

FALL 2007
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Arkansas

public policy WATCH


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LAWMAKERS REACT TO GLOBAL WARMING, HIV/AIDS AND THE OVERTAXED POOR AND SEND KIDS TO SCHOOL AND CONVICTS TO DRUG COURT



Citizens First Congress members watch Governor Beebe sign a bill establishing a Minority HIV/AIDS Task Force. In its most successful legislative session to date, the coalition saw laws enacted for all five of its campaigns.

Members of the Arkansas Citizens First Congress are still celebrating the coalition's most successful legislative session in its nine-year history.

"It was a great agenda, backed by a lot of Arkansas people," said a smiling Bruce Lockett, co-chair of the coalition. "We worked well with our legislators, and they responded by passing some progressive bills."

Lockett pointed to five significant policy victories:

1. Arkansas' first action to address global warming is the creation of a Global Warming Commission,

which the Governor appointed in September. The commission will study the issues and establish a pollutant reduction goal and develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the State to deal with global warming. "Global warming threatens the very sustainability of our quality of life within the next generation," said Don Richardson of the Arkansas Climate Awareness Project.

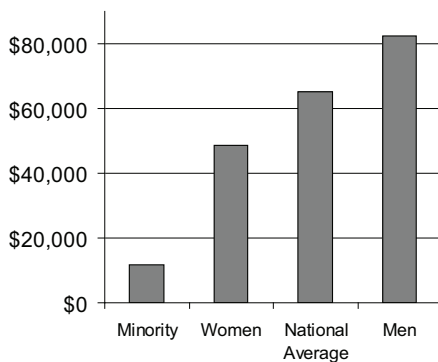
2. Every child in Arkansas from a low-income family can attend pre-school. The Arkansas Better Chance program is one of the most highly rated pre-kindergarten programs in the nation, but parents had to get in

line early to get their child enrolled. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families was at the forefront of this campaign. "Lawmakers took a major step toward improving the well being of children," said Rich Huddleston, executive director. "It's an investment in the future that will pay off for Arkansas."

3. Low-income families got a tax break when lawmakers cut grocery taxes by 50% and raised the income level that requires workers to pay income tax. Low-income Arkansans pay twice the tax rate that wealthy Arkansans pay. According to _____ see **Lawmakers**, page 4

- American poverty rates are at their highest level since 1973.
- 13 million American children, and 1/3 of African American and Latino children, are growing up in poverty.
- Only half of low-income children will graduate high school, and those who do will perform on average at an 8th grade level.
- African American and Latino children perform about 1/2 to 1/3 as well as their white counterparts in school, and the gap for low-income white children is nearly as large.

2004 Median Net Worth



- In 2006 the average worker made less in a year than the average CEO made in half a day.
- African American men earned just 69% of the average wage of whites in 1970. By 2005 that gap had closed only 5 points to 74%.
- 47 million Americans were without health insurance last year, a 5% increase from the year before. The President just vetoed a bill that would expand health care to more uninsured children.
- Our prison budgets are growing faster than our education budgets.
- Arkansas taxes the poor double what the wealthy are taxed.

REVITALIZING RURAL COMMUNITIES ARKANSANS TAKE ON EDUCATION AND

ECONOMICS by Bill Kopsky

Despite significant challenges, Arkansas has incredible opportunities to challenge entrenched poverty in coming years. In community after community, grassroots leaders are making better political representation, better education and more economic opportunity their top priorities – and they are finding more open allies in the political and institutional establishment than ever.

President Roosevelt once asked A. Philip Randolph, the great African American union organizer, to tell him what minority and working people needed to succeed. Mr. Randolph gave the President an answer that covered the spectrum of issues. The President sympathized and said that he largely agreed with Randolph and that as President he did have the power to help. Then he leaned closer to Mr. Randolph and said, “But, you have to go out and make me do it.”

Fast forward 70 years and the fortunes of many Americans, including Arkansans, are stagnant or declining. America has the highest income inequality between rich and poor since 1927, the year before the Great Depression started. Poverty and economic segregation are getting worse and the American Dream is slipping further away from ever more of us. The numbers can be numbing (see the side bar).

