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CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS GEARS UP FOR PIVOTAL YEAR



Leaders from several communities gather at the CFC's South Arkansas Caucus to talk about the 2014 fiscal session and discuss policy priorities. Regional caucuses like this one work across multiple issue areas such as education, civil rights, and election reform and decide what they want to support in preparation for the CFC Convention in June.

2014 opens with the Arkansas Legislature deciding the fate of new health care coverage for 250,000 low income Arkansans and it closes with the November elections, which will help shape the state's politics for the next decade. Citizens First Congress leaders are expanding the CFC's influence, growing its base of leaders and continuing to push solutions that improve the lives of all Arkansans.

In the fiscal session, which began on February 10, reauthorization of the private option, which provides low-income residents with afford-

able, life-saving health care, is the primary issue (see page 2). A vocal minority of legislators are threatening to shut the state government down rather than allow the expanded insurance program to continue.

This is Arkansas's third fiscal session and the first with such high stakes and a much more partisan climate.

In addition, education advocates are fighting a proposal to fund charter school facilities, when the legislature just diverted \$16 million from an already depleting fund for traditional school facilities, many which

are in great need of repair. See this video produced by our partners, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3roCTI23EXk>

"No one's really sure how this session is going to go because we're treading on relatively new ground, both with the process of the fiscal session and with the politically realigned legislature," said Bill Kopsky, the Panel's Executive Director "We are seeing more rigid ideological stances and big spending special interest groups from outside the

see *Gearing Up*, pg 4

ARKANSANS PUSH TO KEEP SUCCESSFUL HEALTH CARE EXPANSION



“I NOW HAVE HEALTH CARE COVERAGE FOR THE FIRST TIME. IT’LL HELP ME TO BREATHE EASIER, I CAN SEE THE DOCTOR WITHOUT HAVING TO WORRY ABOUT NOT BEING ABLE TO PAY FOR OR OTHER EXPENSES.” — Delois Spencer, Monticello

“I now have health care coverage for the first time. It’ll help me to breathe easier, I can see the doctor without having to worry about not being able to pay for other expenses,” said Delois Spencer of Monticello.

Unfortunately, Delois and others are now at risk of losing this life-saving coverage as the legislature needs to reauthorize it during the fiscal session. “I can’t imagine that the legislature would take that away now, it would be devastating for me and my family,” she said.

As we go to press, the future of Arkansas’ expanded health insurance program for families in poverty hangs in the balance. It needs a 75% majority to pass, and the Senate has already passed it, but it only takes 26 out of the 100 Representatives from the House to kill the

program. So far they have voted 4 times and come up a few short each time – leadership from both parties believes it will pass but the Citizens First Congress is urging their members to contact lawmakers and ask them to pass the Private Option. A lot is at stake.

The state’s new health care exchange has already provided over 100,000 Arkansans with access to affordable care that will help them live healthier and longer lives. It’s been hailed as a national model by Republican and Democrat leaders alike.

But it is under threat because well-financed outside groups affiliated with the Tea Party are spending huge sums of money to push some legislators into the extreme position of shuttering the state budget rather than allow the continuance of the expanded insurance program. If successful they would cause the new coverage to be dropped for many who just recently got covered for the first time.

“Many don’t realize how much is at stake in reauthorizing the private option. Most importantly, hundreds of thousands of working people now have access to life saving healthcare through the Private

Option. But the law also ensures hospitals have a payment source for their patients, especially helping our public and rural hospitals to stay open. There is so much to lose, both in lives and economic impact, if funding is not reauthorized,” said Anna Strong, Health Policy Director at Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. “Failure to reauthorize would also put a \$90 million hole in the state budget, putting at risk our existing Medicaid and ARKids First programs and threatening potential cuts to education or other critical services.”

“I would encourage everyone to sign up for it. People think the wait is long, but it wasn’t for me, it only took two weeks from when I called,” Ms. Spencer said. “Even if the wait is long, it’s definitely worth it to get covered.”



Citizens from across the state rallied at the capitol to support health care expansion in 2013.

Coalition Readies Push for Minimum Wage Increase Through Ballot Initiative

The Citizens First Congress, Arkansas Interfaith Alliance, AFL-CIO, NAACP and several other groups have formed a coalition to increase the state minimum wage from \$6.25/hr to \$8.50 over three years.

The coalition, 'Give Arkansas A Raise Now,' will collect signatures to get a proposal on the November 2014 ballot. The group has until July 7 to gather 62,507 signatures.

