

# Putting Families at the Center of Community Action

*Report from an Exploration of Organizations Engaged in Family-  
Based Community Action*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

On November 5-6, 1998, on the windy shore of Lake Michigan at Illinois Beach State Park near Zion, IL, a special group of women (and a few men) gathered from around the country for an extended conversation on “Family-Focused Organizing: Sharing Stories, Building Connections, Advancing Our Practice.” This report would not be possible without the honest self-disclosure, challenging questions, and warm camaraderie expressed at that meeting. We offer our heartfelt thanks to the 13 leaders and organizers who opened themselves and extended their arms at that meeting:

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Finally, we wish to acknowledge the support and collegueship of Bob Giloth and Janice Nittoli of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. They grasp the importance of understanding better how families can become central players in shaping communities and policy reform; they are strongly committed to learning from parents and organizers at the grassroots level; and they were attentive, yet non-intrusive, as this learning and convening project moved forward. In short, they displayed unusual vision and grace, and their partnership enhanced our work.

While these people were crucial to whatever we learned in this project, the authors take responsibility for the contents of this report. Any errors in reporting or interpretation are our responsibility alone.

Sandy O'Donnell  
David Scheie

## **FOREWORD**

This report shares findings from a six-month process that emerged from a conversation with Bob Giloth of the Annie E. Casey Foundation about the interest of our organization, Community Organizing and Family Issues, in expanding our thinking about our work with families and communities. Eager to find “kindred spirits” with whom we could share ideas and methods, we leaped at the opportunity when Bob suggested to us that we convene like-minded groups from around the country. With the research and facilitation help of Rainbow Research, Inc., we contacted over 60 organizations nationwide and brought leaders and staff from five of them together in November 1998.

We were *not* looking for organizations that looked and worked exactly like we do. We *were* looking for people and organizations who shared our values – that families, and mothers in particular, are central reasons and resources for building local communities – and who incorporated those values in actions, programs, and organizational structures.

We found a rich spectrum of experience that we believe will help inform those who wish to strengthen the connections between Family and Community. This spectrum, described much more fully in the report, includes, among others, the work of grassroots “mothers’ groups,” women’s economic development groups, single issues groups focused on issues from child care to welfare “reform,” and multi-issue community organizations, often sensitized to “family issues” by women and youth members.

We also found many who would really like to be doing more: grassroots groups that would like to formalize their work and create sustainable public spaces for parent and community leaders; single-issue advocacy groups that see the need to tackle a broader range of issues; service providers who really want to change systems. Oftentimes we find ourselves pigeon-holed by our starting points – “community organizer,” “parent leader,” “community developer,” “social service provider.” What I realized most of all coming out of this exploration is that we have to find ways to come together, get beyond the limitation of these starting points, and see ourselves as all being builders of a much broader movement. We have more to learn by coming together than by seeing ourselves as different.

At Community Organizing and Family Issues we hope we can recognize both the strengths and the limitations of our origins in community organizing, and be receptive to the rich variety of experience of people who share our values and goals. In so doing, we can strengthen our own model of leadership development and systems change, which we call “family-focused community organizing,” and we can help others develop theirs. And, collectively, we can build a critical mass of ideas and actions that can make our nation’s low-income communities, and all our communities, supportive, vibrant places for families.

Ellen Schumer  
Executive Director, COFI  
Chicago, IL

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Project origins**

In 1998, three organizations came together to attempt to build baseline knowledge of a newly re-discovered community organizing tradition, which we will call “family-based community action,” that focuses on families as a source of leadership and as a central focus of concern for community organizing and development. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is interested in this work as an essential component of its new funding program that seeks to transform communities of deep poverty. Rainbow Research, Inc. is a research and consulting organization focused on discovering and sharing lessons for more effective community action, particularly through the use of communities’ informal and citizen assets. Community Organizing and Family Issues is a nonprofit whose mission is to develop, extend, document, and evaluate family-based community action, toward the goal of making our communities around the country ones that support the healthy development of children and families. The purposes of the project were:

- identify common elements of family-based community action groups;
- begin to cull some shared learnings and some differences within the identified groups through interviews and discussions;
- begin to generate some ideas on how private philanthropy might invest in expanding and strengthening this work.

### **Historical background**

In many urban and rural communities throughout the nation’s history, family and community have been joined at the hip. “Community” meant all the families of the parish or township getting together to build a house or barn or church, to worship, to play, to self-govern. “Family” meant whomever lived or worked in the household -- or indeed, in the entire community -- caring for one another and helping out economically. In short, communities were families, and families were communities. This is a factual, not a value, statement, and it is not a romantic wish for a return to yesteryear: people over the decades have come together to work and care for one another out of sheer necessity.

With urbanization, industrialization, professionalization, the growth of specialized organizations, and the rise of “big government,” these two essential “institutions of civil society” -- family and community – were witnessed as separate spheres of life. The family

was “private”; the community, “public.” The family was nurturing; the community, achieving. Families were developed by keeping Mom at home, in the “private” sphere. Communities were developed by building businesses and houses. Government stepped in when the market economy failed.

Dichotomous thinking like this filtered into the community organizing and development fields. Organizing defined itself as getting people together to build power to beat up on external enemies and to win bricks-and-mortar community improvements. Development became equated with physical capital -- housing and small business development, especially. We forgot about the work of African-American women in founding orphanages, day nurseries, youth programs, reading rooms and boarding homes for young working women; in fighting for equal school facilities and curricula for Black children; and in promoting high standards of conduct in their communities. We remember Alinsky, CDCs, CRA, SBA and CDFI's. We forgot that Ella Baker and Septima Clark and Bob Moses built the ranks for the civil rights movement from a base largely of “ordinary” women.<sup>1</sup> We remember Dr. King's charismatic leadership.

All this time, nevertheless, people -- mostly women -- have quietly been working behind the scenes to build community under trying conditions - so quietly that a recent book about this work is entitled *A Tradition that Has No Name*.<sup>2</sup> These “invisible” community organizers have organized “block moms” to make sure the community's children attended school and got there safely. They have organized support groups for people isolated in their situations - - cancer victims, parents of sick or troubled children, violence victims. They have preserved and celebrated the community's culture through musical events, quilting clubs, and the like. They have adopted children and invented a kind of foster parenting that partners foster and biological family. And, when pressed, they *will* beat up on City Hall, or, in the case of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, on every statehouse in the nation.

A number of ideas and forces have come together in very recent years to lift up this tradition. From theorists come new understandings of the importance of “social capital” (relational networks) in building community, and of the importance of strengthening

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<sup>1</sup>Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline A. Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Mary F. Belenky, Lynne A. Bond, and Jacqueline S. Weinstock, *A Tradition That Has No Name: Nurturing the Development of People, Families, and Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

institutions of “civil society,” namely, those outside of government and the market economy that nurture people and our democracy.<sup>3</sup>

From practice comes growing disenchantment with the boxes we have made, thus the new term “community building” is created as one that combines development, organizing, and formal and informal service support. The “assets-based community development” model brings theory and practice together, in creating a technology for mapping informal and formal associational activity in communities as a tool for building cohesion and power.<sup>4</sup>

From research comes the finding that these new theoretical ideas and practice experiments make sense. A major recent study of 323 Chicago neighborhoods by Harvard University’s Public Health School found that communities with high levels of social cohesion and informal social control were ones with the least amounts of violence, regardless of race or class. In these communities, people knew and trusted their neighbors, participated in block clubs and community groups, made sure that children were properly supervised, worked informally and with the police to stop vandalism and loitering, etc.<sup>5</sup>

The “action” group of this project’s partnership, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), is a product of all of this ferment in thought, action, and research. COFI was founded in 1993 as an outgrowth of a promising pilot project in developing the community leadership capacities of a group of multi-ethnic women from neighborhoods around Chicago. The women’s leadership project and COFI were both responses to a growing sense among veteran women community organizers in the area that something important was missing: living conditions among low income families were deteriorating, yet issues of greatest concern to families were dismissed as “private” ones by the dominant organizing tradition in the city. Moreover, COFI’s founders observed that public policy was being made *for* low income families with little input from those most deeply affected by those policies. COFI thought that there was a connection between these two concerns, and a common underlying cause: people who are the champions of families -- namely, parents -- were being overlooked as a source of public leadership by *both* organizers and “policy wonks.”

