

## **Productive Overseas Americans Week 2009**

Overseas Americans Week 2009 (OAW) during the week of March 30<sup>th</sup> once again brought the voice of overseas Americans to Washington D.C. OAW sponsors are the Association of Americans Resident Overseas (AARO), American Citizens Abroad (ACA) and the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas, Inc. (FAWCO).

The highlight of OAW 2009 was the successful evening reception organized in honor of the Americans Abroad Caucus and the Alliance for Military and Overseas Voting Rights, sponsored by Clements International and held in the elegant Capitol Visitors' Center Congressional Atrium. The evening featured brief remarks of Robert Cary, Executive Director, National Defense Committee and Dr. Claire Smith, Research Program Director, Overseas Vote Foundation. Congressmen Rush Holt and Michael Honda underscored their understanding of the issues facing overseas Americans and Carolyn Maloney, Co-Chair of the Americans Abroad Caucus, reaffirmed her long-standing support for Americans living and work abroad, stating: "As the world experiences global economic strains, Americans living abroad continue to create business opportunities for U.S. companies and workers abroad. They also are the unofficial ambassadors of our nation's strength of character and compassion in a time when much of the world is looking to the U.S. for a way out of this economic turmoil."

OAW delegates made efforts to visit all of the offices of members of the Americans Abroad Caucus in the House of Representatives, as it represents the only structure in Congress which focuses on overseas Americans' issues. The Caucus's growing membership gives an increasing platform to overseas Americans in Washington. Delegates also visited the Consular division of the State Department, as every year, to review progress on issues under the responsibility of the State Department.

Congressional offices, Administration offices and other organizations were visited to address four issues of key concern to overseas Americans – voting rights, taxation, access to U.S. banks, and Social Security and Medicare. Over 100 appointments were held during the week. The 23-member delegation was the largest ever for OAW.

OAW has gained recognition in Washington, and continuing follow-up efforts throughout the year encourage legislation favorable to overseas Americans. Important bills were introduced into Congress during or shortly following OAW.

On the voting issue, Representative Carolyn Maloney introduced H.R. 1739, the Overseas Voting Practical Amendments Act of 2009. The bill already has 6 co-sponsors including Michael Honda (D-CA), Susan Davis (D-CA), Charles Gonzalez (D-TX), Jim McDermott (D-WA), Bob Filner (D-CA) and James McGovern (D-MA). H.R. 1739 would greatly streamline and facilitate absentee voting procedures for overseas Americans and members of the military. It would also enfranchise many young

Americans who today are denied the right to vote. Representative Rush Holt introduced H.R. 2082, Military and Overseas Voting Act, which would accelerate delivery of registration materials and ballots by allowing the use of courier mail services. With a general movement for voting reform underway in Washington, OAW organizations hope to see these bills passed into legislation in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress.

In the tax field, Representative Gregory Meeks (D-NY) reintroduced the Working Americans Competitiveness Act – H.R. 1798, which would eliminate the cap on the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion under Section 911 of the U.S. Tax Code. This continued support will be helpful to remind Congress of the needs of overseas Americans when tax reform legislation becomes the priority in Congress. OAW 2009 ensured that all members of the Ways and Means Committee, the Finance Committee and the Joint Committee on Taxation are aware of the unfair tax burden placed on overseas Americans by current legislation. In tax meetings, delegates also sought support for an update of the 1981 GAO study on taxation of overseas Americans and the implications on the U.S. economy, entitled “American Employment Abroad Discouraged by U.S. Income Tax Laws”. The world has changed radically in the last 28 years and Congress must understand the need to adapt its tax policies to the new world environment in the interest of the nation.

OAW 2009 also initiated contact with two agencies of the IRS - the Taxpayer Advocate Service (TAS) and a new IRS office for outreach to overseas taxpayers. The TAS, an ombudsman office for U.S. taxpayers, is opening up special channels of communication to overseas Americans through the organizations supporting OAW. The new IRS outreach group has already produced IRS Publication 4732, which aims to identify the key publications that influence tax filing by overseas Americans. OAW’s sponsoring organizations look forward to collaborating with both the TAS and the outreach program.

On the banking issue, two important meetings were held with the American Bankers’ Association and FinCen in the Department of the Treasury. Overseas Americans often find they are denied the right to open or maintain a bank account in the United States due to their foreign address. Both groups have offered their support in following up on individual cases identified by the organizations behind OAW.

Concerning Social Security and Medicare, new developments will depend on general legislation in these areas. In particular, as health care reform comes on the table in Congress, efforts will be pursued to have a model program for extension of Medicare in Mexico included in the new legislation.

It was a busy, productive week. OAW represents a major effort on the part of AARO, ACA and FAWCO, and in particular for the organizers and delegates who participate. All are volunteers and pay their own expenses, adding financial sacrifice to the time involved. But the effort is worthwhile and necessary to bring the voice of overseas Americans to Washington.