

ECON Website
Frequently Asked Questions About Community Organizing
August, 2010

- **What is a job description for a community organizer?**
 - I. Conduct Large Numbers of One-On-One Visits to Help Identify and Recruit Large Numbers of Individuals and Formal/Informal Groups to the Neighborhood Organization, and Build Relationships of Trust and Respect with Potential Supporter and Sponsors.
 - II. Assist Volunteers in the Three-Step Process of Community Organizing
 - A. Conducting a Listening Process in Order to Identify Neighborhood Themes and Individuals/Organizations to Solve These Same Themes
 - B. Doing Research to Find Potential Solutions to Neighborhood Themes
 - C. Mobilize Large Numbers of Individuals and Organizations to Solve Problems with Either
 - 1. Self-Help Solutions, or
 - 2. More Commonly with Partners (Government, Schools, Police, Businesses, etc.)
 - III. Help Volunteers to Build and Maintain a Multi-Issue, Long-Term Neighborhood Organization, Including
 - A. Governing Board
 - B. Working Groups to Research and Find Solutions to Neighborhood Themes
 - IV. Fundraising and Administration
 - A. Grant Writing
 - B. Assist Volunteers Raise Local Funds (Membership Dues, Business Sponsors, Fundraising Events, etc.) to Help the Neighborhood Organization Become More Self-Sufficient and Independent
 - C. Manage an Office and Financial Records
 - V. Conduct Trainings for Local Volunteers on Such Themes as How to Do One-On-One Visits, How to Do a Listening Process, How to Research and Solve Neighborhood Problems, Negotiating, How to Lead an Effective Meeting, etc.
- **What characteristics should a community organizer have?**
 - I. Relational, Likes People, Works Well with Diverse People and Groups, and is a Good Listener

- II. Has a Passion for Fairness and Justice, and is Comfortable Dealing with Power
- III. Curiosity About People and Politics
- IV. Self-Directed and Willing To Take Risks
- V. Willing to Work in the Background and Help Develop Others' Skills
- VI. Self-Confident, Professional, Good Sense of Humor, Willing to Learn, and Be Held Accountable
- VII. Writing, Public Speaking, and Administrative Skills
- VIII. Willing to Work Long and Flexible Hours

- Please Note: Community Organizers learn their job by doing community organizing with the assistance of training and consulting from experienced community organizers. So when someone is hired, they are not expected to know all of the skills listed in the job description. But they should demonstrate the characteristics listed above.

- **What is the difference between a community organizer and a volunteer?**

A community organizer is usually a paid professional. The role of the community organizer is to help volunteers build an organization and assist the volunteers in all aspects of the community organizing process. The organizer is never the spokesperson for the organization – i.e. the organizer does not speak at public meetings, press conferences, etc. The job of the organizer is to help prepare volunteers to speak for and on behalf of the organization.

- **Is the community organizer a person from outside the community or can it be a community resident?**

Usually the community organizer is a person from the outside. This helps to make clear that the organizer has no direct self-interest in the themes worked on by the organization other than helping the volunteers solve their problems and achieve their visions for their neighborhood. Occasionally a community organizer will come from the local community, but in this case it is very important to have an open and transparent hiring process and to make very clear to all stakeholders the difference between the role of the organizer and the roll of the volunteers.

- **When can the organizer withdraw from the community?**

Community organizing seeks to build long-term, multi-theme organizations. It is common for a community organizer to work in the same community for 5-7 years. After approximately 7 years, the organizer loses his or her “freshness” and is in need of a new challenge. The organization is also in need of “fresh blood”, a new organizer with new and different perspectives.

Volunteers can do community organizing without a professional organizer, but the challenges are great and the organization is often less efficient and unable to work on as many themes.

- **Can a community organizer work in more than one community?**

It depends upon the size of the community, the stage of the organization’s development, and the style of organizing.

If community organizing is taking place in a set of small villages that are located close to each other, one organizer can work in 2-4 villages. But in a large urban neighborhood, it is common to have an organizer working exclusively in this one area.

During the early stages of building an organization, it is best if the organizer can focus on one organization. But after the organization has been built, has experienced some successes, and has a core group of active and experienced volunteers, it is possible for the organizer to expand the organization into new areas or give it a little less time while developing a new organization elsewhere.

