**SUMMER 2016** Little Rock Arkansas

# public policy



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### **CFC ELECTS PRIORITIES FOR** A BETTER ARKANSAS

new priorities for the Arkansas Citizens First Congress at its 9th Legislative Convention.

"I could just feel all the energy in the room," said delegate Demetria Taylor. "It is a group of diverse people coming together, and I feel like it was one voice united."

Taylor was one of nearly 150 delegates from 61 member organizations who attended the convention. For the first

was nominated was elected to the 10 Priorities for a Better Arkan-

"We made history today," said CFC Co-Chair William El-Amin on the final day of the June convention. "The priorities that were elected were very well thought out. The groups did the research, made a convincing argument on why we need them, and I think that's going to spill over into the legislative session

A record crowd elected time, each issue that when we start fighting for those resolutions."

> The convention is modeled on Arkansas' legislative process to help people understand how bills are passed at the Capitol.

> organiza-Member tions bring proposals to their caucuses to have a discussion, debate and elect priorities to recommend to the full convention.

> "At the end of the day the cream rises to the top," said CFC Co-Chair see Convention, pg 3

#### PARENT TESTIMONY **INFLUENCES SPECIAL EDUCATION REPORT**



The stories of families in Arkansas' special education program are often heartbreaking, but they are also playing a part in improving the system.

Trilisa Marshall's daughter was born with hydrocephalus, meaning she has excess fluid in her brain.

She struggled in school, but multiple tests for learning disabilities continued to turn up the same results.

"The person doing the testing kept saying nothing was wrong," Marshall said. "Although I let teachers know about her condition, some of her teachers didn't treat her with appropriate care."

One day, Marshall was called to her daughter's school after she fell asleep in class. At the meeting Marshall found out the teacher had jerked her awake and threatened the girl with expulsion.

"The stress of this caused my daughter to have a seizure," Marshall said. "The teacher didn't know how to deal with it."

While Marshall spoke to school administrators, her daughter collapsed on the playground, and had to be rushed to the

see Education, pg 4



#### 10 Priorities for a Better Arkansas

- Improve opportunities to learn for all students with research proven education reforms.
- Reform the Arkansas tax code to be more fair, support a sound state budget, and continue expanding access to quality health care.
- Support energy efficiency and renewable energy reforms that reduce carbon pollution, save consumers money and create jobs.
- **Decarcerate Arkansas, curbing the ex**treme growth of Arkansas' prison population which disproportionately affects people of color, the poor, people with mental illnesses, and other minority groups.
- **Implement the new Arkansas State Water** Plan and protect water quantity, quality and aquatic environments.
- **Protect Arkansas tenants by requiring** proof of habitability for rental properties, and ensuring tenants cannot be arrested for failure to pay rent.
- Create a report on gender pay equity in state government in order to close the gender pay gap.
- Regulate and reduce line speeds in poultry plants in order to reduce worker injuries and contamination of poultry that affects the health and safety of consumers.
- **Implement stronger protections to prevent** wage theft.
- **Improve health and relationship education** for youth to address teen pregnancy and other challenges facing youth.

For a detailed look at each priority, visit www.citizensfirst.org/priorities









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#### CONVENTION |cont. from page 1|

Mark Robertson. "Good proposals come out and then the organization as a whole discusses and prioritizes the recommendations."

The CFC elected two new long-term priorities, one to implement the state water plan, and the other to address the growing mass incarceration crisis in our state. The five short-term priorities elected are fair housing reform, addressing teen pregnancy, gender pay equity, stopping wage theft, and poultry worker safety.

In addition, attendees reaffirmed three long term priorities: supporting energy efficiency and renewable energy, education reform, and a fair budget and tax code.

"I'm excited about the wide range of issues and finding common ground and interests across such a broad cross section of the state wanting to work on each other's issues," Robertson said. "The CFC's the one organization in the state that really is a coalition of very diverse interests. If you look out across our membership this year, it's a real slice of what Arkansas is."

The weekend provided an opportunity to celebrate those differences, and gave attendees a chance to lobby for their particular issues, share solutions, develop strategy and build relationships with people from across the state. The collaboration increases pressure for law-makers to prioritize the needs of Arkansas families over special interest groups.

"We have critical issues in Arkansas and it's easy to get disenfranchised when you don't come together in a setting like this," said delegate Chris McNamara. "The focus was

on taking action and promoting love and cooperation and those are the things that keep you motivated. It's definitely the relationships that we build that makes this group strong."

McNamara is a part of the Arkansas Citizens' Climate Lobby, which helped elect long term support for energy efficiency programs and carbon reduction policies to the CFC priority list in 2014. He worked in the environmental caucus, which pushed to make implementation of the Arkansas Water Plan a new priority.

The legislative session starts in January, and advocates are building their priority issue campaigns and contacting lawmakers now to build support. Visit www.citizensfirst.org for a detailed look at each issue and find out how to get involved.

