

SUMMER 2013
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public policy WATCH


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CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF GRASSROOTS ACTION FIGHTING PREJUDICE, BUILDING COMMUNITIES



“It’s time to take charge and meet today’s challenges.”

“This is our vehicle, it’s a vehicle that empowers people.”

“We have to be able to come together to work towards solutions.”

“Get up, stand up, raise your voice, and don’t ever sit down.”

With these words, leaders from throughout the Panel’s history called for a renewed commitment to social change in Arkansas. On June 15, volunteers and supporters gathered at Philander Smith College to celebrate the Panel’s 50th Anniversary and honor the women whose bravery and desire to make a difference spawned the organization that would eventually become the Arkansas Public Policy Panel and the Arkansas Citizens First Congress. The CFC also celebrated its 15th anniversary that evening.

Five decades of photos filled the walls of the reception hall, from the founding of the Panel of American Women to their efforts to work directly in schools, through Brownie Ledbetter’s leader- *see 50 Years, pg 4*

WHY PLACE-BASED ORGANIZING IS ESSENTIAL TO A SUSTAINABLE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

By Curtis Mangrum, Co-Chair of Arkansas Public Policy Panel Board of Directors

I've lived in Gould for most of my life and I've seen a lot of things change. Some of those changes have been bad for the city, as jobs have moved away and development has slowed. But, since we started organizing our neighbors with the Panel's help, we've started to see some significant positive changes in Gould over the past decade. And it goes beyond just Gould: all of South Arkansas has a new energy around it and it's having an impact on the state as a whole.

We've seen major problems with elections in south Arkansas. We've seen ballot boxes disappear, voters being intimidated, people taking pictures while others were voting; it's been a mess.

This year a group of folks from the Gould Citizens Advisory Council joined other advocates from the CFC at the Capitol and talked to legislators about the need to fix these problems. They listened to us. They passed two new laws, which will increase the number of election monitors and improve training for all poll workers.

This is a major victory, and we could not have done it if we weren't organized and informed to make a good case to lawmakers.

Organizing has opened up the door and empowered people to hold elected officials accountable on the local level as well. We've gained experience in reaching out to local politicians and talking about the things we need for our communities. We build a relationship with them, ask them questions, let them



Events like the Strong-Huttig Family Fun Day build community and strengthen organizing efforts.



Delois Spencer of the Concerned Citizens of Monticello meets with other member groups to talk about new policies and next steps at the CFC's Post-Legislative Convention.

hear our vision and our goals. We hold them accountable.

Residents are discovering that there's a lot of value they can bring. People can see how the political process affects their livelihood and the community. They see the need to improve things and so they're willing to bring something of themselves to the larger effort to improve the community. They find that by working together with others, they can be effective in making things better, and this changes their whole outlook and approach towards being involved.

We need more of this sort of change among residents if we want a sustained progressive movement in Arkansas. We need more people to step up and be a part of changing things for the better. Organizing is what has facilitated this in Gould and I've seen it work in other parts in South Arkansas too. It's building up our people in this region of the state and it's bringing them together with leaders from other regions. Working together like this is the only way we're going to have sustainable progress.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY UPDATE

EPA steps in to protect Arkansas water and enforce Clean Water Act

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) removed some of Arkansas' authority to enact and enforce the Clean Water Act in late August to prevent the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) from implementing Act 954, a new law passed in the 2013 legislature that lowers water quality standards. This was a first step and many expect EPA to further reduce Arkansas' authority to issue and manage water pollution permits as a result of the problems with Act 954.

The Panel and other organizations sent EPA and ADEQ letters earlier this summer detailing the ways in which Act 954 violates the Clean Water Act and requesting EPA's intervention.

The Arkansas Pollution Control and Ecology Commission, which governs ADEQ, is currently considering further changes to Arkansas water quality protections as a result of Act 954. The Panel, the Citizens First Congress, and other conservation and environmental allies are speaking against the changes as both unsound and inviting further Federal control of environmental policy in Arkansas. Keep an eye on the Panel and CFC facebook pages for more updates on this important issue.



The White River, shown here, would have received special designation as a National Blueway, bringing resources to the area and fostering collaboration between landowners, conservation groups, and local government.

Photo by Thomas & Dianne Jones

Efforts to obtain National Blueway Designation for White River Watershed suspended

Due to several fears from landowners driven by misinformation, lawmakers decided to put a hold on efforts to designate the White River as a National Blueway. "The National Blueway Designation for the White River would have brought the state resources for conservation efforts that would give landowners, hunting and fishing enthusiasts, and anyone who enjoys the outdoors a cleaner and more beautiful place to enjoy," said Debbie Doss of CFC

member group, the Arkansas Canoe Club, in an Op-Ed for the Arkansas Times.

