

ACORN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL

This model is designed for ACORN organizers in the ACORN/AISJ Organizer Training Program. It is not to be used for mass distribution, rather it is designed as a brief training manual on the community organization model developed by ACORN in Arkansas. First edition 1973. Only vendors put their business on the street, never organizers.

This organizing model was written by Wade Rathke, founder of ACORN, in 1973. There have been many developments and advancements over the last 35 years since this was written, but the organizing model still provides a useful guide to building an effective grassroots organization in lower income communities. This historical document is being made available on our website as a tool for organizers, not as a cookbook full of recipes.

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ACORN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL

GOAL: To build a mass community organization which has as its primary principle the development of sufficient organizational power to achieve its individual members' interests, its local objectives, and in connection with other groups, its state interests. The organization must be permanent with multi-issued concerns achieved through multi-tactics, direct action, and membership participation in policy, financing, and achievement of group goals and community improvements.

I. ROLE OF AN ORGANIZER:

The organizer is the key component in developing an un-organized and apathetic community into a viable organization. Someone at every step of an organization's history must fulfill the roles of an organizer.

There are vast numbers of roles an organizer plays in ACORN organizing. The most simple is that s/ he brings in members and keeps them there.

Other roles include:

- Responsibility for keeping the organization active and democratic.
- Responsibility for keeping the leadership independent and responsive to the membership of the group.
- Responsible for running the organizing drive.
- Responsible for picking the ACORN representative or at least for training group members to assume some roles of the organizer.
- Responsible for setting up the contract between the local group and ACORN.
- Responsible for maintaining an agenda ahead of the organizations s/ he works with at all times. Without an agenda, you are not organizing.
- Responsible for building the organization and maintaining self-discipline, responsibility, organizational priorities, loyalty, and structure.
- Responsible for the total goals of ACORN even above and beyond the local group goals.

II. SETTING UP THE ORGANIZING DRIVE

A. Analyzing the Macro-area: City, Town, County

1. Geography and Landmarks: Take a telephone book and list all the primary organizing landmarks; union halls, city hall, court house, post office, welfare office, housing authority, public housing projects, OEO, school board offices, neighborhood centers of any kind, etc. Then systematically go through the city with a map in hand, checking the locations of the landmarks in the area, and noting those areas which seem to contain neighborhoods in your organizing constituency. Chances are usually excellent that our natural organizing areas are in some proximity to many of the landmarks. A census tract can be helpful. Note whatever is unique or uncommon.

2. Contacts: The whole process of making contacts is built on a pyramid theory. Make one that leads to others. The purpose of contacts is to gather information and resources, and to build power. There are three types: hot, warm, cold. The hot contacts are people we have met before at some point in the organization's history. Check the biographical file in the state office. Warm contacts are those we have not met but know something about in order to build an edge, i.e. we have an opener or a handle for the conversation - something they did, someone they know who we know, some reason to believe we can hit the core. The cold contacts are those people we must meet for some reason, yet we have no lead to them. The only edge there is simply an organizer's skill in prying information and setting up his/ her ego in order to loosen her/ his tongue in person or on the phone. It's a skill to be perfected, if you're greasy, you are in the hole.

Contacts give you several critical elements for setting up the plan. (Be careful, though, that contacts move on your agenda, and not you on their agenda. Many contacts will attempt to influence your eventual organizing plan to serve their self-interest and not ACORN's.)

- (a) Raw information on the area in terms of their analysis on what makes the area move.
- (b) Ability to get things: resources, office, lawyers, tips, other contacts on the pyramid model.
- (c) A constituency to use to build power in the greater area, i.e., they will know the behind-the-scenes roles ACORN is playing in the community in making things happen and making the agenda. They will be the insiders. They will compare the changes from the time you arrive through the period of the organization, and your ability to do what you said you would and could in terms of the reality. Our ability to alter their conceptions of how things move in the community will build their view of ACORN and will get them to then build the organization's influence with their contacts and assumptions.
- (d) Your contacts also give you your invitation and legitimacy in the area, since you are initially talking to them about the possibility of organization rather than the fact of it. The suggestions they have for ACORN, give us the mandate to be there. As residents and factors in community life they have the ability to protect us against many forms of indirect attack. They can vouch for us in conflict.

- (e) They can, if needed, write organizing letters for the operation which allow us to borrow their power and influence until we have some of our own. (Appendix A)

WARNING: With external contacts always guard against being used for their self-interest if it is not in our self-interest. As a general rule of thumb in all phases of organizing, give on your agenda only when it doesn't matter, never give easily, and never give where it matters.

3. Press: Read the paper carefully and everyday for a source of current issues and ideas for issues. Analyze it in terms of how it handles stuff similar to ACORN's potential style and issues. Paper conservative or liberal? Editorial policy? Does it slant? What do you need in tactics or issue content to make good placement? You will also need a reporter to call who you can deal with for your first issues. Find out who usually covers our kind of stuff or general community events. Find out who is the best reporter. If we can pull it off, give him a tip on the first action--background, etc. The only deal is not to quote the organizer or run the story before the action.

4. Politics: Learn the names of the public officials and the rumors and facts behind who really runs the area. The question always is--who is behind what makes the city really move: individuals, interests, and issues. What are the party officials like, what are the local officials like? What real power does the mayor or county judge have, and how do they execute getting on their agenda. Makes sense to attend some of their meetings and get a feel of how they operate, a ward system, pay special attention to whose ward covers constituency neighborhoods.

