What Is Community Organizing?

Organizers across the country struggle to find a single definition that encompasses what they do. So far, no single phrase seems to fit the bill. There are almost as many kinds of organizer as there are organizations. But all share certain core qualities:

**It's getting people to work together**

I'm changing the world. I'm making the world a just place. That's what organizing is about. There are many ways of doing that, but in the end that's what it's about. We're helping people change their reality. We're facilitating so that people can create a better world.

—Guillermo Quinteros

I help get together people who care about an issue. I help provide them with training and give them opportunities to speak out and make a difference on those issues that they care about.

—DeAnna Woolston

The organizer is the one who helps people to move from complaining to action to resolve the problem and get it fixed.

—June Rostan

A community organizer is someone who helps citizens organize effectively, work together effectively to make the changes that they want and to make their communities a better place. It's part teacher, part rabble-rouser, a whole lot of things. I guess one of the things I like about it is that there are a lot of different parts to it.

—John Smillie
In order to truly be effective at organizing, one must understand the concept of community organizing. To start, I was exposed to the idea of community organizing at a very young age—my journey to where I am now has been different and deeper.

Ellen Bryan

The decision that led me to this position was simple: to see in the life of the community, develop strategies to get there, and then move into action to make the changes happen.

James Austin

You don't do one of these things if you don't organize.

An organizer brings people together to sort out specific changes they want to see in the life of the community, develop strategies to get there, and then move into action to make the changes happen.

Paula Yaffe

Except jump in the middle and go do the things we do. I think action is important and organizing is a way to help people do that.

Michelle Hill

In my view, the role of an organizer is someone who brings people together in order to engage in a new mission or to help them understand how to work collectively.

Jill Raines

Next person, "You can start a movement. It takes that patience."
local issues. Working at the grassroots level. Talking to people about what interests them. Traveling around the region and getting to know a particular region and the issues in that region really well. Doing all of that in an effort to make positive change and make a difference in how people can realize this idea of democracy. And to get paid for it, not a lot, but to have it be a real job. It was almost a no-brainer for me.

—Brett Kelver

Organizing is a way to help other people see that there are things other than going out and buying something new or having a few drinks, or all the other things we do. I think action is a great antidote to pain, and I want other people to know what I've experienced. And there's no other way to do that except jump in the middle and go for broke.

—Pennie Vance

It's about democracy

It's about citizenship—not the kind you get by being born in the USA or by swearing your allegiance to the flag, but what it means to be a member of a democratic society.

One of the things about democracy is that people have to participate. One way that an organizer works is to get people to participate and to help shape the decisions that affect their lives.

—Betty Garman Robinson

I'd like to think of a community organizer as an engine of the democratic process—the person who is facilitating citizenship. A lot of people talk about organizers empowering citizens. We don't. The fact is we show them that they already have that power, what power that you have as people. Even the word citizenship bothers me a little bit; I'd like to think that we're open to talking to people who aren't citizens. But in the more general sense of citizenship, we have rights living as human beings and we have responsibilities as well and that is informing people of both those rights and responsibilities and allowing them to decide.

—Matt Sura

In many ways I'm a teacher, not in a traditional classroom but in congregations and schools and neighborhood centers and union halls. We teach people about public life and how to claim an active citizenship, living out the democratic notions of citizen participation and the republican notion that there are civic virtues that have to be taught.

—Perry Perkins
My job as an organizer is to really be a facilitator—get information to folks so that they can participate in the legislative or governmental process in ways that'll help them.

—Presdalene Harris

An organizer wants the group of people she is working with to understand how the system works, as well as how to get what they want, and be able to bring enough pressure of various kinds to bear on decision-makers in order to win. A community organizer isn’t as interested in a specific issue so much as interested in moving lots of people into active roles in public life.

—Ellen Ryan

Community organizing is about getting people to work together for a common good. What’s so hard about that? Oftentimes people can’t agree on what the common good is.

—Scott Douglas

It’s about developing leaders

The role of the organizer is to use the language that exists in the community and tell them, “You already said it. You already know it.” The idea is to reinforce it and to validate that voice that has been trembling to say something, to help articulate it.

—Diana Bustamante

A community organizer is someone who’s catalytic. The best organizers don’t have high ego needs. They’re willing to submit themselves, in Biblical terms, to others. They’re willing to subjugate their own ego needs in honor of the development of other people.

