

Organizer Roundtable: Community Organizing in the Suburbs



On August 26, 2009, Twin Cities organizers came together to discuss specific strategies for community organizing in the Twin Cities suburbs. Presenting at this Alliance for Metropolitan Stability event were **Amina Saleh**, Family & Children's Service community organizer, **Patrick Ness**, Office of Social Justice Catholic Charities public policy manager, and **JoAnn Tesar**, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties civic & community engagement executive associate.

Patrick Ness started out the discussion with a presentation on his work at the [Office of Social Justice](#) (OSJ) at Catholic Charities. Although Catholic Charities is mostly a social service agency providing direct services to clients, OSJ has a commitment to educate and engage citizens in policy reform around various issues that directly affect low-income and homeless people. They focus on issues such as health care, immigration and ex-offenders. Currently, they are a participant in the HIRE Minnesota campaign, advocating for public investments to ensure jobs for low-income and communities of color. OSJ organizes within regional Catholic parishes specifically targeting strategic legislative districts.

OSJ's organizing area extends well beyond the Twin Cities region, up to North Branch and south to Faribault. From Patrick's experience, it is important to remember when working with a suburban population that your leaders may have many diverse political views and core values. When focusing on harnessing people power, Patrick always starts the conversation by emphasizing core values that are common to people of different political backgrounds, including the common good, family and fairness.

Patrick specifically focuses on organizing in legislative districts that have the greatest potential to change state policies. For example, Patrick began organizing in Edina, a suburb of Minneapolis, because the local state representative had voted to eliminate General Assistance Medical Care, which provides health insurance to some of the lowest-income Minnesotans. He organized Catholic parishes around the values of fairness and the common good, recognizing the negative impact of the representative's position. His organizing efforts resulted in 150 leaders meeting with their state representative to advocate for supportive resources for low-income and homeless people.

JoAnn Tesar followed up with an overview of the work at [Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties \(CAPRW\)](#). There are 28 Community Action Partnerships in the state of Minnesota that provide direct services to community members with programs such as self sufficiency, energy assistance and weatherization. CAPRW is unique within the CAPs in the state because of their commitment to civic engagement and leadership development. CAPRW serves 17,000 households per year, and they use their service demographics as a tool to identify legislative districts where their service needs are concentrated.

One of the challenges that CAPRW faces is organizing suburban low-income residents that move frequently. With a transient population, figuring out how and where to conduct outreach is always a challenge. In the suburbs, there are typically clusters of low-income residents in

geographic areas, or occasionally in housing complexes. Another challenge is that suburban communities often don't come together except for special events, such as National Night Out. Because of these challenges, CAPRW has found that partnerships with other organizations are essential for successful organizing, because they can expand the networks of community members across organizations and issues.

CAPRW targets their constituents via mailings and phone calls based on their service demographics. The people who are contacted are familiar with CAPRW because of the services they receive through the agency, so this is an effective way to engage them. They also do outreach at the monthly [Head Start](#) parent meetings. These meetings provide a valuable resource to present on current issues that either adversely or positively impact families in that area.

Amina Saleh was the last presenter, who spoke of her work at [Family & Children's Service](#) (FCS) as a community organizer. Family & Children's Service is 130 years old and began during the settlement house movement in the late 19th century. In her job, Amina focuses on engaging low-income people and communities of color in public policy and civic issues.

Amina has been organizing in the Minneapolis suburbs of Eden Prairie, St. Louis Park and Hopkins. An important focus of her work is building relationships that facilitate acceptance of people of color within suburban communities. Amina also leads a leadership development program for Somali people within the metro area.

Amina described how building partnerships is a very important part of successful community organizing. Amina often partners with [Somali Action Alliance](#) (SAA). For example, FCS and SAA worked together to create the first annual [Somali Day at the Capitol](#), where they organized many Somali residents to the Minnesota State Capital to discuss their issues and meet their legislators.

In Eden Prairie and St. Louis Park, Amina has been working with Somali residents overcoming local policy barriers to Section 8 housing. She has also been working with parents in Hopkins to increase their capacity to advocate for their children in the local school district. Her primary focus is the empowerment of Somali people. Their greatest challenge in the suburbs is being accepted by their mostly white communities.

In the open discussion on suburban organizing, we began by talking about the opportunities that leadership development programs provided in strengthening suburban communities. Leadership development programs increase individual's skills, leading to a stronger community voice that can be organized for policy changes. It is important to value the voice of people who are directly affected by the issues and figure out ways to support them to take the lead.

Building community in the suburbs is a definite challenge, so organizers need to start one person at a time. Starting with one-on-one meetings, organizers can build relationships with residents who have broader networks within their community. Just having a community meeting doesn't really work until the organizer has built up a base through individual relationships. Through these relationships, an organizer can identify common issues that can bring a community together.

One major barrier for outreach is the lack of access to apartment building complexes. An organizer needs to identify natural community gathering places such as community festivals, sporting events, and churches. Parent groups within the school districts are another important gathering place that can lead to successful outreach. It is also important for an organizer to find out the news sources where residents get their information and use those sources for their outreach.

Another barrier that was discussed is the diversity of political values, religion and race in the suburbs which can divide communities. Participants talked about the challenges of identifying common values and common issues. Bringing together diverse groups requires a long-term commitment to relationship building. Yet differences should not keep an organizer from moving forward. It is good to remember that small groups of people can bring about powerful change.

The discussion on suburban organizing emphasized again and again the importance of partnering with other organizations that are connected to the community. The challenge to forming partnership is that suburban services can be few and far between, so low-income people often come into urban areas for their services. Organizers need to be open to unlikely partners by uncovering their common interests and issues and creating common messages. Partnerships can strengthen individual organizations by developing systems of mutual support, increasing their knowledge of community issues, reducing duplication of services, and thereby becoming more relevant to their community.

Organizers who live and office in the suburbs have more credibility with suburban residents. Urban organizers are not always accepted and may find more than the usual barriers to building community. Several of the organizers present had lived in the suburb they organized in for many years, and emphasized the importance of having a relationship network when they started working.

About Organizer Roundtables

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.