There are two main styles of community organizing – developing an organization of individual members or developing an organization of organizations. In an organization of individual members, the organizer (and volunteers) must reach out to and involve each individual person – a necessary, important, but time consuming task. If a neighborhood or village has existing organizations (such as clubs, churches, NGO’s, etc.) it may be possible for the organizer (and volunteers) to reach out to the leaders of these organizations and train these leaders to involve their memberships. This is a more efficient use of the organizer’s and volunteers’ time and allows an organization to involve more people and often cover a larger geographic area.

- **Does community organizing exclusively address the problems of disadvantaged groups?**

In the USA, community organizing has primarily addressed the problems and visions of disadvantaged groups (low-income, unemployed, homeless, migrants, minorities, disabled, etc.). But increasingly middle class residents have become engaged in community organizing because inequalities and injustices of wealth and power have had a direct impact upon them as well – i.e. it is in the self-interest of middle class persons to become organized.

In Central and Eastern Europe where the practices of active and powerful citizens’ participation were absent for over fifty years, the practices of community organizing can be effectively used with the vast majority of residents and citizens.

- **Is conflict a necessary part of community organizing?**

The founder of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, often spoke about conflict and confrontation in community organizing. When ordinary residents or citizens request or demand improvements in their neighborhoods, the reaction of the government officials or others in power determines whether conflict will arise and whether confrontation will be necessary. There are many examples from community organizing in the USA and elsewhere when persons in power have welcomed the input of citizens and have negotiated in good faith from the start. But there are also many examples when persons in power said “No! No! No!” to very reasonable requests and demands of citizens, and conflict arose.

Community organizations should begin a negotiating process with persons in power with an approach that seeks to make these persons allies and to work with them. It is wise for the community organization to reflect upon the questions, “What is in the self-interest of the person in power?” and “Can we create a win-win situation where we get what we want and help the person in power get something that they want?” But community organizations must be prepared to confront persons in power who do not negotiate in good faith.

The key reason that conflict arises in community organizing is because government officials and others in power have conflicting demands placed upon them – for example, “Should I or we allocate resources to this neighborhood or instead to a large corporation that has also made a request from us?” When ordinary residents and citizens are not organized and make no requests or demands upon people in power, this conflict does not arise but improvements in the neighborhood also do not occur.

- **What can a community organization do to make a target appear at a public meeting?**

Community organizing refers to persons in power, persons who can give us what we want around a particular theme, as “targets”. Community organizing often uses large public meetings as a way of demonstrating their power (i.e. that they have the support of large numbers of people) and of securing commitments from targets to do what the community wants.

A public meeting will usually begin with the volunteers from community organization explaining the problem that needs to be solved, offer personal testimonials about how the problem impacts their lives, and stating what needs to be done and by whom in order to solve the problem. The target is then invited to answer a yes-or-no question(s) – i.e. “Will you, Mr. Mayor, do this and that to help solve this neighborhood problem?” The target is then invited to give their yes-or-no answer and a few minutes to explain why they answered yes or no. This direct format is used in order to secure a clear answer from the target and not waste the time of all those persons in attendance.

Prior to a large public meeting, often a core group of volunteers (a negotiating team) from the community organization will meet with the target. In this meeting, they will explain to the target the problem, the potential solution,

and what they are requesting from the target. But unlike a large public meeting, a negotiating session is a dialogue. For example, after proposing a solution to the problem, the volunteers may ask the target, "We are open to other solutions if you can propose something better." At the end of this negotiating meeting, the volunteers will then invite the target to the public meeting, clearly explaining the agenda and what will be asked of the target, and also explaining that the media and large numbers of people are expected to attend. The date and place of the meeting is agreed upon by the volunteers and the target. If the target states he or she cannot come at the specific time and date already set by the organization, the volunteers ask the target to send a representative who can speak on behalf of the target.

- **What if the target sends a replacement or simply does not come?**

If the target sends a replacement to a public meeting, the first question by the community organization to this replacement should be, "Are you here to speak for and on behalf of the target?" If the replacement answers "Yes", the meeting continues. If the replacement answers "No", the conversation with the replacement stops and the community organization publically declares their disappointment and their continued resolve to work with the target.

If the target does not come nor sends a replacement, a common strategy used in community organizing is to have an empty chair with a name tag of the target at the front of the public meeting. The meeting proceeds with the organization declaring their disappointment and explaining next strategic steps to persuade the target to be responsive.