

THOUGHTS ON THE US SENATE CSBG REAUTHORIZATION BILL

By Connie Greer, NASCSP Chair

For almost two years now, NASCSP membership has discussed and debated what should be included in the reauthorization of the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) in order to strengthen the Community Services Network and prepare it for the next century. This lengthy discussion regarding the reauthorization has made for a rich exchange of information and thought. Members have been strategic in their suggestions and thoughtful in their reactions. As the discussion and debate regarding NASCSP's position on the issues continues to be fluid, membership is pleased to see that Congress has steadily moved CSBG reauthorization along in the legislative process.

On Wednesday, October 1st, a bill to reauthorize the Community Services Block Grant (HR 3030) was approved by the US House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Committee on a 28-20 vote. The vote occurred only after a long debate regarding the Charitable Choice provisions currently found in the 1998 Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Act. During the debate, amendments to ban CSBG recipients from discriminating in hiring practices on the basis of religion were offered, none of which were adopted. The only amendment adopted was the amendment proposed by Chairman

John A. Boehner (R-OH). Boehner's amendment would prohibit discrimination in service delivery based only on religion or religious belief. The amendment would codify the regulation issued by the Department of Health and Human Services during the week of September 24th. The regulation (which can be found here: http://www.hhs.gov/fbc/finalCSBG_cregs.html) emphasizes that CSBG sub-grantees cannot discriminate when providing direct service to clients but that faith-based CSBG sub-grantees do maintain Title VII rights regarding their employment practices.

On October 29th, Senator Alexander (R-TN), Senator Dodd (D-CT) and Senator Kennedy (D-MA) introduced the CSBG Reauthorization bill titled, "The Poverty Reduction and Prevention Act of 2003." The bill's number is S.1786. The bill was marked up and passed by the US Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee on October 29th. There was no debate or discussion regarding the contents of the bill.

You can find both the Senate and House CSBG reauthorization bill on the National Community Action Foundation (NCAF) web site here: <http://www.ncaf.org/reauth03.html>. Both the House and Senate bill do an extraordinary job of preparing the Network for the next century. I have taken the opportunity to outline and explain some of the significant amendments the Senate bill, S. 1786, makes to the CSBG Act. You will find them below:

- NASCSP members applaud the Senate's inclusion of language which would allow states to raise CSBG eligibility. Allowing states increased discretion over CSBG eligibility will provide opportunities for states and their Community Action Agencies networks to partner and collaborate in new and effective ways. Allowing states to set maximum eligibility at up to 60 percent of the median income will allow CAAs to coordinate CSBG funded services with other federal categorical programs they manage. This flexibility will allow CAAs to better serve their

clients.

- **NASCSP members greatly appreciate the clarification of the purpose of CSBG that brings to the fore the most important task of Community Action. The new language brings a focus to the opportunity to use CSBG as a means of building assets, both individually and within the community. This language strengthens the Act considerably.**
- **NASCSP members feel that a greater uniformity of approach regarding the monitoring of CAA fiscal and organizational matters will be achieved by the creation of a Financial and Organizational Protocol. NASCSP appreciates that the Protocol will be established using a task force of the stakeholders representing the best practices.**
- **NASCSP opposes the additional separate audit requirement in S. 1786 found under Section 678(a)(1)(D). Section 678(a)(1)(D) states that all CSBG funds, state disbursements and local expenditures would be audited. This means that states and local agencies would participate in this audit exercise. This additional separate audit will not discover new information but will take funding from services now provided by CAAs to low-income people. A conservative estimate of the expense of the additional separated audit translates to about \$14 million of the network's funds.**

Under the current CSBG Act, all states are audited as a part of the Single Audit. States are also required to send annual financial status reports into the Federal Office of Community Services 90 days after the end of the federal fiscal year. On an annual basis states also detail state expenditures on administrative and discretionary funds and the disbursement of the 90% to CAAs as a part of the CSBG/IS Statistical Report. The additional separate audit only duplicates the efforts already occurring and will be costly. The funds that will be used to cover the additional expenses of the audit are currently being used to build the capacity of CAAs and to provide direct services to low-income people. If the current language is retained, these funds which are used to provide technical assistance, to monitor, and to get the money out on a timely basis will be diverted.

The above-mentioned positions have been thoughtfully determined. We appreciate all of the membership's input and insight regarding these issues. Of course the discussion remains open and fluid. As our position continues to evolve, we continue to strive to dialogue and work with our national, state and local partners to make this reauthorization the best it can be for the Network. Cheers to a successful reauthorization!