—Gary Sandusky

I think the definition of organizing is not even much of a big deal to me as much as it is how good you are at building relationships with people so that you can then go back to them over and over again and you can continue to work on things together.

—Donna Uma Aisha Brown

A community organizer is somebody who has vision for a more just and sustainable society and is working with members of whatever organization they work for to try and bring that vision into reality. The role of a community organizer is to develop leaders and to work with the leaders to be the spokespeople of the organization and control the strategy of the

It’s about power

We bring people together in the community to gain influence and political power.

—Jon Liss

An organizer is someone who works in a community and builds a base of power to affect social and political change.

—Leah Ottersbach

I think that the community organizer is not just building the community, but also being a leader themselves, being the leader of the community.
assists thinking through strategy, somebody who, more than anything else, asks the critical questions that help our members think about "Where do we go from here?" with whatever issue we're working on.

—Aaron Browning

I think a community organizer is someone who is there to motivate people, to encourage them, to help figure out strategy, access resources. To draw people into the work, to draw people into participation in the organization. To try to identify and cultivate leadership.

—Brett Kelver

An organizer, basically, is a person who sits in the back of the room and just watches people grow. He doesn't take a leadership position; he just asks the right questions so that people can, on their own, realize that we already have all the answers. In the end people can walk away from it with a sense of "I did it myself. Nobody came in and did it for me. I did it myself and as a result of having done it myself I know that anything that impacts my community, anything that impacts my fundamental quality of life, I can now handle."

—John McCown

A community organizer is somebody whose full-time job is to look for leaders and connect them with each other and with a strategy that the leaders and the organizers think makes sense around issues that they think are important, so that then they have power to do something on justice issues that are important to them. But the core of it is looking for leaders, finding leaders, developing leaders, and then connecting leaders to an organization and a strategy to build power.

—Allen Cooper

**It's about power**

We bring people together in the community to struggle for social change and political power.

—Jon Liss

An organizer is someone who works in a community to build a grassroots base of power to affect social and political change.

—Leah Ottersbach

I think that the community organizer is meant to mobilize people and help them build the power that they once believed that they didn't have to win on issues of justice in the community.

—Makiva Harper
It's about power. Organizers help community groups figure out how to build citizen power by working together.

A community organizer is someone who builds relationships with leaders and uncovers their self-interest, and gives them an opportunity to work in their own self-interest and address problems in the community that they could not address by themselves.

—Jana Adams

Community organizing is about power and empowerment. I think a community organizer helps people who are not used to having power and not used to having a voice be able to come together and build people-power so they can make change happen.

—Holly Hatcher

I really believe that long-term change is dependent upon community organizing. You can't sustain those victories without community organizing. I think you can bring about change, but the likelihood that that change will be long-lasting significantly decreases, I think, if you don't have an organized group of people who are willing to defend those victories, and are willing to hold the people that they elect to the different branches of government accountable.
accountable for those victories. Or accountable, too, if they were to try to undermine them in any way. You have to be able to build the changes you make in society into the political culture and social culture of the state you’re working in, or the country. I don’t think you can do that without grassroots organizing.

—Aaron Browning

I think as a community organizer, my job is to shift people into reframing how they think about what’s going on in their lives and get them thinking about what they can do. Community organizing gives people the voice and the courage to work together to make long-term changes in our society.

—Cathy Woodson

I don’t like to think of it as empowerment, because I think it’s not about giving them power but about activating the power that is in people. We all have it, it’s just that sometimes we don’t know we have it. Sometimes we’ve been suppressed or oppressed or depressed for so long until we’ve lost connection with our power. So I think it’s about helping to power up individuals and communities.

—Sheila Kingsberry-Burt

It’s kind of like . . .

I think of being an effective organizer as similar to being an effective coach. A coach needs to know how to play the game, but doesn’t play the game for the team. A coach makes sure the team knows how to play the game, makes sure each player improves his or her skills, makes sure the team has a game plan suited to their level of ability and the opposing team they are confronting. Telling people, “Yeah, you really can do this!” or “No, you can’t do that, you better practice first,” is a key organizing skill. So you need to be able to be diplomatic, but also direct with folks. Sometimes being an effective organizer just involves showing people the ropes and calling a time out once in a while to rest and regroup. Other times it’s teaching the fundamentals of the game.

