A sense of rebirth and renewal is spreading throughout the South Region under the dynamic new leadership of Kamau Franklin. Kamau, a civil rights attorney who was named regional director in April, brings to AFSC his rich background in organizing at the grassroots level around issues of racial justice and civic engagement. He shares his vision for the region on page two.

Ann Lennon, who for many years directed the Area office of the Carolinas, has been named associate regional director. Ann most recently served as the region’s interim director. Her experience in social justice work and deep understanding of AFSC’s history are invaluable assets as the region moves forward.

Another new beginning can be found in the personal story of Eddie Conway, who was released from prison in March after serving 43 years for a crime he says he did not commit. Eddie, who is working with the AFSC Baltimore office as a community outreach specialist intern, shares his inspiring journey to freedom and how he is using his experiences to restore hope to his shattered community. See his interview on pages four and five.

The South Region also is engaged in a renewed commitment to youth empowerment. During the summer, program participants from North Carolina, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and West Virginia gathered in the nation’s capital for a weeklong Youth Human Rights Summit hosted by AFSC-DC Program Director Jean Louis Peta Ikambana. See photographs on page seven.

In West Virginia, renewed progress can be seen in two key policy victories – one establishing an economic Future Fund from a portion of the state’s mineral severance taxes and the other expanding Medicaid to a higher percentage of residents than any other state. See the stories on page three.

Programs in North Carolina and Atlanta are leaders in the “Moral Monday” movement (page eight) that addresses issues such as attempts to curtail voting rights and cuts to social programs while New Orleans, Miami and North Carolina programs support immigrants in their efforts to find paths to citizenship (page six) and the Atlanta program offers help to families facing evictions from their homes (page six).

This work around a vast range of issues demonstrates the South Region’s commitment to fairness in the present and hope for the future, beliefs that are woven into the tapestry of the AFSC.
Greetings, AFSC South Region supporters,

As the new South Regional Director, I am delighted to become part of the great work of ASFC and in particular the South Region. Although new to AFSC, I am no stranger to the wider social justice movement. For over 20 years I’ve been organizing on issues using a grassroots vision of racial justice, human and civil rights, and civic engagement in our various communities and the larger society. I hope that whatever skills I have developed in my life will be useful to the great work already happening here in the south and to building a movement for social justice and peace.

Re-establishing this newsletter is one step in making sure we increase the support for the South Region programs to the widest possible audience and create as many ways as possible for you to join us in our work. We ask you to join and to continue your support for the following great work and impressive programming happening all across the south:

- Baltimore’s Friend of a Friend program works with the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated to support not only their re-introduction into outside society but also to deepen the connection to their home communities. Participants have the chance to support positive changes by working to improve their communities’ conditions and the institutions that have power over their collective lives.

- Incredible youth/student programming is happening in New Orleans, North Carolina, West Virginia, Washington, D.C., and soon to be again in Baltimore and Atlanta. These programs work with youths not only on conflict resolution skills and leadership trainings, but also on developing social justice campaigns that matter to young people.

- In Miami, North Carolina and Atlanta our work with immigrant populations and so-called “undocumented” immigrants are cutting edge in supporting groups and individuals who have shown great courage in standing up for their place in this society. This work is a testament and a great example of AFSC’s worldview that all people's human rights should be protected.

- In West Virginia our staff have led the way to winning incredible policy victories including the expansion of Medicaid, which has dropped the uninsured rate by 62%.

- In Atlanta our staff spearheaded state wide coalitions like Georgia’s Moral Monday, bringing together people from different sectors of society to organize for policy changes. Our housing justice work has successfully used civil disobedience to win key victories that have kept people in their homes, saved a community church from foreclosure and kept a small business going and its employees working.

Hopefully this newsletter will bring this important work to light and will touch upon important social, political and cultural issues happening across the South Region. As many have recently pointed out, a “New South” is being built, with a more diverse population, more progressive politics and a need for a new vision of justice and peace. Many people are participating in this new struggle to make sure that the old history of the south will not be repeated. Our challenge is to win racial and economic justice that respects everyone’s human rights in a way that will bring us together and not divide us. We hope to do our part within that new struggle with innovative programming, grassroots campaigns and a belief that the people come first and will lead the way. Thank you for your support of our work.
AFSC’s West Virginia Economic Justice (WVEJ) program won a major victory in the 2014 state legislative session with the passage of a measure establishing a Future Fund, a permanent mineral trust fund created from a portion of natural resource severance taxes.