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<sup>3</sup>Don Eberly, “Civic Renewal vs. Moral Renewal,” *Policy Review* (September-October, 1998); Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6(1), 1995, pp. 65-78; Robert Westbrook, “A Civil Action,” *In These Times*, July 12, 1998 (review of two books by Benjamin Barber).

<sup>4</sup>John L. McKnight and John Kretzmann, “Mapping Community Capacity,” Northwestern University Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, n.d.; Christopher Walker and Mark Weinheimer, *Community Development in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, September 1998), Ch. 5.

<sup>5</sup>R. Sampson, S. Raudenbush, and F. Earls, “Neighborhood and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy,” *Science* 255(August 15), 1997, pp. 918-924.

COFI was thus incorporated to develop the leadership capacities of parents to make improvements in program, policy, and practice to make their communities ones that support the healthy development of children and families. Since its founding, COFI has provided leadership training to over 800 parents in five communities, mentored local parent action teams in winning school and community improvements such as GED classes, safe passage patrols and school-based community centers. COFI also brought parents together from across the neighborhoods to begin to tackle public policy issues. COFI calls its model of leadership training, local action team formation, parent-to-parent outreach, and public policy change “family-focused community organizing.”

## **Project focus**

This project, then, focused on:

- discovering who else, along with COFI, might be engaged in some kinds of family-based community action;
- engaging in dialogue with practitioners and observers of this work to learn key similarities and differences in approach and how this might vary depending on goals, history, context and other factors;
- bringing selected groups engaged in this work together to begin sharing knowledge and forming mutually supportive relationships;
- generating ideas that might help both practitioners and funders in this arena increase their effectiveness.

On a pragmatic level, this project focused on strengthening COFI’s peer network and generating knowledge to help COFI address its strategic challenges. When this project began, COFI leaders often felt that they were forging new paths alone. They knew of few people or projects they could turn to for help in reflecting on challenges, frustrations or opportunities. They were eager to find other thoughtful practitioners whose experience COFI could learn from instead of continually having to invent its own path. In addition, COFI hoped to expand its network to find, or learn how to find, more skilled organizers and policy advocates, since COFI’s own growth was being limited by its difficulty in finding additional staff in these areas. In response to these considerations, COFI and Rainbow Research articulated that the learning goals for the project would be for participants to gain new insights into:

- models for family-based community action;
- moving from leadership development in local actions to an impact on policies and institutional systems;

- what organizations engaged in family-based community action look like, and how to build and sustain them;
- methods of recruiting and supporting staff organizers for this work.

## **Methodology**

The first step was to attempt to identify the “universe” of groups nationwide that undertake family-based community action. This enumeration would help us better understand the extent to which there *is* a movement underway; it would help us describe the range of approaches and models; and it would give us a base from which to select a handful of diverse projects/organizations for further shared learning. We settled on the following operational definition.

Family-based community action groups follow these principles:

- families are the building blocks of communities;
- parents are a powerful, often overlooked source of community leadership;
- organized parents can identify and win community improvements and public policy changes that benefit families.

They also employ these elements of practice:

- intentionally nurture parents as personal, family, and community leaders;
- seek local community changes to strengthen the community’s response to children and families;
- advocate for an agenda for policy change generated by parents and focused on strengthening family economic well-being and the community’s response to children and families;
- provide and create family-supportive organizations.

The next task was to begin to find groups, a difficult one because groups do not use a common term to describe themselves (“family-based community action” is *our* label, not theirs; COFI’s “family-focused community organizing” is a unique term). It was also difficult because the field of community organizing/development/building is largely local and not connected with national associations, and because many groups are largely volunteer and informal, and, thus, not known to funders. We built the list through snowball sampling, beginning with a brainstorm among staff of the three participating organizations and a search of available literature. With each lead, we asked the respondent who else they know of that we might talk with. We produced a list of 35 referral sources through this process who provided us with names of 55 practitioners.

We gave priority to finding groups and projects in contexts that resembled COFI’s: urban, low-income, and communities of color. These also were the kinds of communities where

the Casey Foundation is most invested. Beyond these criteria, we pursued a geographical balance, seeking an overview of the field nationally.

We then developed a loosely structured interview guide, based on the principles and elements of practice, that would enable each of us to ask a handful of common questions but would permit conversational interviewing as well. The screening questions were:

What does this organization offer regarding . . .

- 1) Models for leadership development and organizing involving and focused on families?
  - What organizing tradition, if any, do they come from?
- 2) Connecting to policy impact?
  - stories of policy success?
  - well-developed philosophy of policy change?
- 3) Structuring and sustaining organizations that focus on and involve families?
- 4) Recruiting and supporting staff organizers for this work?

Interviews took place between July and October, and consisted of telephone interviews of from 15 minutes to over an hour in length. In retrospect, we found the season of the interviewing to present challenges: we competed with family vacations and heightened program activity of the new school year. We completed 30 such interviews.

We selected 16 people from five groups -- for their diversity in geography and approach -- to meet and discuss their work in more depth than a phone interview would permit. The discussion took place over a one and a half day period in November 1998. The participating groups were:

\* ***Pacoima Urban Village***, a parent-led, largely Mexican-American organization in Los Angeles that rose from the ashes of a larger parent-controlled, school-based family center that had not been able to sustain itself in the wake of professional resistance. It is pursuing a holistic community development vision that would convert service delivery systems controlled by external professionals into a strategy for local economic development and community empowerment centered in residents engaging in reciprocal aid. Pacoima is largely an “organic” organization that wishes to become a formal one.

\* ***Hope Community Inc.***, a community organization in Minneapolis with a 22-year history that began with a hospitality house for homeless women and children. Over the past several

years, Hope has accomplished a major transition, revitalizing two square blocks of low-income rental housing focused on creating community for families and children. Hope has consistently explored ways to provide community building and leadership opportunities to residents of surrounding neighborhoods. Those include community-based learning, listening projects focused on key issues, leadership and strategy sessions leading to issue research and action, and community engagement with children and families. Hope's opportunities for involvement are family-centered, nurture informal networks of relationships in the community, and recognize cultural differences and strengths. Staff act as catalysts, organizers and teachers, not service providers. Some staff are experienced in institutional-based network organizing, but Hope draws from a variety of models including popular education. It serves a mixed population of African-American, African immigrant, Latino, Asian, Native American and white neighborhood residents.

\* ***Mothers of Many***, a largely "organic" African-American women's organization in Selma, Alabama, led by volunteers who find full-time employment elsewhere. With a primary focus on education and violence, MOM conducts weekly "street crusades" as an organizing and violence prevention strategy, sends groups of mothers to monitor schools, holds monthly issue forums, and sponsors children's educational activities. In the past, MOM has also sponsored grassroots economic development ventures. Much of MOM's effectiveness flows from its embeddedness in a network of "community uplift organizations" in the Selma area affiliated with the Black Belt Human Resource and Development Center. These organizations include the Black Belt Arts and Cultural Center, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Youth Leadership Project, McRae Learning Center, and the National Voting Rights Museum. This network is beginning to use its considerable relational power to secure school and other policy improvements at the state and local levels.

\* ***Parents United for Child Care***, an organization of parents (who are members and the governing board) in Boston committed to increasing quality, affordable child care and after-school programs in Massachusetts. It sponsors leadership trainings, policy research and advocacy, and information and service projects. Pucc is moving into neighborhood-based organizing and leadership development, creating local chapters, concurrent with efforts to link with other child care activists across Massachusetts for greater state-level policy impact. Pucc was the only organization of the five with a clearly defined individual membership base. Since its founding in 1987, it has grown to include a staff of 15 people, plus a half-dozen AmeriCorps volunteers.

