

# Community Organizing

*"A process by which community groups are helped to identify common problems or goals, mobilize resources, and in other ways develop and implement strategies for reaching goals they have set."*

Source: Minkler 1990.

Community organizing is a tool for creating self-sufficient, engaged communities. In particular, it is a means of building the power base of those without a voice – typically low-income individuals left out of decision-making – and challenging institutions and power structures, subsequently changing public policies to address their concerns and views. Foundations of all sizes can add community organizing to their list of strategies to create long-lasting change in their communities.

Community organizing can take various forms. For instance, faith-based organizing works to build a network of organizations within a particular denomination. Neighborhood-based organizing focuses on building an organization of concerned individuals and grassroots groups at the local level. Consumer issues organizing focuses on issues that directly affect personal economics, such as health care costs or utility rates. Finally, identity organizing connects groups on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, or some other group identity (Traynor 2002).

Community organizing is challenging work. Although organizers often rally community members around the idea of building collective power to effect change, finding common ground among members can be difficult. Community groups, with their corresponding missions, will find the most success when they work together to identify a common cause. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the funding infrastructure for community organizing activities is often weak. Many funders are hesitant to get involved because of the perceived difficulty of measuring the success of organizing efforts and because it may not seem relevant to their overall mission. Those that have made community organizing a funding priority see it as fundamental to community engagement and revitalization. Individual foundations will differ in their approach to organizing depending on their objectives and mission, but all such efforts require long-term commitment to assure long-term change (Parachini and Covington 2001).

How can funders ensure that community organizing efforts succeed? Above all, it is important to engage strong, committed community leaders to help get the effort off the ground and sustain it in the long term. By encouraging a strong framework

and infrastructure for the effort, funders can play a supportive role to community organizing efforts. Funders may struggle in their relationships with organizing grantees, particularly in determining the proper balance between assisting a struggling group and allowing groups to figure out challenges on their own. Finally, it is important to create specific evaluation measures for community organizing efforts. Since the success of community organizing is best measured in the long term, the criteria used to evaluate the project may need to differ slightly from other projects. A strong evaluation, however, may improve future strategies. Over time, funders will begin to discover which criteria are common among successful community organizing efforts, helping to guide future grantmaking.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS

The following lessons from the field can guide effective community organizing work by foundations. Community organizing efforts are built on relationships and networks but cannot succeed without a clear agenda. Funders can encourage organizers to combine social capital with an agenda focused on change. Funders can also invest in organizational capacity to achieve results. Providing operating support to a community group will allow organizers to pay more attention to initiatives rather than be distracted by fundraising and other operational activities. Funders can also offer valuable technical assistance to grantees. Finally, it is important to recognize that community organizing is not an easy task and can be a frustrating process. Measuring incremental successes as well as long-term outcomes will encourage organizers and provide direction to the effort. (Traynor 2002; Sierra Health Foundation 2004).

To truly inspire change through community organizing, grantmakers can fund organizations that address health as one

## STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY ORGANIZING EFFORT

- Build grassroots infrastructure.
- Shift power into the hands of the people.
- Identify issues to create an agenda.
- Develop skills of community residents.
- Affect public policy.

Source: Parachini and Covington 2001.

part of a community agenda that addresses other issues, such as housing, employment, and education. For example, the Nathan Cummings Foundation supported La Union Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), founded by Cesar Chavez, for an initiative aimed at improving the health and well-being of over 400,000 farm workers in California. The project organized community action committees in 40 rural communities that addressed issues such as health care benefits, living wage, and protection from pesticides and other contamination. In its ongoing work, LUPE empowers members by providing leadership training and by building neighborhood alliances that follow a strategic, systematic method of prioritizing community issues. LUPE also conducts policy research and advocacy and joins forces with other California-based organizations with similar missions.

As a statewide community foundation, the Rhode Island Foundation also works across several sectors of the community. For several years, the foundation has provided financial support to the local chapter of the Gray Panthers, an organization of intergenerational activists dedicated to social and economic justice. In 2000, the Rhode Island Gray Panthers focused its efforts on a statewide community organizing campaign on behalf of low-income elders, collaborating with other senior citizen groups to address issues of voter participation, access to health care, and affordable housing. This process included the recruitment of over 30 community leaders to manage the campaign and later testify before legislative committees on a variety of important health issues, such as extending prescription drug coverage for low-income elderly residents, improving the nursing home workforce, and preventing cuts to Rhode Island's elderly transportation program.

Because successful community organizing requires solid leadership, funders may opt to support leadership development programs. The Tides Foundation provides funding to YouthAction, a national organization devoted to actively engaging young people in community organizing efforts related to social, environmental, and economic justice. YouthAction provides trainings, technical assistance, and networking opportunities to strengthen youth organizing and create change for local communities. YouthAction integrates several components into its organizing efforts, including campaign work, direct action, and leadership development. Campaign work allows young people to be involved directly with setting an agenda and identifying strategies to achieve organizing goals. Direct action includes activities such as sit-ins, walkouts, and lobbying that allow organizers to inform the public about their mission or to influence policymakers. YouthAction uses leadership development as the core of its training programs. Since youth organizing seeks to build the skills of young people as leaders, a commitment to training and providing opportunities for young people is crucial, especially with the support and encouragement of peers and mentors.

Funders can also support national or regional organizing networks. Several funders, including The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, and The California Endowment support People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO), which provides

assistance to community-based groups to help expedite the community organizing process. PICO has been working on community organizing efforts since 1972, focusing on health care access, education reform, neighborhood safety, and housing. A faith-based organization, PICO promotes leadership among community members and congregations and encourages residents to translate their faith into action. In California, PICO's National Healthy Families campaign works to improve health care access for children and families and, in September 2005, published a report about the effect of increased enrollment fees on children's utilization of health services. Through its campaign effort, PICO has been successful in securing funds in California to improve the primary care health clinic infrastructure. In Alameda County, California, PICO also helped lead community organizations to win passage of a sales tax increase, the benefits of which generate \$1.35 billion in funding for health care.

The Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut is making major investments in community organizing as one of its key strategies for achieving its mission: to create a concrete proposal for universal health care in Connecticut by 2007. Understanding that an organized constituency is a highly successful method of effecting change, the foundation recently developed a request for proposals calling for groups that are committed to promoting universal health care in the state. The foundation hopes that the grantees will speak for the experience of health care consumers throughout the state and represent a diverse population. Through its funding, the foundation also seeks to cultivate and develop leaders for change in health care. The request for proposals emphasizes three elements the grantees must implement into their community organizing programs – outreach, education, and mobilization – as well as a policy advocacy component.

*This article is part of GIH's portfolio, *From the Ground Up: Improving Community Health, Inspiring Community Action*. Each article focuses on an approach grantmakers are using to improve health in communities. The entire portfolio is available at the GIH Web site, [www.gih.org](http://www.gih.org).*

## SOURCES

Keddy, Jim and Rebecca Stark, *Making Families Healthy: A Training Manual on Health Care Organizing* (Sacramento, CA: PICO California Project, 2005).

Minkler, Meredith, "Improving Health Through Community Organization," in Karen Glanz, Frances Marcus Lewis, and Barbara K. Rimer, eds., *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

Parachini, Larry and Sally Covington, *Community Organizing Toolbox* (Washington, DC: Neighborhood Funders Group, 2001).

Sierra Health Foundation, *A Ten-Year Investment in Community Building to Improve Children's Health: Evaluation of the Community Partnerships for Healthy Children Initiative* (Sacramento, CA: 2004).

Traynor, Bill, *Reflections on Community Organizing and Resident Engagement in the Rebuilding Communities Initiative* (Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).