

Meeting 6/12/18 with VT Congressional Staff on Immigration Justice



l to R: Haley Pero, Nancy Wright, Linda Graves, Susan Sussman, Richard Butz, Catherine Bock, Stuart Graves, Catherine Cooke, Shannon Furnari, Chrstine Longmore, Sylvia Knight, Bob Wright

In attendance:

Susan Sussman (Leahy), Haley Mock (Leahy, intern) 863-2525; Haley Pero (Sanders) 862-0697; Shannon Furnari, (Welch) 652-2450

Ad Hoc Committee:

Sylvia Knight (group coordinator), Robert Wright and The Very Rev. Catherine Cooke (St. Paul's Cathedral, Episcopal); Linda and Stuart Graves (First Unitarian Universalist Society); Catherine Bock (Burlington Friends Meeting); The Rev. Dr. Nancy Wright, Richard Butz, The Rev. Sarah Flynn (Ascension Lutheran Church); Joanna Cole and Catherine Bock (Burlington Friends Meeting); Christine Kemp Longmore (New Alpha Baptist Missionary Church).

The meeting began with a period of silence to remember our call to immigrant neighbors as part of God's family. Then we introduced ourselves with brief statements. The discussion was structured around five requests that we hoped to discuss with the staff:

1. Please investigate ICE's aggressive behaviors of invading properties in Vermont, New York and Oregon.
2. Require that agents acquire judicial warrants and have professional I.D.s before they try to arrest someone. We understand judicial warrants are required by law.
3. Provide a legal path to legal status for undocumented residents working and contributing to our country, and rescind policy of separating children from families.
4. Begin the process to remove language from the 2018 federal budget requiring daily immigrant detention bed quota of 34,000.
5. Begin process to dismantle WHINSEC (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperative, formerly the School of The Americas) a persistent source of destabilization in Central American countries.

Take away: On most issues raised, we were assured that our representatives support our requests and are working through the system to address them as best they can. They have authored legislation and attempted to work across the aisle but, under the current majority party's control, have had little luck in addressing these issues. Much is under the control of the Attorney General and agencies under him such as Homeland Security, Immigration & Customs Enforcement, and Customs and Border Patrol. Susan Sussman, Leahy's staff for Homeland Security and immigration issues, explained that persons must be in US to apply for asylum; refugees must go through UN agencies. The staff present could not discuss legal issues regarding judicial warrants or constitutional rights. AG Sessions has removed 2 new categories previously supporting asylum: domestic abuse and gang violence in country of origin.

Recommendations: Keep raising the issue and educating. Work with national networks to gather support for change. Encourage any family and friends in other states such as New York or Oregon to circulate petitions and deliver them to their legislators. Work in VT to strengthen Fair & Impartial Policing Policy to separate state and local police from ICE/CBP to reduce arrests by Immigration authorities.

Some actions they have taken:

Leahy: co-signed the "Keeping Families Together Act" on the practice of taking children from their parents under detention.

Sanders: co-signed "Justice Is Not For Sale Act", re: daily immigrant detention bed quota issue.

Welch: delivered a blistering speech in the House on family separation; co-sponsored earlier legislation to investigate the School of the Americas (SOA), now called Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC); signed letter advocating for no arrests by ICE in sensitive areas: churches, medical facilities, courts, schools. Senators Leahy, Sanders and Rep. Welch have written joint letters to help release some immigrants in Vermont from detention.