



## **AARO-FAWCO Overseas Americans Week – 2014**

by Victoria Ferauge

For over a decade now, organizations representing the interests of Americans abroad have made an annual trip to Washington, D.C. for “Overseas Americans Week.”

AARO, FAWCO, ACA and others organized the first trip thirteen years ago and it has become a yearly tradition where a delegation of Americans abroad heads for Washington to knock on doors, exchange information, and raise awareness of the many issues facing the over 7 million U.S. citizens living outside the United States. This year’s AARO/FAWCO delegation included the AARO President and FAWCO U.S. Liaison Lucy Stensland Laederich, Ellen Lebelle, John Fredenberger, Tim Ramier, John Davidson, and Victoria Ferauge.

The delegation was very well received by the agencies and members of Congress. Awareness was high and issues important to Americans abroad were definitely on their radar. Some of this was because of the excellent work done by past OAW delegations and AARO, but just as important were constituents’ letters, recent media coverage, reports from staffers’ families and friends abroad, and in some cases, their own experiences as former Americans abroad. At the top of the agenda was the banking discrimination that many U.S. citizens are experiencing right now, both abroad and in the United States.

However, there were other important issues as well: taxation, Social Security, citizenship, voting, consular access, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Business Travel Card. Positions on all these topics are available on the AARO website. The week kicked off bright and early Monday morning with a planning and strategy meeting over breakfast. AARO Vice-president Ellen Lebelle was responsible this year for contacting Congressional offices and setting up appointments. The schedule was ambitious – daunting but doable as a team effort. Here are the highlights from that busy week in Washington:

### **Taxpayer Advocate Service:**

The TAS is an independent service within the U.S. Internal Revenue Service that is the voice of all American citizens at the IRS. This year the *AARO Award for Distinguished Service* was presented to Nina Olson, United States Taxpayer Advocate, for her support for “fair tax treatment for the global American population”. Every year Ms. Olson presents her report to the U.S. Congress highlighting the most serious problems that she and her staff see with the U.S. tax system. In her 2013 report *International Taxpayers* are “Most Serious Problem #23”: difficulties getting service from the IRS, disproportionate penalties, and burdensome reporting requirements. She and her staff are committed to working on these problems and she is pushing for action. After receiving the award, Ms. Olson shared some of her ideas and initiatives and expressed cautious optimism for positive change in the near future.

## **Americans Abroad Caucus:**

No Overseas Americans Week would be complete without touching base with Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Mick Mulvaney (R-SC), Co-Chairs of the bi-partisan Americans Abroad Caucus. Congresswoman Maloney founded this caucus in 2007 with Joe Wilson (R-SC) and it now has 28 members. The AARO-FAWCO delegation briefed the Co-Chairs' staffs on the most pressing issues with a specific emphasis on banking discrimination.

## **State Department:**

In the middle of the week, the delegation met with Ed Betancourt, Director of the Office of Policy Review and Inter-Agency Liaison in the Directorate of Overseas Citizens Services of the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and his staff. Mr. Betancourt stressed the importance, in their eyes, of raising consciousness among government agencies about Americans abroad and a constant process of education against many (mis)perceptions and myths.

Citizenship and voting issues were at the top of the agenda at this meeting: the question of gestational (not biological) mothers transmitting U.S. citizenship to their children, residency requirements for mothers abroad giving birth out of wedlock without one continuous year of residence in the U.S., and how to address those situations (yes, they still occur) where two U.S. citizen parents abroad can't automatically transmit U.S. citizenship to their children born abroad. State is focusing on voting in this mid-term year.

Many U.S. embassies now have Voting Assistance Officers who can be reached quickly by email with a standard email format:

*Vote[city]@state.gov*, e.g. *VoteTokyo@state.gov* or *VoteParis@state.gov*

Voters with problems are also encouraged to write directly to [votinginfo@state.gov](mailto:votinginfo@state.gov).

## **Federal Voting Assistance Program:**

The meeting was with the new director of the FVAP, Matt Boehmer, and his staff. One of their top priorities is getting a reliable count of overseas voters – both military and civilian – and they are working with the Election Assistance Commission to get more accurate data about UOCAVA (Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act) voters. Civilian overseas voters are harder to find than the military, said Boehmer, but his staff is working to proactively get information to them using their new website, on-line advertising, email alerts, and social media. They are also asking organizations like AARO, and other government agencies like the State Department, to help.

It was a very busy week in Washington but the delegates' work was not quite done even after they returned home. A few weeks after "OAW", AARO held a public debriefing in Paris that was open to all members, where each delegate spoke about his/her impressions and gave a synopsis of what happened at the meetings he/she attended. To reach all AARO members worldwide, the event was filmed and the video has been posted on the new AARO website ([www.aaro.org](http://www.aaro.org))