“This is a campaign we’ve worked on with key allies for about four years,” WVEJ Director Rick Wilson said. “The bill is not perfect because it was amended and weakened late in the session, but we hope to strengthen it next year. Just getting the legislation passed is huge because the Future Fund will allow the state to convert non-renewable resources into a renewable source of wealth that will help build a more stable, viable future for generations to come.”

AFSC’s West Virginia Economic Justice (WVEJ) program won a major victory in the 2014 state legislative session with the passage of a measure establishing a Future Fund, a permanent mineral trust fund created from a portion of natural resource severance taxes.

“It’s rare that West Virginia leads the nation in any measure of social well being, but the state has expanded Medicaid to cover a higher percentage of its citizens than any other state. AFSC’s West Virginia Economic Justice (WVEJ) program was part of a broad coalition that encouraged Governor Earl Ray Tomblin to expand Medicaid, which now serves more than 134,000 West Virginians.

If you add in the state exchange and those who gained access to existing programs through new outreach efforts, at least 63 percent of previously uninsured West Virginians now have health insurance, the greatest reduction of any state in the country.

AFSC’s Rick Wilson, left, presented an AFSC-created poster supporting the establishment of a Future Fund to West Virginia Senate President Jeff Kessler, who led legislative efforts to create the permanent mineral trust fund. AFSC helped rally support for the measure, which passed in the 2014 legislative session. Photo by Bryan Vana.

West Virginia currently is experiencing a natural gas boom similar to that of the coal industry in the last century.

“We missed the boat with coal,” Rick explained. “Other states with extractive industries have benefited economically from the creation of mineral trust funds while we have been shipping our coal wealth out of West Virginia.”

As a result, the state’s coal counties have been subject to extreme economic boom and bust cycles that have resulted in lower median household incomes; higher family poverty rates; worse health outcomes; lower education levels and higher income inequality.

“If we had had a Future Fund during the 20th century, West Virginia would now be one of the nation’s richest states, instead of one of its poorest,” Rick said. “We can’t go back to 1920 and redo things, but we can make sure we create a brighter economic future for this generation and beyond. The Future Fund is a giant step forward.”
Dominique Stevenson: You have been home for approximately four months, what is life like?

Eddie Conway: It is exciting – I get to see things that I haven’t seen for forty five years, I’m seeing things I’ve never seen before – buildings that did not exist, the Inner Harbor, the light rail, a host of new things. I am busy, but I try to find time to relax. I’m just reading my first book since being released. I used to read every day.

DS: What are the challenges?

EC: Initially, I thought I would have some time to relax, adjust, but that wasn’t the case. After seeing the conditions in Baltimore, I felt that something needed to be done. Riding through the city and seeing people in a stupor, or nodding in front of abandoned buildings made me realize how much the city and the population had deteriorated since the ’70s. This tugged at my consciousness because it seemed like there was a sense of hopelessness. I felt the need to do something about it. That is what we do in Friend of a Friend – restore hope.

DS: What are you doing to restore hope?

EC: I am working to bring an array of people together to put the neighbor back in the hood, so to speak. We are trying to build relationship by supporting the community – providing lunches, school supplies and working with residents around issues that affect them. For
instance, there is a basketball court in disrepair, we are trying to get it restored so that the youth have some place to play ball. We are also hosting a community cookout to bring our group of concerned people together with community members and youth. In addition, Friend of a Friend has partnered with a high school in Baltimore – Connexions School for the Arts. They do not have a library, so we are organizing a book drive to establish that library by September. The school also is incorporating Friend of a Friend into some of their activities and curriculum.

DS: How has the transition been for your family members and friends?

EC: They are obviously happy, but I am not as available as I was when I was in prison. Obviously I couldn’t move around like I now do. Sometimes I feel that I am not as attentive as I was when I was locked up, and my desire to reach out and interact with everyone is not realistic because I don’t have that kind of time anymore. There are too many people, too many things, just too much to do, (laughs) and too many places to be.

DS: Where are some of the places you prefer to be now that you can move around?

EC: I can’t be in the places I want to be right now. I’d like to go to New Orleans, Paris and Africa. I really want to go to Kilimanjaro and walk up the mountain, but I am under strict supervision through the Department of Parole and Probation, and they do not generally allow recreational travel. However, the state did let me go to Ohio to visit my grandchildren because I had never seen them outside of prison. This was an exceptional decision on their part, but I had to keep pushing through the bureaucracy to get them to grant permission. They originally refused me.

