



Organizing for Civic Engagement in Oklahoma City

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Imagine the following people seated around tables in Oklahoma City to share personal stories and listen to one another discuss their most important concerns: a nun from Guatemala working with immigrants; a man recently released after seven years in prison; the principal of a low-income public high school; a prominent African-American pastor; a variety of grandparents and members of various church congregations and civic organizations. It is challenging for such a diverse set of people to discover concerns shared across their families and neighborhoods, and even more challenging to build relationships strong enough to allow sustained cooperation to press for changes in the larger community. Yet the challenges are being met through “Voices Organized in Civic Engagement,” VOICE for short, a growing coalition of thirty religious congregations, schools, and nonprofit organizations that formed after Oklahomans sought training and inspiration from the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national community organizing umbrella organization whose current co-chair, Ernesto Cortes, Jr., has spent a lifetime helping groups learn to work together for bottom-up change.

Local religious and civic leaders in Oklahoma City knew they needed new ideas and approaches to overcome polarization and previous failures at bridging racial, economic, and cultural chasms. These leaders turned to the Industrial Areas Foundation after studying the success of affiliated community organizing efforts like Citizens Organized for Public Service in San Antonio, Texas, “One LA” in Los Angeles, California, or Valley Interfaith in southern Texas. In the Industrial Areas Foundation approach, leaders from various community organizations engage in a sustained process of discovering shared interests and concerns, preparing their members to cooperate again and again to push public officials and business leaders for concrete reforms and improvements.

How the Coalition was Built

For several years Oklahoma City leaders met to build relationships, share stories about problems facing their families, and study models of collective action. Even choosing the name VOICE for the organization was delayed until relationships gelled. The overriding goal in this style of community organizing is to build sustainable collective power. Particular issues are chosen not just because they are important, but to enable repeated cooperation. In Oklahoma City, leaders have coalesced around this or that issue many times, but cooperation has proven short-lived. This time, leaders worked step by step to build a more enduring coalition.

- First, they held one-on-one meetings between individuals to identify leaders – in the sense of people prepared to take initiative – in various member institutions. Then a series of small group meetings were convened within each member group to assist that institution in clarifying issues of concern to its own members. For example, a church held a dozen small group meetings where people shared the concerns of their own families. Then small group leaders met to list issues of wide concern to church families. By reconnecting with calls to work for justice from their own tradition, they set priorities and considered

levels of commitment and resources to address issues.

- Next, leaders representing member institutions met to discover ways to work together on issues relevant for all participating groups. Member institutions – churches, synagogues, schools, and so forth – contributed dues and leadership to the overall development of VOICE, but no member institution had to fear being dragged into community organizing around an issue they wanted to avoid, because overall goals are chosen through a consensus-building process. Of course, the skills participating institutions learn – how to do relational meetings, how to develop leaders, and how to build collective power – can be deployed to work on each institution’s own special concerns. But coalition-wide efforts focus only on shared goals that unite member institutions.
- After this patient, imaginative process, the Oklahoma coalition was able to pinpoint issues for joint work over the first few years – in areas ranging from health care and education to immigration and prison reform, transportation, and economic justice. More than 1,200 people from 28 member institutions attended the founding convention in February 2012, and more have since joined. Now meetings are underway to begin a new affiliate group in Tulsa.

What Has Been Accomplished?

Voices Organizing in Civic Engagement has already influenced public life:

- An effort by utility companies to raise rates was blocked after the coalition mobilized in opposition to cost increases worrisome to many Oklahoma families.
- Candidates for city council and school boards are questioned in public accountability sessions about their stands and actions on issues of concern to Oklahoma families. Candidates or political parties are never officially endorsed, but a number of elected officials now in office in the Oklahoma City area agreed before they were elected to work on the coalition agenda.
- Statewide meetings are underway to evaluate effects of testing programs on public schools.

The Oklahoma coalition is just getting started, but it has already been able to knit together robust relationships among previously divided groups, preparing them to work together over the long haul to improve life for families and individuals in and around Oklahoma City. Seeds have been planted that will flower in unexpected ways in the future, as ever more groups join in.

Oklahoma’s Voices Organizing for Civic Engagement also facilitates citizen reflection and learning, serving as a kind of mini-university for public life. Members meet regularly, not just to learn from coalition successes and failures, but also to discuss readings from philosophers like Thucydides and Hannah Arendt to contemporary scholars and thinkers such as Sheldon S. Wolin, Dorothee Soelle, and Robert Caro. Setting aside partisan labels and reflecting on moral principles as well as power dynamics prepares Oklahomans to join forces on projects of common interest and shared moral concern, setting aside issues on which sharp disagreements remain. Following principles articulated by Ernesto Cortes, citizens learn to think deeply, compromise, negotiate, hold the powerful to account, and accomplish enduring social change.

Research for this brief was drawn from Ernesto Cortez, Jr., "**Toward a Democratic Culture.**" *Kettering Review* (Spring 2006): 46-57, and Bernard Crick, "Civic Republicanism and Citizenship: The Challenge for Today" in *Active Citizenship*, edited by Bernard Crick and Andrew Lockyer (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).