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CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS SEES MAJOR SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES DURING HISTORIC LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The Arkansas Citizens First Congress came out of the 2013 General Assembly stronger than ever, helping pass crucial legislation including health care expansion, education reform, an energy package, election reform, landowner notification in the Fayetteville Shale, and more.

The CFC made over 50,000 phone calls, sent over 45,000 emails, and mobilized over 500 people at the Capitol to advocate for better policies that help all Arkansans.

They also helped stop several bills that would have harmed our schools, the environment, and the state's budget.

None of this would have been possible without the hard work of some amazing CFC leaders, legislative allies who helped move bills through some tough committees, and the support of the governor's office on a few key issues.

For a detailed overview of the session and how legislators voted, check out the CFC's vote guide and scorecard at www.citizensfirst.org.

"The last few months have been challenging but ultimately rewarding. I think we've shown that the CFC has the capacity to overcome obstacles and successfully push for progressive change at the Capitol," said CFC Co-Chair Mark Robertson.



With a crowd of young advocates behind him, Liobardo Ibarra speaks at a rally during the CFC's Youth Advocacy Day about the need for quality educational opportunities for all students.

Arkansas made history by becoming the first and only state in the South to expand health care coverage under the federal Affordable Care Act. The legislation will benefit over 250,000 currently uninsured Arkansans and will save countless lives. This was a huge accomplishment, showing that Arkansas can still be a regional leader and help move the country forward through bipartisan cooperation.

"RAND Corporation estimated that the new law could create 6,200 jobs and boost the state's GDP by

about \$550 million," said Anna Strong of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "The economic benefits also extend to rural hospitals and small businesses around the state. Most importantly, we know children and families will benefit from having affordable health coverage, allowing them to focus on school and work rather than big medical bills."

Expansion was passed in two parts: the enabling legislation, Act 1498, and the appropriations law, Act

see **CFC Advocates**, pg 4

SOUTH ARKANSAS RESIDENTS EMERGING AS KEY LEADERS AT THE CAPITOL

"We've come a long way, but really we're just getting started. Now that we know we can make a real difference at the Capitol, we're seeing more and more people in South Arkansas step up to get engaged in the process," said Sam King of the Gould Citizens Advisory Council, also a member of the Citizens First Congress Steering Committee. "I think we're going to see more leaders coming up and pushing for better laws that help our communities."

Residents who thought that what happens at the Capitol doesn't matter and that there's little point in getting involved now understand that legislation affects them at the local level and what they can do to impact it. They're developing more accountable relationships with their lawmakers so that they can keep pushing for policies that make life better for their communities.

This session there was a big increase in regular turnout from South Arkansas residents. Leaders from Gould, Monticello, Prescott, Marvell, Dumas, Strong, Huttig, and other communities helped make the Education and Youth Advocacy Days some of the most successful ever, turning out hundreds of people at the Capitol.

Leaders from Gould were coming up several times a week to advocate for election reform laws, education reform, fair tax policy and health care expansion. The election reform bills were largely a grassroots effort, born out of residents' frustration with election irregularities as an ongoing problem in their communities.



Ms. Lillie Miller of Marvell at an Opportunity to Learn Campaign rally advocating for accountable schools and research-proven reforms like pre-K, parent involvement, and effective discipline policies.

"We've had people intimidating voters, looking over their shoulders, taking pictures, standing right outside the door at the polling site. We've seen ballot boxes disappear for long stretches of time and people coming in to vote from out of town, and we are tired of it," said Curtis Mangrum, President of the Gould Citizens Advisory Council.

"We've had poll workers without knowledge of election laws running our elections. State Election Monitors have helped us, but there's not enough of them," he added.

With the legislature passing laws to increase the number of election monitors and require training for all poll workers, residents are excited to see positive change that will benefit their communities. More importantly, they know that they helped make it happen, and they

feel a strong sense of ownership and empowerment in having led a successful effort for positive change for the whole state.

In addition to advocacy days, residents came in large numbers to rallies to advocate for research-proven education reforms and stop harmful education and budget bills. Fannie Fields and Lillie Miller from Marvell spoke alongside education leaders from around the state against HB 1040, a bill that would have created an unaccountable charter school system.

"We owe it to our kids to make sure that charter schools are held accountable, and I'm glad we were able to stop that bill," said Ms. Miller. Ms. Fields added, "We're tired of attempts at reform with no research or data behind them. Our schools need

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reforms that are proven to help expand opportunities for our students.”

As powerful groups increase their efforts to privatize education next session, it is even more important for grassroots leaders to get involved and let legislators know that they want a quality public education system that provides opportunities to learn for ALL students.

The trips to the capitol also help newer community groups see how the process works and how they can take their knowledge back and be more effective in their efforts to improve their own communities.

“Coming to the Capitol is exciting for us. We feel like we’re a part of what’s happening there and so we know that we can come back and make a difference at home,” said Ms. Miller.

Citizens First Congress leaders mobilized at the State Capitol to meet legislators, advocate for better policies, and support each other’s campaigns. Clockwise from top left: LeAnna Humphrey, Gladys Tiffany, Sen. David Johnson, Ken Smith speaking with Rep. Charles Armstrong, a crowd from the Education Advocacy Day, Panel Policy Director John Whiteside with CFC Co-Chair Mark Robertson and Gladys Tiffany.



