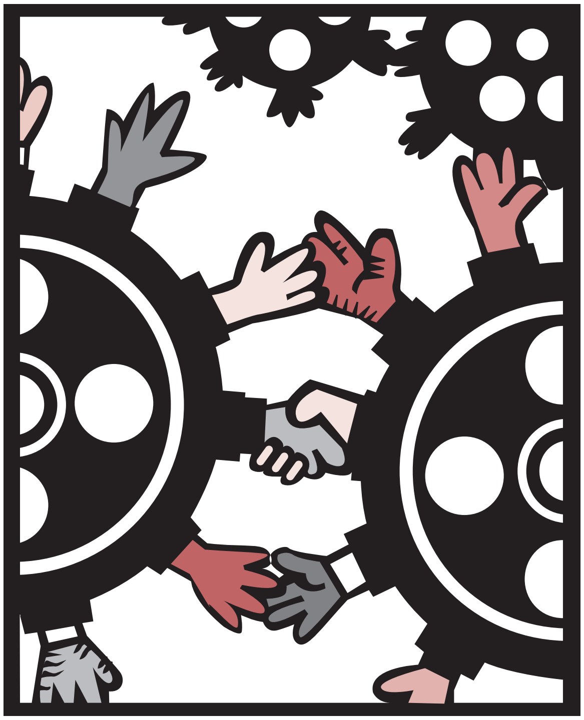
COMMUNITY



ORGANIZING
TOOLBOX

Community Organizing: The Basics

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: THE BASICS

WHAT IS CO?

> *Community organization is that process by which the people…organize themselves to 'take charge' of their situation and thus develop a sense of being a community together. It is a particularly effective tool for the poor and powerless as they determine for themselves the actions they will take to deal with the essential forces that are destroying their community and consequently causing them to be powerless.*[7]
>
> *— Reverend Robert Linthicum, World Vision International*

> *Organizing does two central things to seek to rectify the problem of power imbalance — it builds a permanent base of people power so that dominant financial and institutional power can be challenged and held accountable to values of greater social, environmental and economic justice; and, it transforms individuals and communities, making them mutually respectful co-creators of public life rather than passive objects of decisions made by others.*[8]
>
> *— Mike Miller, Organize Training Center*

Just what is CO? What are its driving philosophy, values and goals? Who employs the strategy? What are some examples of CO in practice? What is being accomplished? Why does it seem to be gaining in importance and use today? How does CO differ from other strategies, activities or interventions that seek to benefit low-income people and communities?

This section of the *Toolbox* paints a broad-brush picture of CO and underscores its importance for making what may be called "bottom-up" change in pursuit of social and economic justice.

CO is a values-based[9] process by which people — most often low- and moderate-income people previously absent from decision-making tables — are brought together in organizations to jointly act in the interest of their "communities" and the common good. Ideally, in the participatory process of working for needed changes, people involved in CO organizations/groups learn how to take greater responsibility for the future of their communities, gain in mutual respect and achieve growth as individuals. Community organizers identify and attract the people to be involved in the organizations, and develop the leadership from and relationships among the people that make the organizations effective.

Typically, the actions taken by CO groups are preceded by careful data gathering, research and participatory strategic planning. The actions are often in the form of negotiations — with targeted institutions holding power — around issues determined by and important to the organizations. The CO groups seek policy and other significant changes determined by and responsive to the people (that is, their "constituencies"). Where good-faith negotiations fail, these constituency-led organizations seek to pressure the decision-makers — through a variety of means — so that the decision-makers will return to the negotiations and move to desired outcomes. CO groups continuously reflect on what they have learned in their action strategies and incorporate the learning in subsequent strategies.

Definitions of CO range from a single sentence — "Organizing is people working together to get things done" (followed by a book length discussion to demonstrate what this means)[10] — to long listings of what are thought to be its most important characteristics, to lengthy essays containing assertions about CO.

Modern CO rests on a solid bed of key principles around which most knowledgeable practitioners and observers are in general agreement. The degree of adherence to these principles, and the relative emphasis placed on one principle or another, provides the best means to distinguish CO groups and efforts from each other. These same principles also help to distinguish CO from other types of strategies for neighborhood and community change and social betterment.

The central ingredient of all effective CO in the view of many involved in the field — what they believe distinguishes CO most clearly from all other social change strategies — is *building power*. CO builds power and works for change most often to achieve social justice with and for those who are disadvantaged in society.

