Dear Friends,

As we enter a new spring, we must approach the rest of 2021 with a fresh outlook. For many of us in the Northeast Region there seems to be a warm spirit of hopeful change and possibility with new policies being proposed. As we work our way into warmer weather, there comes a time to prep the garden. With any good garden you must prepare the soil by adding compost, spreading fertilizer, planting the seeds, and tilling the land to produce a bountiful harvest. Much like prepping the soil, we have to prepare ourselves in our work for a more just, equitable and peaceful world.

Here in the Northeast Region, we are reviewing what changes are happening in the country policy-wise, which offers us the opportunity to better address some of our program issues on behalf of and in accompaniment with our community partners. We see opportunities in our immigration work: opportunities to provide citizenship for people with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA); to create just policy and a pathway to citizenship; to renew Temporary Protected Status (TPS); to provide education and action opportunities for healing; all the while battling the COVID-19 crisis to protect those that are most at risk such as those who are in our detention centers, jails and prisons. Seizing these opportunities will help us create a season for recovery.

The COVID pandemic has caused many of us to make major adjustments in our daily lives. Those adjustments have been exacerbated in many of the communities that we work in and are allied with. As a global community and family, we need to provide for and support each other as we strive to offer healing and recovery in all of our work. Due to the pandemic, the AFSC was fortunate to be able to provide material assistance to the neediest of families in Maine and New Jersey, where we were able to give people food, gift cards, baby and paper products, and other basic necessities.

AFSC’s vision and mission is in full effect as our program staff and committees adjust and develop creative opportunities to continue our work in community. We are cultivating a season where the spirit of kindness and caring for one another comes into bloom, like the first flower popping its head through icy snow.

So much has happened over the last 12 months—many disturbing events beyond the pandemic, including a brutal attack on our democracy, challenges to our election, murders and injustices against BIPOC communities and violence against immigrants. But through these difficult times, our amazing staff and committee members continue to live the values that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged our country to uphold. I am reminded of this passage by Dr. King:

We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies … True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

“Beyond Vietnam” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
New York City, April 4, 1967
New Hampshire

AFSC-NH engages in a variety of coordinated strategies which, implemented together, vitalize and nourish a large and growing movement of diverse people calling for social, racial and economic justice. This past year, the program said 'farewell' to Arnie Alpert at the end of June, and then welcomed two dazzling new team members in July and August: Grace Kindeke, our Program Coordinator, and Lidia Yen, our Grassroots Organizer Intern. Grace is bringing her creative talents and passion for movement building to AFSC's work for immigrant justice and ending mass incarceration. In December 2020 she organized a #FreeThemAll car caravan in Manchester as part of the AFSC's national week of action, lifting up the voices of formerly incarcerated and formerly detained people to demand that we dismantle systems of state violence—and this spring, followed up with a powerful caravan and rally for our May Day to Mother’s Day actions.

Lidia just graduated from Franklin Pierce University in January with a degree in healthcare administration. She is leading young adults in Concord to promote economic justice and racial equity, including a current campaign to remove police from schools.

Healing Justice

In New York, plans are underway for the Liberation Summer Youth Advocacy Camp, with a proposal submitted to a foundation to bring on a Fellow to support the work. We are working to transfer our Hope Lives for Lifers Manual to tablet format to make it available to people in prison since in-person programming is not permissible under Covid guidelines. A proposal for increased renewal funding has been submitted to Trinity Church Wall Street.

Prison Watch

In New Jersey, Bonnie Kerness helped expose the unconscionable abuse at the state’s sole women's prison. Her, partial testimony below best reflects our recent effort to change this abusive system:

“I am here on behalf of the American Friends Service Committee's Prison Watch Program, which receives letters and calls from men and women in New Jersey prisons. We also hear from family members, testifying to cruelest forms of abuse and conditions of confinement.

On January 16th, I received a horrific letter describing unrestrained assaults on women at Erna Mahan Correctional Facility. One hour later, I had my third telephone call from a frantic mother of a woman imprisoned there. Each of those reports noted that this abuse took place in the ‘black hole’ most inappropriately renamed the Restorative Housing Unit, which is essentially solitary confinement.

I am also here on behalf of the courageous women who risked themselves to get word to the outside world of torture, beatings and abuse by the often-lawless people who hold the position of ‘correctional’ staff. A seven-page letter from one described guards dressed in riot gear, opening food portals, spraying prisoners with pepper spray before opening their cages, then handcuffing, and shackling the women before dragging them on the floor out of their cells. She describes the sickening sound of the beatings and screams.

In my 40 years as an advocate, I can attest that torture in New Jersey prisons and jails has escalated; that sexual and racial discrimination reigns; that cruelty happens with impunity, and that it appears that no one is accountable ... The Department of Corrections is more than a set of institutions; it is also a state of mind. That state of mind has led us here today and is at the core of the changes that are necessary. We are grateful for this gathering, and for the commitment of legislators to address the critical need for the monitoring and public oversight that a resurrected Office of the Public Advocate can bring.”

Further details and coverage can be found at the following links (continued on page 3):

New Jersey Immigrant Rights Program

The organizing and legal teams are working closely together on efforts to end immigration detention in New Jersey, and to provide services to people while they are detained. Our #FreeEDC (Elizabeth Detention Center) Campaign Coordinator is also supporting the national #FreeThemAll actions.

IRP staff are working closely with our national Human Migration and Mobility team in understanding the many changes that the Biden administration has begun to implement. A good summary of the changes is here. Our local staff are fielding a high volume of phone calls from the immigrant community in New Jersey who are eager to learn about new opportunities for them to legalize their status in the U.S. We are responding as much as possible and are organizing conference calls and virtual presentations to ensure that people understand what is being proposed, and to advise them against paying any attorney or notary public to file paperwork until legislation or other programs are actually in place.

Wabanaki Program

The Wabanaki Program helps the Native community by providing new opportunities for the Wabanaki community and its young people to heal through education, training, participatory activities using Native traditions, and building strategies for healing and increase their confidence and believe that they can shape their world grounded in Wabanaki traditional values; by educating young people about issues of mass incarceration and the prison industrial system; by facilitating Native prisoners’ practice of spirituality; and by doing decolonizing training and developing alliances with non-Native people.

As we reflect on the challenges of the long pandemic winter, we must now look forward to tending our seedlings and embracing signs of new life throughout the garden, clearing the way for their growth. Just like in the garden, in our work we will continue to nurture new life and identify opportunities to connect with our communities, aiming to strengthen the already deep roots our programs have in the region.

Please consider a tax-deductible donation to our Northeast Region, which will help support our ongoing work to resist oppression and create spaces for peace, justice and human dignity.

Also remember to check out the AFSC Alumni Page at www.afsc.org/alumni or via our Facebook group at www.facebook.com/groups/234049520577404 to engage with current and former AFSC staff, volunteers, interns and fellows.

Sincerely yours for peace and justice,

Keith B. Harvey
Northeast Regional Director

Amy Gottlieb
Northeast Regional Director