## **GET INVOLVED!**

The CFC has a new individual membership option, learn more and sign up at:

## www.citizensfirst.org/join-us





#### EDUCATION |cont. from page 1|

hospital.

"We learned the tube in her head had been shaken loose," Marshall said. "Fluid was building up on her brain."

Marshall's daughter finally got help when she was in the 7th grade. A new person performed the test, and said she should have been in the special education program long before.

Marshall traveled to the Capitol in July to share her story with the Legislative Task Force on the Best Practices for Special Education.

"My daughter spent years struggling in regular classes and being mistreated by some teachers because the person doing the testing was not doing their job," Marshall said. "The people who are testing kids for learning disabilities need proper training and they need to be held accountable."

The CFC and our partners at Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families pushed for creation of the task force after parents complained that their children with special needs were not receiving adequate services. The Panel helped organize parents, and collected stories to inform the discussion.

Dollie Spencer told the task force her granddaughter was prematurely removed from special education.

Spencer's granddaughter suffered extreme trauma when she was two years old.

"Her mother put the girl and her brother in the trunk of a car, and the boy died," Spencer said. "I don't know how much my granddaughter remembers of this, but she sometimes talks about her brother's murder, and when she gets upset, she lashes out. Sometimes she starts laughing for no reason, or bursts into tears and can't explain why."

She didn't speak for the first four years of her life, and entered elementary school with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). However, when she graduated to middle school, Spencer says the district removed her from the special education program, over the protest of her granddaughter's therapist.

"The school said we no longer needed an IEP," Spencer said. "They told me she just has bad behavior. She has been suspended three times this year. She was suspended three days for crying in class, and that just puts her farther behind."

Spencer called on the task force to increase training for Special Education teachers and new discipline policies that do not punish a child for their disabilities.

"They need to show these children compassion, and take time to work with each child on their own level," Spencer said. "Teachers need to know this is a child suffering from emotional trauma, and how to work

with her to calm her down. Simply sending her home is only making it harder for her to learn."

The parents' testimony highlighted the disconnect between the policies in place and what's actually being implemented. On paper the state is complying with federal regulations for Special Education, but student outcomes say otherwise.

"The task force really needed parents' perspectives," said the Panel's Education Organizer Ana Phakhin.

Phakhin said the testimony heavily influenced the task force recommendations.

When one member objected to a mandate that all schools implement evidence-based interventions, another member reminded everyone of Ms. Marshall and Ms. Spencer's stories. The mandate was included.

Recommendations also include increasing the number of Special Education teachers, and increasing funding for special education. Currently, the fund for "catastrophic" special education needs is supposed to pro-



Trilisa Marshall (L) and Dollie Spencer testify at the Legislative Task Force on the Best Practices for Special Education. Their stories influenced the recommendations in the recently completed report.



#### COMMUNITY GROUPS HOST COUNTY CLERKS

Community groups across South Arkansas are implementing election strategies, including meeting with county clerks and election commissioners to ensure no one is unfairly denied the right to vote on election day. They are especially concerned after the Arkansas Secretary of State's office started a statewide purge of some registered voters.

Union County Clerk Shannon Phillips spoke to the Strong Community Leadership Alliance and Concerned Citizens of Huttig at a joint meeting in early September.

Phillips offered advice to make sure they don't run into problems on election day.

"Verify your voter registration early because that is key to getting to vote where you are supposed to and on time," Phillips said. "(Voting) is important to make sure that the people you vote in are actually doing what they're supposed to and they're representing you."

CCH President Van Page said the information will bolster voters' confidence.

"It's very important to understand the voting process," Page said. "We have some voters who are kind of timid, and could be easily discouraged. Knowledge is power, and if you know what your rights are, then you go in with a much different attitude."



Concerned Citizens of Huttig President Van Page (L) with Union County Clerk Shannon Phillips, Strong Community Leadership Alliance President Edwina Howard, and CCLA member Art Henry inform voters from Strong and Huttig.

#### EDUCATION |cont. from previous page |

vide \$30 million (2014-15 school year) for special education needs but has only given out \$11 million per year.

As a result of the task force's findings, the house and senate education committees voted to recommend a \$20 million increase in funding over the next two years.

Legislators will take that information into account while they set the budget, but we are still in the beginning stages of true reform.

"These are just words on paper until we actually get the legislation and the funding to implement them," Phakhin said. "Politicians pay lip service to special education, but will they prioritize it in the budget and pay for it with real dollars?"

Anyone who is interested should join the Opportunity



to Learn Campaign at www.arkansasotl.org or find us on Facebook.

"Special education is one of our priorities," Phakhin said. "We're going to be working on this for the long term."

GET INVOLVED AT ARKANSASOTL.ORG OR FIND THE ARKANSAS OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN CAMPAIGN ON FACEBOOK

## watch public policy

#### Thanks for 20 years Beth!



Beth Ardapple (center) retired this year, after spending two decades as the Panel's Development Director.

Beth was an anchor of our work, developing the programs and raising the money that supported the organizers and leaders as they established sustainable, grassroots democracy in communities across the state.