But hidden in the dire numbers are

incredible opportunities for progress. More and more grassroots leaders are emerging to confront these facts. They know that a better future is possible and that we need to bring our communities together to achieve it. They are not oblivious to the mixed results of many previous reform efforts, but they know that they are the ones who have to make things better in their communities.

We are looking for partners who want to strengthen their communities and improve education and economic development.

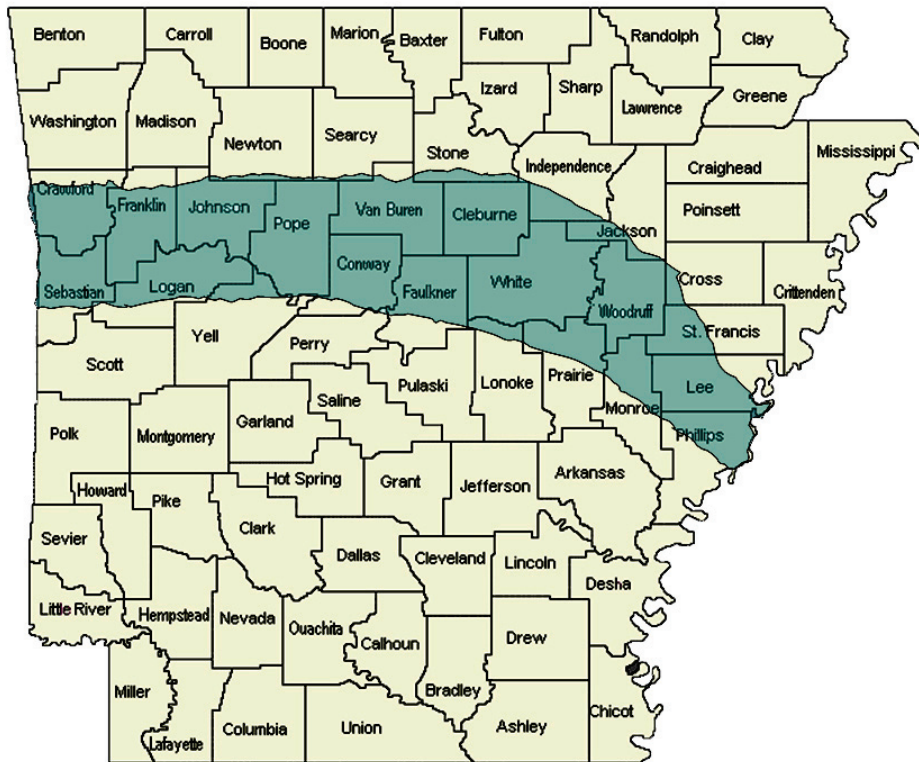
To support them, we are partnering with two great policy organizations who are stepping up to do grassroots-led research and training to find solutions.

With Advocates for Children and

Families, we will soon issue a report highlighting possible next steps to close the education achievement gap. Arkansas has made good progress on education reform in recent years, but much more work is needed. Community leaders are looking for ways to strengthen the home lives of children and better support families as tools for improving education. They are also looking at reforms needed in schools.

The Southern Good Faith Fund is providing training on economic literacy and matched savings programs that families can use to buy houses, start businesses or pay for college. They are creating reports that will evaluate economic development strategies for low-income and rural communities. Regardless _____ see **Rural Communities**, page 6

DRILLING FOR NATURAL GAS EXPOSES INADEQUATE TAX SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENTAL OVERSIGHT



As Arkansans welcome new money and jobs from Fayetteville shale gas exploration, they are scrambling to fix a legal and regulatory system that doesn't adequately protect private property or require the industry to pay its fair share of taxes to maintain roads and restore land and water damaged by industrial usage.

Stretching across central Arkansas, a wide strip of shale containing natural gas is creating an economic boom, but also new problems. The Fayetteville Shale formation lies 3000 to 6000 feet under central Arkansas. Until recently, there was no way to separate the gas from the shale. Now, workers are using new techniques to drill into the shale and pump in over a million gallons of pressurized water. The water cracks the shale and pressures the natural gas to the surface, along with the now-contaminated water.