—Ellen Ryan

Some organizers are architects, who become impatient without big monuments, and others are like teachers, and feel like their job is to make incremental contributions in a long stream of other people that will also make incremental contributions. I think the teaching-type tend to plug along and to stay in the work.

—Jeff Malachowsky

An effective organizer is part empowerer and part storyteller, telling the stories that persuade people that they can make a difference. Part
cheerleader. Part leadership scout. You need to have the ability to recognize abilities in people that they may not have seen in themselves and talents that you can cultivate.

—Kimble Forrister

There are people who know the techniques well. There are techniques about how to run a campaign. Sure. We know how to identify people, get people out, and do phone banking. That’s a piece of it, but it’s not organizing. It’s mobilizing, maybe. It’s part of organizing, but it’s not all of it. My take is that [an organizer is] really a facilitator who helps develop capacity in the community. The organizer is somebody who facilitates that whole process. In certain places there are organizers who are also leaders, because they come from that community. They are leader-facilitators. I don’t see them as people who can completely disengage or be completely separated from what they are doing.

—Guillermo Quinteros

It's not...

Being an organizer is not the same as being an activist. For me, there’s a distinction between working on issues that I care about myself, where I’m working as a volunteer with friends and neighbors to get something done. In that case I’m an activist, or hopefully a community leader, myself. When I’m functioning as a community organizer, I’m listening to other people, listening to enough people to identify patterns in what they are saying, and pulling those people together to develop a strategy and take action on something they want to accomplish together.

—Ellen Ryan

It’s not for you to go in and solve people’s problems for them, but to help people to come together to find a means to bring an end to their own problems.

—Steve Bradberry

I think the difference between service providers and organizers is that service providers just try to cover, or take care of the needs today but not tomorrow. As an organizer, you look at the long term. You help them to figure it out and become more conscious of how they can move from where they are now, from point A to point B. Because if you really want to make social changes, you have to base it in and engage with that which is in the community.

—Edgar Rivera

Organizing is not inherently progressive. There are a lot of right-wing organizers who do this, too. I’m only interested in what a progressive
organizer is, which is that you have to do the work in a way that creates justice, peace, equity, and dignity for people, in a way that protects the environment. It lets people love whom they want and worship how they want, without doing harm to others. That's the kind of organizer that interests me.

—Kim Fellner

A key feature is that the community organizer, for reasons of accountability, has to be grounded. They must be the exponent of some viable community

So—What do you do for a living?

Most folks don’t know what a community organizer is. If you’re sitting on a bus or a plane, how do you explain it to the person sitting next to you? What if it’s your own family who don’t understand?

Well, I still have to tell my parents every now and then.

When I took this new job, they were like, “Now, what do you do?” My grandmother’s starting to think that I am a spy of some sort. I give them the newsletter, try to talk them through it, but I’m not communicating very clearly.

—Kelley Weigel

When I told my mom I wanted to be an organizer she was so upset. She said, “You went to school for so long and that’s what you came out with?” In her mind she saw White people with long hair and no shoes hugging trees or the northerner from New York or New Jersey coming down to the South telling the poor Black folks what they ought to do, and then leaving. So it’s that mentality. I think that gives it a bad name.

—Octavia Ware

You could type in the search words “community organizer” and come up with some strange things. It seems like the outside world doesn’t know what a community organizer is.

—Kelly (Corley) Poknarel

If I really want to engage people, I say, “It’s a wonderful job. I get to work with people who are trying to make things better and help figure out how to do it. I help them figure out exactly what they want and who can give it to them, how to get those people to give it to them, and how to stay together while they do it.”

—Dave Beckwith
organization. I think there are people who say they are community organizers who kind of float and do good. But if there's going to be a shift in power, unaccountable floating will not lead to that. Or it will not lead to a sustainable shift in power.
—Scott Douglas

Sometimes people understand . . .

With Latinos, it's much easier in some ways, because a lot of us come from a country where we had done this work, you come with experience. Or maybe they hadn't done it, but they had the knowledge of what an organizer is. For example, a lot of times when I go into the community, people say, "Oh, I know what you're trying to say. I know, you're trying to organize and make a revolution." They understand it that way. So even though people haven't done it, they have it in mind. They understand what organizing is and what it is we're trying to do. So, with Latinos it's much easier.
—Edgar Rivera

. . . and sometimes they don't.

