

AARO News

Overseas
Americans Week
2009

At Last: A White House Liaison for Americans Abroad

by Don Johnson, AARO Vice President

A team of 23 members from AARO, American Citizens Abroad (ACA) and the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO) descended on Washington from March 30 to April 3 for our annual quest to help American citizens overseas with the issues that face them. More than 120 meetings were held with members of the House and Senate and other agencies covering issues that included voting, taxation, the Americans Abroad Caucus, banking, representation in the Administration for overseas Americans, Medicare and Social Security.

Special attention was paid to taxation, absentee voting improvements, and recruitment of the 60 newly elected Congressional members for our Americans Abroad Caucus. Contacts were made with 17 newly elected members, and several of them will likely be added to our present roster of 26.

The AARO team was composed of Kathleen de Carbuca, Andy Coyne, Don and Mary Adair Johnson, Tom Rose, James Kigin, Peter Goldfarb, John Fredenberger, Barbara Stern and Kathleen Misry.

The most striking result of this year's expedition was the appointment of a member of the White House staff to specifically handle overseas Americans' issues with the administration and federal agencies. AARO and its sister organizations will be engaging in dialogue with this appointee, Bobby Schmuck, in the weeks and months to come to find new ways to work together on the issues of greatest importance to overseas Americans.

On taxation, a meeting was held with Nina Olson, National Tax Payer Advocate at the IRS, to discuss the complexities and absurdities of the U.S. practice of citizenship-based taxation of the world-wide

most positive element of the discussion with her and her staff was her openness to having some overseas Americans become regular participants on advisory panels for her office. This requires follow-up on our participation with its panel. It has been a long time since anyone (including the IRS) has been willing to listen to views on double taxation and its impact. (Ms. Olson wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 10 on the complexities of the tax code and the need for a simpler system that is less burdensome on the American taxpayer).

In the area of foreign bank accounts, John Fredenberger met with IRS officials on the Report of Foreign Bank Account Form (TD F 90-22.1). He presented a paper basically warning that the form is a model for identity theft and the new requirement for reporting exact maximum value in each account outweighs the benefit derived from such information. He proposed a series of remedies, including the reduction of information on the form, elimination of annual filing, and electronic filing. The IRS is moving towards electronic filing and seemed amenable to raising the minimum filing requirement from \$10,000 to at least \$50,000. This will require legislation by the House Banking Committee.

Regarding the issue of voting for Americans resident overseas, our team met with all the key committee staffs that have jurisdiction over this issue, as well as key legislators who are actively involved. Several bills recently introduced, if passed, would make significant improvements in the process, including simplifying registration, allowing the use of courier services, reducing non-essential requirements for ballot acceptance, extending voting rights to U.S. citizens born overseas who have not met a



Photo: James Kigin

requirements, giving all voters the option of voting by absentee ballot in federal elections for any reason (the so-called "no excuse" proposal), and elimination of notary requirements. Prospects for passage of some of these provisions are considered good by the Congressional staff involved.

Some more sweeping changes, such as voting by e-mail, the use of the latest technologies and standardization of forms and deadlines, are being considered by the Uniform Law Commission, which expects to offer a proposed set of changes by 2010. They are not, however, currently on the agenda.

A special evening highlight was a reception in honor of the Americans Abroad Caucus and the Alliance for Military and Overseas Voting Rights held in the Atrium of the new Capitol Visitors Center. Guest speakers included Caroline Maloney (D-NY), Mike Honda (D-CA), Ruth Holt (D-NJ), Robert Carey of the National Defense Committee and Dr. Claire Smith, Research Director, Overseas Voting Foundation. Dr. Smith completed a comprehensive survey of overseas voters which showed, among other items, that 22% of civilian voters and 27.5% of military voters did not receive the ballots they requested in the last election.

Robert Carey, representing military voters, also supports our proposed Overseas Voting Practical Amendments Act (HR 1739), introduced a few days before our arrival by Caroline Maloney (D-NY) and Mike Honda (D-CA). This legislation amends the Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) and attempts to harmonize the implementation of UOCAVA across all states and

territories. It also calls for a \$10 million grant for non-partisan organizations to improve outreach education and services for military and overseas voters, and to provide solutions to voting discrepancies such as cycle time for registration and ballot distribution and collection.

An important contact was made with the office of Jim Clyburn, House Majority Whip, whose staffer (Lindy Birch, Director of Special Events) has already written to thank us for the visit and to indicate that she might be of help with the congressional delegations traveling abroad. The organizers would let AARO and other overseas Americans organizations know when members of Congress are traveling to their areas - highly useful information that could be used to remind members of Congress that they also have constituents overseas and to organize meetings when possible.

In general, many of the staffers and members of Congress, as well as the State Department, appeared to be more open and truly attentive than in the past few years. An example of enthusiasm occurred in a meeting with a new House Member, Congressman Gerald Connolly (D-VA), who was very interested in absentee voting and took the initiative in our discussion, proposing a much greater use of computer technology, both to register and vote. He will likely become an Americans Abroad Caucus member. This was just an example of the renewed vigor we perceived on our visit. We hope this trend will continue and we will work hard to follow up on the discussions that affect our issues.