

Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of New Jersey

Task Force on Immigration

2014-15 Annual Report

There is much reason to conclude that not much happened over the past year for the Immigration Task Force. Certainly the New Jersey Legislature has been inactive on bills related to immigration; we and other organizations are trying to work on a drivers license bill and a wage theft bill, but there are no significant efforts in the Legislature in these areas. And the effort for federal comprehensive immigration reform stalled with the end of the last Congress. There is no realistic chance of that in the next few years.

Such a conclusion, though would be inaccurate. In the absence of legislative work, the task force has been working along in other ways to support the goal of fair and humane treatment of immigrants among us. This work has involved three initiatives over the past year, and the task force looks to other opportunities as well.

One such initiative has been a stronger partnership with the organization called First Friends. First Friends supports immigrant detainees who in most cases are being held awaiting deportation, and it has also been very active with the arrival of unescorted minors across the border last summer and fall. UULMNJ has helped First Friends with publicity and also with strong support for their "Stamp Out Despair" program that raises funds twice each year to help detainees stay in contact with loved ones and with their attorneys.

Another effort has been to join a coalition of like-minded organizations working for fair immigration policies and practices. Over the past year a promising organization called the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice has been established, and UULMNJ has become a member of NJAIJ. We expect that through working with NJAIJ we will be able to be much more involved and productive than we can be by ourselves.

UULMNJ participated with others in an effort to achieve lower telephone rates for incarcerated and detained persons in New Jersey. While the FCC had mandated lower interstate rates, New Jersey was slow in lowering the phone rates for intrastate calls. The costs are very important for detainees who need to talk to their lawyers and their loved ones, and we are glad that a recent decision has accomplished lower rates at the state level and for Essex County. There is still more work to be done in this area.

Also, we are proud that last summer the task force took advantage of the opportunity to make not one but two videos for use in our congregations. Those videos and accompanying background papers are available for congregational use. One interviews the director and a former detainee from First Friends. The other outlines the work of the Morristown-based organization called Wind of the Spirit, involving the participation of two migrants involved there.

Looking forward, we expect to become more involved at the local level. There are opportunities to make policy and practice at the municipal and county level in New Jersey. Stay tuned to find out what we will be able to do!