The new industry brings new economic activity and new jobs, but they come with risks. Arkansas is not prepared to deal with the side effects of drilling: Landowners who feel that their private property rights are not respected. Streams pumped dry to provide the water that indus-

try needs. Water so clogged with silt that bird and fish habitat is destroyed. Public and private drinking water systems polluted.

These problems are exacerbated by a state tax on natural gas that is so low – Arkansas Business Journal editors called it a “laughable pittance” – that the industry is not paying its fair share of the taxes needed to repair roads and bridges or monitor the industry to ensure that it uses “best management practices” to protect the environment.

The key to fixing the tax system, protecting the environment and private property is political will. Lawmakers must know that the public stands behind them when they tax the industry and protect property rights. The Department of Environmental Quality must have

the staffing and political support to require that water quality and lands be protected.

Find more resources about mining and drilling at:

www.earthworksaction.org

www.arcare.info

THE PANEL STAFF

Celestine Wesley, Little Rock

Bill Kopsky, Little Rock

Bernadette Devone, Pine Bluff

Rosemary Brown, Monticello

Beth Ardapple, Bass

Fay Knox, Deer

Janice Tillman, Gould

VISTA Volunteers:

Tanzania Walker, Gould

Gail Young, Dermott

Brett Miracle, Little Rock

LAWMAKERS | continued from page 1 |

to Bill Kopsky, executive director of the Panel, "This is the first time in decades that lawmakers reversed that trend. We have a long way to go to fix our system, but this is a good first step for tax fairness."

4. A new task force will look at HIV/AIDS in communities of color, to determine if the current programs are working. "The incidence of HIV and AIDS has increased dramatically among ethnic minorities and women," said Rick Collins of Future Builders, which provides testing and counseling services, "especially in rural counties. We need to know why, and what else we must do to combat it." The Governor's Office is currently reviewing candidates for the task force.

5. Convicted drug offenders have a chance to stay out of prison if they are chosen to participate in one of the new drug courts lawmakers authorized around the state. Advocate Richard Tiffany of the OMNI Center for Peace and Justice explained, "The drug courts save the state money, and they team up drug treatment professionals with judges to offer rehabilitation. For juveniles and nonviolent offenders, it's a great option."

Alice Lightle, lobbyist for the Citizens First Congress, credited the good working relationships among CFC members for the successful session. "In our fights we are not alone. We joined coalitions and we helped create coalitions that are developing a strong progressive agenda for Arkansas."

The Citizens First Congress had spent most of a year weighing the issues in preparation for the legisla-



At a post-legislative session party, Rosie Dunn of the Wilmot Concerned Citizens and Curtis Mangrum of the Gould Citizens Advisory Committee celebrate the power of many people and organizations working together.

tive session. "Altogether, sixty-eight organizations discussed and debated with each other before setting a legislative agenda," said Bill Kopsky. "It wasn't easy for them to choose just five priorities, although they

coalition's steering committee met every Friday by telephone to review those bills and determine the coalition's position. Committees for the five major campaigns met even more often, sometimes three times a week when the action was at its peak.

"The coalition has savvy leaders," said Kopsky, "who put themselves on the line for the people they represent. They put in tremendous time and effort to move their bills through the legislative process."

Lightle also credited the Governor and the House Speaker for a good session.

"This was one of the most

harmonious and progressive sessions that veteran legislative watchers can remember," said Lightle. "One reason was the leadership of the governor, who had served over 20 years in the Arkansas Senate. Another reason was the capable leadership of House Speaker Benny Petrus. He guided the House to consensus on many bills."

CHECKLIST FOR THE 2007 ARKANSAS LEGISLATURE

- Lower taxes for working families
- Extend pre-school for low income kids
- Create an Arkansas Global Warming Commission
- Create HIV / AIDS Minority Task Force
- Expand drug courts for non-violent offenders
- Defeat threats to the environment
- Protect civil rights
- Save early voting hours from rollbacks
- Bring people from all over Arkansas together to get involved and make the state better
- Have Fun**

also adopted a broader agenda." The final agenda was selected by delegates from the forty member organizations of the Citizens First Congress.

