Geneva.

To get a copy of IPS's report, email bvanderberg@sorosny.org or visit www.ips-dc.org. (Bill Vandenberg, Program Director, Democracy and Power Fund)

Ensuring Transparency, Equity, and Accountability in Economic Recovery

Recognizing the high stakes significance of successfully managing the economic recovery act and its appropriated funds, Vice President Biden shared with the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Oversight that he is working with GAO and the Recovery Act Transparency and Accountability Board and "reaching out to governors and local officials on a weekly basis to solicit their feedback on what more (the Administration) might be doing to implement the Act." Biden shared that he's also been working with OMB on the next set of reporting guidelines (to be released next week) and that he is working to address GAO and local and state officials' concerns.

Earl Devaney, Chairman of the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board, has called the estimated \$55 billion in fraud and abuse of funds appropriated in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act "unacceptable." To challenge this fraud and abuse, estimated at roughly 7 percent of the overall stimulus package appropriations, Congressman Honda (D-CA) and several colleagues are calling for greater transparency of the \$787 billion in ARRA appropriations. This week, Rep. Honda will send the Obama Administration a letter supporting extensive transparency of the ARRA funds, specifically through usage of technologies that would allow third parties to reuse the information for analysis and posting on third party websites. The aim is to let users detect fraud and abuse and ensure greater accountability. (Laleh Ispahani, Program Director, Transparency and Integrity Fund)

Seize the Day Fund Grantmaking

To date, 15 grants totaling \$3.75 million have been awarded through the Seize the Day Fund and OSI funding is supporting organizations that are addressing our four priority strategies: Advancing the hardest issues; ensuring transparency, equity, and accountability in economic recovery; expanding public participation in federal policy fights; and integrating election year innovations into the social justice advocacy community. A full list of recently approved grants will be sent with next week's update. Among the new Seize the Day grantees include the new **USAction Education Fund** led "Rebuild and Renew" federal tax fairness campaign (OSI funding will support public education, coalition building, and field work only); the **Center for Social Inclusion's** equity assessments of economic recovery in the Gulf Coast and New York State; and **Color of Change**, an African-American community based online advocacy organization that's expanding the base of activism on criminal justice and drug policy reform issues. OSI senior staff met on April 28 with senior Atlantic Philanthropies and Ford Foundation staff to share transition funding priorities and better synch our respective funding efforts. The three foundations share many areas of interest and will continue to meet in order to maximize funding impacts in the field and explore a state funding strategy to expand on the ground public support for a more transformative agenda. (Bill Vandenberg, Program Director, Democracy and Power Fund)