\* ***Community Organizing and Family Issues*** and one of its neighborhood partners, ***West Town Leadership Project***. West Town Leadership Project is a new family-focused community organization led by a core group of 20 parent leaders who represent six school-based leadership teams. Over the past two years, partnering with COFI, West Town Leadership Project has trained 250 parents to become leaders, reached out to 2000

additional parents to build relationships and clarify their visions for the community, developed new lines of communication with institutional leaders and public officials to make parents' voices heard, won new programs for parents and children, and sponsored events that help build community and support families.

We asked each group to bring a staff executive, an organizer, and a parent leader; especially in the case of the two grass roots groups, these roles blurred considerably. We ended up with an extremely diverse group in every respect except for sex (there were but three men, and two were from Rainbow Research and the Casey Foundation).

The meeting was designed to move conversation beyond the usual "show and tell" performances into a creative exploration of the deeper questions participants encounter in their work with parents, families and communities. We conducted extensive advance preparation with individuals and organizations; we integrated personal reflection, writing exercises, small group and large group formats.

Before the meeting, each participant was contacted individually by letter and telephone. We asked what each wanted from the meeting, explained our vision, and asked each person to reflect in advance on several key questions. We took pains to explain that this was not a "task force" or "planning session;" rather, as our advance letter said, the purpose was "to share, challenge ourselves, and peel back the onion to look at the heart of what we're doing," so as "to see things in a new, fresh light." Participants were asked to share written information on their organizations, to help us cover the basics and move quickly into deeper, more difficult questions.

At the meeting, we sought to integrate the personal and the organizational, feelings and facts, small groups and large, writing and speaking. We started with personal storytelling of how we each got into this work, what keeps us active, and where we're headed, as well as highlights from our own family experiences. We spent additional time on the first day in small groups describing our organization's focus, approach, challenges and lessons, recording comments on flip charts for all to view. We periodically checked in to learn perspectives on the progress of the gathering, asking people to speak from the heart as well the head. Several adjustments to the schedule were made based on this input.

The second day focused on three topical discussions: 1) getting people involved, 2) sustaining family-focused organizations, and 3) impacting policy. The meeting concluded with a written reflection form and group discussion, gathering feedback and ideas for possible next steps.

## **FINDINGS**

### **The “state of the field”: Is there a “movement” of people and organizations involved in family-based community action?**

#### *Summary*

Before we get to the permutations of the theme, it seems important to state the summary observation: We would be stretching it to say there’s a movement, but there **is**:

- ferment in the thinking of many organizers who, like COFI’s Ellen Schumer, are coming up against the wall of limited ideas and tactics in traditional organizing that keep important leaders out of the process and important issues off the plate;
- a growing number of parents and women’s groups that originated in a grassroots revolt, usually directed at the schools or the welfare system, that incorporate a focus on families, and that have moved or are moving from informal to formal organization;
- a rich number of admittedly fragmented efforts -- including women’s economic development organizations, youth groups, service providers, etc. -- to engage local people in improving systems and conditions that will make life better for families.

Two threads seem to connect all these disparate efforts. The first is that they recognize that parents, women, young people, and other “ordinary” family members are an untapped source of leadership talent, with a voice that, when heard, will put new, “family” issues on the table. The second is a fairly consistent affinity with popular education,<sup>6</sup> or “developmental organizing,”<sup>7</sup> as a means of developing these new leadership bases. Whether these groups formally develop leaders or not, they generally recognize that the people they involve often do not see themselves as leaders initially, and they also recognize

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<sup>6</sup>Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1970/1994).

<sup>7</sup>C.H. Kieffer, “Citizen Empowerment: A Developmental Perspective,” in J. Rappaport, C. Swift, and R. Hess, eds., *Studies in Empowerment: Steps Toward Understanding and Action*. (New York: Hayworth Press, 1984).

that leadership skills and attributes can be learned. Formally trained organizers mention a shift from Alinsky-inspired to Friere-inspired organizing.

### ***Comprehensiveness***

Of the groups we examined, many were involved in some of the activities that COFI believes defines “family-focused community organizing,” but no groups were involved in all of them. For instance:

- Family support centers and self-help groups may focus on parent capacity building, but usually stop at the family leadership level. Although some are beginning to draw the connections between personal/family leadership and community leadership, we found none in our scouting that actively work to encourage parents to become community and policy change agents.
- Some groups focus on “family” policy change issues or provide a family supportive work environment, but they don’t consciously or formally develop the leadership capacities of parents to guide these changes.
- Some groups -- such as parent-led school reform groups and welfare reform groups - - develop parent leaders and involve them in guiding policy change, but they are quite issue-specific and often are not community based, so they have limited capacity or interest in building local communities supportive of families.

### ***Affinity groups***

We uncovered a variety of approaches that certainly are kindred spirits of COFI’s, but have some important shades of difference. A challenge for COFI in this coming year is to consider how these like-minded people and organizations can connect at critical junctures to strengthen local leadership bases and to change systems, and how they can continue to help COFI define “family-focused community organizing.” Some examples:

- Several groups are doing wonderful work in developing the leadership capacities of young people to make family, community and policy change, such as SPIRIT in Portland and PUEBLO in Oakland. In some communities of immigrants and refugees, young people become advocates, first for themselves, then for their families, and then for the broader interests of the community. COFI’s link with a youth leadership collaborative in West Town has led to its first effort to integrate parent, youth, family, and community leadership.

- Similarly, some groups are actively striving to develop multi-generational family leadership, adding elders to the mix of youth and parents. We would posit that such inclusion might expand the palette of family-focused concerns to include the support and care of elders, strains on elder caregivers, etc. COFI's parent leaders have largely been elementary school parents, focused on the futures of their children. It would be interesting for us to find out what difference an older "voice" in the leadership teams would make on the issues and priorities we identify.
- Not surprising to COFI, since its prototype was the Women Leaders in Action project, was the re-discovery of organizing and community development groups that are manifestly feminist. These groups place the empowerment and economic advancement of women at center stage, although they are not unmindful of the beneficial impact such goals have on families. COFI's focus on parents seeks to include the participation and voice of fathers; in reality, though, its leadership base and leadership voice is very largely that of women. Feminist groups speak of the importance of "sisterhood" and of creating "women's space" -- psychic as well as physical -- in their work. Providing opportunities for women to come out of their isolation, to give and receive mutual support, and to surface issues through the lens of parents' concerns are hallmarks of feminist organizing. Indeed, one of the very reasons Women Leaders in Action was created was to give opportunity for women, who had largely been subordinated in traditional community organizations, to put "family issues" on the organizing plate. The challenges ahead are to figure out when sex-separated spaces are needed to effectively develop leaders, how and when "women's leadership" translates to "family leadership," and how and when it may not.
- In clear lineage with the *kindezji* or "othermother" role in African communities, and with the role of *promotoras* in Latina communities, several groups we spoke with were indeed focused on building and supporting families, but through the connective work of people already recognized by the community as leaders. In modern parlance, this role has been called "natural helper" or "outreach." There seems to be tremendous potential to take this helping work "to the next level" by involving those *kindezji* or *promotoras* or natural helpers who wish to do so in systems change.

### ***The voluntary tradition***

We became newly appreciative of the richness and depth of the voluntary, informal, mutual aid tradition, for which we came to use the term "organic." A major question that the project posed for us is how, and under what circumstances, family-based community action can grow as a field by helping these informal organizations take their work to the next level

-- **however they define that next level** -- be it funding for programs, expansion of effort, or the move from program to policy.

A related question is that of adapting models of family-based community action to differing community fabrics. Highly intensive “developmental organizing” models seem appropriate in communities like those where COFI has worked, where the informal tradition was seemingly lacking, perhaps as a consequence of high transiency and high levels of hopelessness and fear among residents. In such communities, formal, intensive leadership development processes staffed by paid organizers seem to be necessary and appropriate. In other, more stable, communities like Selma, Alabama, where informal organizations are building a leadership base, the appropriate role for organizations like COFI might be providing technical assistance in organizational development or systems change.

Family-based organizing projects entering “new” communities are challenged to look carefully at the community fabric and find out to what extent the informal tradition exists and can be built upon . . . and to what extent the leadership base must be built from anew.

### ***Challenges ahead***

It is important to note briefly some challenges ahead in building family-based community action.