CO encompasses other principles that were described in a particularly thoughtful article jointly written a few years ago by a veteran foundation official and an experienced community organizer. The authors, Seth Borgos and Scott Douglas, stressed that "the fundamental source of cohesion of every strong CO group is the conviction that it offers its members a unique vehicle for exercising and developing their capacities as citizens."[13] The authors also noted that the most common usage of the term CO "…refers to organizations that are democratic in governance, open and accessible to community members, and concerned with the general health of the community rather than a specific interest or service function…"[14]

Power is the purpose of community organizing, and the issues, problems, strategies and victories are a means to the end of increased power for the organization and the community.[11]

— Dave Beckwith and Randy Stoeker

The empowerment process at the heart of CO promotes participation of people, organizations and communities toward the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice.[12]

— Nina Wallerstein, American Journal of Health Promotion

According to Borgos and Douglas, the key principles of contemporary CO are:

- **A Participative Culture.** CO organizations view participation as an *end in itself*. Under the rubric of leadership development, they devote considerable time and resources to enlarging the skills, knowledge and responsibilities of their members. "Never do for others what they can do for themselves" is known as the iron rule of organizing.
- **Inclusiveness.** CO organizations are unlike other kinds of voluntary associations that, in most instances, tend to draw their membership from a narrow social base and their leadership from business and professional elites. As a matter of principle, CO groups are generally committed to developing membership and leadership from a broad spectrum of the community, with many expressly dedicated to fostering participation among groups that have been "absent from the table," including communities of color, low-income constituencies, immigrants, sexual minorities and youth. Working with marginalized groups demands a high level of skill, a frank acknowledgment of power disparities, and a major investment of time and effort.
- **Breadth of Mission and Vision.** In principle, every issue that affects the welfare of the community is within CO's purview, where other civic institutions tend to get stuck on certain functions while losing sight of the community's larger problems. In practice, strong (but by no means all) CO organizations have proven adept at integrating a diverse set of issues and linking them to a larger vision of the common good. This is a holistic function that has been largely abandoned by political parties, churches, schools and other civic institutions.
- **Critical Perspective.** CO organizations seek to change policies and institutions that are not working. In many communities, they are the only force promoting institutional accountability and responsiveness. Because community organizations take critical positions, they can be viewed as partisan or even polarizing in some contexts,

> and an obstacle to social collaboration. However, research suggests that effective governance depends on "civicness" — not consensus. A critical stance may generate conflict, but it can also stimulate participation and sharpen political discourse in ways that lead to deeper forms of social collaboration.[15]

How CO Differs from Other Strategies. CO is one of many strategies for revitalizing disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities and for pursuing social change on a broader basis. But CO is the only strategy that invests all of its resources and energy to build the power of the people themselves — low-income residents, people directly impacted by the issues being addressed — to work effectively for community change.

CASE STUDY #1: SOUTHERN ECHO

CO at Work: How a CO group helped to break down racial barriers in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi.

> *Meaningful and lasting impacts usually come through processes that involve community folk in a long-term approach to the work. One of the things I learned during the civil rights movement is that it takes a long time to build trust in a community especially in Mississippi where people have been left isolated and standing alone for a long time. You've got to get beyond talking to prove to people you're not going to run in and run out. You need to become part of the community.*[16]
>
> *— Hollis Watkins, Southern Echo*

Southern Echo, a multi-issue CO organization in Mississippi, honors the legacy of and carries forward the goals of the civil rights movement. Its work is inspired by the spirit of those organizers and leaders who gave so much to this cause. Following is but one example of Southern Echo's work and impact. The group's results — like those of many CO groups around the country who tackle the toughest issues — are all the more remarkable when seen in context, as described briefly here.

The population of Tallahatchie County, on the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta, is 59 percent African American. The county has a long history of racial oppression — it was in the county courthouse that the men who lynched Emmitt Till in 1957 were acquitted by an all-white jury. As of 1990, nearly a generation after enactment of the Voting Rights Act, no African American had ever won a countywide election. Tallahatchie is one of the ten poorest counties in the nation; yet, the county's Board of Supervisors refused to cooperate with efforts to attract new industries whose presence might affect and boost wage levels on its cotton, rice and soybean plantations.