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CFC ADVOCATES | continued from page 1 |



Ed Mick, Robert McAfee and other leaders gather to discuss policy proposals at the Environmental Advocacy Day.



Keturah Rucker at the CFC's Youth Advocacy Training playing a trivia game to learn more about the legislative process and how government works in Arkansas.

1496, which provides the funding. Both laws were passed with very close votes. The appropriations bill required a $\frac{3}{4}$ majority, and passed narrowly by a two-vote margin in both the House and Senate.

"The supermajority vote requires true bipartisanship and compromise to succeed," said Dr. Jay Barth, Politics professor at Hendrix College. "Arkansas has shown in the past that we can look beyond ideological differences and work together to pass important legislation like this, so it's good to see us continue to build upon that legacy of pragmatic progressivism."

In another show of bipartisanship, the legislature passed Act 1299, the Arkansas Landowner Notification Act with only one vote against it. The law requires gas companies to notify landowners about natural gas ('fracking') operations on or near their property, including notice of development plans and any spills or permit violations.

"This is the culmination of several

years of hard work by many advocates in the Fayetteville Shale area," said Debbie Doss, CFC environment caucus chair. "There's more work to do ahead, but it sets a major precedent that we can pass grassroots led legislation to help those who have been affected by natural gas drilling."

Two major pieces of the CFC's energy package passed: Act 554 (Guaranteed Energy Cost Savings) and Act 1074 (Property Assessed Clean Energy). Another piece, HB 1390 (Distributed Generation), was referred to interim study and will come back next session.

"These laws put Arkansas on the map as a regional leader in the new energy economy," said Joanna Pollock, CFC Steering Committee member. "They'll have a major impact on the state by creating jobs, saving energy costs, and protecting the environment."

The Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign made progress in their

efforts to enact research proven reforms in our schools. "With help from a huge group of allies, we saw a few key successes and stopped several harmful bills," said Regina Von Tunglen, OTL Co-Chair.

OTL helped pass laws to increase parent engagement (Act 1423), and make discipline policies more fair and effective (Act 1329).

Additionally, OTL joined with school administrators from across the state to form a new coalition to support reforms that are proven to expand opportunities to learn for students. They were able to stop a few bad bills that would have eliminated accountability for charter schools, redirected funding from schools to highways, and diverted funding from public to private schools.

It was a tough session for education advocates, and they had to play a lot of defense against attempts to privatize the state's education system.

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"We know that we'll continue to see more pushes for unproven or unaccountable charters and privatization with little evidence to back them up, but we will continue to stay focused on our proactive agenda," Von Tungeln said.

Grassroots leaders pushing for election reform saw success with Acts 1456 and 1457, which will increase the number of statewide election monitors and require training for all poll workers in the state. The campaign was headed by leaders from the Gould Citizens Advisory Council.

"We've been dealing with a number of election irregularities in Gould for many years, so we are very happy to see this legislation pass," said CFC Co-Chair William El-Amin. "We know our community is not unique and that these laws will help ensure free and fair elections across the state."

The laws stand in stark contrast to Act 595, the new Voter ID Law, which will require voters to present photo identification before being allowed to vote. "It's unfortunate that the legislature passed such a discriminatory and unconstitutional law," El-Amin said. "We believe that this law will be challenged and will be struck down by the courts."

These victories represent a huge accomplishment for the CFC, but the session was not without its share of setbacks. Several harmful laws were passed which targeted women's rights and environmental protections, including act 954, which guts water quality standards and allows for more pollution in streams not currently designated as drinking sources. We believe the worst of these laws will be overridden by federal law or struck down by the



George Wiley, Lee Williams and Hazel Pruitt at a legislative committee hearing discussing the need for fair elections in Arkansas and advocating for more election monitors and training for all poll workers.

courts. CFC priority bills that would have granted in-state tuition rates to all students, helped stop wage theft, and ratified the Equal Rights Amendment failed in committee.

Despite Arkansas' unfair system which already taxes middle and working class families at twice the rate as wealthy Arkansans, the legislature passed cuts that will make our tax system even more unfair and will present major challenges to the state budget in the next few years.

"The tax cuts were definitely a big disappointment of the session," said Rev. Howard Gordon, a Panel board member. "We need a more fair, responsible, moral, and effective tax policy that doesn't overburden the working and middle class families who are struggling the most in Arkansas, and we're heading in the absolute opposite direction."

The cuts balloon from a cost of \$150 million in 2014 to over \$300 million in 2016 with the benefits going vastly to the wealthiest 5% of Arkansans. The losses in rev-

enue could jeopardize education or health care funding in the next session.

The CFC will convene on June 15 for its Post-Legislative Celebration/Conference at Philander Smith College to plan its next steps.

"We need to be thinking about how to adapt our strategies to the changing conditions at the legislature," said Co-Chair Mark Robertson. Co Chair William El-Amin added, "The next few election cycles will help determine our future successes and we need to be thinking about how we can help make sure that Arkansans elect legislators who are committed to CFC priority issues."