A great deal of misinformation was circulating which claimed that the designation would lead to changes in property rights and water rights. In fact, nothing in the designation would affect property rights or water rights at all. Still, legislators at a hearing in July decided to wait and study the issue more. They indicated that there were positive aspects of the proposal, but that more information was needed to address public concerns.



Debbie Doss, Mark Robertson, Ken Smith and Keaton Smith update the CFC on natural gas, energy and water policy changes.

50 YEARS | continued from page 1 |



In 1963, a diverse group of mothers formed the Arkansas Panel of American Women to share their stories across the state and help facilitate school integration. None of them could have imagined the lasting impact of their work or the organization they were building. They simply set out to bridge differences and build relationships to help make our state a better place. Today the Panel continues their legacy.

ship of the organization and her work building statewide progressive coalitions, to the formation of community groups in South Arkansas and the founding of the Citizens First Congress.

Panelist Joyce Williams began the program by calling out the uncensored prejudices that she and other Panelists encountered in the 60s and 70s. Racial slurs and negative stereotypes about African American and Jewish people were common and harsh. She talked about the progress made since then, as well as the unfinished business that remains. "As we, the seed planters reach maturity and move on, it's time for others to step up and take charge and meet today's challenges," she said.

Former board chair Jim Lynch talked about Brownie Ledbetter

and her legacy: "She placed a high value on diversity but not just for diversity's sake. Pushing aside the boundaries of race, gender, and religion is what Brownie did all her life to make Arkansas better."

Brownie's son Grainger also spoke to introduce the new Brownie W. Ledbetter Action Research Fund (see inset p. 5).

Panel Board Chair and Gould Organizing Project President Curtis Mangrum shared his experience working with the Panel as part of a community group in South Arkansas. "We have to be able to come together as a whole to work towards solutions," he said. "Our communities are suffering because they're split along racial lines. We've got to be able to get over these dynamics that have kept us divided for so long."

CFC Co-Chair Mark Robertson emphasized the real value of the Citizens First Congress, "The bills are merely the byproducts of what the real success is, which is all around us tonight. We're growing a coalition of 56 members across lines of race, sexual orientation, gender, and economics, finding common issues, and moving forward together."

Bruce McMath ended the evening with a challenge for those in attendance: "If you have a progressive bent and you want meaning in your life, you're in the right place. You've got the Arkansas Public Policy Panel... and it will empower each of us in the proportion that we're willing to invest in it."

Find out more about the Panel's history at www.arpanel.org

Over 200 volunteers and supporters came out to celebrate the Panel's 50th anniversary. The crowd applauded the members of the Panel of American Women as they received special recognition for their service.



Announcing the Brownie W. Ledbetter Action Research Fund!

Grainger Ledbetter, son of the Panel's longtime executive director, announced the Brownie Williams Ledbetter Action Research Fund to the crowd celebrating the Panel's 50th anniversary.

"I cannot think of a better legacy for Mom's life work than the Panel and the [Citizens First] Congress," he said. "This fund will enable orga-

nizations to get the research they need to make the arguments to bring about effective change."

The Ledbetter family and donors to the Fund have raised over \$40,000 to endow the fund and to take immediate action on research needed today to improve education, protect the environment, strengthen protections for civil rights and more.

To contribute to the fund, make checks out to The Panel and include a note to let us know it is for the Research Fund.

THE PANEL STAFF

Beth Ardapple, Bass
Bernadette Devone, Pine Bluff
Bill Kopsky, Little Rock
Celestine Wesley, Little Rock
John Whiteside, Little Rock
Rosemary Brown, Monticello
Janice El-Amin, Gould
Brett Miracle Huie, Little Rock
Ana Phakhin, Little Rock
James Szenher, Little Rock

VISTA Volunteers:

Shirley Renix, Camden
Trina Walls, Star City
Endia Holley, Huttig

Panel Board –

www.ARPANEL.org

CFC Steering Committee –

www.CitizensFirst.org



Panel supporters and leaders, including William El-Amin, CFC Co-Chair and Curtis Mangrum, Panel Board Co-Chair (right) listen as speakers recount events of the Panel's 50-year history.

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Anna Strong, Health Policy Director at Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Starting in October, more than 500,000 Arkansans who currently lack affordable health insurance will now have more opportunities for coverage. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) was passed by Congress in 2010 and upheld by the Supreme Court in 2012. Thanks to the ACA and Arkansas lawmakers' efforts, Arkansans will be able to access more affordable health insurance starting this fall.

The ACA will help insure MORE Arkansans

One in four Arkansas adults lacks health insurance. Affordable health care coverage would help Arkansans get the preventive care, screenings, and treatments they need to get a good education, put healthy food on the table, and stay in the workforce.

New coverage that's available in Arkansas!

In short, all Arkansans will be able to access comprehensive, affordable insurance regardless of pre-existing conditions or other barriers. The only exceptions are individuals who are not lawfully present in the U.S. or who are incarcerated. The GREAT news is that 95% of uninsured Arkansans will qualify for financial help to pay for new coverage.