These conditions were in part due to the intransigence of the white minority, but they were also the product of internal strife, turf battles and unaccountable leadership within the black community. The unity of purpose achieved in the civil rights movement dissipated into "mischiefs of faction" during the 1970s and 1980s, as a multitude of organizations, clubs and networks pursued their own divergent agendas. The prevailing opinion in the county was that it was impossible to unite the black community around any issue of importance.

In January 1991, Jackson, Mississippi-based Southern Echo conducted a weekend-long workshop in Tallahatchie on redistricting opportunities in the wake of the 1990 census. Community residents learned about the technical aspects of redistricting, dissected the issues in small groups, and engaged in a "role-play" presentation to the County Board. By the end of the workshop, contrary to all expectations, the participants had formed an umbrella organization encompassing all the major factions within the African American community, and had agreed upon a plan to take a redistricting proposal to the County Board of Supervisors. Southern Echo then initiated a six-month organizing campaign that resulted in the Board agreeing to hold public negotiations at the county courthouse — the first time the supervisors had ever agreed to negotiate with a black organization.

The negotiations stretched out over more than a dozen sessions, and for most of that time the white supervisors remained silent; an attorney spoke on their behalf. But by the end of the process, the supervisors acquired a grudging respect for the expertise and commitment that the community negotiating team brought to the table, and they were talking face-to-face about demographic details. Finally, in the same courtroom where the murderers of Emmitt Till were acquitted, supervisors and the community negotiators shook hands on a plan to create three "electable" black districts for the five-member board.

This plan was subsequently rescinded by the supervisors under pressure from their white constituents, and then restored, in a somewhat different form, by a federal court. The habits of unity and risk-taking that were acquired in the months long effort were not lost to the African American community. In 1993, three residents who led the redistricting struggle stepped forward to run for the county board. With the help of a strong get-out-the-vote effort, two were elected to office. While they aren't a majority, their presence has fundamentally altered the culture of Tallahatchie County government.

Since their election, the county has attracted several new industries, created two public parks, and won designation as a federal Enterprise Community. Community activists also formed a nonprofit housing corporation and are involved in state legislative and Congressional redistricting.[17] And, on a broader basis, Southern Echo's CO work has expanded to many other communities in the Mississippi Delta. Its work has attracted funding from a significant number of national foundations, including Ford, Kellogg and Charles Stewart Mott.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CO

> *The roots of modern community organizing are as intertwined with the settlement house movement of the nineteenth century...as they are with the protest movements of the 1960s.*[18]
>
> *— Gary Delgado, Applied Research Center*

To better understand where CO stands today, it is helpful to view its history. Over the decades, CO has increased its sophistication and networking for greater impact and wider results. Today's CO field[19] encompasses varied philosophies, approaches, organizational arrangements, actors, priorities, issues and constituencies. CO has taken root in both urban and rural settings. It enables ordinary people to work effectively together for change, often with significant impact at the block, neighborhood, community, city, county, regional, and, at times, state and national levels. Various racial and ethnic groups, and other disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups, use CO to fight for fairness and equity.

Robert Fisher and Peter Romanofsky, the editors of *Community Organization for Social Change*, grouped CO activities and perspectives into four historical periods: [20]

1890 – 1920. *The heyday of neighborhood organizing before 1960. Liberals and progressives sought to meet the challenge of industrialization — the bigness of cities and their chaotic social disorganization — by organizing immigrant neighborhoods into "efficient, democratic, and, of course, enlightened units within the metropolis." Since the emphasis of the reformers was mostly on building community through settlement houses and other service mechanisms, the dominant approach was social work.*

1920 – 1940. *Community organization became a professional sub-discipline within the social work field. Little was written about decentralized neighborhood organizing efforts throughout the Great Depression. Most organizations had a national orientation because the economic problems the nation faced did not seem soluble at the neighborhood level.*

1940 – 1960. *A new interest in CO from the social work perspective. This development dovetailed with the emergence of the distinctive approach of Saul Alinsky. Federal involvement in reshaping cities and their neighborhoods through the post-World War II urban renewal programs abetted this unique alignment. (Note: more information on Alinsky is included over the next few pages.)*

1960 – 1980. *Neighborhood organizing became widespread beginning in the 1960s. Literature analyzing events at the grassroots during this period is extensive. Experience with federal anti-poverty programs and the upheavals in the cities produced a thoughtful response among activists and theorists in the early 1970s that has informed activities, organizations,* *strategies and movements through the end of the century, though many major changes in CO have occurred since 1980.*[21]