Please consider a gift to continue her legacy of a growing social justice movement in Arkansas. www.ArPanel.org/donate

#### Thanks to our 2016 Summer Interns!



Sarah Leflar, a sophomore at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, researched and summarized potential environmental health hazards in South Arkansas. She also created info sheets to show people how to report violations of environmental laws.



Jovonnie Quintero, a senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, worked with the education organizing team to help develop strong parent leaders in South Arkansas. He assisted with several

trainings on community surveys and developed tools for community groups to conduct voter engagement campaigns.

#### MAKE YOUR VOTE COUNT FOR MORE

November 8th is fast approaching when Arkansans will vote for the future of their communities, the state and the Nation.

We will have a number of very close elections across the state, which will be decided by just a few votes.

Nothing turns your vote into an action that helps your community like asking a candidate where they stand on your issues at a public forum before the election. Getting candidates on record and encouraging everyone you know to vote based on their positions is one of the most powerful things you can do.

Often in Arkansas we elect candidates without knowing where they stand on many issues. It's our job as voters to expose the real differences between candidates on the issues we care about.

Will they support research proven strategies to boost public education or will they support the privatization schemes that are resegregating our schools?

Will they support action to protect Arkansas waters?

Do they support clean energy?

Will they support economic and tax reforms that boost opportunities for middle class, working and vulnerable families, or do they support more tax favors for the super rich?

Do they support reforming our prison system which now has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world?

Do they support continuing health care coverage for



275,000 Arkansans through the Arkansas Works?

Many leaders in our network are hosting forums to ask candidates where they stand. Some leaders are taking it a step further, going door-to-door to pass out information on where to vote and some of the key issues they are concerned about. Many are volunteering to help candidates who stand for their vision for the future of their community.

Voters will consider 7 ballot measures ranging from removing caps on corporate welfare (Issue 3), limiting your ability to sue bad actors for damages in negligence cases (Issue 4), and 2 medical marijuana measures (Issue 6 and 7).

Never forget the power of your vote, and the battles we are still fighting to preserve your right. Just this year the Arkansas Secretary of State acknowledged that he erroneously removed thousands of eligible voters, but refused to correct the error.

In recent years our members in Gould, Huttig and other communities have had to fight to keep from being harassed and spied on in the voting booth, to make sure their ballot boxes arrived at the County Courthouse unopened and were



#### ARKANSAS ADDS TO GULF DEAD ZONE

Excessive nutrients found primarily in animal waste, fertilizer and sewage treatment discharges are polluting Arkansas waters and contributing to an area in the Gulf of Mexico that is nearly devoid of sea life.

This 'Dead Zone' is now larger than the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.

It hurts Arkansans as well. Water bodies with excessive nutrients can be toxic to fish, plants and wildlife and can harm drinking water supplies and close beaches.

"Beaver Lake provides drinking water for 420,000 people, and every fall the water smells and tastes odd thanks to algae blooms from excess nutrients," said Don Richardson of the Arkansas Environmental Defense Alliance. "This is just one example of a national problem, where unfortunately, Arkansas plays a big part."

Arkansas ranks among the highest contributors of nutrients to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. The state adds about 7% of the total nitrogen and 10% of the total phosphorus to the Gulf of Mexico.

Statewide strategies and policies must protect water resources while not overburdening farmers or industry. We need fair policies and procedures that ensure local stakeholders and the public are aware, and involved when siting and managing facilities that could impact our water resources.

"We must find a balance of supporting farmers while still protecting the precious clean water we all depend on," Richardson said.

Right now, there are virtually no

standards that the agriculture industry must meet to address these problems. Arkansas uses subjective standards to set thresholds for nitrogen and phosphorus in water bodies. These standards don't easily translate into permit requirements.

Nutrient management plans help landowners and operators achieve maximum soil fertility while protecting state waters. Currently such plans are required only in a handful of watersheds.

The new Arkansas Water Plan recommends the state require nutrient management plans statewide for the application of poultry litter and animal manure. Legislation is being drafted to address the need for nutrient management plans statewide and will need support during the 2017 Legislative Session.

#### VOTE |cont. from prev. page|

counted fairly, to make sure polling sites were located at convenient locations and staffed with competent poll workers and functioning machines. Last year we had to fight against legislation that would have shortened the hours available for early voting.

If you don't like the candidates running, it's just as important to get involved. Staying home only diminishes your ability to make change. Instead get out and vote, but make sure the candidates know where you stand before the election, and don't let them forget after they take

Stay engaged. You can even run for office yourself in the next cycle.

Voting is the first step in creating the government we need and deserve, but it is not the last step.

#### PANEL HOSTS ENVIRONMENTAL SUMMI



The Arkansas Public Policy Panel in partnership with Sierra Club Arkansas Chapter and Audubon Arkansas hosted the 1st annual Arkansas Environmental Policy Summit in September. 130 attendees, including professionals and members of the public discussed current environmental issues and how they should be addressed.

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