- » If you have existing, affordable insurance – you can keep it.
- » If you currently qualify for Medicaid or ARKids First but aren't enrolled, you can enroll.
- » **NEW! If you earn more than 138%** of the federal poverty level**, you can purchase a health insurance plan in the state's new insurance "Marketplace." Most uninsured Arkansans will qualify for subsidies to help pay the monthly premium. Depending on what plan you choose, you'll also have copays or deductibles when you go to the doctor. You will probably pay between 2% and 9.5% of your family income toward coverage.

- » **NEW! If you earn less than 138%** of the federal poverty level**, you may qualify for Arkansas's "Private Option" Medicaid coverage. Medicaid will pay your monthly premium for a health insurance plan you choose from the Marketplace. You may have to pay small copays (\$4-8) at the doctor, but your coverage would be very affordable.

*** 138% FPL is \$15,856 for individual, \$32,499 for a family of 4. A full-time worker earning minimum wage earns \$14,500 per year.*

What else do I need to know?

Local "in-person assisters" and "navigators" will be in every county in Arkansas helping uninsured Arkansans find their best coverage option. Hospitals, community health centers, and other places can help you enroll, too. All Arkansans will need to enroll in affordable coverage between October 1, 2013 and March 31, 2014, or they may face pay a penalty for being uninsured. The penalty is \$95 per person in 2014, but it goes up significantly to \$695 per person by 2016.

Where can I learn more?

- » Visit www.arhealthconnector.org for a list of local enrollment assisters, information on plans, and to enroll in coverage after October 1st. The Arkansas Health Connector is also available at 1-855-283-3483.
- » Your local Health Department and Human Services (DHS) office will also have information.
- » The federal government's site, www.healthcare.gov, is also great! It has a glossary of terms, FAQs, and other resources.
- » Check out AACF's website at www.aradvocates.org or follow us on Facebook or Twitter.

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Arkansas **HEALTH CONNECTOR**
Your Guide to Health Insurance

Health Insurance Marketplace

EXCHANGE PROGRAM UNITES ORGANIZERS FROM EUROPE AND SOUTH ARKANSAS

“Building Grassroots Democracy in Minority Communities,” an exchange program run by the U.S. State Department, brought a Slovakian organizer to Arkansas to see citizen democracy in action through the CFC’s campaigns at the Capitol, and a south Arkansas organizer to East-Central Europe to work with minority groups combatting discrimination. The connections they made between their work at home and abroad have deepened their understanding of issues and given new significance to their work.

The Panel hosted Martin Klus of Slovakia this spring. Klus visited community groups in South Arkansas, saw the Citizens First Congress at work at the Capitol, and got a taste of our pristine beauty and wildlife by visiting the Buffalo National River.

Klus is chairman of Aliancia nezávislých, a group focused on community building and civic engagement activities in Bratislava. He’s also vice president of Banskobystrický okrášlovací spolok, which does community clean-up and beautification projects, and 2nd vice president of the Turkish-Slovak Alliance for Education and Development, which bridges the gaps between different groups in the two countries. On top of all that, he’s a university professor.

“I found participation in the program helped me gain new communication, mobilization, and organizing skills, and I enjoyed meeting new people and building new friendships,” he said. “The advocacy activities at the State Capitol and in rural areas of South Arkansas will improve my work within my organizations as well as lecturing and research at the university.”

Janice El-Amin has been an organizer in Gould for the past six years, tackling racial injustices and racial polarization in South Arkansas. Over the summer, she traveled to Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary to work with the Roma population in those countries. The Roma are a marginalized group that face discrimination much like minority groups in the United States.

“Seeing the connections between the types of discrimination that people face in Europe and in America was powerful,” said El-Amin. “It was surprising to me that many people there thought that racism did not exist in the United States. We see racism in South Arkansas that’s unchallenged for the most part, but that’s starting to change as people get more involved and become

aware of their potential to make an impact here.”

El-Amin described the experience of seeing advocates in Europe going through a process similar to the one that residents in South Arkansas go through: “We role played around local issues and concerns, and people had to develop strategies and solutions in real time. It was exciting to see people get a better understanding of the planning process and how it could help their efforts. I know that feeling, because I see it in South Arkansas all the time, when people realize that there is a way for them to make an impact and make things better. It changes their whole perspective.”



Above: Panel Organizer Janice El-Amin with activists from Lom, Bulgaria. She worked with local groups who were organizing to combat discrimination of the Roma people in East-Central Europe.

Below: Slovakian organizer Martin Klus (in straw hat) and new Arkansas friends stepped away from the legislative session long enough for a float trip on the Buffalo River, courtesy of Lost Valley Canoe.





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Delegates to the Citizens First Congress Post-Legislative Convention came together on June 15th to debrief the successes and challenges of the 2013 legislative session, plan next steps to follow up on the session, and started preparing for the 2015 Arkansas Legislature.