"It's time for an increase so folks who are working hard, playing by the rules, can actually make their ends meet," said Rev. Steve Copley, who chairs the coalition.

Arkansas is one of only four states with a minimum wage below the federal minimum of \$7.25. The federal wage has to be paid except when the employing business makes less than \$500,000 annually, according to the federal Fair Labor Standards Act. Arkansas state minimum wage currently stands at just \$6.25 an hour.

If you are interested in becoming a signature-gatherer or want to help out with the campaign, contact Lance Strother at 870-918-7057.



Holiday Parties in (left) Prescott, Monticello, Magnolia, Strong, (right) Gould and Little Rock. These parties give residents a chance to connect with each other and to introduce their group and the work they do to local public officials and state legislators. They drew in anywhere from 70 to 150 people in attendance.



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GEARING UP | continued from page 1 |



Activists at the CFC's Environmental Caucus discuss policy proposals for issues such as clean water, renewable energy, natural gas, and more. They develop proposals into resolutions to be submitted at the June Convention.

state.”

The CFC is responding by helping member groups have a larger impact on the November elections and the 2015 legislative session. “CFC members are working to expand public support for our agenda so that we remain effective in our new political climate,” said William El-Amin, CFC Co-Chair.

“We want to increase voter turnout,” said El-Amin. “We want to build support for key issues regardless of which legislator we’re talking to or what party they belong to. We have to show legislators that they have constituents who care about issues like health care and who vote so that we can continue to impact legislation which has opposition.”

2012 saw some very close races in the Arkansas legislature. Sen. Bobby Pierce won District 27 in south Arkansas by only 299 votes. Rep. John Hutchinson won District 52 in northeast Arkansas by just 45 votes. If 23 people had switched

their vote, the outcome would have been different.

The CFC’s agenda is elected by its membership, and the process for selecting that agenda is beginning now at caucus meetings leading up to the Pre-Convention and eventually the Convention where the 10 priorities are finalized. “The 2015 session is nearly a year away but we have to start now so we have the time to build strong campaigns to support the priority issues,” said CFC Co-Chair Mark Robertson.

CFC members will convene for a Pre-Convention April 26 to prioritize policy directions and begin developing resolutions for the full Convention June 20-22, which sets the agenda for the 2015 legislative session.

“The process is effective because it gives groups the space to discuss the importance and the viability of possible campaigns before voting at the convention on what the 10 priorities will be,” said Robertson. “It’s

vital that we have a lot of participation at the Caucus meetings, the Pre-Convention and the Convention so that we can make sure these campaigns are well-developed and supported by CFC members on the ground.”

Upcoming CFC Meetings

**Environmental Caucus
March 15**

**Central Arkansas Caucus
April 5**

**CFC Pre-Convention
April 26**

**CFC Convention
June 20-22**

More caucus meetings and
caucus locations TBA.

See www.citizensfirst.org

Curtis Mangrum facilitates discussion at a meeting of the South AR Caucus



State Water Plan Meetings

Southwest Region – Texarkana – March 13

East Region – Stuttgart – March 17

North Region – Fayetteville – March 17

West-Central Region – Russellville – March 19

South-Central Region – El Dorado – March 20

Find out more about the meetings and water plan at
<http://www.arwaterplan.arkansas.gov/>



At a town hall in Magnolia, John Whiteside, Sarah Scanlon and Jillian Fisher answered questions about expanding health care, increasing the minimum wage, and the new voter ID law.

RESIDENTS HELP DEVELOP NEW STATE WATER PLAN

Arkansas needs a new state water plan, and residents now have the chance to give their input. The Arkansas Natural Resources Commission will host several meetings around the state in February and March to hear comments, concerns, and suggestions in the planning process.

“This has been a CFC priority for the last few years, and we’re excited about the progress that’s being made this year,” said Environmental Caucus Chair Debbie Doss.

The current plan is decades old and doesn’t utilize the most current science. Clean water advocates are encouraging residents to participate in the meetings and talk about the importance of good data and good analysis when making policies that affect our water.

“These meetings are extremely important because they will determine the state’s water policy for the foreseeable future,” said Doss. “We’ve all got a lot at stake in protecting Arkansas’ clean water and we need everyone who’s passionate about this issue to attend these meetings and make sure their voice is heard.”



