

# Toolkit for Organizing Community Organizing 101



What is community organizing?  
Community organizing is the main tool used by social movements to make change. One key element of organizing is building power with people who don't have it, often because it's been systematically denied to them. Power, privilege, and oppression are all important things to think about as you organize.



## what is community organizing?

**There are many styles of community organizing across the country.** Here's a definition to consider:

“Organizing is bringing the talents, resources, and skills of people in the community together to increase their collective power to transform themselves and their community and work for social change. Organizing is different than mobilizing, development, or service work. It involves building relationships and consolidating perspectives, thoughts, and ideas into an organizational structure.” - scott winn at the Seattle Office of Civil Rights

Let's break that down into some key elements of community organizing:

- Bring people from the community together around a common problem.
- Identify issues in the community and build relationships.
- Share what resources, talents, and perspectives people in the group have to offer.
- Come up with a common narrative or story for the group. What change do you want to see?
- Develop a plan of action to build power and to push for change.

**Read further for:**  
Our Assumptions  
Elements of Organizing  
Steps to Organize for Change

**Pro-tip:**  
There's a lot of organizing knowledge out there! Search "community organizing" the Internet or the library to keep learning.

## our assumptions for RAP

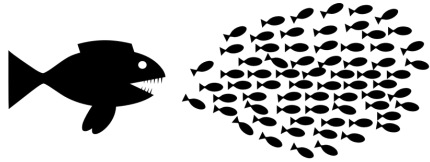
1. We know our world is built on relationships between people, organizations, and institutions.
2. The relationships in our world too often reflect a massive difference in power, where many are oppressed for the benefit of a few.
3. The power differential reflected in these relationships is created and reinforced by laws and policies.
4. Social change aims to disrupt those relationships and change laws for justice.
5. True justice can only be achieved if people who are most directly impacted are “at the table.”

## What does this mean?

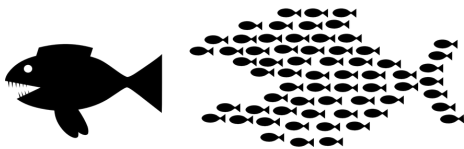
The problems we see in our world did not happen by accident. They stem from systems of oppression that maintain power and privilege for certain groups of people. Those systems of oppression are built into laws and policies by decision-makers who are people with power and privilege. They have had the power to consolidate and maintain their power for decades. Organizing collectively - with a unified, anti-oppressive message - is one tool to achieving justice and fighting for a more equitable world.

## elements of organizing

Below are some basic concepts that are fundamental to organizing.



**ORGANIZE!**



**Power:** Organizing aims to shift the balance of power or to demand that somebody who has power use their power to make a specific decision or change. **Power is not a value -- it can be used for good or bad.** Organizing also builds power by bringing together many people. Power can be viewed as: organized people, organized money, and organized information.

### Goals:

First, what do we want our world to look like, and then what are the specific changes we want to see to realize that vision?

- An example could be: "Our vision is that nobody experiences homelessness in our community."
- One specific change that will be a step in that direction is: "We want to see the state invest in more affordable homes."

### Strategy:

- A careful plan or method for working toward your vision, usually over a sustained period of time; the skill of making or carrying out plans by using tactics to achieve a goal.

### Tactics:

- Action of a person or organization to promote forward movement in the direction of your goal, resulting in a reaction from your target.
- "If the strategy is the ladder, tactics are the steps on the ladder."

**"Wins":** There are multiple ways to "win" in organizing. The obvious win is getting your issue resolved. Also, important to your campaign's success, even if your specific policy hasn't been won yet, is that you built your base, built community, or got further than you have before. Be sure to celebrate all of your wins, even in times where you haven't gotten exactly what you wanted.

## elements of organizing

### **Base:**

- the group of people and organizations who are deeply committed to your issue, many times directly impacted by your issue or serve people who are.

### **Allies:**

- people and organizations that have similar interests on issues. Many times these are organizations or people whose issues intersect with your issues, such as housing and transportation or health and education.

### **Decision-Maker:**

- The person who can give you what you want. It is especially necessary to know who these folks are when working on a legislative or city campaign.
- Decision-makers are always people or individuals, not groups. For example, a Representative Smith is a decision-maker, not the state legislature.
- Decision-makers are sometimes referred to as **targets**.

### **Problem:**

- Informs about what's wrong (makes a complaint).
- Makes everyone responsible (and no one).
- Hard to know when it's fixed (problem lingers).
- Example: Homelessness

### **Issue:**

- Frames the values at stake, to point to the demand.
- Identifies a target who is responsible for granting or blocking change.
- Know whether you win or lose.
- Example: Housing is a human right. We demand that the Governor invest \$200 million for homes for people experiencing homelessness.

There are problems in our communities. Our organizing challenge is to transform our problems into issues that we can make a plan around and take action on.

## organizing for action

### Step 1: Analyze

**Gather with people to identify the issues that are happening in your community.**

- Is the group that you're bringing together representative of the communities that are most impacted?
- Who is not at the table? How can you bring them in?

**As a group, identify what you see as a solution to the issues that you've identified.**

- Set some short-term and long-term goals.
- For example, a short-term goal could be that you hold a few more smaller community meetings to evaluate the issues in the community. A long-term goal could be to pass a piece of legislation at the state level.

**Think about the scope of your goals.**

- Do your goals involve a behavior change (ex: landlord complies with code), a legal change (ex: a bill passed), or an institutional change (ex: a bank prohibits redlining)?
- Who are the key players involved in this issue? Who has the power to make the change that you want to see? Who is your target?

### Step 2: Planning

**Develop a strategy that could help you achieve your goals.**

- This could be a plan that: informs the public, identifies your base and allies, encourages people to take action (like boycotting, voting, writing to a lawmaker) that affects your target to make decisions that could help you meet your goal.

**Identifying the tactics in the strategy. How are we going to execute our strategy?**

- What are the steps involved in meeting your strategy?
- For example, if you want to build your base, you could hold house meetings. If you want to influence a lawmaker, you could do a letter writing campaign. See the list of 198 ways to do nonviolent action in the appendix on page viii to get some ideas!

## organizing for action

### **Identify roles in the strategy.**

- Who is going to hit the streets? Who is going to speak at events? Who is going to create the message and the flyers? Who is going to prepare the snacks?
- Roles could include leaders, coordinators, social media experts, logistics planners, or cooks!

### **Make a plan for safety.**

- Are there any safety considerations in the action or campaign that you are planning?
- Who could those safety concerns impact? How can you, as a collective, address those safety concerns?
- Keep this in mind while you are planning your roles!

## **Step 3: Action/Campaign Delivery**

**You've got your plan, and now you're ready to jump into action and carry out your strategy!**

- Along the way, keep track of your timeline and milestones. You may need to modify your tactics depending on the organizing conditions.

## **Step 4: Impact/Evaluation**

**Reflection is important. Take time as a group to talk about your action.**

- What did we achieve? Did we build community? Did we "win"? Did we develop an effective strategy? Are we closer to achieving our vision? What did we learn? What was successful, and what can we do better next time?

### **Celebrate your wins!**

- Celebrate the success of your short term goals!
- Celebrate the success of your long term goals!
- Celebrate the fact that you're coming together in community to resist unjust power structures and fight for a more just society!
- Don't limit yourselves to a narrow view of "wins."