

PUBLIC POLICY WATCH

The Newsletter of The Arkansas Public Policy Panel

Winter 2002



Farmers to Voice Their Concerns at Agriculture Hearing

The newly-formed Arkansas Farm-Community Alliance (AFCA) is plowing ahead with a campaign to create an Arkansas Department of Agriculture. Arkansas is currently the only state in the country without a department or similar agency. Since the last legislative session, a diverse coalition of farmers has been working full speed ahead toward this goal.

The Agriculture Committee of the state legislature will host a hearing about the Dept. of Agriculture issue on Thursday, April 18th at the State Capitol, from 10:00 am until about noon. The farmers need your help in spreading the word through your networks and to bring your folks to the hearing.

One of those farmers is Marsha Fair. A farmer from Poinsett County and consultant for the US Rice Producers Association, she supports a Dept. of Agriculture because of the additional funds and benefits international marketing development programs could bring to the state. "Arkansas farmers already provide food and fiber to global markets and have a vested interest in the development of those markets to the fullest extent possible," said Fair.

Stephan Walker, a farmer from Jefferson County is concerned that USDA funds allocated to help family farms develop are ending up in some strange places. "We need a way to make sure that federal money allotted to Arkansas agriculture goes where it's supposed to," Walker said. A good Dept. of Agriculture would offer market development programs for independent farmers and be accountable for where and how USDA funds are spent.

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Local Communities Take Action on Education

"We as parents want to be involved in the schools, but we are not welcomed. That has to change." Those words were stated by parent and Marianna resident Doris Wallace at a recent community meeting on public education in Marianna. "When I walk into the school, the office staff and teachers look at me like I'm here to cause trouble, but I'm just here to drop off my son's instrument," Wallace continued.

The community of Marianna and residents of Phillips county are organizing to address public education reform. Both groups are comprised of parents, teachers, students and others concerned about public education. Community folks of Phillips county voiced concerns regarding parental involvement, curriculum enhancement,

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Marianna Education Group



Join the Arkansas Citizens First Congress May 17 -19

The Arkansas Citizens First Congress is in May this year at the Majestic Hotel in Hot Springs. The Congress is where community groups from across the state plan a citizens' legislative agenda and priority issues for the 2003 Arkansas General Assembly. Come and help build a community voice in state government. To register your group or find more info, call the Panel at (501) 376-7913 or visit www.CitizensFirst.org.



Citizens First Congress Meets With Success

The Arkansas Citizens First Congress started rolling towards its 2003 Citizens' Legislative Agenda with four great caucus meetings in December. Arkansas activists got together to discuss challenges in areas of the environment, agriculture, economic justice and social justice. Proposals coming out of the caucus meetings included a good mix of old issues, such as getting a state department of agriculture and passing hate crimes legislation, and new ideas. The proposals discussed at the December caucuses will be some of those brought forward before the whole Citizens First Congress on May 17th thru the 19th, when the group selects its five priority issues for the 2003 legislative session.

See Citizens First Congress on p. 4

NEWS BRIEFS

The **Arkansas Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice** will hold a *Workers Memorial Day Service* for workers killed or injured on the job last year. The service will be held April 26th. Spokespeople are available to speak at church services during the month of April on this subject. Call the Interfaith Committee at (501) 614-8416 or e-mail aicwj@aol.com for more info.

A. Phillips Randolph Institute's national president, Norman Hill, spoke at area colleges during the week of February 18 for Black History Month. He visited U of A Pine Bluff, Shorter College in North Little Rock, and Philander Smith College in Little Rock during his stay.

ARDPArk Sen. John Riggs (D-LR) plans to introduce a medical marijuana bill for the upcoming legislative session. ARDPArk organizers are urging supporters to contact their legislators and ask them to sign on as cosponsors to Sen. Riggs' bill.

Drug Policy Education Group, Inc. is kicking-off a speakers bureau. Speakers will address drug policy from the focus of their expertise. For more information about this free service or to receive the speakers bureau packet containing a list of speakers, contact Drug Policy Education Group, Inc. at 541 West Meadow, Fayetteville 72701 or call 479-839-8543.

Arkansas Voices announces the annual Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis event to be held at the Capitol on Friday, May 10th. This is part of an annual national campaign by Justiceworks to bring attention to the plight of imprisoned mothers and their children.

The Hendrix College **Students Transforming and Resisting Corporations** recently sponsored teach-ins on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the School of the Americas. For more info contact Richard Jarboe at jarboere@mercury.hendrix.edu

Support the Nurses at St. Vincent's!

Nurses at St. Vincent's Medical Center in Little Rock need your support! The union has been negotiating for more than a year in an attempt to gain a contract but management has refused to budge on key issues.

One of the main stumbling blocks in negotiations has been St. Vincent's refusal to talk about patient care. Management has failed to address issues of under staffing and the reassignment of nurses out of their areas of expertise, two areas that have significant effects on the quality of care.

Nurses have reported staff shortages in such critical areas as the intensive care unit and the emergency room.

"Reductions in staff have resulted in nurses having to take on a lot more

responsibilities. You can't provide quality care when you have so many patients that you're running from one to the next," said one St. Vincent nurse.

A strike called for Tuesday, February 26th was postponed when a "Community Committee of Concerned Citizens" requested that a special panel of civic leaders mediate negotiations in hopes of resolving outstanding issues. However, if St. Vincent's doesn't bargain in good faith on key issues, a strike is inevitable.

The nurses need public support to win this struggle. "Public participation is key, whether it is writing letters to the editor or helping with picketing or contacting St. Vincent board members, the public needs to let St. Vincent's know that the people of Arkansas support the nurses and quality health care," said lead union organizer, Donna Shaffer.