The Roots of Modern CO. A discussion of CO's history and current practice must feature Saul Alinsky, the founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). His work from 1938 until his death in 1972 is unique and had a powerful, multi-dimensional influence on the CO field. It was Alinsky who drew the roots of CO together in the late 1930s — roots first planted in the American Revolution and later sprouting in the populist movement of the 1890s, the political radicalism of the 1920s and 1930s that focused on organizing tenant unions, unemployed councils and other organizations to protest the horrible conditions of the period, and industrial union organizing of the 1930s.[24]

The Alinsky-inspired approach to CO catalyzed the creation of many organizations while he was still alive. He learned from his experiences in city after city, and spearheaded efforts to modify organizing methods and strategies for maximum effectiveness. Many current CO groups that trace their own history to Alinsky combine the best of Alinsky with fundamental modifications they have made to forge the approaches they now employ.

Many books, reports, critiques and films about Alinsky and his efforts are available. Alinsky himself wrote two books, *Rules for Radicals* and *Reveille for Radicals*, that are immensely popular and in constant use as tools in training for community organizers and leaders and in some college-level courses, primarily in schools of social work. A selected bibliography of resource materials by and about Alinsky, and information on obtaining a recent documentary film about Alinsky and the work of IAF,[25] is on NFG's Web site, at **www.nfg.org**.

Labor Organizing in the 1930s: Seeds for CO's Future

In the 1920s and 1930s, labor militants created unemployed councils to raise immediate demands for public relief as part of their effort to build a working class movement. They used a range of supplementary action tactics, including local and national demonstrations, hunger marches on employers and government officials, petition drives, street corner speakers, etc. In addition, to strengthen their movement efforts among the unemployed, they supported community-based tenant associations to fight evictions, farmers' unions to fight foreclosures, veterans' committees to demand bonus payments, cultural associations among immigrants and artists, share-croppers' unions among Southern Blacks, and underground in-plant organizing committees.[22]

…The eventual course of this work contributed heavily to the enactment of the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, and other landmark New Deal programs, and to the establishment of industrial unionism in mass production. It also set off a wave of organizing across the working class.[23]

BACKGROUNDER # 1

Tracing the Influence of Saul Alinsky on Modern CO

Most contemporary community organizing finds its beginnings in the work of the late Saul Alinsky. He organized the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) in Chicago in the late 1930s. Allied with the United Packinghouse Workers Union, BYNC was instrumental in helping tens of thousands of packinghouse workers to dramatically improve their standard of living and gain the dignity that comes with union recognition and collective bargaining. BYNC brought together under one organizational umbrella not only the union but most of the Roman Catholic parishes in the BYNC neighborhood and a myriad of other voluntary associations. The organization quickly developed sufficient power to be able to deal effectively with the Chicago 'machine' and win victories on numerous issues, including child welfare, public school improvement and neighborhood stabilization.

For Alinsky, the BYNC experience also led to recognition by the powerful Archdiocese of Chicago, John L. Lewis of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) and wealthy department store owner Marshall Field. Backing from them helped Alinsky to form the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which was Alinsky's base of operations for the remainder of his life.

After World War II, Alinsky brought Fred Ross, Sr. onto his staff. Ross's work in California led to the formation of the Community Service Organization (CSO), largely Mexican American, and the identification and training as an organizer of Cesar Chavez, then a community leader. Unlike BYNC, which was an 'organization of organizations,' CSO took a 'direct membership' form, a precursor to the ACORN model initiated by Wade Rathke. Chavez, of course, founded the National Farmworkers Association and later was the principal leader of the United Farmworkers Union. Chavez involved Ross in his organizing, calling him 'my secret weapon.' It was Ross who trained many farmworkers and students — and trainers who could extend the training to others — for work on boycotts across the country. In the labor movement today, almost every union that is actively involved in organizing has staff who went through the farmworkers union experience. The same holds for numerous community organizing groups.

