

The American Society of Criminology Public Policy Education in Washington DC

As an organization, the American Society of Criminology understands and emphasizes the important role that reliable and accurate social science research plays in creating effective public policy. This work – and the work of many individual ASC members – is supported by the programs and funding of federal entities such as the National Institute of Corrections, the National Institute of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and other research grant programs housed in the Department of Justice. In recent months, ASC has taken the first steps towards establishing itself and its members as a resource to policymakers on Capitol Hill on the need for and impact of these programs. Especially with the arrival of a new Congress and new Administration, ASC has a great opportunity to build and expand its role in this arena.

Background: The “Typical” Federal Appropriations Process

Each year, Congress is responsible for passing appropriations legislation to fund the activities and functioning of the federal government. The House, the Senate, and the President all play a role in the appropriations process, and ultimately must come to agreement on the levels of spending that will be appropriated for any federal agency, activity, or grant program. Federal fiscal years go from October 1 to September 30. In each calendar year, the appropriations for the fiscal year that begins that October is prepared (so in 2008, for example, Congress was working to pass the FY 2009 appropriations that will be in place from October 1, 2008 through September 30, 2009).

The annual appropriations process traditionally begins with the preparation of a budget proposal from the President, laying out the budget amounts he believes are needed by the various federal agencies. This budget proposal usually comes from the President to Congress in February. The House Appropriations Committee, through its Subcommittees, then prepares and introduces a series of appropriations bills that serve as the basis of the congressional appropriations process (usually in late March). The Senate prepares its own version of all the appropriations bills (usually in late April), creating a version that must then be reconciled with the House version through the conference committee process (usually in late spring and summer). Once the House and Senate have come to agreement and passed an appropriations bill, it goes to the President for signature or veto. Theoretically this entire process should be completed by the summer; however, in recent years this has often not been the case.

Congress must complete all appropriations work by September 30th of each year in order to keep the government running and fully funded for the beginning of the new fiscal year. If they do not make this deadline, they usually enact instead a short-term appropriations bill called a “continuing resolution.” A continuing resolution is a stopgap funding measure that is passed for a short period of time to give lawmakers additional time to work on a final measure. It typically maintains funding of individual programs at their existing levels.

The Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Subcommittee (“CJS Subcommittee”) is responsible for the budget of the Department of Justice, where many criminology research programs are located. Both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have a CJS Subcommittee.

The FY 2009 Appropriations Process: What Happened This Year?

The President’s Proposed Budget

On February 4, 2008, President Bush released his budget proposal for fiscal year 2009. The President’s budget recommended \$22.7 billion for the Department of Justice. As in his fiscal year 2008 budget proposal, the President recommended consolidating all grant funding for the Justice Department into four competitive grant programs, and recommended eliminating some programs all together including funding

for the Federal Bureau of Prisons to continue supporting the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). NIC is the only federal agency with a legislative mandate to serve as a center for correctional knowledge and to provide specialized services to the corrections profession, and is unique in its provision of direct services rather than financial assistance. The work of the NIC is integral to criminology in general and specifically to the work being done by many ASC members.

Additionally, the President's proposed budget recommended funding the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) at \$37 million. The NIJ performs research and evaluation functions within the Department of Justice. While comparable to NIJ's funding in FY 2008, this proposed amount represents a decrease of more than 30% from the FY 2007 funding level of \$54.3 million.

Congressional Response

Fortunately, neither the House nor the Senate concurred with the Administration's recommendations. The CJS Appropriations Committee in the House supported considerably higher levels of funding for both of these important functions, recommending NIJ funding of \$45 million in FY 2009 and continued funding of NIC through BOP. The CJS Appropriations Subcommittee in the Senate also rejected the proposal included in the President's budget to eliminate the National Institute of Corrections from the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Additionally, the Senate recommended funding the National Institute of Justice at \$50 million, which would have brought it close to its FY2007 funding level; however, the Committee did not specify any of those funds solely for social science research.

Outcome

Ultimately, the appropriations activity on the part of the President, Senate, and House did not move forward in 2008. The House and Senate never convened a conference committee on the bill; and in late September of this year, Congress passed a continuing resolution that lasts through March 6, 2009, continuing to fund programs at the current levels. Because of this, NIC and NIJ will continue to be funded at 2008 levels through that time.

The 2009 Appropriations Process: What Will Happen in the New Year?

The Importance of Action in 2009

As a new Administration and a new Congress convene in January of 2009, the ASC and its members will have an excellent opportunity to educate their own Members of Congress, relevant Committee Members, and Administration officials about the importance of continued federal support for all of these programs. Especially in light of a tight federal budget and many competing priorities, providing decision makers on Capitol Hill with information about the role, cost-effectiveness, and real-world usefulness of criminology and criminal justice research and evaluation programs is more important than ever. A new federal appropriations process will begin early in 2009, and this will be the best time to contact the new Administration and Members of Congress. When Congress and the new Administration take office in January, addressing appropriations before March 6th will be one of their first responsibilities; so reaching out to them very early in the year will be very important.

