

2000: The Year in Review

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Ohio Citizen Action celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2000, tackling tough issues across the state. Citizens Policy Center, our research and public education affiliate, complemented the organizing work with high-quality research and issue development. Here are the highlights of the year.

A. Pollution prevention

In each of our five local offices (Toledo, Cleveland, Akron, Columbus, and Cincinnati), we carried out local pollution prevention campaigns, aimed at protecting Ohioans from exposure to toxic chemicals.

1. Beryllium exposure from Brush-Wellman and related industries (Toledo and Cleveland offices):

Ohio Citizen Action worked with neighbors of the Brush-Wellman plant in Elmore to document how the plant threatens the community's health and safety. We conducted our own swipe sampling, and found beryllium in the homes and cars of 5 of 6 workers tested, as well as on the car of a minister who lives across the street from the plant. These results galvanized our campaign for community testing.

In Lorain, we worked with City Councilwoman Kathy Tavener and community leaders to force Brush-Wellman to agree never to use beryllium in their Lorain facility. We also exposed shoddy beryllium-handling practices at one of Brush-Wellman's testing labs in Cleveland, and documented the irresponsible use of beryllium in the dental industry. We also helped a citizens group in Tucson, Arizona, who contacted us about problems caused by a Brush beryllium plant there. The group has now been successful in getting the school board to put up air monitors in neighboring schoolyards.

2. WTI hazardous waste incinerator (Akron office):

By making Vice President Al Gore's broken promise to close the WTI hazardous waste incinerator in E. Liverpool a part of the national Presidential debate, we were able to force new actions at the facility. In October, the U.S. EPA National Ombudsman recommended that the incinerator be shut down for at least six months, and that a new test burn be conducted, based on evidence that the original safety tests used rigged data. The EPA did not close the facility, but immediately began new testing.

3. Contamination at River Valley schools (Columbus office):

Graduates of the River Valley High School and Middle Schools in Marion County, which are built on top of a former military waste dump, have an unusually high leukemia rate. Ohio Citizen Action worked with parents at the River Valley

Schools in Marion County, along with citizens from throughout Central Ohio, to pressure Governor Taft to relocate the students. In November, voters passed a levy which will build new schools in three years, but we believe that immediate relocation is warranted. We also brought public attention to the whistleblower case of Paul Jayko, who was removed from his position as site coordinator at River Valley. Jayko won his case in October 2000, and was finally reinstated to his position, with back pay and an apology from Ohio EPA, in February 2001.

4. Morton International (Cincinnati office):

After the success of their campaign to convince Cincinnati Specialties to adopt pollution prevention and safety measures, our Cincinnati office turned their attention to Rohm and Haas ♦ Morton International chemical plant in Reading. Residents are asking the company to stop emitting cancer-causing pollutants, and to stop violating the Clean Water Act. We won a first-step victory with restrictions on parking for diesel trucks in the neighborhood, and got the attention of Rohm and Haas ♦ corporate headquarters in Philadelphia for making needed environmental changes at the plant.

B. Environmental enforcement

We exposed Ohio EPA as a scandal-ridden agency, which often protects polluters rather than citizens. We collected volumes of information to support our petition to U.S. EPA, which asks the federal government to withdraw support for the state environmental programs due to the lack of enforcement. We submitted 60 affidavits of Ohioans about their experiences with Ohio EPA, and spurred an unprecedented investigation by the U.S. EPA of the state agency.

Two glaring examples of Ohio EPA's failures occupied the headlines of many newspapers: the agency's decision to pursue its case against whistleblower Paul Jayko, who had been removed from his position as site coordinator at the River Valley Schools, and the revelation that Ohio EPA had known for at least five years that test results at WTI were rigged. By opposing State Issue 1, Governor Taft's environmental bond issue on the November ballot, we were able to educate thousands of Ohioans about the failures of the Ohio EPA and its brownfields clean-up program, with over 200 newspaper articles and additional radio and TV coverage.

In addition to our major pollution prevention campaigns listed above, we also worked with dozens of citizens groups across Ohio who are frustrated with a lack of action of Ohio EPA.

