

## **Battle Rages as Congress Moves to Restrict Advocacy Activities of Federal Grantees**

*By Timothy Saasta*

While the media has focused most of its attention on the big battles going on in Washington over the future of welfare, Medicare, Medicaid and the like, one of the fiercest battles has concerned a proposal to change the rules governing nonprofit organizations that receive federal grants.

Dubbed the "Silence America" amendment by its opponents, the proposal would place severe restrictions on how these organizations could spend not their federal grants, but their non-federal dollars, including their private contributions.

The legislation, pushed hard by three Republican representatives (Istook of Oklahoma, McIntosh of Indiana and Ehrlich of Maryland), was passed by the House in early August as an amendment to an appropriations bill. The battle now is in the Senate, where at least some moderate Republicans have balked at supporting such a sweeping and possibly unconstitutional law. The White House has said it would veto a bill that included the amendment, while its hard-core supporters in the House say they will refuse to vote for a spending bill that does not include it.

Why so much passion over legislation that would change federal grants law?

Supporters say the law would end what they term "welfare for lobbyists." They claim that much if not all of the \$40 billion or so in federal grants that go each year to nonprofit organizations is used simply to lobby for more federal grants. They see this new law as crucial in their drive to severely cut federal social welfare programs.

"Hogwash" is basically the response of the hundreds of organizations opposed to the legislation, which have organized themselves into a coalition called Let America Speak. The coalition is quite broad, and includes the Red Cross, YMCA, American Lung Association, American Arts Alliance, Alliance for Justice, and Independent Sector, itself a coalition of more than 800 charities and funders.

— Page 1 of 3 —

*Copyright © 1995, Timothy Saasta. This article may not be reprinted, reproduced, or retransmitted in whole or in part without the express written consent of the author.*

*Reprinted here by permission given to The Grantsmanship Center.*  
<http://www.tgci.com> (800) 421-9512 [Join Our Mailing List](#)

## Who Benefits?

Members of the coalition claim that the "Silence America" amendment is a blatant political power play by House radicals who don't want to hear from the groups that provide a voice for ordinary Americans and people who need help. The coalition points out that lobbying with federal grant money is already strictly prohibited, with severe penalties for violations. They say they are offended by the charge that these grants support lobbyists, saying that in reality the money is used to provide the most basic services to people in need. And they are amazed that the House passed the amendment with no evidence that there is a problem with grant funds being used for lobbying. "They keep trotting out the same three or four examples, all of which have been rebutted," states Independent Sector's Bob Smucker, who has helped lead the opposition to the amendment.

The coalition also dismisses the claim that receiving federal grants frees up money that a charity can then use for lobbying, pointing out that a grant usually allows a group to provide a new service or expand existing services. Plus, getting a grant often requires the group to put up its own money as a match, thus decreasing the funds available for advocacy.

## The Real Effect

Ironically, while the "Silence America" amendment is seen by some as part of a crusade to "defund the left," many on the "left" have long bemoaned the reluctance of organizations that receive federal money to become vigorous advocates. They believe federal money often makes a group more reluctant to speak out because they fear losing funding for their services. Independent Sector's Smucker believes the amendment reflects a basic misunderstanding of the historical role of nonprofit organizations and their long relationship with government. "The assumption the supporters of this amendment make is that the only advocacy nonprofits do is advocacy for more money, and that is just simply not true," says Smucker. "Nonprofits are constantly being asked about what works and what doesn't, and why. They are constantly trying to educate people about the realities they face in their communities.

"Nonprofits play an absolutely crucial role as bridges between government and people in need," says Smucker. "It would be a terrible tragedy for government to cut itself off from the groups and people that are the closest to our social problems."

---

*Timothy Saasta is communications director for the Center for Community Change.*

— Page 3 of 3 —

*Copyright © 1995, Timothy Saasta. This article may not be reprinted, reproduced, or retransmitted in whole or in part without the express written consent of the author.*

*Reprinted here by permission given to The Grantsmanship Center.*  
<http://www.tgci.com> (800) 421-9512 [Join Our Mailing List](#)