During the legislative session, interns from nearby colleges scanned all 2,816 bills that were filed, flagging every bill that touched on Citizens First Congress issues. The

GRASSROOTS ROUNDUP

Members of the **Gould Citizens Advisory Committee** (GCAC) are informing and uniting their community. GCAC hosted a workshop on personal finance presented by Southern Good Faith Fund. A second workshop on how city budgets work helped members understand city issues. To engage young people, GCAC hosted youth from a 5-county area for a day of recreation and education about civic engagement. Representative David Raney spoke with young people about voting and how the political process works. GCAC's education committee is working with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families to survey schools and identify local strategies for closing Arkansas' education achievement gap. Gould, population 1305, is in Lincoln County.



Young people in Gould performed at a gathering on Labor Day weekend.

The **Stamps Citizens in Action** (SCA) is building a track record of increasing voter turnout. SCA's voter education program informs residents about how political structures function, including the city council, quorum court and school board. To launch a neighborhood watch program, SCA hosted a training by the Neighborhood Watch Coordinator of Pine Bluff. Stamps, population 1,984, is in Lafayette County.

The **Wilmot Concerned Citizens** (WCC) are conducting city-wide cleanups. To address the state's achievement gap in education, members are forming a chapter of the statewide organization Arkansans for Excellence in Education. WCC is a member of the Southeast Regional Council, which develops policy solutions to regional issues. Wilmot, population 786, is in Ashley County.

The **South Arkansas Good Government Commission** (SAGG) is a project board that meets in Camden (Ouachita County) to oversee the organizing work of Arkansas Public Policy Panel in southwest Arkansas. SAGG raises money (a recent raffle raised \$325) to support grassroots efforts in south Arkansas and engages area leaders.

The **Eastside Community Club of Dermott** recently began work with the Panel to engage area voters more deeply in the political process, especially youth. Members traveled to Fayetteville to meet with northwest Arkansas activists and participate in a house party for the Panel. Dermott, population 3,292, is in Chicot County

CONGRATULATIONS to

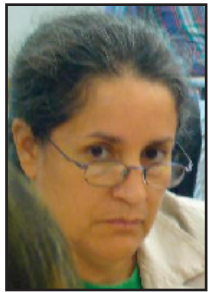
Alice Lightle, policy director for the Panel, for her appointment by Governor Beebe to serve as the Third Division Little Rock District Judge. Our heartfelt thanks to Alice for her past work on building the policy and political potential of the Panel and Congress.



Arkansas
Citizens First
Congress

STEERING COMMITTEE

- Alice Andrews**,
Arkansas Canoe Club
- John Austin**,
Gould Citizens Advisory Committee
- Alejandro Aviles**,
Community Leaders for Fair Policy
- Rick Collins**,
Future Builders Inc.
- Debbie Doss**,
Arkansas Canoe club
- Rosie Dunn**,
Wilmot Concerned Citizens
- Fannie Fields**, Co-Chair,
Concerned Citizens Of Marvel
- Bruce Lockett**, Co-Chair,
Future Builders Inc.
- Carsell Mathis**,
Arkansans for Excellence in Education
- Onie Norman**,
Southeast Regional Council
- Randi Romo**,
Center for Artistic Revolution
- Michael Rowett**,
Southern Good Faith Fund
- Evelyn Washington**,
South Arkansas Good Government
Commission
- Myrtle Watt**,
Wilmont Concerned Citizens
- Jean Wiley**,
Lake Village Concerned Citizens



Welcome to new members of the Panel Board of Directors: Rev. Mary Purifoy from Chidester, with the Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission; Margarita Solorzano from Springdale, with the Hispanic Women's Organization; and Barry Haas from Little Rock, with the Arkansas Audubon Society.

THE PANEL BOARD of DIRECTORS

- E.J. Miller**, Co-Chair, Little Rock
- Linda Polk-Carnahan**, Co-Chair, Russellville
- Curtis Mangrum**, Gould
- Rev. Howard Gordon**, Little Rock
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- Barry Haas**, Little Rock
- Rev. Mary Purifoy**, Chidester
- Margarita Solarzano**, Springdale

RURAL COMMUNITIES |continued from page 2|

of strategy, the key to every success story is a community coming together to share the responsibility of helping everyone do better.

