



Friends Committee on Washington Public Policy (FCWPP)

— A Quaker Organization

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## 2008 Legislative Report

This legislative session, a short session in our state's biennial system, was complicated by the mid-session discovery that tax revenue would fall far short of projections—by \$423 million. That meant that both the governor and the legislators were more reluctant than usual to undertake new spending. Even so, we are happy to report significant progress toward our legislative goals in our three areas of focus: criminal justice reform, peace, and economic justice. We are also pleased to report that, thanks to the leadership of Dan Clark, we were able to add a fourth area of focus this year, global changes including climate change.

**Criminal justice reform.** Because FCWPP has always focused our work in areas not already covered by other advocacy groups, criminal justice reform has continued to be our main emphasis. This session FCWPP worked to end the practice of transferring inmates to private prisons out of state. We supported a bill proposed by Reps. Mary Helen Roberts and Roger Goodman that would have prohibited out-of-state transfers of inmates who have regular visits from their children—we filled the hearing room with between 40 and 50 friends and families of inmates, at least a third of them people of color. As a result, the newly appointed secretary of the Department of Corrections (DOC), Eldon Vail, agreed that transferring inmates out of state is a bad practice and promised to end out-of-state transfers this summer unless the legislature passed other laws that pushed the prison population even farther beyond capacity.

Unfortunately the legislature did pass several bills that created new crimes or lengthened prison sentences. One in particular, HB 2712, will send many more young people of color to prison. This bill was originally intended to provide money for gang prevention programs and also to crack down on gangs—a “carrot and stick” approach. But by the time it was passed and signed by the governor, the prevention provisions had nearly disappeared and only the punitive provisions remained.

FCWPP has also worked hard with Senator Jim Kastama over the past two years to establish an ombudsman system that would provide independent oversight of the Department of Corrections. Although the ombudsman bill itself (SB 5295) stalled in Ways and Means, Senator Kastama attempted to take a first step by establishing an Offenders in Families Committee by budget proviso. Unfortunately, the creation of this committee was vetoed by the governor. The interested parties are continuing to work between sessions to set up some type of committee to help resolve problems relating to prisoners and their families.

Inspired by a faculty member from Grays Harbor College who donated his time teaching a college class to prisoners at Stafford Creek Correctional Center, Senator Jim Hargrove sponsored SB 6790, which would have established two modest pilot programs that would reintroduce college classes to Washington's prisons. Classes would be provided by volunteer faculty from local community colleges, with some financial support from the state. Data on the programs' graduates would be carefully monitored over several years to make sure that the drop in recidivism rates predicted by numerous studies is realized. Although this bill did not pass this session, we expect it to resurface next session and will be working hard to make sure it succeeds.

Perhaps the most exciting development this year involves a challenge to FCWPP by Representative Mary Helen Roberts. In the discussion over the out-of-state transfer bill, she told our FCWPP lobbyist that we absolutely must reduce our prison population. That effort, she believes, should start with a citizens' coalition. It would be charged with finding ways to reduce the Washington prison population, both at the front end (by finding effective ways to keep people out of prison) and at the back end (by finding ways to identify and release inmates who no longer pose a danger to society). She suggested that FCWPP, as a respected party, should take the lead in bringing

together that coalition—teaming up, perhaps, with an unlikely partner, such as the prosecutors. At our April 25 meeting in Ellensburg, the FCWPP legislative and steering committees will consider whether we have the resources to commit FCWPP to accepting Rep. Roberts' challenge this summer.

**Peace.** Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos again authored a bill that would have required schools to offer recruiters from the Peace Corps, Job Corps, and AmeriCorps the same level of access to high school students that is provided to military recruiters. We succeeded in getting this bill amended to allow students the chance to selectively opt out of recruitment programs--that is, to specify which groups of recruiters would be allowed to contact them. Unfortunately the bill died in the Rules committee before getting to the Floor. We will certainly be working on similar legislation in the 2009 session.

**Economic Justice.** This year our work in this area was led by our allies in the Religious Coalition for the Common Good (RCCG), of which FCWPP is a founding member. The Coalition and allies succeeded in increasing the Housing Trust Fund by \$70 million, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients gained their first increase (3 percent) since 1995. Food Stamp eligibility was increased from 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$31,800 for a family of 4) to 200 percent (\$42,400 for a family of 4) at a cost of \$1.1 million.

**Global Changes/Climate Change.** All of the four Global Changes bills that FCWPP and its Global Changes Working Group supported this session passed the legislature and have been signed by the Governor (with some modifications in SB6580 and HB2844). Those bills are:

- **Climate Action & Green Jobs (HB2815)** – this big win sets responsible limits on climate pollution, sets a path for creating a “green jobs” economy, and reduces miles traveled – a key step given ½ of our global warming pollution comes from cars and trucks.
- **Local Solutions to Global Warming (SB6580)** – this first step develops tools that will help local governments make land use and zoning decisions that reduce driving and meet the growing demand for green, walkable communities.
- **Evergreen Communities (HB2844)** – this new law helps retain and replant trees in urban areas to reduce stormwater flooding and pollution as well as absorb CO2 and increase and protect our quality of life.
- **Local Farms - Healthy Kids (SB6483)** – this major step forward will make Washington a national leader in the local food movement by getting more Washington grown produce into our schools and food banks, thus improving children's health and creating new and thriving markets for our farmers.

**Building our network.** In addition to our work on issues, we have begun this year to build a working relationship with the Seattle African American community, particularly on the issues of out-of-state transfers and gangs, working with the NAACP, Village of Hope, and the Black Prisoners Caucus. We hope to build on this foundation if we take on Rep. Roberts' challenge of heading up a citizens' coalition to reduce the prison population.

Also, in an attempt to broaden the participation in the Religious Coalition for the Common Good to include representatives from the dry side of the state, our lobbyist and three other representatives of the Religious Coalition for the Common Good traveled to Spokane twice, once in November and once in January, to meet with a coalition of like-minded congregations and advocacy groups and develop a joint legislative agenda, and to help organize progressive groups for legislative advocacy. Nick Block and Spokane Friends were both organizers and hosts of the January weekend activities. Leaders from several religious communities, including Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and from the United Church of Christ, met with Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, Senator Chris Marr, and Rep. Timm Ormsby. A group of religious leaders under the auspices of the RCCG also met with the governor to discuss our joint priorities.

Finally, FCWPP participated again this year in organizing Faith Advocacy Day in Olympia, which took place on January 29 and attracted around 200 people from various faith groups, including a large contingent of Friends. FCWPP offered the briefing sessions on criminal justice reform.