Residents can get involved with the process for developing the State Water Plan and help make an impact on wetlands such as those in the Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Debbie Doss

ARKANSAS EDUCATION LEADERS CELEBRATE DECADE OF PROGRESS, TARGET POVERTY AS KEY OBSTACLE



Brenda Robinson, President of the Arkansas Education Association talks about the limitations of charter schools and the need to focus on proven solutions to Reclaim the Promise of Public Education such as Pre-K, after-school programs, parent involvement, and teacher development.

10 years after the landmark Lakeview decision by the Arkansas Supreme court, grassroots leaders, advocates and education professionals highlighted how Arkansas has improved over the last decade and the next steps the state needs to take to continue to improve opportunities to learn for all Arkansas students at a recent press conference.

“We need increased access to pre-K, expanded after school and summer programs, better teacher training and development, and better interventions to help struggling students,” said Richard Hutchinson, Co-Chair of the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign.

“We know these reforms will have an immediate impact improving educational opportunities for every child in Arkansas. Every solution we call for is backed by mountains

of research and evidence. We must build the political will to implement and fund these reforms now; we cannot wait any longer.”

Advocates contrasted these proven reforms with other policy proposals that focus too heavily on unproven experiments and privatization.

“Though I am not against charter schools as a whole, traditional public schools are definitely my priority because well over 90% of all students are educated in our traditional schools. I am adamant that charter schools should serve as laboratories of innovation as originally intended, not take the place of traditional public schools. If that were the case, charter schools would likely have much more support,” said Senator Joyce Elliott of Little Rock.

“The problem with vouchers and many charter schools is that they

don’t improve educational outcomes on the whole; they siphon money out of already strapped public schools and give some students more resources than others, making the system of education even more tilted towards the privileged few,” said Gloria Majors, Co-Chair of Concerned Citizens of Prescott.

The event was part of a nationally coordinated Day of Action supported by the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, ‘Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education.’ Education reformers also identified poverty as the primary obstacle that prevents students from realizing that promise.

“Poverty is our biggest education problem, hands down,” said Ron Harder from the Arkansas School Board Association. “We are doing a lot to help low

cont. →

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Absentee voters must send copy of ID with every ballot.

If you don't have photo ID, you now must obtain and provide certain papers before you can vote, even if you are already a registered voter.

If you think you may be affected by this new law or need info on how to get an ID, please contact us!

CALL 870-510-2064 or 501-376-7913 (Ex 10)

income kids in school and we can do more, but children in poverty face challenges that schools alone can not fix, and we need the whole community to support healthy development and learning."

Many students who come from families in poverty struggle, and they lack the resources to fully meet their needs.

"Arkansas has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country; children's opportunities to succeed in schools shouldn't depend on their parents' income," Harder said.

Poverty also impacts schools funding. Even though every district is required to meet minimal standards for funding per student, wealthier districts can afford to pay teachers more, provide matching funds for more building improvements, and may see contributions from lo-

cal businesses and individuals for facilities, pre-K, summer and after school programs and extracurricular activities.

"Arkansas needs better ways to ensure equitable funding for all students," said Remona Block, Co-Chair of Concerned Citizens of Prescott. "We can't afford to ignore the disparities in opportunity between wealthy school districts and those with high poverty rates."

The event was sponsored by the AR Opportunity to Learn Campaign, AR Advocates for Children and Families, Rural Community Alliance, AR Education Association, AR School Boards Association, AR Association of Education Administrators, and AR Rural Education Association.

Learn more or join the campaign at www.arkansasotl.org

Panel Hires New Education Organizer



The Panel recently hired Brittany Foster as our new Education Organizer. Brittany is a former public school teacher who taught in Crosssett and Conway.

She will work closely to build local education groups and connect them with the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign to develop state-wide policy campaigns and help bring about improvements at the local level.

Ana Phakhin, who has been the Education Organizer for the Panel since 2009, is taking a temporary leave for a fellowship which has her researching social change across the globe for the coming year.

We'd also like to recognize Trina Walls and Endia Holley as our two newest VISTA organizers. They are working with our organizing team to support the work of community groups across South Arkansas.



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ANY size gift helps the Panel and Citizens First Congress grow stronger

\$50 – prepares 32 volunteers to advocate with power brokers

\$100 – educates 333 Arkansans with a post card about an issue

\$150 – provides 60 legislators with a well-researched information packet

\$250 – pulls together 10 far-flung leaders for a critical campaign strategy session



**Make checks out to The Panel
or donate online at
www.ARPANEL.org**

Your donations support events like this town hall in Magnolia, keeping Arkansans informed about critical issues like health care and voter ID laws!