Now is the time to act! Contact the United Health Care Local 22 of the OPEIU at P. O. Box 56555, Little Rock, AR 72215, 501-565-5430 or www.unitedhealthcarelocal22.org



St. Vincents Nurses out in the cold fighting for a fair contract

Education Forums, cont. from p. 1

and increasing teacher pay. Superintendent Leon Phillips of the Lake View School District attended the first community meeting in West Helena. He stressed the importance of increasing school funding to make all Arkansas schools equitable.

Parental involvement is high on the list of concerns of Marianna residents. An additional concern is the removal of the summer school program for the 4th-9th grades. Seventy-four percent of the students in the county receive free or reduced meals during school. With the removal of

summer school, many students will potentially go hungry during the summer months and the academic achievement scores of students are in danger of dropping. This decision was made without any comments from community members or teachers, nor was their input sought by the school board.

Residents are taking action by attending meetings and organizing to make local changes. If you want to get involved in your community, contact Eric Reece at 501.376.7913 x 11, or email to Obrian_30@yahoo.com.

74% of the students in the county receive free or reduced meals during school.

Friend-of-the-Court Brief Filed in Lake View School Funding Case

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel and the Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT) recently filed a Friend-of-the-Court (amicus curiae) brief before the Arkansas Supreme Court. The brief, filed to support the state's rural schools, urged the high court to uphold a lower court's ruling in the landmark Lake View school funding case, which is currently on appeal. "Every school day, geography is determining the educational destiny of thousands of Arkansas students," the brief contends.

Arkansas has more students who attend small rural schools than any other state. "More often than not, these students live in economically distressed communities where the only path out of poverty is through the school house door," notes the brief. The brief also contends that:

- Arkansas' large rural population and high rural poverty rate make it essential that the needs of rural students be considered in a court

decision on the equity and adequacy of school funding.

- Smaller school and smaller districts are particularly beneficial to help overcome the effects of poverty on student achievement in poorer communities.
- Equal school funding does make a difference: the effects of poverty and the disadvantage of rural geography can be mitigated for rural students if they have equal educational opportunity.
- The state's property tax system creates serious inequities for rural schools.

A copy of the brief filed before the Supreme Court can be found on the Arkansas Public Policy Panel website at www.ARPanel.org. Also check out the web site for a closer and clear look at the Lake View law suit and other education fact sheets.

Farmers Organize, cont. from p. 1

Floyd Weidower, General Manager of the Arkansas Dairy Co-ops Association and farmer in Faulkner County, said "a good Dept. of Agriculture would've made it easier for the dairy farmers to get our farmer-run co-op off the ground and keep it running. Since we had no help from the

state, we had to start from scratch." The Co-op has grown to include over 170 farm families in

four states and has helped keep dairy farmers' livelihoods intact. "It sounds crazy but a lot of milk in Arkansas stores comes from New Mexico while most of the milk we produce in Arkansas has to be shipped out of state because there's no marketing support."

Fair, Walker, Weidower, and other AFCA members know that the April 18th hearing in Little Rock is crucial. They hope that folks make plans now to spend a day in Little Rock and show that there is widespread support for farmers in the state.

In Loving Memory of Our Friend Becky Rawlings. 1954 – 2002



News cont.

The **Arkansas Hunger Coalition** is working with Bread for the World on urging Congress to improve and strengthen Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). They want welfare reform done in ways that better meet the needs of poor and hungry people by providing more support as people seek work and by making poverty reduction, not just caseload reduction, a major goal. For more info contact Hope Coulter at the Arkansas Hunger Coalition at arhunger@flash.net or 1-877-RHUNGER.

For the past six months, the **Ouachita Watch League (OWL)** has held meetings with U.S. Forest Service officials and scientists in an effort to promote forest biodiversity to replace the industrial forest model which has logged and mined public lands for decades. An OWL meeting is scheduled for Sat. March 9, 10:00 AM in the Red Room at the Arkansas School for Math and Sciences, 100 Whittington Ave. in downtown Hot Springs. Visit OWL's web site: ouachitawatchleague.org or call 501-623-8425 for more information.

Panel organizers are researching problems occurring from toxic chemical releases in Arkansas communities. People living near polluting industrial facilities are experiencing health problems and property devaluation due to the lack of enforcement of environmental laws. Contact Tina Bellou at (501) 376-7913 ext. 16 if you have concerns in your community.

The Panel and the **Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission** are interviewing possible organizers for South Arkansas to work with low-income communities around economic, environmental and civil rights issues. The Panel is also bringing on Denisse Jones as a VISTA to work with Latino communities around the state. Members of **La Voz** helped create this project. We still have several VISTA positions open to work with organizers in East or South Arkansas, or on environmental, agricultural or civil rights issues. Give us a call or check the web site for more information.



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In This Issue:

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and don't forget the

Arkansas Citizens First Congress
in Hot Springs, May 17-19

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Citizens First Congress, cont. from p. 1

Following the caucus meetings, Congress members braved harsh weather to voice their concerns during a rally on the steps of the Capitol. The group then met at the Arkansas Education Association building for a banquet and party. The Congress awarded Denele Campbell, of the Drug Policy Education Group, the 2001 Brownie Ledbetter Dragon Slayer Award. Denele, of Fayetteville, has done a lot of great work educating Arkansans of the state's inequitable drug policies. The banquet also included dancing and live music from Little Rock's Wolf Mother Wallpaper, featuring the Panel's very own Tina Bellou.

Thanks to all those who contributed and participated!



Members of the Citizens First Congress gather on the steps of the Capitol

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community voices in Arkansas**

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