

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

Associate Member Report to the Unitarian Universalist Association

June 2016

Challenging injustice, advancing human rights

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) was founded in 1940. Beginning with the individual efforts of Rev. Waitstill and Martha Sharp to rescue refugees fleeing Nazi oppression in Europe, UUSC has grown to an organization with over 40,000 members and supporters working in over two dozen countries worldwide. UUSC's innovative approach and measureable impact are grounded in the moral belief that all people have inherent power, dignity, and rights.

In partnership with grassroots organizations, we mobilize UUSC members, tireless activists, and community volunteers to ensure that fundamental human rights are realities for everyone – no matter race, gender, or class. UUSC works with people and communities who are denied their rights because of who they are – women, people of color, religious minorities, LGBT individuals. These groups are often left unserved by mainstream human rights organizations. In some cases, they are the direct targets of prejudice, bigotry, and oppression. In other cases, they are among the last to receive assistance when natural disasters strike.

UUSC Programs

UUSC organizes its worldwide work into three main categories: Environmental Justice, Economic Justice, and Rights at Risk. In addition to these three priorities, UUSC conducts innovative research programs, and its Justice-Building team advocates for the advancement of UUSC's partner and program goals. Much of UUSC's work is supported by its Ministerial Leadership Network and creative collaborations with congregations, the UUA, and other UU-related organizations.

Economic Justice Program Highlights

UUSC's Economic Justice Program advances the human rights of workers in the informal economy, both internationally and among food chain workers in the United States.

- New partnerships and projects in Malawi, Nepal, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe are designed to empower informal economy workers to advocate for their human rights in ways policymakers cannot help but hear.
- Continuing collaboration with KENASVIT (the Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders) to develop leaders who can bring resources to women and gender minority workers, and to increase their self-reliance in lobbying and advocacy work. To date, KENASVIT's work has directly or indirectly benefited about 4,000 individuals.
- In the United States, UUSC partner RCWA (the Rural Community Workers Alliance) has held several labor rights trainings with OSHA in Missouri, which were attended by more than 50 individuals. As a result, 1,500 workers have received OSHA wage and hour booklets and "protect your rights" cards. In Milan, Mo., RCWA hosted a health fair offering information and free care to people in need.
- Along with 50 other organizations in the Good Food Now! Campaign, UUSC demands that Olive Garden and its parent company, Darden Restaurants, make 20% of their food purchases based on the Good Food Purchasing Policy Principles (GFPP).

Environmental Justice Program Highlights

In this program area, UUSC works to advance the human right to water. Beginning this year, environmental justice programming will address the broader issue of how the human rights of marginalized communities are affected by climate change.

- In response to the water and humanitarian crisis in Flint, UUSC and its partners supported three Congressional bills that address (1) the 72-hour reporting of water contamination events; (2) abolishing "flushing" taps before lead testing; and (3) requiring delivery of water that will not damage human health.
- UUSC partners and allies helped the City of Detroit adopt a water affordability program, with universal access as a core principle.
- On a national level, UUSC co-founded NCLAWater (the National Coalition on Legislation for Affordable Water), whose goal is to assist the 15% of U.S. residents living in poverty in accessing clean, safe, and affordable water.
- UUSC's partner EJCW (the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water) convinced the California State Water Resources Control Board to adopt an historic resolution establishing the human right to water as one of its core operating principles. Working with tribes and environmental groups, EJCW is working to require human rights, health, race, and social impact assessments as part of California's procedure for allocating water rights in its massive "California Water Fix" agreement.
- Local partner Massachusetts Global Action has completed groundbreaking research on the race impacts of shut offs by the Boston Water and Sewer Commission; as a result, the utility reduced water shut offs by 50% in 2015, and instituted a 30% low income discount for seniors and persons with disabilities. It has also established a "right of service" program that prohibits shut offs to households where infants, low income seniors, and chronically ill individuals reside.

Rights at Risk Program Highlights

Through this program area, UUSC responds to urgent humanitarian disasters and gross violations of civil and political rights. Examples of these violations include forced migration, ethnic conflict, sexual rights, and the closing of organizing space for civil society activists.

- In Southern Africa, UUSC initiated partnerships with organizations that advance sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights by amplifying the voices of progressive religious leaders who are working to create safe spaces in their churches and mosques for LGBT Africans.
- UUSC quickly mobilized to distribute resources to 8 grassroots organizations in Nepal in the wake of the April 2015 earthquake, with a particular emphasis on supporting women and Dalit minority groups in their efforts to rebuild their communities.
- UUSC works with organizations in the Balkans and Jordan, providing critical humanitarian and legal assistance to refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war and other conflicts. These efforts also include support for organizations confronting Islamophobia and promoting refugee resettlement in the United States.
- Addressing the crisis at home, UUSC partners with organizations to mitigate the causes of forced migration in Central America, provide humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers on the U.S./Mexican border, document cases of abuse wherever they occur, and ensure due process and access to counsel for women and children.

Research Highlights

Implemented in the past year, UUSC's research program conducts and sponsors innovative studies to increase understanding and foster engagement in all three UUSC program areas.