By the late 1950s, Alinsky broadened his base of institutional support from the Chicago Archdiocese to Catholic dioceses all over the country, and to many mainline Protestant denominations. The impact Alinsky's (and IAF's) work had on how a fair number of American churches increasingly supported urban

BACKGROUNDER # 1 (continued)

reform efforts and fought racism and poverty beginning in that period is still in evidence in such grantmaking agencies as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

In 1959, the impact of the emerging civil rights movement in the South was beginning to be felt in northern ghettoes. With support from both Catholic and Protestant funding sources, Alinsky began work in the largely African American Woodlawn neighborhood in Chicago. The next year the student-led sit-ins began in the South. As the civil rights movement spread and gained momentum, it generated considerable interest in economic and racial justice issues in colleges, and in religious seminaries and denominations across the country, and created new sources of organizers and funding for community organizing. Alinsky capitalized on this to spread his brand of organizing to still more communities. Paralleling this development, urban unrest grew; poverty and racism became increasingly unacceptable in northern communities of color, Black and Hispanic, and this too obviously spurred community organizing's growth.[26]

— Mike Miller, Organize Training Center

CO Today. Since the mid-seventies, and particularly in the 1990s, CO strategy has prioritized the development of powerful, multi-issue organizational vehicles with the track records, intent and potential to become significant long-term players for change. And this is exactly what has happened. The CO field is studded with powerful organizations achieving important results, and more such groups — nurtured by national organizing networks — are emerging. These groups, and CO practitioners as a whole, have demonstrated increased sophistication in attracting allies, developing community cohesion, and marshalling power not only locally, but on regional, state and national levels. The *Toolbox* focuses primarily on this modern period.

LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION: HOW CO GROUPS WORK

> *It was women going door-to-door, speaking with their neighbors, meeting in voter-registration classes together, organizing through their churches that gave the vital momentum and energy to the movement, that made it a mass movement.*[27]
>
> *— Andrew Young*

CO places its faith in the value of people working together for common ends, and in what they can do if given appropriate guidance and opportunity. In CO, the people lead. Without them there is nothing that can properly be called CO.

Organizers call the work they do to involve people "base-building." It is continuous and challenging, whether done through religious institutions, as in the faith-based approach to CO, or directly with individuals and families in direct membership CO groups. Base building is recruiting and engaging new people, keeping current members motivated and involved, and deepening member participation.

Foundation Support for Base-Building. Base-building is not a "project" that can easily fit into narrowly defined grantmaking categories. Its effectiveness is hard to measure but critical. A strong and successful CO organization's base must have qualities like heart, hope, persistence, resilience and energy. It must be truly representative of and accountable to the community, continuously making room for new people and adapting to new circumstances.

Funders often invest in CO because they believe in the way CO reaches out to and involves people who have not been well served by societal institutions, who aren't voting or don't believe that their voices count. The funders want to see hard results — changes in policies, new jobs in the community, reductions in health hazards and more. But they know that the work of change that is responsive to and "owned" by the community takes long-term base-building efforts.

The Importance of Developing Community Leaders. Any business, governmental unit, nonprofit organization, or foundation rises or falls with the quality of its leadership. For CO groups, the importance of identifying and developing responsive and effective leadership from the community cannot be understated.

In CO, "the goal of encouraging people to feel and be more powerful is typically as important as achieving substantive change. Hence, leadership development is critical. … Every member is encouraged to take leadership roles. Members and leaders make all organizational decisions, from bylaws to slogans. Members raise and select organizational issues based on the self-interests of the group, and broad agreement among members is necessary before the organization will pursue an issue. Most grassroots organizations work on many issues at once. Decisions regarding strategy, tactics, and targets are made by leaders and members, using staff consultation. … Pressure activities are implemented and evaluated by members. Leaders speak to the press and negotiate with targets."[29]

One Group's View of Base-Building

The French American Charitable Trust (FACT), a national, family foundation based in San Francisco, is among those funders that have prioritized base-building organizations in their grantmaking. In its first five-year report issued in April 2000, the foundation stated:

"The belief that base-building organizations are critical to achieving lasting social change is central to everything we do. We are convinced that societal changes come about most often through the involvement, instigation, and commitment of many people. Furthermore, history has shown us that it requires vigilance on the part of the public to implement and maintain good social policy. We think that base-building organizations are a key mechanism for educating and involving the public in decision-making processes and for maintaining people's involvement over the years."[28]

CASE STUDY #2: LYNDALE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

CO at Work: How a Minneapolis group builds upon relationships among neighbors, block by block.

The Lyndale Neighborhood Association (LNA) has received national attention for its work in Minneapolis, making the transition from a crime-infested, transient community to one of the most diverse and vibrant neighborhoods in the city. The area's recent renaissance — new housing, revitalized retail areas, and community-based services for families and children — is due in no small part to the work of hundreds of residents organized by LNA.