ASC's Opportunities on Capitol Hill

For ASC and the field of criminology, engaging Members of Congress has benefits beyond simply providing educational information about a specific appropriation or piece of legislation: meeting and becoming familiar with congressional offices will help to build the effectiveness, impact, and visibility of the ASC, its members, and their work. Building relationships on Capitol Hill and educating Members and their staffs may open the door for future opportunities such as participating in, or providing written testimony for, Congressional hearings; organizing Hill staff briefings; serving as a resource to Committee staff; providing expert information to appropriations staffers; and creating an opportunity to shape and inform public policy that affects research in criminology and more broadly, in the social and behavioral sciences.

Congressional Education and Relationship Building

Public policy decisions that affect the American Society of Criminology, its members, and the issues they care about – such as funding for the National Institute of Corrections and National Institute of Justice, as well as other criminology grant programs and databases – are made by Congress through legislative and appropriation decisions. As researchers, practitioners, and academicians, the members of the ASC have a vested interest in ensuring that Congress and the President support research in social science and criminology, including scholarly and scientific research concerning the etiology, prevention, control, and treatment of crime and delinquency; and that it supports the maintenance and expansion of key federal crime databases.

Why Congress Benefits from Your Input

Members of Congress are experts at drafting, passing, and enacting legislation; however, they are rarely experts in all of the various fields over which they have jurisdiction, and have to draft legislation and make appropriations decisions in many specialized areas. Members therefore rely heavily on their staffers, and are informed by the letters and calls that their offices receive on specific issues or pending bills. As a non-partisan, academic organization, the ASC and its members are well situated to communicate with Members of Congress and Committee staff to share their expertise, and to educate Members and their offices about the importance of continued funding for criminology and criminal justice research. Additionally, no voice is more important to a Member of Congress than that of a constituent from their own district; legislators welcome the opportunity to meet with constituents who can share with them the personal and professional impact that proposed legislation would have on their work or the potential consequences for their district.

Ways of Communicating with Members of Congress

ASC has members throughout the United States, and thus has a terrific opportunity to impact and educate virtually all Members of Congress with communications not only from the organization, but also from constituents. There are numerous ways that individual members of ASC can participate in this educational process. Through the ASC's public policy coordinators, members can be notified when a moment for action has arrived, and then have numerous options about how to communicate with their elected officials:

- *Visits in the Member's DC office.* Although not always feasible, the best way to communicate with your elected officials is through a personal visit. Most of the policymaking work is done in Washington DC, and a face-to-face meeting with a Member or with his or her staff in Washington is a great way to provide information and an effective way to convey the importance of your message.
- *Visits in the Member's district office.* Senators and Representatives make frequent visits to their districts, especially during congressional recesses. This provides constituents with an ideal opportunity to meet personally with and educate Members. If you are not able to schedule a meeting with his or her Representative or Senator, staff in the district office may be available for a meeting. District staff will then communicate your information to the Member and to DC-based staff working on relevant legislation or appropriations.
- *Letters to the Member.* If you are unable to meet with a Member or their staff in person, sending a letter to your Senator or Representative is a great way to educate them about your issue of concern or to provide them with information. If you decide to write to your member, it is highly recommended that you fax a copy of your letter as well as mail a hard copy; faxes are preferred due to the length of time it takes for letters to reach Members through the mail (since 2001, they go through a screening process that can take weeks). It is also a good idea to contact the Member's Washington office to determine which staffer handles your issue so that you can send them a copy of the letter by email.
- *Telephone calls to the Member's office.* If you cannot visit your legislators personally, or prefer not to send a letter, you can simply take a moment to call them on the telephone. When you call, ask to

Speak to the staffer who handles your issue for the Member. If the staff person is not available, leave a clear and detailed message explaining who you are, your name and address (important for communicating that you are a constituent!), and why you are calling. If you are willing to answer any questions the staffer has, you should also leave a telephone number; however, in most cases you will not receive a call back. Leaving a message is fine – the Member will know what you think about the issue through your message. All congressional offices are careful to keep track of these contacts from constituents, so your call will definitely be worthwhile.

Follow-up and Documenting Information

If you do visit with a Member or staff person, in Washington or in the district office, follow up is very important. Be sure to write a personal thank you note to the Member and/or staffers who attended (communicating by fax or email is entirely appropriate at this stage). In the note, mention any commitments they made to you; and if you promised to provide further materials or information, be sure to follow through. Remember, you want to be seen as a resource that the Member and staff can come back to on a regular basis. It is also helpful to create a record of the visit for future reference (i.e., who was there; what was covered; was the tone/feel of the meeting friendly and relaxed, or stiff and uncomfortable; and anything you learned about the position or relevant interests of the Member). Provide the information to whoever is coordinating ASC's public policy outreach work as well; this information will be invaluable in strategizing about how to approach this person in future visits.

This document was prepared for the annual conference in St. Louis, MO, November 11-14, 2008. For further information, please contact Katharine Huffman, The Raben Group LLC, at (202) 466-2479 or khuffman@rabengroup.com.