- The “practice wisdom” that organizing groups which involve and focus on families are growing out of the self-help and family support movements was not confirmed by our scouting. Audrey Gardner (National Self-Help Clearinghouse) could identify no real trend among parent-led self-help groups in moving from self-help to social action, other than Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). A number of people thought family support advocates were recognizing the imperative of parent leadership development, organizing, and ownership, but we couldn’t find an organization that exemplified this perception. A more ambitious search than we were able to do is surely warranted. Ellen Schumer, for instance, describes a consulting experience of her own, helping a domestic violence self-help organization get involved in community clean-ups and other action campaigns. She has worked with several support groups that have endeavored to get involved in changing public policy – domestic violence survivors, formerly incarcerated mothers and foster parents.
- Family-based community action groups are typically isolated from readily-recognized networks of community organizing, community development, and community-building organizations. Consequently, many are struggling with growth and sustenance issues; many have unrealized systems change potential;

and many of us are unnecessarily reinventing wheels because we do not know of the work of others.

- Much of what passes as “parent empowerment” or “parent ownership,” is not. “Full service schools” proponents include parents in the advocacy coalition, but they do not extend parents the power to shape the initiative or its individual services. An institutional-member community organization develops parent leaders but does not expand its membership structure to include them fully in the organization. Policy advocacy groups tend to “cut” the issue *and then* reach out for parent support as part of the coalition-building strategy.

## **Models of family-based community leadership development**

The family-based community action organizations we examined varied widely in the formality and structure of their leadership development and organizing methods. Some, like COFI, have a clearly defined leadership training program, even if that model is still evolving. Others, like MOM, develop leaders and organizing campaigns informally, in the process of “doing.” The variation seems likely the product of differing responses to differing community conditions and to differing experiences and orientations of founders and staff leaders.

### *Similarities*

Still, certain practice elements are almost universal. The five organizations that we brought together, and the handful of other organizers we found<sup>8</sup> that shared our working definition of family-based community action groups were united on several principles underlying their practice.

#### **1) Leadership development and activism are holistic, integrated processes.**

They see the many spheres of a person’s life – personal, family, community, organizational, and institutional systems – as inter-related, parts of a whole.

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<sup>8</sup>These included Lisa Abbott of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth; Ellen Ryan of the Community Regeneration Project; Don Elmer of Center for Community Change; Dan Petegorsky of Western States Center. Additional organizers that we heard shared our definition but with whom we were unable to talk due to time and schedule constraints included Women’s Community Revitalization Project in Philadelphia, National Congress of Neighborhood Women (based in Brooklyn with affiliate organizations scattered around the country), Southern Echo in Mississippi, Neighborhood Pride Team in Portland OR, Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL) in Montana, Environmental Health Coalition in San Diego, JEDI Women in Salt Lake City, La Mujer Obrera in El Paso, Indian People’s Action in Montana, Rosedale Block Cluster in Pittsburgh, and Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment in South Carolina.

Increasing a person's agency in any of these spheres will have ripple effects into the other areas.

- 2) **Personal and family empowerment must be at the core of the leadership development and organizing process.** People stay involved, and stretch into increasing public responsibility, as they see this as contributing to their own growth and empowerment, and equipping or assisting them to reach important personal or family goals they hold. For example, several participants in our meeting, mothers with low incomes and modest formal educational credentials, spoke of how empowering it was for them to learn how to set goals and plan steps toward their goals – and that this is a skill they are applying in their organizational role but also in their role in leading their family and keeping their household together, in their primary intimate relationships, and in pursuit of personal self-development.
  
- 3) **Supportive social networks are a crucial resource for personal empowerment and for sustaining leaders.** As one organizer<sup>9</sup> said, “We teach that everyone deserves a support system. You might find that in your family, or among your neighbors, or we can form a support network for each other right here, in this leadership development class.” These support networks include both peers and mentors. They include people who want to see us achieve our own goals, and who are willing to help us do that. Helping people move from isolation to relationship, and from relationships of domination and dependency to relationships of affirmation and mutual support, are huge steps in the empowerment process.
  
- 4) **Cultural activities are powerful group-building and personal development tools.** The groups we spoke with vary in how performance-oriented their cultural activities are: some primarily share food together<sup>10</sup>; some stage skits and talent shows occasionally as part of organizational meetings and retreats<sup>11</sup>; and others develop musical and theatrical productions that they present in public venues, using them as visibility- and revenue-generating tools as well as vehicles for personal and group development.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Idida Perez of West Town Leadership Project (Chicago).

<sup>10</sup> Community Organizing & Family Issues, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, West Town Leadership Project.

<sup>11</sup> Parents United for Child Care.

<sup>12</sup> Black Belt Human Resources Development Community.

- 5) **Conducting one-on-one conversations and surveys are valuable activities, especially in the intermediate stages of leadership development and organizing.** These activities are useful for many purposes:
- Becoming agents in the process of constructing information for official and public use – for example, documenting conditions and priorities around child care quality and affordability – is an extremely empowering experience. People’s knowledge, confidence and authority grows through the experience of framing research questions, gathering information, analyzing and reporting it.
  - The resultant information can be a useful resource in a policy change campaign.
  - Conducting one-on-ones and other forms of interviews also helps develop crucial public skills in listening, communication and relationship-building.
  - These activities also help enlarge the membership base of organizations. They raise the visibility of the organization, build relationships among people and surface additional people in the community willing or eager to get involved.
  - These processes also generate information that can help guide the organization and focus its work.
- 6) **In sum, the family-based community action organizers we found hold a remarkable integration of the private and public realms.** They recognize the connections between the personal and the political, and underscore those connections constantly.

### ***Differences***

Along with these commonalities, we also saw some differences in practice among the family-based community action organizations with whom we spoke.

- 1) **Groups vary in their use of “one-on-one” conversations.** Virtually all of the family-based community action groups we talked with start with one-on-one personal contact. There are variations in how those conversations are framed and where they lead.

- In what we came to call the “organic” models, conversations typically led to asking people to help with or attend planned events or activities of the organization. For example, Mothers of Many invites people to their monthly meetings, to a Monday neighborhood crusade, or to help with some aspect of a cultural event. For Pacoima Urban Village, parents may be invited to bring their families to an intergenerational field trip or potluck sponsored by PUV. People are drawn into organizational activities first, and leadership development happens informally and unofficially.
  - In what we called the “professional” models, one-to-ones more often would culminate in an invitation to join a leadership or personal development course.<sup>13</sup> These courses sponsored by the organization were often the first stage of involvement a person would have with the organization. Membership and organizational participation came later, after relationships formed, after people experienced gains in their personal networks and skills through the training.
- 2) **Groups vary in how they frame “leadership development.”** Only the “professional” models, with paid staff that consciously draw from Alinsky organizing traditions, sponsor official leadership development courses. And they varied in their emphasis.
- Some organizations<sup>14</sup> start with a focus on personal and family roles and, over time, broaden to look at community and institutional systems. As people discover their talents and exercise new skills in these “close to home” areas, they become emboldened to venture further out into the world of meetings, institutions, professionals and policies.
  - Others<sup>15</sup> emphasize mainstream organizing/advocacy skills such as media relations, meeting facilitation, and problem-solving, and education on policy issues such as child care and welfare reform, with less focus on parents as leaders within their own families.
  - Still others<sup>16</sup> are experimenting with ways to link “power education,” which boosts participants’ awareness of personal and community power

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<sup>13</sup> Parents United for Child Care, Community Organizing & Family Issues.

<sup>14</sup> Community Organizing and Family Issues; West Town Leadership Project.

<sup>15</sup> Parents United for Child Care.

<sup>16</sup> Hope Community.

dynamics, with organizing actions around specific community change goals.

3) **Groups vary in where they find organizing leadership.** As is true of all organizing work, individuals who have one foot in the community world and another foot in the world of policies and institutions play essential functions in family-based community action. Sometimes called “organizers,” sometimes known as “leaders,” other times simply recognized as important community members, these people are active in nurturing other people’s development from family leaders into community leaders, and are active in translating people’s family concerns into a public agenda.

