



# **NASW 2008 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

**Office of Government Relations and Political Action**

**GOVERNMENTRELATIONS • GOVERNMENTRELATIONS • GOVERNMENTRELATIONS • GOVERNMENTRELATIONS**  
**GOVERNMENTRELATIONS • GOVERNMENTRELATIONS • GOVERNMENTRELATIONS • GOVERNMENTRELATIONS**

## **POLITICAL AND LEGISLATIVE CLIMATE**

In a general sense, political energy seems to be leaning Democratic for the 2008 cycle. Much polling and media attention appears to center around a Democrat winning the White House, and most congressional forecasts consider how large a majority the Democrats will hold in Congress next term, rather than whether the Democrats will still be in the majority.

At the congressional level, early indications are that Democrats are running strong. For example, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (which helps fund House races) has roughly \$29 million on hand and only a small amount of debt, while the Republican counterpart, the National Republican Campaign Committee (RNCC), has roughly \$2 million on hand and over \$3 million in debt. This shows that Democrats are more energized than Republicans, and, therefore, more willing to assist their party financially. Another indication of Republican electoral weakness is the recent heavy spending by the RNCC on normally Republican-leaning seats in special elections held last month in Ohio and Virginia.

Issues important to social workers are prominent in many federal level races this election cycle. This includes health care topics such as universal coverage, care for veterans returning from Iraq, and Medicare, along with issues addressed by the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative. While it is 11 months before the 2008 election, indications are that the Democrats are improving their overall standing, and that issues of importance to social workers have a significant place in the dialogue of electoral politics.

NASW government relations staff expect more legislative gridlock next year as electoral campaigns for Congress and the presidency shift into high gear. Both Republican and Democratic leaders may be looking for political points to win elections, rather than negotiating legislative and public policy.

Democrat Party leaders point out that many of their 2006 campaign promises were delivered in 2007, including raising the minimum wage, implementing recommendations of the commission that investigated the September 11 attacks, and trying to stop ethics abuses that have plagued Congress. However, Republicans contend that issues such as providing small increases for some domestic spending priorities, reforming U.S. immigration law, bringing an end to combat in Iraq, and expanding health coverage for children in need were not addressed successfully by the Democratic-led Congress.

## **SOCIAL WORK REINVESTMENT INITIATIVE**

This past year, NASW centered much of its political efforts on the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative (SWRI). The goal of the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative is to secure federal and state investments in professional social work to enhance societal well-being. The Action Network for Social Work Education and Research (ANSWER) is coordinating efforts to recruit new social workers, retain current social workers, retrain experienced social workers, and promote social work research. This is a nationwide

effort, with federal, state, and local components. Six of federal SWRI legislative issues are discussed below. The cornerstone of the federal initiative is the “Dorothy I. Height/Whitney Young Social Work Reinvestment Act” (SWRA).

NASW chapters will implement state level SWRI plans in 2008. These plans, as varied as the chapters themselves, reflect current social work needs, particularly in the areas of public education, loan forgiveness, compensation, training, reimbursement, and recruitment.

The chapter plans are being uploaded into the Social Work Reinvestment website at [www.socialworkreinvestment.org](http://www.socialworkreinvestment.org). The website is an interactive tool for users interested in federal and state investments in the profession. Website visitors will be able to search for, and to browse, previous achievements, as well as current efforts. Additionally, all related legislation, social work education programs, employers, and workforce data will be available and easily searchable. Policymakers will be able to use the site to gain information about SWRI.

## **I. “Dorothy I. Height/Whitney Young Social Work Reinvestment Act”**

The “Dorothy I. Height/Whitney Young Social Work Reinvestment Act” will be introduced in the first quarter of 2008. Congressman Edolphus Towns (D-NY), a fellow social worker, has agreed to introduce the bill and is currently seeking a republican co-sponsor for bipartisan support. NASW is building a grassroots mobilization plan to engage its membership to fully support the Act. Additionally, allied organizations are being identified to support the legislation. As part of a comprehensive SWRI communications strategy, an event will be held in 2008 to promote the introduction of the Act including a press conference and reception.