Panel organizers are helping leaders build organizations, unify their communities, develop accountable relationships with elected officials and connect to state policy debates. We are helping groups take action on local priorities as well as ensure that state policy is rooted in the real life experiences of people all over Arkansas who know what needs to change.

We will engage thousands of Arkansans in critical discussions about better schools, better economic opportunities, better political leadership and stronger communities. The Arkansas Citizens First Congress, coming off a very successful year, will soon begin convening meetings to develop the agenda for the next Arkansas legislature.

A. Philip Randolph instantly knew what President Roosevelt meant when he said

“you have to make me do it.” He understood that even sympathetic politicians can't do much without organized political power – people asking, or demanding that politicians act. Most politicians don't move until the public gives them the political incentive and the cover to do it. It's as simple as that.

We are looking for grassroots

partners across the state who will pull their neighbors together to find ways to improve education, improve economic development and well being, and build stronger communities. Together we can do it. I hope you will contact us to learn how you can get involved.

Bill Kopsky is the Executive Director of the Arkansas Public Policy Panel.

**Family Economic Security in Arkansas:
Creating a Shared Vision**

Monday, November 5 &

Tuesday, November 6, 2007

Pine Bluff Convention Center



This conference is an opportunity to discuss how working together can help us create more economic success for everyone.

It will offer discussions on a range of issues, including:

- Homeownership
- Earned Income Tax Credit
- Consumer rights
- Energy assistance programs
- Tax filing
- Arkansas 211
- Credit rehabilitation
- Delta initiatives
- Latino issues
- Future state policy efforts
- The right role for government in economic development

To register, or for more information, visit www.aradvocates.org

WIN TWO AIRLINE TICKETS!
from Southwest Airlines

and support the Panel and the Citizens First Congress

Just \$2 per raffle ticket!

Drawing on December 14 at the Third Annual Holiday Party
(You need not be present to win!)



Get your raffle tickets from any staff or board member of Arkansas Public Policy Panel,
or come by the Progressive House at 1308 W. Second Street in Little Rock.



You can now donate to the Panel online! Go to www.arpanel.org to make a donation and help move Arkansas forward!

(from left) Anthony Scott, Georgia Hussey, Delois Brown, Charles Kester and Doris Scott share a laugh at a fundraising party on the lawn, hosted by Rob and Sarah Leflar of Fayetteville. Party-goers raised \$4,039 for the work of the Panel and Citizens First Congress.

Yes! I want to help move Arkansas forward.

- Enclosed is my automatic monthly tax deductible donation with Visa / MasterCard.
Please select one: __\$5 __\$10 __\$20 __\$35 __\$50 __\$100 __other
- Enclosed is my one time tax deductible donation with Personal Check / Visa / MasterCard.
Please select one: __\$25 __\$50 __\$75 __\$100 __\$250 __\$500 __\$1000 __other
- Contact me about making a three-year pledge.

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— Thank you for your support. —



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INSIDE

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- **Revitalizing communities with education and economic reforms**
- **Fayetteville shale - opportunities and risks**
- **Grassroots roundup**



SAVE THE DATE!!!

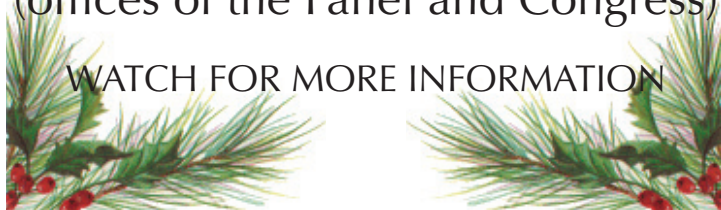
to Celebrate Another Year of
Success From Working Together

Annual Holiday Party

December 14, 2007

1308 W. Second Street, Little Rock
The Progressive House
(offices of the Panel and Congress)

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*Community organizing in southeast Arkansas:
Rev. Rufus Thomas of Dermott describes community
revitalization efforts for a Panel donor.*