

## Organizing Report August 2013

Westchester United is a growing interfaith network of congregations and other community organizations working to build a new power base to generate positive social change locally, statewide and beyond. We are an affiliate of the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation ([www.metro-iaf.org](http://www.metro-iaf.org)).

This report is intended as a review for our supporters, and members – be they active Strategy Team Members, peripherally involved, or even those who are casually interested in our efforts as we enter the fall of 2013.

### Kindergarten



*Mother of future kindergartner Jessica Cruz addresses crowd in favor of Kindergarten.*

In December, Westchester United hosted Representative Amy Paulin as we unveiled legislation to ensure that kindergarten is seen as essential part of education for all New York children. Unbelievably, in these times of budget cuts, kindergarten is something that has come up in several school districts as an

option to cut. What was a particular highlight, however, was to see the breadth of participation from our still young organization. The presence of 40 leaders from 10 institutions best represented the success of the event. It is because of the passion, involvement, and vision of those involved that we've made such progress.

In January, we published an op-ed in the Journal News and met with and over the next few months won official support of 26 Assembly members. We then ran into opposition from the Assembly's Education Committee Chairwoman.

The Chairwoman, who refused to meet with us, stated to our allies that she did not want to mandate kindergarten but instead would like to authorize school districts to mandate

kindergarten. Her argument is that this would follow the model of what the Assembly did for New York City, Syracuse and Rochester when they requested authorization to mandate kindergarten. The problem with that approach is that in the large cities, whose education law is significantly different from the education laws in rest of the state, the school officials were



*Westchester United hosts Rep Amy Paulin to unveil mandatory kindergarten legislation, December, 2012*

lobbying as districts for such authorization. In our situation due to polarizing and at times corrupt local school politics, we cannot rely on school districts to maintain kindergarten. Because of state law, the only way to guarantee access to kindergarten is for the state to mandate kindergarten. Therefore, we have argued that authorizing school boards to mandate kindergarten would not help us meet our goal to protect kindergarten.



Our leaders and allies continued to reach out to their representatives resulting in waves of Assembly members pleading our case to the Chairwoman.

Finally, we held an event in June with 180 leaders from throughout the County calling for this bill's passage. Responding to our request, and to inquiries of the press, the Chief Counsel of State Assembly Speaker met with our Assembly allies and suggested we amend the bill to authorize the State Education Department (i.e. the Regents) to mandate kindergarten for certain districts. This could, perhaps, allow the chairwoman to save face and utilize the desired language of "authorizing" the mandating of kindergarten. It would give us a means, with only four days left of the legislative session, to try to get this out of committee. Knowing that the SED has itself lobbied to mandate kindergarten in the past, this might be a way to move our issue forward. The Chairwoman agreed to this suggestion.

Westchester United leaders and staff are, at the time of writing, in discussions with top staff of the State Education Department to secure their support to Guarantee Access to Kindergarten.

### **Tappan Zee Bridge Report**



*Until we called attention to it, this "outreach center" remained closed.*

Tappan Zee Bridge – with our partner Metro IAF, Westchester United hired a transportation expert to do a study for us on the proposed plans to build a new Tappan Zee Bridge—the largest public works project in the region. After a presentation at Westchester Reform Temple, a team of leaders decided to look into the proposed jobs to see if our community members could get them.

We began with a degree of skepticism. While the Governor reported that 45,000 jobs would be generated, there was no specificity as to whether the project would employ local workers and no commitment to work with the local communities to achieve this. Indeed, a lot of public money is regularly spent on public works projects which hire people from out of state and do little to help our communities in need. Indeed, as those hired begin doing the initial dredging work, we are seeing many license plates showing up at the work site from out of state. We also read the Project Labor Agreement (PLA), which lays out how large labor unions would control the hiring process with little to no public accountability. Moreover, public records, and projects of similar scope, led our expert to estimate that fewer than 5,000 jobs would be created – rather than the stated 45,000.

Hoping for the best, our team continued to look for work for our community members. We called public numbers associated with the bridge. We went to the Community Relations Office

several times but found it open only once (with no one inside). We witnessed highly controlled workshops put on by state officials with no room for public input. We also met with a minority focused apprenticeship also struggling to break in. Because of this, and because promises like the ones made get wiped out when no one is held accountable, we decided to make this issue public. After a discussion with the Strategy Team, we decided to launch The Great Tappan Zee Job Search, asking, "How many jobs are there really? Where will they be? And, most importantly, will any be available to non-union members of our communities?" The Governor's staff members were not pleased with our questions, or our making them public. They called some of our leaders to complain. We have, in turn, asked for a meeting with the Governor to discuss the problem, and are awaiting a response.

