Community Building & Community Organizing
Issues in Creating Effective Models

By Sandy O'Donnell and Ellen Schumer

> *Sandy O'Donnell and Ellen Schumer have been deeply involved in developing a new model of organizing called "family focused community building." Their work centers on organizing low-income families in Chicago neighborhoods.*
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> *In the following article, O'Donnell and Schumer examine the problem of organizing, or lack thereof, in housing and community development, from the vantage point of two experiences. Sandy last year led a team that evaluated the Woods Fund of Chicago's Community Organizing grantsmaking program. Over a six-month course, the team interviewed dozens of organizers, funders, community development professionals, and community leaders. Ellen has 20 years of community and political organizing experience and is currently director of a project, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), (co-founded by Sandy and Ellen) that seeks to develop leadership to make low-income communities more family supportive. This emerging model in community organizing, the authors contend, holds great promise in developing low-income communities.*

When CDCs first proliferated in Chicago, they were tightly connected with organizing. Many CDCs grew out of neighborhood organizing campaigns. Organizing generated policy "wins" that gave CDCs the tools they needed to keep growing: the CRA is the clearest example nationally, and several organizing groups locally have "won" campaigns for CDCs to acquire vacant property and to acquire and rehab HUD-foreclosed homes. In many cases, neighborhood organizations became CDCs, and organizers became their chief executives.

Over the years, this partnership has weakened. Organizing has become more and more narrowly defined. Many organizations focus largely on church-based leaders. Strategies are aimed mainly at gaining resources for communities from external "enemies," and the tactics used are primarily confrontational. Meanwhile, many CDCs have become enamored with bricks and mortar and technical sophistication, replacing residents on their boards and planning teams with bankers, developers, and Realtors.

Many organizing and development professionals in Chicago are thus at an impasse: development corporations don't reflect commitments to democratic participation and resident empowerment; organizing doesn't develop and empower families in low-income housing.

"Midwest CDC" (the names of these CDCs have been changed to maintain their anonymity) is just one of many CDCs lacking an organizing component to deal with the problems it faced. Midwest CDC developed and directly managed hundreds of units of low- and moderate-income housing. In the past several years, Midwest began experiencing serious losses in its lowest income multi-family housing units as results of vandalism, high turnover, and poor upkeep. Midwest spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop a resident services program, hiring social workers to counsel families and structure activities and programs. Although residents expressed satisfaction with the new services, the problems did not abate.

"Southside Planning Council"* organized institutional leaders and business people to develop a "comprehensive" plan for community development in an area racked by disinvestment. The plan focused on mixed-income housing

development, the restoration of historic buildings, the revitalization of commercial strips, and parks and infrastructure improvements. It was virtually silent on the community's significant social assets, on assuring resident control of the community development agenda, and on the human and family development needs of the community's predominantly low-income population.

These two common examples of a missed opportunity in community development show that, without organizing, the effectiveness, legitimacy, and staying power of community development organizations is limited. With organizing, residents can learn to both build community from within and to own and guide the community development process. Further, with an organizing/capacity building component, the community development movement can build the desperately needed political will - and muscle - to change policies that impede the progress of low-income communities.

Organizing Low-Income People to Build Community
Although the majority of CDCs fail to incorporate organizing into their agendas, a growing number of other organizing projects, both in Chicago and nationwide, are beginning to draw from the "base community" or "popular education" organizing tradition. These models, while varying in focus, build on the idea that empowerment begins from within, and that oppressed people need to develop a new awareness of themselves as people, in a community context, who can individually and collectively set and achieve goals. This "consciousness-raising process," for want of a better term, links the personal with the political, and draws heavily upon culture, spirituality, ancestors, and small-group support as sources of sustenance.

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless has successfully developed a base community organizing model to build community - and community power to develop programs and inform policy - among shelter residents. Coalition organizers visit shelters, holding "house meetings" with residents to talk about their goals, hopes, needs, and concerns. Organizers then raise awareness about how organizing might address these concerns, and, eventually, bring together residents from the different shelters.

In addition, over 1,000 homeless women have participated in the Coalition's Women's Empowerment Project (WEP). These women have become a powerful force in advocating for housing and jobs policies to prevent homelessness, focusing on reform of the city's abandoned property program and on creating general interest-bearing accounts for security deposits to subsidize low-income housing. WEP is also presently developing transitional housing for homeless women and children.

The Lugenia Burns Hope Leadership Center is taking an explicitly African-centered focus to the popular education model. The Hope Center has just graduated its first class of eight community leaders, who are organizing a congress of parents from child development centers, parent participation in the governance of a local school, and parent participation in a human services reform experiment that seeks to redirect public spending in the community. Assuring that the development of the community does not displace low-income families who live there is a major concern of the Hope Center. Consequently, organizing low-income residents to participate in the community's redevelopment is its top priority.