I've had several reactions when I say I'm a community organizer. I had one person say to me, "Oh, you must have really clean closets."
—Vivian Chang

Two things happen when you say you're an organizer. They say, "Is that when you organize closets and offices?" I say, "No, I'm not that kind of organizer. I actually organize people. Think about the concept of organizing a closet and making sure things are where they belong. There's just a better view of your closet. My job is to look at the world as a closet and make sure people go where they need to go so that the world looks better."
—Lisbeth Melendez-Rivera

But often the question provides an opening to talk about organizing to someone new.

An article I wrote about the labor movement starts out with me going on a plane trip. "What do you do?" the person beside me on the plane invariably asks. It's usually a businessman. On good days I tell them I'm an organizer, and I'll wait for their shock to appear on their face. On bad days I say, "I work for a non-profit." And on really bad days I think about opening a bakery and dumping the whole thing. After I tell them I'm an organizer, I ask, "Do you know what that is?" And sometimes people will say, "Oh, like for a union." Then you at least have a way of starting in. I say, "Well, union and community organizing are really related. It's looking around and seeing
The role of the organizer—A story

I help leaders sort through the data and information they're collecting in our research and help them think through what our plan of action should be. Often I'll come up with a draft of recommendations on how to go into a research or negotiation meeting. Then I help them to evaluate afterwards. It's my job to help the group come to a common interpretation of what just happened in that meeting.

This is a good story related to the housing that we've been working on. First, another organizer and I met with our spokesperson to be clear about our questions and our approach and to rehearse a little bit. Then we had a meeting for the seven people going into that negotiation meeting for housing for low-income families. Then we reviewed all of our roles and the demeanor that we wanted to take. We role-played every different kind of reaction that we could get from this guy. How do we want to react, as a group? We did all this practicing of how we're going to react to this official. Then we go to our meeting. We get in to see the official. He's smooth. He's a politician. He knows how to wine and dine.

So he is going on and on about how he agrees with us but why he just can't do it. "Here's why we have to keep it at 140 percent income" [housing assistance available only to those whose income is 140 percent of the median income]. It's basically B.S. And he's using big words that we don't really understand and concepts that we think we understand. He's kind of intoxicating us because he's been in this field for however many years. So in our evaluation afterwards, the leaders are a little bit intimidated and not sure what to think. They're saying, "Maybe he's right. Maybe it is impossible. Maybe he's doing all that he can do." Part of my job, as an organizer, is to agitate that a little bit and also help to facilitate a discussion so that no one person is dominating.

"Well, Reverend Gladd, do you think he's doing all he can do?" Then she said, "Well, it sounded good, but now that I'm out here I don't think so. Why can't we serve people making $15,000?" We start talking about it. If we left that meeting and just went our separate ways, I think half of our leaders or even all of them would have said, "Oh, he's a nice guy and I think he's doing all he can." But if we go through and interpret we can cut through that layer of B.S. We can interpret that together: "The stuff he said... there was no basis for that. He was just kind of giving us a speech there. He wasn't really giving us hard facts about why. And we do know that these other communities have been able to serve these people." So by the time we left we have agreement that this guy's argument did not hold up and that we're still going to fight this. What's our next step and how are we going to fight it? I think the organizer plays a big role in helping to facilitate all that.

—Haley Grossman
something that’s not quite right, then working with other people to try and make that better. There are things like that in every community."

—Kim Fellner

That is one of the toughest things—explaining it to people. You ask a question, “What kind of problems do you see in your community? What are the things that you would like to fix or make better if you had a chance?” Then you pick one of them and you say, “Well, community organizing is taking this problem that you have and seeing if there are other people in the community who have the same problem and who would like to see it fixed. You try and find those other people and you get them to work with you to figure out who has the power to make a decision that would change this situation. Community organizing is about getting that group of people together and getting them to go and put pressure on whatever public official who has the power to change it and get it done.”