### **Do Not Stand Idly By – MetroIAF's Strategy to Reduce Gun Violence**

Soon after the tragedy of Newtown, CT, and motivated by grief from all gun violence in this country, Westchester United leadership decided to research avenues for impact on gun violence. We entered into this guided by an interest in finding common ground, but also not being afraid to take a stand on common sense proposals to keep guns out of the hands of those who should not have them.

Skeptical of our ability to move Congress, we explored other



*Rabbi Joel Mossbacher addressing a crowd on Metro IAF's "Do Not Stand Idly By" – a unique campaign to reduce gun violence.*

avenues where we might have more leverage. We found out that 40% of the gun and ammunition purchased in 2012 was purchased by Law Enforcement and the military.

It occurred to us that we, the taxpayers, have a good deal of leverage over the gun manufacturers.

In March, Westchester United hosted 80 of our brothers and sisters from throughout Westchester as well as from our sister Metro IAF organizations in Connecticut & New Jersey to hear gun violence victim Rabbi Joel Mossbacher speak about Metro IAF's Strategy based on the dictum from Leviticus "Do Not Stand Idly By the Blood of your Neighbors." Capitalizing on the fact that taxpayers are the largest single purchasers of guns and ammunition, this effort asks that law enforcement and the military to use this purchasing power to take specific steps to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people.

Since then Westchester United Leaders have met with police commissioners of New Rochelle, Port Chester and Scarsdale, all of whom agreed to sign onto our covenant. Additionally, the President of County Association of Chiefs of Police has invited us to speak at their September meeting. This Association is comprised of the Chiefs of Police from the 42 separate jurisdictions in Westchester County, as well as executive rank officers from the MTA, the County Police, the State Police and the FBI and Secret Service.



In May, a delegation of us was positively received by top ranking staff of the New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman. We continue to explore avenues for working together with the AG's office.



- In May, Westchester United leaders participated in a national video conference with sister organizations from New Jersey, New York City, Chicago, Cleveland, Boston and Connecticut. There we shared and compared strategies. It strengthened us to see sister organizations working in unison on this national effort.

The above strategy is quite audacious, but it is a unique strategy that no other group of citizens is exploring. We are encouraged by those law enforcement entities signing on from across the country, the support from 7/8 of the candidates for NYC mayor, and the positive conversations that are taking place in Cleveland, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

- The final leg of this effort involves a Retail Strategy. Westchester United Leaders are exploring how guns are sold in Westchester County, partly to learn more about the industry as well as to see what steps can be or are taken to keep guns out of the hands of criminals.

### Other Local Organizing

Local work on this issue has continued as well. In Mt Vernon the city has begun putting up signs to protect pedestrians at

intersections that Westchester United leaders have designated as unsafe. In New Rochelle the Police Department has responded to the specific public safety concerns brought forward by Westchester United members there.



### Fundraising

In addition to our dues paying members, and private donations, this year we received support from the Elias Foundation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America World Hunger Program, Presbyterian Church USA Office of Community Ministry, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod Housing Program.

We also, in addition to a stand alone grant, received a \$2,000 matching grant from the Unitarian Universalist Fund for a Just Society. They will match every dollar we raise by year end up to \$2,000.

Finally, we have received a capacity building grant from our long time and early supporter the Elias Foundation. We have used this money to hire Bob Connolly, the founder of a fundraising consulting firm which serves non-profits and congregations in 23 states and has helped over 1600 clients raise more than \$1 billion since 1986. As the founding leader who hired the IAF to help him and others establish Milwaukee Common Ground, Bob is well acquainted with our kind of organization.

We are currently scheduling a training led by Mr. Connolly for the beginning of October on fundraising. This training will be titled: "How to Raise Money for Anything."

### Thanks & Please Give If You Can

Thanks to those communities, organizations, and individuals who've helped to make all this work possible. If you would like to help with a contribution, please visit our website at:

[www.westchester-united.org](http://www.westchester-united.org) and click donate.