- In the “organic” models, these “bridge persons” tended to have deep roots in the local community. They had a community identity prior to their professional identity with this organization. These are the “othermothers,” the mature women already playing mentoring roles in the community.<sup>17</sup>
- In the “professional” models, these roles are played at least initially by “organizers” who come from outside the local community. They bring skills and experience from other settings, and must earn credibility and build relationships locally with present activities in order to be effective in this community. These organizations gain strength as parents from the local community take on organizing and leadership roles.

## **Local community action and building**

### *Introduction*

Organizing that involves and focuses on families combines two powerful traditions -- that of “winning” local actions as a means of building community power and that of the role of “othermother” (or champion of families) -- to build local communities that are family supportive. It is the combination, the intersection, of these two traditions that makes the work uniquely family-based: without the consciousness of “othermother,” wins could be alleys or potholes; without the idea of “winning” tangible improvements, “othermothers” could stay focused on informal caregiving and not get involved in the broader community. This “consciousness raising” aspect of local community action/building is extremely critical in family-based community action, which, we now understand, belongs to a newly-articulated “developmental organizing” school that places the leaders’ awareness of the

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<sup>17</sup> Examples: Joanne Bland of Mothers of Many, Guadalupe Salgado of Pacoima Urban Village.

process at center stage. Family-based local community activity is thus tightly intersected with leadership development and systems change processes:

- both “actions” and relationship-building outreach work are parts of the leadership development process;
- outreach relationship-building is both a means to increasing parent power and an end, in increasing the social capital of the community; and
- there is a consciousness developed that many local needs are imbedded in systems and, as such, are best fought at the policy level.

### ***The COFI model***

The COFI model starts with parent leadership development focused on personal and family leadership capacities. However, community-building and local community action are introduced late in the first phase of parent leadership training, and become increasingly prominent in later phases of the COFI model.

- 1) **Parent Action Teams.** Toward the end of “phase 1” leadership training, parents participating in the training decide whether or not they want to work together to make some changes in their local schools and communities. They almost always do. They then develop a plan of three to five “winnable” actions, form themselves into an Action Team, and seek allies from principals, teachers, social agencies, other parents’ groups, and the like. Parent Action Teams have “won”:

- school uniforms;
- changes in the preparation of school lunches;
- new programs in or in partnership with the local school, including ESL, GED, and computer literacy;
- improved communications with principals and elected officials;
- school safety patrols;
- spaces and events in the local community for families.

- 2) **Parent-to-parent outreach.** Parent Action Team members who wish to participate in “phase 2” leadership training then learn how to do effective one-on-ones as ways of a) bringing more people in the community into relationship with one another, and b) getting more parents involved in community change. The one-on-one is coupled with a structured survey instrument that also gives the Action Team “hard” data on what parents in the community need and want.

Parent leaders do the outreach work in teams to provide mutual support for one another and to complement one another’s strengths. In many communities, a bi-

lingual team is a necessity. Thus far, parent action teams in two Chicago communities have conducted over 3000 one-on-ones. Through the process, they have been able to build the “case” for parent-controlled community centers in local schools, for improved access to adult education programs, etc. They have also drawn more parents into the leadership development process.

3) **Building community organizations that embrace parent leadership.** One of the more critical, and less structured, parts of COFI’s “model” is the work of building local organizations that fully include parents as leaders. Sometimes this means making space for parents in traditional multi-issue community organizations, in local schools, in social agencies. Sometimes it means supporting parents who want to build their own organizations. Some examples of this work to date:

- Many COFI-trained parent leaders have run for and won seats on local school councils, increasing the number of well-prepared, vocal leaders for this critical school governance role.
- In one community, COFI staff have brokered greater inclusion of parents in leadership roles in a traditional multi-issue community organization.
- Also in that community, COFI staff have assisted parent leadership teams to create their own community center in that school, developing a governance structure and resources that assure parent control of the center.
- In another community, COFI created a project that would develop the capacities of parents to guide community decision making about a private foundation’s investment in children and families. From the parent leaders’ perspective, the agenda, dictated by a foundation, was too limiting: these parent leaders have now decided to form their own organization. COFI staff provided technical assistance.
- Through that very project, however, participating settlement houses began to “see the light” about the benefits of including parents more deeply in agency planning and decision making. COFI is now training one settlement house’s staff in this process.

***Other examples of community action/building work nationwide***

- **“Cultural work”** is a visible community building strategy among family-based community action groups. The corporate family of Black Belt Human Resource Development Corporation and Mothers of Many in Selma, Alabama also includes a museum to remember the contributions of residents in the civil rights movement. MOM builds group and community solidarity with song. Pacoima Urban Village similarly builds solidarity with drama. West Town Leadership Project parents have hosted *Kermes*, fairs that bring people out and together and sponsored holiday celebrations such as Cinco de Mayo.
- **Creating public spaces and programs in communities for families** is another concrete (literally) means of building community. COFI-affiliated parents have “won” community centers that they program and govern in public schools. Parents in “Beacon Schools” and other “full service schools” have made sure that programs and activities include all family members. Pacoima Urban Village hosts many “whole family” events, including trips to beaches and museums. WILP parents created a computer literacy class for parents and children to attend together.
- **Involving parents and other family members in the civic sphere** accomplishes the goal of increasing civic participation, generally, and of placing concerns of families on the community’s agenda. Parents United for Child Care creates leadership space for parents in strengthening child care resources, a critical part of any healthy community’s response to working families. West Town Leadership Project parents serve on various community councils and advisory boards. MOM leaders provide important -- seemingly dominant -- civic energy and leadership in Selma.
- **Strengthening the community’s public and nonprofit institutional response to families** builds community by breaking down the “us/them” sense between institutions and those they serve, and by making these institutions more welcoming of, accessible to, and used by the community. New ESL and GED classes not only build human capital; they also draw people into the civic sphere and into dialog with one another. “User friendly” agency policies (child care, transportation, bilingual staff, etc.) make it possible for young isolated mothers to attend classes and groups, assured that their children are well cared for while they do. Improved lines of communication between parents and principals, and between parents and agency directors, yield deeper parent cooperation in helping these institutions achieve their goals.
- **Organizing as strengthening mutual support** is an especially important community building strategy in communities of high mobility, transiency, and

distrust. COFF's emphases on mutual support within parent leadership teams and in the Parent-to-Parent outreach process is just one example. Hope Community's "bricks and mortar" community development work starts with relationship development. Minneapolis-based organizing consultant Julie Ristau, Lisa Abbott of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and every MOM leader, says that strengthened relationship building is as integral to the organizing process as winning actions. In all these organizations, much leadership development and training time is spent in one-on-ones and small group discussions.

### ***Roles for professionals***

Probably one of the clearest themes that emerges from conversations nationwide is the understanding that the professional is the "facilitator" or "coach," not the "expert" in fostering family-based community change. Yet it is their expertise, combined with their commitment to share it with others and their ability to teach it, that makes professionals useful. Some examples:

- Visual and performing artists provide ideas and teach methods for producing community-building cultural activities, such as drama, murals, festivals.
- Organizers help indigenous leaders convert "problems" to "issues" to "winnable actions," and encourage them to tackle evermore challenging issues.
- Professionals who understand the systems can open up doors for dialogue between parent leaders and institutional leaders.
- People with experience in organizational and resource development can provide technical assistance to parent leaders in institutionalizing their groups and running their programs.

## **Public policy change**

Just as leadership development methods vary widely in structure and formality among family-based community action groups, so do policy change methods. At one end of the spectrum, MOM leaders learn of a problem or injustice and simply call up their associates in the general assembly. At the other end, PUC was founded to tackle an already-identified policy issue, child care and then developed a grassroots parent leadership base. PUC stands apart from the many family issues-specific advocacy groups nationwide in the depth and intentionality of its commitment to develop parent leaders: parents are a majority of board members, a necessary stakeholder in attendance in every policy-relevant meeting, and a consciously cultivated and developed leadership base.

