



Organizer Roundtable: The Importance of Organizing in Community Development

The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability held an Organizer Roundtable on March 11, 2009, that brought together Twin Cities' organizers to discuss the Importance of Organizing in Community Development. This roundtable provided an opportunity to discuss the role organizing plays in community development efforts – and to share challenges faced and successful approaches to use when organizing in a community development setting.

Marcus Marcus, community organizer with the [Northeast Community Development Corporation](#) discussed his work organizing for the Northeast Futures Community Vision, a project to develop a shared vision for the 13 neighborhoods that NECDC covers. NECDC created a diverse community council to oversee the process. To gather feedback from the community, Marcus interviewed one person on every block using positive, solution-focused questions, and created focus groups targeting the newer communities. Next, they developed a community vision statement and a list of values, which were presented at a large community event. NECDC keeps this vision moving forward by asking people to sign on to the vision, either as Partners, who agree to take action, or Friends, who pledge their support. Marcus pointed out that organizing increases the credibility of NECDC's work by reflecting vision and values of the broader community.

Betsy Sohn and Chaka Mkali, community organizers with [HOPE Community](#), shared their insights into the role of organizing in community development. HOPE has a 32-year history, starting as a hospitality house in 1977 in response to an overlooked homelessness crisis.

After 10-15 years of this approach, a major problem began to emerge in the neighborhood around HOPE's St. Joseph house: crack cocaine. The people at St. Joseph's saw the destructive effect this was having on the neighborhood, and decided that the crisis-based response they had been using was not working. Instead, they transitioned to a systems change approach.

To realize their community vision, they focused on three strategies: thinking about place and people (both community development and the people who live, work, learn and play in those built spaces); listening; and site control. Over 12 years, 1,400 people participated in the listening sessions, which were the main community engagement strategy to identify community leaders and partners. Over the years this in depth conversation with community members and leaders has helped to shape Hope Community's vision, mission and programs.

Betsy and Chaka discussed that this type of organizing has many small steps before the end result and that these small steps are genuinely important through their cumulative impact. Chaka emphasized that the role of community members is to actively participate so they will continue to implement the vision even if the money or organization should stop. The dynamic process of listening, learning and letting the community define its own problems is particularly important to this approach.

Peter Nagell, a community organizer with [Project for Pride in Living](#), spoke about his experiences organizing in a challenging environment. PPL is a large organization that focuses on employment training, housing, youth development and supportive services. Peter works at a service-enhanced housing location in St. Louis Park. The community organizer's role in this setting is to partner with service providers and provide job training and community building events with a goal of greater self-sufficiency. Peter works with a very diverse population, including many single adults who are very isolated and not community focused. This isolation leads to hesitancy and mistrust that makes organizing to create mutual support and neighborly relationships very challenging.

Anthony Dew, also a PPL community organizer, added that his community organizing work continues to be a learning experience. Anthony is working to integrate his academic background with his work in communities that aren't familiar with academic frameworks, without becoming pedantic. He faces ongoing challenges with how to connect community members to each other and how community members can understand they have the power to make a difference. Peter and Anthony both noted how important it is to stay connected with other organizers to share successful strategies for community engagement.

The organizers present also asked questions and discussed challenges they struggle with. Themes that emerged from the discussion included the challenges of organizing isolated and scattered populations; the tension between quantitatively measuring attendance goals and the harder-to-measure qualitative changes in relationships; and the culturally different approaches to organizing. Participants also pointed out that lack of funding is no excuse for lack of action, as evidenced by the success of the Civil Rights movement. Organizing is more than a job – it is an identity that is continually new and challenging. It is important to celebrate the small victories, build relationships and to grow a tough skin -- without losing your caring and motivation.

Organizer Roundtables are one of the Alliance's strategies to build a network of organizers that work on issues related to growth and development in the Twin Cities. Roundtables are led by and for organizers and are held monthly at the Alliance's offices in Minneapolis. Please check our web site at www.metrostability.org for upcoming roundtables.