Our own work in this area has evolved over several years. Last year, with advice and support from other community organizing and policy colleagues, we founded Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI). Our aim is to refocus community organizing and development on the family as the central building block of communities, and to place public policies affecting low-income families on organizing agendas. Our primary focus has been on the development of neighborhood-level parent organizing projects. We've worked intensively in three Chicago communities, collaborating with local institutions and organizations to develop a leadership training and capacity-building model for low-income parents that draws on previously successful approaches, but moves beyond them to speak specifically to parents' - especially mothers' - needs, strengths, goals, and visions for their communities.

Last year, the curriculum helped over 150 parents recognize that the skills honed by "just" being a good parent translate into leadership skills in the larger community. And it has helped them recognize that many of the struggles

they face in sustaining their families are rooted in public policies that, accordingly, have public remedy. These parent leaders have formed leadership teams that are working to make their communities more family friendly. One group has organized a campaign to drive prostitution and drug dealing from their community. Others are working on school improvement efforts. And one group has organized and conducted door-to-door outreach to involve families in a community visioning and planning project. They are now working to open their school as a community center after hours to provide adult education, recreational and children's activities, family support, and ongoing community organizing and parent leadership training.

COFI and the other projects described are just beginning to change the organizing and development landscapes; all are considered experiments with limited constituencies, and all face constant funding problems.

Barriers to Building Organizing into Community Development Strategies
There are three fundamental obstacles to organizing/development models that build healthy communities with effective indigenous leadership. They are:

1. *Community planning and development organizations often lack patience with - and perhaps commitment to - the organizing process.* Organizing is frequently not on their radar screens, at least not until problems emerge for which service or other "doing-for" solutions don't work. Organizations focus on developing housing, or businesses, or sewers, not people (and families). Further, organizations are under heavy pressure to produce results efficiently; they do not wish to risk slowing things down by involving many people in decision making. When organizing is initiated, it is often by the CDC to solve a problem of the CDC, and thus looks more like a mobilization (getting out the troops) than an organizing process. Often, also, as William Traynor recently observed in these pages [*Shelterforce* # 83], a single organizer is hired into an organization with no organizing expertise, isolating him/her and thus dooming the effort.
2. *The definition of community organizing is so tightly circumscribed, in Chicago and elsewhere, that the kinds of organizing that resonate with community development are marginalized.* In brief, the traditional action model of organizing - getting people and institutions to fight for and "win" resources for the community - seems to work best in communities where people are already connected to associational life and have some sense of themselves as public actors. Popular education models seem more appropriate in low-income communities of historically oppressed people, where there is first a need to develop people's sense of self-efficacy and consciousness of community.
3. *There is a weak funding infrastructure for organizing of any kind, and an especially weak one for organizing to build community.* In Chicago, the few foundations that support organizing favor the traditional action model - they look for turnout numbers and concrete wins as primary evidence of effectiveness. Paradoxically, one reason so few foundations fund organizing is that most are adverse to this model, especially to the extent that it uses confrontational tactics to gain victories.

Departing From Tradition
The family-focused community-building model advanced by COFI departs from the traditional action organizing model in several ways:

1. We r*ecruit prospective community leaders explicitly from the ranks of low-income families, primarily mothers.* We identify these participants through local institutions which families frequent. So far, our projects have focused on schools and daycare centers, but we are exploring efforts to replicate this work in low-income housing developments and settlement houses.
2. *We provide leadership training that emphasizes the continuities between family and community leadership and between "private" and "public" issues.* The topics we cover in leadership development include: setting and achieving personal goals; neighboring; identifying the public policy roots of "private" family problems; fostering children's healthy development and school achievement; and more standard fare of identifying self-interest, identifying issues, etc.
3. *We explicitly frame visioning and agenda-setting conversations in terms of what will make the community a better place for families.* COFI-trained parent leaders are actively involved in a family support program in

which parents reach out to other parents and families in their neighborhood. In addition, they are working to involve families in, for example, changing school policies, transforming an elementary school into a community learning center, and eliminating drug and prostitution corridors.

4. *COFI recognizes that there are many different kinds and levels of leadership - personal, family, and community leadership - in family-supportive communities.* We look to various examples of leadership, such as people who watch out for their neighbors' children, who organize parent support groups, or who help out as classroom aides or tutors at school. Thus, leadership training is not veered only in the direction of creating multi-issue organizations to tackle issues.

5. *At the same time, recognizing that many of the issues making communities unsafe and unhealthy places for families are rooted in public policies beyond the local level, we are structuring COFI and part of its leadership training to take on city or statewide policy campaigns.* Our first goal is to develop a sufficiently large and strong cadre of local leaders so that parents, not policy advocates, drive the process. From the early training, we facilitate local-level dialogue between parents and professional staff and advocates in the communities to raise each party's awareness of the others' perspectives. We teach parents to articulate their ideas and visions for families in the community to institutional partners, and to consider the interests of community institutions in partnering with them. We also informally teach policy advocates and institutional staff about organizing and how to listen to the families.

