
Search for Common Ground-USA Program Overview

SFCG-USA is a national leader in catalyzing and facilitating consensus-based approaches to address challenging national policy issues and high-priority community needs. We bring diverse stakeholders to a common table to build bipartisan solutions to specific, important issues at the national level. We work to build consensus and engage in cooperative problem-solving activities at the local level. We also work to institutionalize and strengthen capacity for cooperation and consensus-building over time. A hallmark of our work is not only to foster dialogue but also to engage groups to take actions that serve their shared interests.

Current Projects

United States Consensus Council

The U.S. Consensus Council is an eminent, diverse, and bi-partisan group of individuals that serves as a steering committee for Search for Common Ground-USA. The USCC helps develop, promote, and support our projects at the national and local levels. Through its diverse and respected membership, the USCC provides credibility for the efficacy of our work and for our status as a non-partisan organization.

U.S. Engagement with the Muslim World Project

SFCG-USA is working in partnership with the Consensus Building Institute to conduct a groundbreaking, interdisciplinary dialogue and public engagement process that seeks to reverse the downward spiral in U.S. relations with the global Muslim community. The project's central goals are to:

- create a coherent, broad-based and bipartisan strategy and set of recommendations to improve relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world; and
- communicate and advocate this strategy in ways that shift U.S. public opinion and contribute to changes in U.S. policies, and public and private action.

A report from the project's Leadership Group will be released on September 24, 2008. The active Leadership Group includes a former Secretary of State (Madeleine Albright), former Republican members of Congress (Vin Weber and Steve Bartlett), a former U.S. envoy on the Middle East peace process (Dennis Ross), and an equally eminent, remarkably diverse set of leaders and experts from business, faith communities, foreign policy, and related fields. Eleven of the group's thirty-two members are Muslim-Americans. Project funders include the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Hewlett Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and others.

Completed Projects

Health Care Coverage for the Uninsured Consensus-Building Project

There is widespread agreement across the political spectrum that all Americans should have access to health insurance; however, major disagreement on how best to address this problem has left 45 million Americans without coverage and the issue gridlocked for many years. SFCG-USA, in partnership with the Meridian Institute, organized key national stakeholders into a consensus-building process to develop broadly supportable recommendations to cover as many people as possible as quickly as possible. The HCCU group released an historic agreement in January 2007 and continued to work throughout the year on legislative initiatives to implement their recommendations.

Philadelphia Consensus Group on Reentry and Reintegration

To find common ground on crime policy, SFCG-USA facilitated the Philadelphia Consensus Group on Reentry and Reintegration of Adjudicated Offenders. That project, chaired by former Mayor Wilson Goode, Sr., reached agreement on a series of recommendations that have led to the unprecedented coordination of services relating to the re-entry of ex-offenders into society. Building on that process, SFCG-USA continued

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to mobilize local coalitions to work toward sustainable ex-offender reentry, receiving an award of \$1.05 million to participate in Ready4Work, the national ex-offender workforce development program spearheaded by the U.S. Department of Labor. A major impact of the work was a far lower rate of recidivism among participants in our project, compared to the national average. The project concluded its work in August 2006.

Collaboration DC

For the period June 2004-December 2006, Collaboration DC supported collaboration between residents and neighbourhood organizations, and among the community, business and government sectors on key issues in the District of Columbia. Collab DC provided expert consultation and facilitation involving community engagement on public school improvement, a top priority for DC government and residents. It also worked over this period with residents, community leaders, and neighbourhood organizations in Near Southeast-Southwest DC, the site of large scale development. This development poses both a challenge to the city's vision of an inclusive city and an opportunity for new investment to remedy longstanding human needs. Collab DC catalyzed the formation of the Near SE-SW Community Benefits Coordinating Committee, which works with community based organizations, elected officials and developers to gain concrete benefits for the community. Collab DC continues as a network of practitioners committed to collaborative and participatory process in DC, and is now coordinated by the Community Building Institute.

Search for Common Ground on HIV/AIDS Project

In September 2005, Search for Common Ground - USA (Search-USA) launched a consensus process that brought together leading U.S.-based organizations involved in global HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care and human rights. Participants represented a broad range of opinions in this field and included secular and faith-based advocacy organizations and service providers. The overall vision of the project was to help transform the currently polarized environment in the HIV/AIDS community to one of increased trust and understanding that would enhance the potential for cooperation. Senators Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Richard Durbin (D-IL) endorsed the process, and served as honorary conveners and followed the process with interest. Funding was provided by the United Nations Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

Faith-based Initiatives, Human Needs, and the U.S. Constitution

Proposals to expand government funding for faith-based social services providers have been a subject of intense legal and political controversy in the U.S. For three years culminating in 2003, SFCG-USA brought together national Working Groups with leaders from across the religious and political spectrum to address unmet needs related to poverty in the U.S. While not all major issues could be resolved, these Working Groups laid out detailed principles to protect religious freedom *and* empower faith-based groups to partner with government to meet human needs. Some of these recommendations were adopted in legislation (the Care Act of 2003) that was passed by the U.S. Senate.

The Common Ground Network for Life and Choice

From 1993 to 2000, SFCG sponsored a project called The Common Ground Network for Life and Choice (The Network). The project goal was to change the dynamic of the abortion conflict in the United States from one defined solely by disagreement and extreme polarization, to one where strong disagreement is acknowledged but the parties work to understand other viewpoints, uncover common interests and consider ways to act jointly on shared goals such as preventing unwanted teen-age pregnancy. The Network extended to 20 cities and worked intensively in two communities where the abortion debate escalated into violence – Buffalo, NY and Pensacola, FL.

The Common Ground Communities Project

Between 2000 and 2004 we conducted this project to support U.S. communities in developing the capacity to deal constructively with recurring community disputes. We provided training, technical advice and support materials to three communities in Maryland, Minnesota and Kentucky with a total of 30 counties involved in: establishing a cooperative problem solving center; developing services such as neighborhood problem solving and cooperative land use planning; and developing community-wide awareness and skills in cooperative problem solving.