Suggested provisions of the Act include:

- A findings section to exhibit the state of the profession
- A Blue Ribbon Panel to provide independent advice and counsel to Congress on policy issues associated with the recruitment, retention, research, and reinvestment in the profession
- A Demonstration Program to make grants available to support activities related to research, workplace improvements, education and training, and community based programs of excellence
- The permanent establishment of March as Social Work Awareness Month

## **II. Loan Forgiveness**

Congress reconvened in January and is expected to consider “The College Opportunity and Affordability Act of 2007” (H.R. 4137). This bill allows a person with a degree in social work or a related field, and who is employed by a public or private child welfare agency, to have part of his or her college loans forgiven. For each year of work, \$2,000 would be forgiven, up to a maximum of \$10,000 over five years. Mental health professionals would also be eligible. This bill differs from H.R. 2669 (which was signed

into law on September 7, 2008) which forgives all loans after ten years of public service and dramatically lowers the interest rate from 6.8 percent to 3.4 percent.

The Association will continue to work with other national organizations—including the National Child Abuse Coalition, the National Bar Association, the National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations (NAPSO), and the Action Network for Social Work Education and Research (ANSWER)—to promote passage of this bill and loan forgiveness for social workers in child welfare and education. We will also educate Congressional members about the importance of loan forgiveness programs to the social work profession and will activate our grassroots network to support our lobbying efforts in this regard.

### **III. Clinical Social Work Medicare Equity Act (CSWMEA)**

Medicare payments for clinical social workers reached crisis proportions when already inadequate Medicare payments for clinical social work services were cut at the start of 2007. NASW is very active, trying to restore payment rates and working with key Senators and Representatives to gain support for the “Clinical Social Work Medicare Equity Act” (S. 1212) and other legislation to repair the badly broken Medicare mental health benefit. In 2007, NASW, in collaboration with strong member support and with key Members of Congress, pushed this legislation further than in previous sessions, and we pleased with the progress. Since the latest Medicare extender was very short term, NASW will give top priority to clinical social work payment issues in the fight for the next bill, which must be completed by June 30, 2008.

### **IV. Teri Zenner Social Worker Safety Act, H.R. 2165**

Given that the “Teri Zenner Social Worker Safety Act” has bipartisan support, NASW hopes the bill will move closer to consideration during the next session of Congress. In 2007, NASW staff worked with the congressional sponsor of the bill to draft the bill language, hosted a congressional briefing on social work safety and sent letters to Congress urging more cosponsors for the bill. NASW will continue with the efforts in the House and is seeking a Senate sponsor for the Social Work Safety companion bill.

### **V. Child Welfare Training**

Education and training of child welfare workers is the SWRI focus of child welfare. NASW works in coalition with The Children’s Defense Fund to develop solutions to the shortage of workers, especially social workers in the child welfare system. During 2008, NASW will explore ways to provide additional and, flexible child welfare staff training funds. This may include legislation or regulatory changes to the Title IV-B and Title IV-E training fund programs.

## **VI. National Center for Social Work Research Act, S. 106**

The National Center for Social Work Research Act was introduced to raise the profile of social work research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) where less than 1% of the NIH budget is dedicated to social work research. The bill has been introduced in the Senate. NASW is working with legislative staff and the SWRI consultant to determine the best course of action regarding S. 106. Legislative staff and the consultant recommend including the language of S.106 in the “Dorothy I. Height/Whitney Young Social Work Reinvestment Act.” The bill might also remain a separate piece of legislation allowing for the most effective approach possible.