COFI stands somewhere between these two approaches. COFI has intentionally *not* ventured quickly into policy campaigns out of commitment to the process of having parent leaders define the policy agenda and lead the change process. At the same time, since its founding, COFI has consciously sought to 1) develop the capacities of parents to lead systems change, and 2) create space for them at policy-making tables. While the parent leadership team has been emerging, COFI staff have participated in many rounds of conversations with advocacy groups challenging them to become more fully inclusive of grassroots voices.

Like COFI, Hope Community has always had systems change as part of its mission. Hope is moving slowly, but steadily, to develop resident leadership capacity to advocate for policy change. They begin by involving staff in an intensive process of listening to what concerns the residents voice (jobs, education, and welfare reform have been consistent concerns), and cultivating staff relationships with policy makers and policy advocates working on these issues. The idea in cultivating these relationships is not to speak “for” the residents, but rather to make space for them in policy making circles.

Other “in between” approaches that bear special observation are several southern multi-issue community organizations that are taking on welfare reform campaigns. In this case, the organization’s “bottoms-up” systems change infrastructure is in place, but the change focus has not historically been family-focused. The imperative for the welfare reform campaigns seem to be emanating from a shift toward more careful listening to women in their constituency. As women’s voices get heard, these organizations have begun to place access to child care, adult educational opportunity and other issues connected to welfare reform on a par with holding coal and timber companies accountable and other concerns typically voiced strongly by men. Several southern organizers told us specifically that the welfare reform work is the product of the organizations finally listening seriously to their women members.

So many of the organizations we talked with nationwide could essentially be described as single-issue, or issue-focused rather than parent-focused, that this phenomenon bears some reflection. In some cases, like PUCC and the Montana welfare group Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL), the organization was founded by a small group of professionals who wished to fight injustice within the system. But it would be far too facile to say that issues-focused organizations are “professional model” and parent-focused community organizations are “organic.” In other cases, like schools, the organization comes out of the informal, voluntary tradition but focuses on that one institution. And in others, like the southern community organizations now working on welfare reform, the campaign comes out of a multi-issue community organizing tradition that tackles issues as a means of building grassroots power.

Two issues -- school improvement and welfare reform -- seemed the most frequently occurring ones for policy change among the groups we talked with. There was little overlap between groups working on school change and groups working on welfare reform.

We need to think about the implications of all this in the coming year or two. Some questions:

- 1) How does family-based community action approach single issue groups? There are “pros” of being issue specific -- clarity of focus, depth of expertise, niche. There are “cons” -- “winning” one family issue at the expense of another, sustaining the organization long run once the issue is “won,” developing a sufficiently large and a clearly parent-controlled organization when only one issue is on the plate, etc. And there is the question: How does this single issue continually build community and parent leadership?
- 2) Can family-based community action be the “glue” that can bring diverse issues specific groups to coalesce on a broader range of family-focused issues? What *are* the opportunities for building larger and more powerful grassroots coalitions for family policy issues by coalescing welfare groups, school groups, and youth groups?
- 3) Might there be capacity to “grow” the family-based community action field by linking with some traditional but nondoctrinaire multi-issues community organizations (like Kentuckians For The Commonwealth and other Southern Empowerment Project members) helping them incorporate or shift to a family-centered focus?
- 4) Lastly, can family-based community action be the “glue” that can bring family policy advocacy and community organizing together within a particular community, and across communities, under a set of policy making principles that centers on parent leadership and full participation?

## **Key features and issues facing family-based community action organizations**

### *Key characteristics of family-based community action organizations*

The family-based community action organizations we examined most closely differed both in issue emphasis and organizational structure, but had some significant similarities as well.

All the organizations work to win or create community improvements for families. But they emphasized different specific change objectives. Pacoima Urban Village aspired to impact local community economics. Mothers of Many fought to improve schools and reduce violence in the community. Hope Community worked on adult access to jobs and education and on neighborhood stabilization. Parents United worked mainly on child care. COFI groups tend to focus on local school improvement issues, often moving to create school-based community centers, as well as on adult education and community safety issues.

Regarding organizational structure, we discerned three types among the five groups. The three "professional" organizations more or less resembled the conventional nonprofit organization led by skilled staff (organizers, trainers and administrators). Mothers of Many is a structure in which a few esteemed community matriarchs recruit, cultivate and coordinate others' activities. These key individuals might not hold staff positions, or even positions of official authority, but their capacities to assess situations and people, and their history of effective developmental leadership make them centrally important. Pacoima Urban Village offered another organizational structure, a "web" image in which authority and leadership was dispersed across a range of people, some on staff and others community members.

The family-based community action organizations we got to know were similar in their fluidity and holism. Fluidity showed in the blurred lines among staff and leaders, and among members, clients and volunteers. Key staff generally self-identify as parents and family leaders: this is a crucial aspect of their motivation and qualification for doing this work. Some people start in a staff role while emphasizing their personal engagement as parents; others start as parents in a leadership development class or as volunteers in a project, and eventually gain a paid staff position.

Due to the depth of the personal identification with the organization's mission, however, whether one is paid or not is not necessarily an accurate indicator of one's level of responsibility, commitment or activity. Virtually all of these organizations had experienced financial shortfalls at some point in their history. When the money is good, people are designated as "staff" and get paid for their work; when the money runs short, staff hours are

cut back but people continue to be active. Staff titles and official job descriptions may not be accurate indicators of a person's role or importance either, sometimes people are paid to be an administrative assistant or receptionist, but their crucial contributions flow from their community connections and skills -- they engage in organizing, training and mentoring from that position; and they hold that official clerical position simply because those were the functions that could get funded.

Indeed, many staff at family-based community action organizations prefer not to work full-time, because they want to reserve time to continue in their own family responsibilities.

Because of the blurring (or integrating) of personal, family and community leadership that these organizations recognize, the organizational culture, to a degree common among women's organizations but uncommon in many other community and civic groups, encourages members and staff to talk about their personal and family lives while at the organization. There is great continuity and synergy between personal and public, family and organizational interests.

### ***Building and sustaining family-based community action organizations***

**Summary:** Like virtually any emerging grassroots nonprofit, family-based community action groups tend to start small and to grow slowly. To a great extent, slow growth is intentional and planned, to assure that grassroots leaders fully “own” the organization. To some extent, however, growth is unnecessarily (to the ownership process) constrained by lack of skilled staff and lack of funding. The potential of building and sustaining family-based community action organizations by “converting” already well-developed nonprofits is yet another strategy to be more fully explored.

**Leaders:** We have previously described this vital organization building block in the section, “Models of family-based community leadership development.”

**Membership:** The organizations we talked with had widely varying approaches to membership. Some, like Parents United for Child Care, had clearly delineated formal membership structures, and “used” their membership rosters as a symbol and source of fuel for organizational strength. Others, like Hope Community and Pacoima Urban Village, confer informal membership on anyone who becomes involved. The latter, however, *does* make formal the expectation that anyone who benefits from Pacoima’s programs also “gives back” by volunteering for the organization. Pacoima is an excellent illustration of the fluidity of the boundaries of “client,” “member,” and “volunteer” in these organizations. This fluidity is a strength, enabling the organization to see people many organizations marginalize as “the helped” as someone who can participate and strengthen the organization

and the community. COFI is struggling with the issue of membership. Some local organizations COFI works with are institution-based, and the challenge has been to establish parents' groups as institutional members *and* to make more space for parent leaders among the existing institutional members. Other local groups are establishing individual memberships. COFI presently has no members of its own, and is examining the strengths and limitations of this situation.

### ***Member recruitment and support***

Family-focused community organizations use the usual methods to recruit members -- one-on-ones, flyers, meetings, announcements, etc. Several practices they use to recruit, sustain and build members seem especially important.

