

# THE DEFENDING FREEDOMS PROJECT

## MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE SENATE SHOULD ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF A PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE IN THE DEFENDING FREEDOMS PROJECT

In 1983, Congressmen Tom Lantos (D-CA) and John Edward Porter (R-IL) founded the bi-partisan Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC). The CHRC was dedicated to the defense of all the rights enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After the death of founding CHRC CoChairman Tom Lantos in 2008, the House unanimously adopted H. Res. 1451 to establish the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC). Membership to the bi-partisan TLHRC is free and open to all members of the House of Representatives. The current Co-Chairs of the TLHRC are Congressman Jim McGovern (D-MA) and Chris Smith (R-NJ).

In 2012 the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in conjunction with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Amnesty International USA, created the Defending Freedoms Project (DFP) to support Prisoners of Conscience around the world. The DFP aims to increase attention to human rights abuses by encouraging Members of Congress to advocate on behalf of Prisoners of Conscience wherever they may be found. The DFP allows Members to stand in solidarity with Prisoners of Conscience, let them know they have not been forgotten, and encourage accountability for unjust treatment. In 2017, the DFP coalition expanded to include Reporters without Borders (RSF), Freedom House, and Freedom Now, and in 2018 Scholars At Risk also joined.

In January 2020, the Senate Human Rights Caucus joined the Defending Freedoms Project. Now any Member of the United States Senate can also advocate on behalf of a Prisoner of Conscience in the Defending Freedoms Project. In 2014, Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) and former Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) co-founded the bi-partisan Senate Human Rights Caucus to build support in Congress for efforts to preserve and protect fundamental human rights around the world. The Caucus regularly holds briefings on a wide range of human rights issues. Membership to the bi-partisan Senate Human Rights Caucus is free and open to all members of the Senate. The current Co-Chairs of the Caucus are Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) and Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC).

Any Member of Congress who chooses to support the case of a Prisoner of Conscience is provided with a detailed toolkit to help facilitate in his/her advocacy efforts. By taking on a Prisoner's case, the Member of Congress could contribute to the release or reduction of a prison sentence or the improvement of prison conditions, while also raising awareness about the unjust laws or policies that led to imprisonment.

The DFP is flexible, allowing Members to determine and pursue different advocacy activities, such as:

Giving a one-minute floor speech; writing an op-ed; tweeting; making radio and television appearances; holding briefings or hearings; writing individual letters; signing Dear Colleagues letters; sponsoring legislation; pressing the State Department and White House; raising cases with visiting diplomats; and ensuring cases are raised by delegations traveling to foreign country in which the prisoner is detained.

If interested in advocating on behalf of a Prisoner of Conscience in the Defending Freedoms Project, please contact the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission at (202) 225-3599 or [TLHRC@mail.house.gov](mailto:TLHRC@mail.house.gov)

### AIUSA RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS:

Members of Congress from the House of Representatives and the Senate should advocate on behalf of a Prisoner of Conscience through the Defending Freedoms Project.

Resources:  
<https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/defending-freedom-project>