LNA takes pride in its reputation as an organization that empowers the community. Based on the philosophy, "We're not building a community organization, we're building a community," staff was cut dramatically several years ago, and the organization now depends on the talents and abilities of residents to define its goals, create projects and implement solutions to neighborhood challenges. Hundreds of residents are involved in LNA's work each month, and the organization focuses on building resident leaders. LNA supports with technical assistance and funding any project residents want to take on, providing an incentive for residents to become organizers and gather support for desired projects. This level of involvement holds true for virtually all of the group's community initiatives. Even young people plan and implement programs to serve their needs.

Through a decentralized network of block clubs — 48 of the neighborhood's 52 blocks participate — LNA's organizing approach emphasizes strengthening relationships among neighbors, finding common interests, and developing mutually supportive skills and needs, and then building on these relationships to shape how problems get solved. Residents who work with LNA choose to be involved in every aspect of the systems that provide them with services, both to avoid being relegated to "client" or "customer" status, and to ensure that the community controls how its needs are met and develops its own capacity to meet those needs.[30]

COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS: WHO ARE THEY?

> *The soul of organizing is people. An organizer might be paid or work as a volunteer. The group could start as part of a master plan hatched in a smoke filled room or out of a 'spontaneous' community reaction to a crisis like a toxic waste dump. They might base their work on house by house prayer groups or cells of clandestine conspirators. The ultimate goal could be the preservation of Hopi language and culture or the overthrow of the real estate tax based system for financing public education. Organizers can differ on strategy, tactics, even on what seem to be base values. However, all organizers believe in people, in the ability of regular folks to guide their lives, to speak for themselves, to learn the world and how to make it better.*[31]
>
> *— Dave Beckwith and Randy Stoeker*

Achieving the long-term goals and specific concrete objectives of CO in and for a community of any size is challenging work, to say the least. A CO organization never starts with a level playing field. To develop, mature and succeed over time, it must constantly fight uphill battles. There is no roadmap to accomplishment. Resources are often in short supply. Risks are high.

Behind the success of any CO organization or effort are community organizers. Many have called organizers the "driving force" of CO,[32] though CO's principles require that they facilitate the people's work, not lead it.

Just what organizers do can sound like any standard job description — "administration, planning, policy decision-making, program and leadership development and action implementation, public relations activities, and service activities."[33] But CO work takes form within the dynamics of community and struggle, requiring organizers to have an extraordinary range of competencies.

The organizer must thoroughly understand the characteristics and the power patterns of the community through extensive interviews and discussions with community members. The organizer is a listener. The organizer identifies and trains potential leaders. These potential leaders are not necessarily the titular heads of organizations. Through an extensive listening process issues or problems of concern to the people are identified. People must be encouraged to talk about their views of the community and it is important that they realize that the organizer does not come with a preconceived program. An organizer must also be able to agitate people to act. "Until the people recognize that it is they who must do something about their own problems, and that it is only THEY who can be trusted to do the right thing — and until they realize that only if they organize enough power in their community that something can be done about these things, nothing will get done." [34]

The National Organizers Alliance: An Organization for Community Organizers

Among a wide array of organizations that strengthen the CO field, the National Organizers Alliance (NOA) is the only one whose membership is primarily community organizers. Launched in 1992, NOA has more than 1,000 dues-paying members and a larger affiliated community of more than 5,000 persons involved in CO, representing over 2,000 organizations. NOA supports people of color becoming organizers and encourages people from diverse communities to enter the CO field. For more information on NOA, visit the NFG Web site at **www.nfg.org**.

Wage Scales for Community Organizers: One Perspective

As a committed CO funder, Regina McGraw, executive director of the Wieboldt Foundation, is keenly aware of the extraordinary efforts put forward by many community organizers. For what they do and accomplish, they are often underpaid. McGraw recommends that funders examine grantee wage scales and benefits packages to see if they are appropriate to the level of skill, management responsibilities, interpersonal skills, and public presence that are needed for success. She believes that if nonprofits are to pay full benefits, funders must support the expenditure by giving operating support whenever possible.

BACKGROUNDER # 2

The Roles and Responsibilities of Community Organizers

Organizers challenge people to act on behalf of their common interests. Organizers empower people to act by developing shared relationships, understandings, and tasks which enable them to gain new resources, new understanding of their interests, and new capacity to use these resources on behalf of their interests. Organizers work through "dialogues" in relationships, understanding and action carried out as campaigns. They identify, recruit and develop leadership, they build community among that leadership, they build power out of that community.