- First, these organizations go where parents go -- they are able to recruit well and to sustain involvement because they meet parents on grounds comfortable and convenient to them. COFI recruits leaders and provides leadership training in local schools, day care centers, and settlement houses. Hope Community and PUCC hold house meetings.
- Second, the imperative of marrying the personal with the public seems to make possible a deeper and fuller connection with people's self-interests than the traditional organizing's private/public split does. Members of family-based community action groups come together to develop themselves and their families, as well as their schools and communities. They personally benefit immediately from membership.
- Third, the organizations are deeply committed to consciously developing mutual support as a membership "service." As we have seen, some organizations like MOM actually grew out of mutually supportive relationships, and others, like the communities COFI serves, have consciously created mutual support structures in communities where they did not exist. Whatever the origin, members of family-based community action groups come together to give and receive mutual support, as well as to improve their schools and build their communities.
- The last practice is the breadth of ways parenting is visibly honored -- and, consequently, members are valued -- by family-based community action groups. Meetings are held at times convenient for parents. Child care is provided. Meals and snacks are available for all family members who attend. Meetings integrate time for personal and family storytelling and problem solving.

## ***Challenges in sustaining and organizing members***

Lest we paint too rosy a picture of membership building and sustenance strategies, we observe that many family-based community action groups are struggling with critical membership issues.

- One is the balance between supporting members -- through personal development, mutual aid, and program delivery -- and moving the organization forward on issues and actions. This is the classic “maintenance” vs. “goal” function tension of any organization; it perhaps seems heightened in family-based community action because we feel the pressure from traditional organizing (and funders of traditional organizing) for numbers and wins.
- Most of these groups are struggling to escape the limitations of conventional dues-based membership paradigms to create more appropriate mechanisms for belonging and leadership. Recognizing that relationships and the opportunity to wield power are key, rather than a bureaucratized membership structure. Hope Community, for example, has purposely not created a formal membership structure, perceiving that would limit involvement. Instead, Hope offers a variety of opportunities for initial involvement including community-based education, leadership development and community events involving adults, youth and families. Those who participate more intensely may become Hope Community leaders through a variety of roles: as collaborating teachers for community-based education, as members of organizing and issue committees, as well as through participation in other planning groups and projects. The structure of the Hope Organizing Committee, open to those who have attended basic leadership training sessions, is purposely kept flexible. Although Hope’s physical revitalization vision is focused on a 16-block area, people who participate come from neighborhoods beyond those boundaries.

**Staff:** This is a sufficiently critical challenge that it warrants a full discussion. See next section.

**Governance:** Unfortunately, we were not able to probe this important organizational building block in great depth. In informal and emerging organizations, most board members tend to come from the leadership base. Such a board lends the great strength of assuring good linkage with the community, but, beyond some grassroots fundraising, this kind of

board has limited resource development capacity. At the other extreme is a group of organizations -- COFI among them -- whose boards are primarily professionals; creating space for parents at the Board table is a challenge before them. We cannot think of a family-based community action organization that has successfully balanced business, civic, and grassroots leadership in building a board capable of raising funds, holding the staff executive accountable for the efficient achievement of organizational goals, and maintaining accountability to parents and the community.

**Funding:** Family-based community action is beset by all the funding problems community organizing and policy advocates all over the country face. They are inherently change-focused and thus threatening to traditional corporate and private philanthropy. They are neither bricks-and-mortar focused nor service-delivery focused and, thus, not of interest to traditional donors. They do not provide traditional public, social, or educational services and thus cannot rely on government grants and contracts. Their memberships are by definition of low income people who cannot raise substantial sums of funds. On top of all this, at least in Chicago, family-based community action is only beginning to be recognized as “real” organizing by traditional funders of organizing.

Informal family-based community action groups nationwide seem to sustain themselves very largely through volunteer efforts such as volunteer staff and small grassroots fundraising efforts. The more formal, staffed, groups sustain themselves through grants and, if they have memberships, through membership fees. Neither situation is, to say the least, ideal. Both informal organizations we met with last fall -- Pacoima Urban Village and MOM -- lamented the limitations placed on them for lack of resources. And every grant-supported organization we know recognizes the labor-intensiveness of the process and the built-in proclivity to displace the organization’s goals with the funders. We discovered some creative resource ideas through our conversations that bear further discussion and development among the community of family-based community action groups nationwide.

- The first is raising resources through the celebration of culture. Pacoima Urban Village hosts dramatic performances. MOM seems ripe for musical performance. Whether its parent organization’s museum might generate revenue for other groups remains a question mark, for museums themselves are costly to maintain. Nevertheless, MOM secures resource support from the museum, anyway, by sharing staff (the museum can pay staff that MOM cannot). West Town parent leaders have raised funds through *kermes* (fairs). Sales of the baked goods or craft work of particular cultures are other examples.
- The second is connecting family-based community action to public services goals, and securing some (not predominant) funds from public

sources. Family-based community action, as we have seen, is already showing great capacity to build community and, thus, “prevent” family and community problems that would otherwise generate social services spending. Some public policy campaigns of family-based community action create new public resources to support this work. Two examples are creating lines in school budgets for parent leadership development and creating community centers that rewrite staff credentials to embrace parent leadership. Family-based community action also generates new community capacity for human service planning; one untapped opportunity is that of securing public support to develop and nurture governing structures to make human services more fully accountable to the community’s needs and priorities.

### ***Developing and sustaining staff for family-based community organizations***

Senior staff at family-based community action organizations come from varied backgrounds. Some come from labor organizing (especially in the services sector), some from community organizing, some from community development and planning. For example, one of the senior organizers at our meeting had formerly worked for Industrial Areas Foundation, another had worked for AFSCME and another, for a community organization mentored by a protégé of Saul Alinsky. Others had backgrounds in theater and teaching, public health, or public and corporate management.

What linked them together was their family and community commitments. Most were driven by their own concerns as parents. Some had left other careers to parent their own young children. They got involved in family-focused projects, first as concerned parents and later crossed into paid staff roles. Others began doing family-focused organizing at a stage in their lives when their own children were grown. They had strong community and extended family ties that motivated them to do this work, and they had a multi-generational view of personal, family and community leadership.

To some degree or another, these groups are also growing their own staff leaders. Most of the organizations at our conference included some staff who had started as participants in parent leadership training or other program activities sponsored by the organization, and whose involvement had deepened and expanded over time -- as one outgrowth of their personal leadership development -- into paid staff responsibilities. Capable parents move into various staff niches: some as trainers, others as office staff, others as organizers, managers and policy planners.

Funding shortages, of course, constrain the growth of staff. Some organizations, notably Parents United in Boston, have dealt creatively with this by using AmeriCorps and other stipend-paid volunteer service programs, college work-study and internship programs to expand their (nominally) paid staff. These quasi-staff slots enable talented and ambitious parent leaders to cross the threshold into doing this work for pay, and draw in students and recent graduates excited by this kind of community action.

However, senior organizers and policy workers are hard to find, and slow to develop. It seems to take years of seasoning and mentorship for people coming up through parent training and volunteer experience to develop the depth and breadth of capacities required to handle senior responsibilities in planning, coordinating, and strategizing. For some of the organizations in our exploration (including COFI itself), skilled staff is a critical shortage; this is one of the primary bottlenecks slowing their growth and impact. Developing the networks and training programs that can attract and accelerate the development of more skilled staff is a critical challenge for this field.

Interestingly, many of the people drawn to this field want part-time, not full-time, paid work. They are leaders in their families, and are unwilling to withdraw from their own family life to the degree that full-time work requires. Therefore many organizations are innovating with staff structures with part-time positions.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusions**

***A. While the term “movement” seems a stretch, we identified, without much difficulty, over 50 groups nationwide who focused on “family” issues and drew leaders from the ranks of parents and other family members.***

- 1) The groups vary greatly with respect to origins (organizing, volunteerism, advocacy, community development), formality of structure, formality of leadership development, and issues they tackle. Many draw deeply from popular education principles and methods, and take a “developmental” approach to leadership and action.
- 2) The variety of approaches to family-based community action seems to be the rich product of differing responses to differing community strengths and needs, of differing cultural traditions, and of the creative spirit of the groups’ founders.
- 3) These groups remain largely marginal and unrecognized in the organizing/development field, and they remain largely isolated from one another, raising nagging influence and sustainability questions.

***B. Despite the differences in origins and communities, family-based community action is united in its principles and in several key practice elements.***

- 1) The principles are these:
  - Families are the building blocks of communities.
  - Parents (and other family members) are a powerful, often overlooked, source of community leadership.
  - Organized parents (and other family members) can identify and win community improvements and public policy changes that benefit families.