Creating "Peoples'" Community Development Organizations

Addressing the following issues will help to create more effective organizing/development structures in low-income communities:

1. *There is too little systematic distillation and dissemination of successful - or even promising - efforts to integrate community organizing and development.* As a result, development professionals lack access to ideas about how they might organize resident leadership. COFI is attempting to respond to this need by circulating a newsletter and documenting our field successes and failures; funding constraints remain a problem in doing both.

2. *An overwhelming number of those interviewed for the evaluation of the Woods Fund of Chicago's community organizing grantsmaking program decried the lack of vision in community planning, development, and organizing.* Lacking this vision, the focus of efforts can easily get distorted, making tactics or projects or plans an end rather than a means. One of the strongest recommendations interviewees made to the Woods Fund was to strengthen their funding support of efforts to engage many residents in the process of developing a vision for their communities.

3. *We find in Chicago significant isolation within the development and organizing fields.* Development professionals may participate in one or two trade associations, both of which have focused heavily on bricks and mortar and job creation. Organizers may belong to one of several organizing networks, each one of which is quite proprietary. Most organizers do not talk with organizers outside their own network, let alone with community planning and development professionals. These professional development structures mitigate a cross fertilization of ideas and a fusing of disciplines. They also contribute to the isolation organizers feel, especially single-staff organizers in CDCs, schools, social agencies, and other institutions not primarily concerned with organizing. COFI is attempting to connect people across networks and disciplines; yet turf and time constraints (of both COFI and the groups it is attempting to connect) hamper this effort. Funders can help by hosting or funding networking events, and by supporting mentoring systems or guided sabbaticals through which community development professionals and organizers can gather new ideas.

Strengthening the Funding Infrastructure

Funders, organizers, and community developers jointly need to tackle some major problems to better sustain organizing in community development. These include:

1. *Few funders understand organizing: few even know it exists as a field of philanthropic endeavor, and those who do tend to view it as insurrectionist.* Several area funders support organizing, but only if it is around an issue of interest to the foundation. Although funders' comfort with more traditional - and concrete -

philanthropic causes are factors, it also appears that the organizing community has not marketed itself effectively. One grantsmaker describes organizers' style as "beat 'em up grantseeking"; another funder of organizing complained about the generally poor quality of proposals from organizers; many organizers we talked with expressed a loathing of grantseeking. Such antipathies do not create an atmosphere of understanding.

2. *We suspect that foundations and corporations that fund CDCs are even more bottom line than traditional grantsmakers in general.* At the same time, we wonder how hard CDCs have pushed these funders to support more participatory projects and structures.

3. *We find substantial support for the frequently heard complaint that funders seek fast and visible results.* Even the few funders who fund organizing as organizing (rather than as a means to an end around some issue) want to see numbers and wins over the short run. This may replace the goal of citizen empowerment with the goal of building a large organization, leading one organizer to ask "are we really about building democracy, or are we a turnout machine?" It also produces incentives to "win" local actions rather than to build citizen capacity to tackle issues in the policy arena. On the other hand, the organizing community has not developed alternative accountability criteria. It seems possible and timely to create some leadership development benchmarks in the areas of personal development, leadership skills attainment, membership development, and increased civic involvement. It also seems imperative to "track" leadership careers, so that we can indeed demonstrate how increased self confidence leads to increased leadership activity and effectiveness.

4. *The Woods Fund evaluation team also found considerable adherence to old "rules" by both funders and CBOs about long-term funding support.* Funders cling to the idea that grassroots fundraising can sustain organizing in the long run; organizers cling to the hope of general operating support. Funders look to collaborations to promote efficiency, apparently unaware that collaboration is time consuming and labor intensive, albeit "worth it" in community building. Organizers see fundraising as an extraneous burden and avoid it to the extent that they can. When service creation is part of the strategy, both expect public dollars to absorb the innovation.

5. *Funding processes don't permit organizing to put its best foot forward. While the prototype organizing process is fairly straightforward, by definition it must remain messy and tentative.* Outcome objectives - both organizational development and issues campaigns - in particular are hard to define, since the very idea is to develop community leaders who will set the agenda and move it forward. This seems particularly an inherent tension in foundation-initiated comprehensive community development projects [see CCI article], where the models and the hoped-for outcomes are defined in advance by the funder.

It's time for organizers to take their boxing gloves off, for developers to take their hard hats off, and for funders to come out from behind their desks, to begin a serious dialogue about how organizing can be integrated into – and, yes, drive – community development strategies. Funders need to begin to consider broadening their time horizons; organizing needs to develop credible accountability measures and to continually experiment with and evaluate the effectiveness of differing models; bricks-and-mortar developers need to refocus on people (and their families) as the central development purpose; and all of us need to listen more actively to community residents in determining the worthiness of our investments.