Organizers develop new relationships out of old ones — sometimes by linking one person to another and sometimes by linking whole networks of people together.

Organizers deepen understanding by creating opportunities for people to deliberate with one another about their circumstances, to reinterpret these circumstances in ways that open up new possibilities for action, and to develop strategies and tactics that make creative use of the resources and opportunities that their circumstances afford. Organizers motivate people to act by creating experiences to challenge those feelings which inhibit action, such as fear, apathy, self-doubt, inertia and isolation with those feelings that support action such as anger, hope, self-worth, urgency and a sense of community. ...

Organizers work through campaigns. Campaigns are very highly energized, intensely focused, concentrated streams of activity with specific goals and deadlines. People are recruited, battles fought and organizations built through campaigns. Campaigns polarize by bringing out conflicts ordinarily submerged in a way contrary to the interests of the organizing constituency. One critical dilemma is how to depolarize in order to negotiate resolution of these conflicts. Another dilemma is how to balance the work of campaigns with the ongoing work of organizational survival.

Organizers build community by developing leadership. They focus on identifying leaders and enhancing their skills, values and commitments. They also focus on building strong communities: communities through which people can gain new understanding of their interests as well as power to act on them. Organizers work at constructing communities which are bounded yet inclusive, communal yet diverse, soladaristic yet tolerant. They work at developing a relationship between community and leadership based on mutual responsibility and accountability.[35]

TYPES OF CO GROUPS AND THE WORK THEY DO

By one estimate, there are more than 6,000 community organizations in the U.S. using some form of CO to carry out their community-serving missions. Most have been formed in the past 25 years or so.[36] A far smaller but rapidly growing number of groups, no more than several hundred, can be most accurately categorized as full-scale CO groups — groups of all sizes whose values, goals, accountability, governance, organizational development and operational strategies consistently reflect CO's core principles, and who can readily be distinguished from other types of nonprofit organizations. There are also some two dozen or more intermediary groups at regional and national levels that play critical roles in training community organizers and community leaders, and provide technical assistance and other services to strengthen CO.

Though community organizations with CO as their central strategy come in all sizes, shapes and locations, they share the elements listed below.

- They enable grassroots people — not the government, business, academics, the media or anyone else — to set their own priorities.
- They help their members and constituents to develop skills and know-how to act on those priorities.
- They have an impact, changing public and private policies and priorities to become more responsive to the needs of the people closest to the problem.[37]

The most advanced and highly regarded of CO organizations today work on a range of issues, are staffed, intend to be around for the long term, and are invested in building the capacity of their constituencies — often of many races and/or cultures — to address increasingly more difficult, complex and/or recalcitrant issues. Many CO groups also seek to contribute to the growth of a broad-based movement toward their vision for a more humane and just society, and may seek to model that vision in their internal structure and operations. Changes sought by CO organizations often require them to pursue collaborative efforts with other CO organizations, as well as with other types of groups, in order to effectively address issues at jurisdictional levels beyond the current scope of any one of the CO organizations. Most receive assistance from intermediary organizations that provide training, advice and resources.

Three Types of Groups. On the broadest level, CO organizations can be roughly categorized by where they most closely fit within three major approaches. (See Backgrounder #3 for examples of each approach.)

1. ***Direct or individual membership groups*** that are typically small and geographically-based efforts to organize individual low- and moderate-income people. The members may be broadly focused on improving their neighborhood or working on a specific issue like workers' rights or environmental degradation. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now's (ACORN) individual groups are among those that fit this category.

2. ***Issue-based coalitions*** that mobilize public interest groups, unions and other already established groups to affect a public policy or to address a common concern, such as a crisis in the public school system. The Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee and the Interfaith Coalition for Workers' Rights are two such coalitions.

3. ***Institution-based organizing*** (or congregation-based or faith-based organizing) that is rooted in and brings together local religious (and most often other) institutions to work on behalf of a community. The IAF pioneered this approach with Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in San Antonio, Texas.

None of the three CO approaches exists in "pure" form, nor are the approaches accompanied by hard and fast rules to which all CO organizations of a particular type subscribe. Many CO organizations employ approaches that are mixed "models" or hybrids. What is best for any given community can only be determined in the context of that situation. The CO field is quite dynamic: for CO groups, adjustments in organizational structure, tactics and strategies to meet changing societal conditions are more the rule than the exception.