DS: What is your daily routine, and how has it changed since you were in prison?

EC: I still wake up at three o’clock in the morning and stay awake for a couple of hours. Three a.m. is count time in the prison, the guards come by and verify that you are alive by shining a light in your face. For the last four decades, I have had that light shined in my face nightly, and I am still waking up at this time. It is part of the rhythm of my life. Daily I am running – working at home or in community – on the phone, attending meetings, and I struggle to get a nap in to make up for that loss of sleep at night, but it is rare.

DS: Has life outside been as you expected it to be?

EC: Pretty much, even more – I enjoy foods that I only dreamed about before, I can go places, buy things that were once prohibited. I have also met a lot of interesting people, many who are very hopeful for the future.

DS: In parting, is there anything else you would like to say?

EC: Yes, I have a tremendous faith that people of all backgrounds can come together and make changes in their community.
Calling for humane eviction policies

AFSC joined Occupy Our Homes Atlanta and DeKalb County residents who are facing eviction in staging a press conference in July at which speakers called for a more humane process for those facing eviction.

The participants delivered a letter to acting Sheriff Jeff Mann outlining a list of recommendations that included scheduled evictions, no evictions after hours, no evictions during extreme weather, costs paid by the evictor or a cap of public spending, relocation and 30 days’ storage for belongings; handling belongings with care and referrals for housing services.

“Occupy Our Homes Atlanta continues to be overwhelmed by the number of DeKalb County residents in immediate housing crisis,” said Tim Franzen, director of AFSC’s Atlanta Peace and Conflict Transformation Project. “AFSC continues to support residents in need by advocating for fair treatment of those facing eviction. There’s a clear moral imperative to make the eviction process more humane for folks going through a very difficult time in their lives.”

Finding paths to citizenship in Miami

Within the last year, the AFSC Miami office has begun groundbreaking work towards helping gay immigrants married to American citizens obtain legal permanent status (LPR).

Gay immigrant spouses can now apply for legal status since the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in June 2013.

According to federal law, married homosexual couples are granted the same legal benefits as married heterosexual couples.

One of those benefits is that gay immigrants married to American citizens are as equally eligible to apply for a green card as spouses of heterosexual citizens.

Staff members at the Miami office also are preparing family petitions for gay binational couples.

AFSC staff has already worked with three gay binational couples on submitting their family petitions and is currently filing the applications for two of them.

Marie-Georges Jean, a paralegal at the AFSC office, confirms that the process for gay immigrant spouses applying for a family petition is the same as that for heterosexual immigrant spouses.

“We’ve been helping other [heterosexual] couples with the adjustment of status, and with their [homosexual couples] cases, there is nothing different,” Marie said.

Marie said she enjoys working with the binational gay couples that she met thus far.

“I’m really happy to make them comfortable,” Marie assures, “American Friends welcomes them.”

(This article was written by Grace Slawski, an intern with the Miami program.)
Students from South Region programs in North Carolina, West Virginia, New Orleans, Atlanta and Washington, D.C., gathered in the nation’s capital in June for a Human Rights Summit organized by Jean Louis Peta Ikambana, above left, director of the AFSC-DC program.

The students participated in workshops to prepare for meetings with their representatives on Capitol Hill.

Said Elijah Coleman of the Logan, West Virginia, ACE program, “It was definitely an experience I will never forget. I am really uncomfortable talking to people, and AFSC helped me to become more comfortable expressing my opinion.”

*Photos by Bryan Vana*
In North Carolina, the NAACP and partnering organization AFSC initiated a series of weekly protests demanding progressive policy changes from lawmakers.

Dubbed “Moral Monday,” the protests targeted specific policies in the state which have had negative effects on citizens.

The movement has spread to Georgia, where AFSC hosted a Moral Monday retreat in June at the Atlanta office.

The retreat provided an opportunity for Moral Monday participants to reflect on strengths and weaknesses, examine where the effort has gone, and strategize about where it needs to go and how to build an effective and enduring movement.

Moral Monday Georgia was launched during the 2014 legislative session and managed to mobilize a diverse coalition every week of the session to cast a spotlight on specific policies detrimental to regular everyday Georgians.

The coalition moved so fast that while the protests were occurring, there was little time to reflect on how best to move forward.

“If Moral Monday Georgia is to be a movement, not a political moment, then taking time to reflect, build skills and strategize is key,” said Tim Franzen, director of the Atlanta Peace & Conflict Transformation Project. “AFSC is honored to play a role in bringing people together for that purpose.”