—June Rostan
Profile: Brian Johns

A Day in the Life of a New Organizer

We asked Brian Johns, a new organizer, to describe a typical day, to give an idea of what life is like for an organizer still learning the ropes. At the time of the interview, in October, 2003, he was an organizer for the Virginia Organizing Project. He is now Political/Community Organizing Coordinator for the Service Employees International Union District 1199P in Philadelphia.
I have a great job. I have two main formats for a work day. One is the office day. I'll come in at 8:30 or 9:00. A lot of the work to set up meetings is done in between the meetings. The meetings are the really fun part, but you might have to call 150 folks to get ten out. A lot of those days are spent just calling people, or doing research. For example, I started working on a Virginia Housing Development Authority campaign. They had a $1.2 billion surplus that wasn’t being put into use helping low-income folks get affordable housing. I would go in and look at VOP’s database or contacts that I knew from different churches just from being in the Richmond area. So I create these lists. I call my office the “Land of Lists” sometimes, because you’ve got all these initial contact lists, and then you’ll take a list of thirty, pare it down to the ten who’ve responded and who agreed to meet. Then once you meet with folks, you have another list of those who are really interested in acting on this. Some days in the office you’re calling people all day—following up and setting up meetings.

Another office task might be research. We're starting a tax reform campaign; I didn't know a whole lot about Virginia's tax structure going in at all. So I spent some time recently reading a lot of the information on the tax system we have in the state and on some of the proposals that our statewide strategy team are working on to change that. I'm trying to make sure that I know enough to speak about it. So it's research, making calls, making lists, and following up from meetings. A huge part of it is follow-up.

We had a Dismantling Racism workshop in Petersburg on the ninth, and had about fifteen folks there. I'm calling all those folks and seeing what they thought about it, and really talking to them about some of the issues that were brought up. That's the same with any meeting. You want to come out of a meeting and sit down and really reflect on what happened. And then strategically think about what's next. “So we got this done, we got that done. What do we need to do to keep this thing going?” So that's the office days.

Then there are the individual meeting days, which are the traveling days. I'll try to set up three, four, or five meetings—however many I can on that day—and just go. For example, it can be going to ask for endorsements on the affordable housing campaign or campaigning to restore voting rights for former felons who had served their time in Virginia. You spend a lot of time meeting with folks to get endorsements, and with folks who work with voting rights or in civil rights organizations. Or churches, or different kinds of organizations that might be interested in signing on to work on the campaign.

And from those meetings you work out what people are willing to do. Some people say, “Hey, endorsements are a gimme. What else can I do?”

Then there are one-to-ones. One-to-ones are a huge part of chapter development. In Petersburg I started in December just talking to folks. I was mainly going into the community, figuring out what people were passionate about and what people wanted to see changed. These conversations can
range from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. It's just really finding out what people are interested in, and if they'd be interested in working with a group like VOP.

Also, we do a lot of planning meetings and trainings. The chapter in Williamsburg is going down to meet with the state senator and we've got a mix of a couple folks who have done this before and really been active in meeting with politicians, and a couple—"This is one of the first meetings I've been to in a while because I got involved with another group that didn't really pan out or something happened." And some have never been active before. And just really working with that group and saying, "Well, what do you want to say to the senator? What do you want to get across and how do you want to do it? Who's going to talk? Who's going to do this piece of the meeting, who's going to do that?"

So that's what some of my days are like. Really odd hours at times. Sometimes it's 5:30 or 6:00 getting home, and sometimes it's midnight. The first formal chapter meeting of a group includes a visit from a VOP State Governing Board member. The closest one that could go to Petersburg was in Lynchburg. So I left here [Charlottesville] at 3:00 in the afternoon for a 7:00 meeting. Lynchburg is west of here, and Petersburg is east of there. So hours are all over the place.

It's really a great thing, for example in Petersburg, to see a group go from these local, individual conversations to fifteen folks sitting in the room at a meeting saying, "We've got a real problem with drugs in the city," or "with kids on the street during school hours," or "with landlords raising our rents but not providing the services. What can we do about this?" and really look strategically at these kinds of things.

That's my typical day. It's either in the office or on the road for meetings or trainings. Today was an office day; we got back from a retreat this weekend so I had lots of follow-up to do.

I'm still struggling a lot with the whole aspect of not overworking. I'm getting into this mindset of, "We could all work on this forever, and what change are we going to see?" It's really easy to get into the thing of, "Well, if I just make these twenty-five more calls today that's one step closer to the goal."

My life, I would say, is pretty consumed by organizing. But I am learning how to set some of those boundaries. You need a day off or an afternoon off every now and then, and understand that that's acceptable. I think the organization does a good job of making you see that as well. But at the same time it's what I love, and this is how I want to live. I tell people I'm always surprised every time I see the paycheck—it's like, "Whoa." This is something I really love doing.