- UUSC recognized PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action, and Research) in Mumbai, India, as the 2015 Innovation Fellow for its Barefoot Researchers program advancing the human right to water among 25,000 residents in the impoverished community of Mandala.
- In September 2015, UUSC published *No Safe Haven Here: Children and Families Face Trauma in the Hands of U.S. Immigration*, a study of families held in our country's disgraceful "family detention facilities."
- UUSC contributed to *Wages and Working Conditions in Arkansas Poultry Plants*, a report on economic injustice in the poultry processing industry based on 500 worker surveys. UUSC also coordinated public relations and advocacy efforts for the report in early 2016.
- Published research in support of UUSC's human right to water initiatives includes two major reports: *Defending the Human Right to Water: a Decade of Support for Global Water Justice*, a compilation of UUSC's ten years of work in this field, issued in January 2016; and *The Invisible Crisis: Water Unaffordability in the United States*, released in May 2016. UUSC also published a two-page spread on its human right to water work for the November 2015 annual Hunger Report issued by Bread for the World.

Justice-Building Highlights

The UUSC Justice-Building Team crafts and implements campaigns to advance key programmatic goals; grows and supports our volunteer and activist base; and reaches out to current and prospective supporters both within and outside of the Unitarian Universalist community to advance our collective justice-making capacity.

- Supporting UUSC's economic justice programs, the Justice-Building Team is collaborating with other groups to bring public pressure on Olive Garden and Darden Restaurants to commit to the Good Food Purchasing Policy. To date, more than 55,000 people have signed to support this campaign. Similar efforts on behalf of poultry industry workers resulted in a rally and press conference coinciding with Tyson Corporation's annual shareholder meeting, and the recruitment of Arkansas and national faith leaders into the coalition addressing occupational health and safety conditions in the poultry industry. A third action is UUSC's involvement in a growing movement to boycott Wendy's Restaurants until they adopt wage fairness in their food supply chain.
- Justice-Building efforts in UUSC's environmental justice programs include laying the groundwork for new federal legislative and regulatory action on water affordability and equity. UUSC hosted a briefing for members of the US House of Representatives on this subject, and is planning a similar event in the Senate. A social media campaign resulted in the delivery of more than 3,000 letters to the EPA on World Water Day, and a successful campaign to urge the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to hold hearings on inequality in access to water and sanitation in the United States.
- The Justice-Building Team's work in UUSC's rights at risk programs includes participation in public hearings, rallies, press conferences, letter writing efforts, and other forms of protest and moral suasion on behalf of asylum seeking women and children. It also includes efforts to block national legislation designed to limit or ban refugees from entering the country based on their nationality or religious identity.

- To expand opportunities for UUSC members and supporters to get involved in these efforts, the Justice-Building Team has established a national Refugee Rapid Response Network in consultation with the national Interfaith Immigration Coalition and other partners. In addition, UUSC has created *Building Bridges: A Refugee Toolkit*, which includes a range of program ideas, tools, and guidance for community action.
- New Justice-Building programs include a joint effort with the UUA and the UU Leadership Institute to create a set of online social justice skill building classes, and the first year of UUSC's Justice-Building Innovator (JBI) volunteer program. JBI aims to catapult congregations to a much greater level of skill and ambition in contributing to social justice through intensive leadership development. The 2016 JBI program includes sixteen individual volunteers from 8 congregational projects in four different states.

UU College of Social Justice

A collaboration between UUSC and the UUA, the UU College of Social Justice (UUCSJ) was founded at Justice GA in 2012. During its fourth year of existence, the initiative has continued to develop powerful immersion learning programs to help fulfill its mission: to inspire and sustain faith-based action on issues of local, national, and global importance.

- This year, UUCSJ offered opportunities for congregations and individuals to journey to Haiti, the U.S./Mexico border and Nicaragua, plus U.S. destinations in Brooklyn (Hurricane Sandy Recovery) and Bellingham, Wash. (solidarity with First Nations). Grounded in worship and reflection, these programs were supported by a robust framework of study before, during, and after the experience.
- UUCSJ is continuing to build out Activate, its justice training for high school age students. UUCSJ's summer 2016 programs include a one-day version in Columbus, Ohio, and weeklong trainings focused on a specific justice area in Boston (Climate Justice), Tucson (immigration Justice), and New Orleans (Racial Justice and the Beloved Community).
- UUCSJ continues to strengthen its internship program for college age young adults by offering placements with justice organizations in the United States, and with UUA partners in India. During their placements, UUCSJ supports interns with stipends, a framework for weekly reflections, and connections with a facilitator.
- This summer, UUCSJ is piloting a new justice training program for young adults called Grow Racial Justice, organized in partnership with the UUA's Thrive Young Adult leadership program for young adults of color, and also with Standing on the Side of Love. Grow Racial Justice will bring 30 young adults to New Orleans for a five-day intensive training to help them explore their racial identity, offer training in community organizing, and help develop the skills and spiritual resources to engage in sustained racial justice activism.
- For the second year in a row, UUCSJ is working with UUSC partner RAICES in San Antonio, Texas, to place volunteers with either Spanish language or legal aid skills during the summer months. Last year, 20 volunteers worked with detained refugees in Karnes detention center. This year, 24 volunteers are scheduled to help incarcerated refugee women and children understand and fight for their right to asylum.

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
689 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
617-868-6600 | uusc.org