C. Community choice in electric rates

In 1999, Ohio Citizen Action won a significant victory by convincing the Ohio legislature to include "community choice" options in the electric deregulation legislation, so that local governments can bargain for lower electric rates on behalf of their residents. In 2000, voters in 132 communities passed the community choice option on their local ballots, giving over 750,000 residential consumers an opportunity to be represented in buying groups. A coalition of communities with 450,000 customers in Northeast Ohio became the largest buying group in the country, and announced its intent to buy power from Green Mountain Energy in February 2001.

D. Reducing pesticide use

In a joint effort with the Innovative Farmers of Ohio, the Citizens Policy Center published "Farming Without Chemicals," case studies of seven Ohio grain farmers who have made the switch from conventional farming to organic farming. We organized a statewide coalition interested in reducing pesticide use and promoting sustainable agriculture, in preparation for the "Reconnecting Consumers and Farmers" conference which will be held in Columbus on March 24, 2001. We also worked with several major Ohio food processors to explore ways for them to reduce pesticide use.

In 2000, U.S. EPA finally took action to rank atrazine, the most commonly used weedkiller which shows up frequently in Ohio's drinking water supplies, as a cancer-causing chemical, and to ban the use of dursban, a pesticide which is widely used by homeowners. Ohio Citizen Action had been campaigning to ban the use of these chemicals for years.

E. Supreme Court races

The most hotly-contested elections in Ohio in 2000 were the Ohio Supreme Court races. The issue of disclosure of campaign donors, which has been a major focus for Ohio Citizen Action, was central to the race. We published two major studies on campaign contributions in these races, and received extensive media coverage.

We also published voter education information on the voting records of the incumbent candidates, since candidates for judicial office are prohibited from discussing issues. We distributed over 50,000 educational brochures door-to-door throughout the state, as well as mailing them to our members and covering the races in our newsletter.

F. Money and politics

Ohio Citizen Action and Citizens Policy Center were involved in four major projects on campaign finance reform in 2000:

- Disclosure of contributors and implementation of electronic filing: We worked with the Secretary of State's office to implement the Voter Right-to-Know bill which passed in 1999, requiring candidates to submit their contributor data over the internet or on computer disk. The first electronic reports were filed in January 2001. We also graded candidates for Supreme Court and the political parties on their willingness to disclose donors.
- Using our extensive database on campaign donors, we analyzed the campaign contributions of interest groups pushing various proposals at the legislature and on the ballot, including the bond counsels and financial interests who supported the Governor's environmental bond issue. The information on financial contributions was supplied to reporters and activists around the state.
- We worked with the Project on Campaign Conduct to enlist Congressional candidates to support a code of ethics during the fall election campaigns. Candidates from six Congressional districts signed ethical codes of conduct, committing not to use negative advertising against each other. Our canvassers collected thousands of postcards encouraging candidates throughout the state to participate.
- We joined the Alliance for Better Campaigns in an effort to push local television stations to provide five minutes of free media coverage each night, for thirty days before the election, to candidates and issues that would be on the November ballot.

We convinced 25% of Ohio stations to make this pledge, as opposed to 7% of the stations who made the pledge nationally.

- In Cincinnati, we worked with the Fair Elections Coalition to develop a local campaign finance reform proposal, and began collecting signatures to place the measure on the ballot.

G. Environmental education

In Akron, we worked with the Lippman School to build an outdoor education center, known as Tikkun Village, for elementary and middle school students. (Tikkun means to heal or repair in Hebrew). Over 1,000 students hiked the nature trails and participated in programs. Citizens Policy Center also helped research and produce a curriculum resource book for the Summit County Historical Society, detailing the history of the workers who built and used the Ohio and Erie Canals, and initiated a huge community garden at one of Akron's busiest intersections.

H. Fair trade

Ohio Citizen Action held a teach-in with 700 participants during the Cincinnati meeting of the "TransAtlantic Business Dialogue," known as "TABD," in November. The TABD helps to set policy for the World Trade Organization. Over the course of the three-day meeting, we participated in rallies, marches, and press conferences.

We also hosted presentations by Charles Kerhaghan, leader of the National Labor Committee, which is exposing sweatshop working conditions around the world, in Toledo in October.