Ultimately though, while the political shift will continue to have a significant impact, the basic strategy for passing legislation at the Capitol remains the same: those campaigns with active and engaged constituencies and a large base of support behind them are more likely to succeed.

ORIGINAL PANELIST JEAN GORDON SHARES MORE OF THE PANEL'S EARLY HISTORY

As we approach the Panel's 50th anniversary, we continue our series of talks with original Panelists about the early history of the Panel of American Women, speaking this time with Jean Gordon.



Jean Gordon and Mildred Terry at a celebration of the Panel's 40th anniversary.

"It isn't always easy to put into practice the things we believe in."

This line comes from a speech that Jean Gordon gave to various churches, PTA groups, and others as she traveled around the state with the Panel of American Women (PAW).

Jean talked about what it was like for women of diverse backgrounds to get to know each other before they set out on their mission to help facilitate school integration:

"We had to meet several times in the beginning to get acquainted with each other. At first it was like skating on thin ice. We had very little contact with people outside our respective racial and religious groups. We were so afraid we'd say the wrong thing and hurt someone's feelings, so we were all very careful at first. Eventually though, we got to know each other and later

we laughed about how cautious we had been."

She gave a detailed account of one experience where the group had been refused service at a restaurant:

"I was on a panel that was turned away at a restaurant because we had a black panelist. It was a Sunday night and we were going to speak at a church in a small town outside of Little Rock. We walked in the restaurant and all the waitresses turned their backs on us. It took a few minutes for us to realize what was happening. Later, we talked to the students at the church about it, and they were very upset to hear this. They thought we were nice ladies and didn't deserve to be treated this way, and that they would tell the manager they didn't like what he did.

The next week, we went back to the restaurant with a Catholic priest,

and the manager welcomed us and we had lunch there. We all learned a lot from that experience. The feeling of being turned down, it gave me a little bit of an idea of what it feels like to be discriminated against."

Jean talked about how she developed the speech she gave to the groups that the Panel were invited to speak with.

"Sarah (Murphy, PAW Founder) met with each of us and helped us write a speech. We'd go home and write it out and talk with her about what we wanted to convey and how we wanted to present ourselves. We'd always say, 'we're housewives and mothers, not experts on race relations,' and we'd tell about our personal experience in a way that wasn't telling the audience that they should be like us. We wanted to share stories and build relationships rather than preaching or making a political argument."

Jean shared her speech with us, which is a great window into the message that the Panelists were bringing across the state:

"The world in which my children will live is not the world in which we grew up and will never be again. Sixty new nations have been born since Hall High School was opened. More and more people of different nationalities, races, and religions will be working together in business, government, church, and civic affairs. I want my children to be prepared to live in this world - to know and under-

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PANEL TO CELEBRATE LEGACY, DOCUMENT HISTORY WITH 50TH ANNIVERSARY EVENT AND UALR PROJECT

Women's Panel Will Appear Monday Night



Jean Gordon (read her story on page 6), Faustenia Bomar, Sara Murphy, Barbara Phillips, Carol Taylor and Mary Snider Griffin present their stories as the Panel of American Women.

On June 15 at 5:00, the Panel will host a dinner and celebration at Philander Smith College that will include a journey through the Panel's 50 year history as well as 15 years of the Citizens First Congress led by speakers from various decades.

In 1963, times were uncertain in Arkansas, but a few brave mothers came together as the Panel of American Women to travel our state and share their personal stories to help ease tensions surrounding school integration. Their efforts grew into the Arkansas Public Policy Panel, which 50 years later continues to seek social justice in Arkansas.

"This event is going to be a lot of fun, and we're going to hear a great set of speakers share their stories about how we got started, where we've been, and where we're going," said Rev. Howard Gordon, Panel board member.

Speakers will include an original member of the Panel of American Women, former board chair and current Panel and CFC leaders.

The Citizens First Congress will meet at Philander during the day from 12:00-4:30 for their Post-Legislative Celebration/Planning Session. The 50th Anniversary celebration begins at 5:00 with a reception, fol-

lowed by dinner at 6:00.

"We've been working hard to make this a wonderful event and we hope everyone involved with the Panel and CFC will make plans to be there to enjoy it," said Panel Fundraising Committee member Barbara Miles, who is also helping plan the event.

Students in the Public History program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) are producing a comprehensive history of the half-century of the Panel and CFC's work, which will soon be available to the public.

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stand many kinds of people and to wish for others the same privileges they enjoy.

"What do I do about all this? I can urge my church groups to have exchange programs with people of different faiths and races. I can help see that all the children of our city can participate in the cultural activities offered. I can let the School

Board know how I feel about giving all children the same opportunities at school.

"When we shut others out we create isolated groups for ourselves which stifle and limit our own ability to grow. America was built on the principle that a free flow of ideas is a healthy thing - I can do my part to keep it that way only if I listen and try to understand other

points of view."

Jean's actions and those of her fellow Panelists show that while it's not easy to take action to create the changes we want to see, with enough courage it is certainly possible.

To learn more about the Panel's history, and to donate to the organization, go to www.arpanel.org.

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