2) The practice elements are these:

- Personal, family, school, and community leadership issues are consciously connected, with recognition that people cannot lead well in the public sphere if their personal lives are in disarray, and that “private” individual and family problems often have public roots and public remedy.
- Supportive networks are consciously developed among leaders and within communities, recognizing that many of our highly mobile communities lack these support networks which are essential for human development and community health.
- Cultural activities are encouraged as a means of building solidarity and of celebrating community
- As in other good organizing, one-on-ones and small group activities are the essential tools of building relationships, understanding and discovering people’s concerns, and drawing people into participation.

***C. Family-focused community organizing builds the local community by***

- 1) reconnecting people with their culture and uniting them in it;
- 2) strengthening relationship and mutual support networks;
- 3) creating public spaces and community-identified programs for parents and other family members to participate in civic life;
- 4) strengthening accountability of community institutions -- of the schools, of social agencies, of elected officials -- to families.

***D. Family-based community action is re-shaping public policies affecting families in some communities, but its policy change potential is as yet largely unrealized.***

Parents United for Child Care has won major new public resources for child care, successfully placing after school care on the state’s agenda. Other groups have won “full service schools” and improvements in state regulations implementing welfare “reform.” But the promise of much greater impact is almost palpable. The unrealized policy potential lies

just as much in the process -- making sure that parents centrally guide the agenda and the campaign -- as in the outcomes.

***E. The growth of family-focused community organizations is thwarted by lack of skilled staff organizers and nonprofit managers, and by limited resources.***

Staff who can play the coaching/training/coordinating/planning roles required to develop membership and leadership, translate personal and family concerns into community and policy change agendas, design and execute successful change campaigns, and maintain organizational stability, are in short supply. Sophisticated skills are required to do this work well, and these capabilities take time to develop. This shortage of skilled staff is true throughout the organizing sector. It is especially acute in family-focused work where there are not yet the regional and national networks of organizations, training institutes and mentors that labor and traditional community organizing have developed over the past several decades.

An additional barrier to recruiting and developing organizers and coordinators is posed by the short-term and shifting funding base with which family-focused organizations now struggle.

Widespread interest in family-focused organizing by many community organizations, family service institutions and school systems means that the field could grow rapidly - but growth will be slow until the pool of skilled practitioners capable of responding to these invitations expands.

***F. There seems to be a variety of ways to build and nourish family-based community action, among them . . .***

- 1) Reaching into family support, early childhood education, schools, and any other direct service program that has a “parent involvement” goal, and transforming “involvement” into “leadership development.”
- 2) Similarly reaching out to other programs that are focused on the healthy human development of adults -- including welfare-to-work programs and maternal and child health outreach programs like Healthy Families -- and seeing how they might take the personal development process a few steps further . . . and build community support and policy constituencies for their programs in the process.
- 3) Work with those existing community organizing and development networks that are not unduly dogmatic, and integrate family-based community action into their

work. Look out for and listen to the informal, voluntary groups of women leaders in communities and assess opportunities for partnerships, technical assistance, etc. to take those who wish to the next level.

- 4) Examine the potential within “single issue” parent based organizations -- school reform, welfare reform, etc. -- to build multi-issue family-focused organizations.

## **Recommendations for grantsmaking**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, among several others nationwide, has recently committed to a place-based grantsmaking program that would support projects and processes to “transform” extremely low income urban communities around the country. (Mott, Rockefeller, Surdna, MacArthur, Ford, and Pew are others that have developed similar efforts in recent years; Kellogg has one on the drawing board but has reduced grantsmaking activity this past year.) The Casey Foundation, unlike many of these others, is expressly interested in the intersection of family and community development. Our discussions with family-based community action projects nationwide has generated some ideas that might assist the Casey Foundation in encouraging similar efforts in communities in which they make grants.

***A. Look for indigenous groups/interest/capacity in local communities who can organize, tap into existing social support networks, and create social support for isolated families.*** Finding local leadership, action and support networks is a basic skill practiced by many community organizers, though family-based community action requires more attention to mothers’ networks than many Alinsky-tradition organizers are used to. Another set of tools that could aid the search process, perhaps especially for people from service-delivery backgrounds, is the “assets mapping” methods developed by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD at Northwestern University).

***B. When such indigenous capacity and interests exists, and when the involved people wish to take their work “to the next level,” involve veteran groups like COFI in providing technical support to them to strengthen their voice.*** The goal would be to transform the community by transforming the institutional infrastructure in the community and, in so doing, create more real spaces for parent civic involvement.

***C. Strengthen already-existing family-based community action groups' practice by continuing to bring family-focused practitioners together.***

As we began to do in November 1998, these gatherings help us learn from one another, validate one another, and sharpen our practice. This kind of dialogue can strengthen local level work as well as build thinking and action nationwide.

***D. "Grow" already-existing family-based community action groups by providing funding support to adequately staff them.*** The work cannot "scale up" without dedicated staff, despite the enormous and contributions of volunteers and of part-time staff-parents.

***E. Create (fund) opportunities for veteran family-based community action groups to advise, coach, teach other agencies, organizers, and individuals who may wish to adapt family-focused models/methods.***

COFI's one-day training at the Casey Foundation is one example of this kind of activity. Targeted audiences might include settlement houses, family support agencies, traditional community organizations, community development corporations, and the like.

***F. Produce descriptive print materials about family-based community action*** that will spark changes of direction by traditional organizing, development, and service agencies, as well as by private and public funders.

***G. Develop some easy-to-use "tools" that would support the retraining of traditional groups, support to indigenous groups, and the "scaling up" of existing family-focused groups.*** We make this recommendation with some profound ambivalence -- we have seen too many people take a curriculum guide and assume it's all they need to implement the model well. We have also seen tools reified -- the tool becomes "the program." Nevertheless, accompanied by the development of a hands-on teaching/training capacity in the field, tools have their place.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A**

### ***Participants in the meeting at Illinois Beach State Park, November 5-6, 1999***

#### **MOMs - Mothers of Many**

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## **Appendix B:**

### ***Persons and Organizations Contacted for the Project***

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Mothers of Many  
Selma, AL

Molly Barnett  
Study Circles Resource Center

Heather Booth  
Washington, D.C.

Charles Bruner  
Child & Family Policy Center  
Des Moines, IA

Don Elmer  
Center for Community Change  
San Francisco, CA

Audrey Gardner  
National Self-Help Clearinghouse  
New York, NY

Robert Halpern  
Erickson Institute  
Chicago, IL

Jenecia Hayes  
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Conference, LA Public Education Fund  
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Jackie Kendall  
Midwest Academy  
Chicago, IL

Jill Kinney  
People Helping People  
Tacoma, WA

Janet Lansberry  
Community Training & Assistance Center  
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Jorge Lara  
Pacoima Urban Village  
Pacoima, CA

Eunice Letzing  
Seattle, WA

Nora Lichtash  
Women's Community Revitalization  
Project  
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Lakita Logan  
Sisters in Portland Impacting Real Issues  
Together (SPIRIT)  
Portland, OR

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Andy Mott  
Center for Community Change  
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Joe Nathan  
Center for School Change  
Minneapolis, MN

Janice Nittoli  
Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Baltimore, MD

Beth Newkirk  
Organizing Apprenticeship Program  
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Yoland Trevino  
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Monique Washington  
Community Advocates for Educational  
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**O**ur mission is to help increase the effectiveness and impact of socially concerned organizations in responding to social problems. We work in support of organizations and communities to help them achieve their goals.

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**W**e can help you to:

- Improve your understanding** of key program elements that contribute to program effectiveness.
- Improve program impact** through integrating principles of program effectiveness into day-to-day operations.
- Improve management** of resources to achieve program purposes.
- Improve the fit** between your organization’s activities and your community’s needs and opportunities.
- Improve commitment** of staff and Board to your organization’s mission.
- Improve communication** between your organization and its various stakeholders and publics.
- Improve linkages** between your organization and other like-minded organizations.
- Improve access** to tools and support services that strengthen program performance.