### **CHILD WELFARE**

Staff will continue to monitor the Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act (H.R. 1376) that will address ways to provide Medicaid coverage for youth who exit the foster care system without permanent family units. Currently, 25,000 youth age out of the foster care system every year. They tend to have a variety of unaddressed medical conditions and other challenges, because of inadequate health insurance. These challenges include mental and physical disabilities that may result in a lack of educational achievement and financial instability. Some youth become homeless. The bill is currently in the Health Subcommittee of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. NASW will continue to urge Congress to pass this legislation which could significantly improve the lives and outcomes for youth in foster care. We will meet with Hill staff on this issue and will mobilize our members to contact their members of Congress.

### **CIVIL RIGHTS**

Civil Rights will continue to be a focus of Congress in 2008. The following civil rights issues will be on the Congressional agenda for 2008:

- Prosecution of hate crimes as detailed in the Shepard Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act (S. 1105)
- Employment Non-Discrimination Act (H.R. 2015)
- Immigration reform
- Paycheck Fairness Act (H.R. 1338 and S. 766)
- District of Columbia Voting Rights Act (H.R. 1905)

NASW will work with allies such as the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, People for the American Way, the Human Rights Campaign, AFSME, American Civil Liberties Union, AARP, and APA on passage of the provisions contained in these pieces of legislation.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

### **I. Health Information Technology (HIT) and Personal Privacy (S.1693)**

In theory, Health IT legislation is a popular bi-partisan issue, but it will remain difficult to pass in 2008. As 2007 ended, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee continued to push for its bill, S.1693 Wired for Healthcare Quality Act, on the Senate floor, although it remained mired in disagreements over issues that have long stalled the bill, including provisions to protect the privacy of personal health information. The House showed much greater support for health privacy requirements in their legislation; but on the overall bill, demonstrated much less support for action. Several weeks ago, Speaker Pelosi announced that she was moving the legislation up on her list for floor action. NASW will continue to work in coalition with the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association as well as other interested mental health groups, especially regarding confidentiality provisions/protections; however, this will remain very controversial legislation, and, therefore, very difficult to pass in the 2008 climate.

### **II. Mental Health Services Appropriations**

Congress was unable to negotiate a compromise with the President on the regular Labor-HHS appropriations bill funding the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2007. Democrats will attempt again to boost domestic spending during 2008, but they are unlikely to be successful in raising overall spending levels, including those of SAMHSA. NASW will work in coalition with mental health and other advocacy organizations to support funding for social work priorities within SAMHSA and other Labor-HHS programs.

### **III. Mental Health and Substance Abuse Parity (S.558/HR1424)**

The long-standing political opposition from business and House GOP leaders to mental health parity legislation largely ended in 2007, but some very difficult and technical differences remain between the House and Senate bills. These relatively minor objections may scuttle final passage again in 2008 unless the President intervenes to produce an agreement. NASW will continue to work with a large coalition of mental health groups to support passage, while congressional leaders continue to iron out differences. Overall prospects for acting on the bill before 2009 will dim if action does not occur early this year.

### **IV. State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)**

Congress, and particularly the Democratic leadership, sought a major expansion of the SCHIP program in 2007. This effort was very effectively opposed by the White House. NASW will continue to lobby with a large coalition of groups supporting expansion of the program, but White House political opposition seems likely to again prevent passage of significant reforms this year.

## **HEALTH**

### **I. Health Care Reform**

According to a recent report by Families USA, health care is the top domestic concern among voters in the upcoming elections. Congress will likely address more domestic issues in 2008 including consideration of health care legislation to demonstrate to voters that Congress is addressing their concerns. NASW staff will continue to work with Congress and other health care leaders to advocate for full consideration of health care legislation by Congress.

### **II. Cancer Patient Navigation**

In collaboration with C-Change, NASW will organize a Hill briefing regarding cancer patient navigation. The briefing will include an NASW-developed toolkit, containing a video, encouraging communities and organizations to develop cancer patient navigation programs. The briefing will also include advocacy for Congress to provide the \$25 million necessary to fully fund the 2005 Cancer Patient Navigation Act.