5. Race Get a feeling of the percentages, and where whites and people of color live. Given the predominance of race as a divisive issue in communities in most urban areas of the country in setting up a broad-based, long term organizational effort in the area, the first drives are going to have to be strongly multi-racial including whites. (The nature of white racism is such that whites can be integrated into the base of the organization at the beginning, but only with great and perhaps insurmountable difficulty once the organization has matured.) If the early, founding drives were in mixed or predominantly white communities, then be prepared to move to quickly pick up the people of color with subsequent drives once you have established the image of the organization. It is nearly impossible to do the opposite. Find out what role race played in the political and social history of the area in the '60's and '70's, as a guide to these problems. Your better contacts will know and say. How you handle the racial stuff in the initial drives will largely be determined by this history. Only reach people of color first and exclusively, if your organizing plan indicates accepting the risk that ACORN may never have a white membership in the area. If the area is composed of a majority of people of color, then this will be your natural base, and the drives should move aggressively in these communities without concern for diversity. If all of this concerns you, call a liberal for advice on how to pretend 200 years of experience does not exist in America, but in the meantime take the glasses off and look at communities as as organizer making organizing plans to build ACORN.

6. History of the Issues: If you do not know the history you duplicate previous errors, or build a "me too" group without realizing it. The only reason

to ever go into an old issue in the area is if you (a) know you can win; (b) are "forced" by the adamancy of the membership; or (c) have a new wrinkle on it (time or tactics). It is always necessary for your contacts and your potential membership to establish the uniqueness of ACORN. Old issues are usually already encrusted in the communities' viewpoint. How, who and what happened in old issues will also give you an edge in knowing what to expect from the external factors and the community leadership.

7. Previous or Current Organizations: You need to know what the competition is--to avoid them, freeze them out, and not tread on "their" issues until after you have built your base. It is also important to know how they lived, died, how long, who put them together, and whether they are still around. Look for established groups: unions, NAACP, ACHR, etc. for a record. The most interesting ones are those that were exclusively local. Little things that happened and then faded away.

8. Office: You are not looking for an office, so much as you are looking for space, a phone, and someone to handle your messages. Sometimes your contacts can lead you to such a place, sometimes they can provide it. Neighborhood centers, agencies, lawyer's offices, union halls, are all space possibilities. You want to pick your space. You can't take just anything you are offered. Some places you might pick could define your effort differently than you want the group actions to. You also want a place you can trust and where you can control your information. A member in one of your neighborhoods who can answer the phone would be better than letting yourself get forced into a bad decision in the early stages of organizing.

9. Lawyers: Always make sure that one of your contacts is a lawyer. In state organizing it's like insurance. If you do not find one, then know where ACORN's closest lawyer is. You can never tell. A good "contact" lawyer might also do minor local, issue research for you, or, if necessary, file suit.

10. Services: Know what variety of social and community services exist in an area, how they work, and their effectiveness.

11. Buses: Know what transportation is like in case part of a tactical organizing plan ever involved a mass action flowing out of your neighborhoods. Know the costs.

B. Analyzing the Micro-area: Neighborhoods

1. Geography: Go through all the neighborhoods that are in your potential organizing constituency. Get a feel for their size and their diversity of housing, etc., and where they are in relationship to the rest of the city.

2. Landmarks: Note everything that seems potentially relevant in the drive. Churches, grocery stores, agencies, parks, neighborhood centers, schools, projects, businesses, industrial or commercial encroachment, zoning patterns, highways or freeways, real estate activity, etc. are all organizing landmarks.

3. Race: If white, or people of color, where does the other housing begin? Is it mixed? If so, which is dominant? Our goal is building power for people to achieve their interests in an organized fashion. We are not interested in just

making people like each other. People coalesce around power, anything else is social work acclimating people to what exists.

4. Income: Determine from census information, housing, streets, etc., what the general income range in the neighborhoods are.

5. Visible and Historical Issues: Driving or walking through a neighborhood you can often spot visible issues--streets, open ditches, drainage, bad lighting, condemned or dilapidated housing, curbs, gutters, sidewalks, litter, domestic and commercial eyesores, weeds and overgrown lots, lack of parks or recreational facilities, bus routes, and a number of other issues. Depending on the situations, all of these things are potential organizing issues. With historical issues find out from your community and external contacts whether or not solutions have been actualized, what progress has, or has not been made. Historical issues are important--if the history was good, build on the increased and unfulfilled expectations. If the history was bad, it may be an even better history to build upon since if your issue is good you build the expectations.

6. Discounts: Make a list of all the businesses in the general area for possible discounts. Approach and secure them on the basis of the experience in other areas of the state with the discount system as well as the total number of stores in the system. Having some discounts clearly makes it easier to build legitimacy with your community contacts from the beginning. (Appendix B)

7. Contacts: The key element in setting up the neighborhood is the quality and quantity of your initial local contacts. These are people for the most part who live in the area, know people in the area, and are your potential members. These people will also be your best feed-back on local organizing issues.

- (a) Community Leaders: Always be wary and careful with people who are seen as community leaders in the neighborhood. Some are good and some are bad, but they are always potential problems in terms of their agenda versus your potential organizations. They have the ability to define your group. Community leaders always bring the past history of the area with them. Our purpose is always to organize against that past history. If that's not where they are at, keep them away from where you are. Ministers and OEO personnel and others often define themselves as community leaders.
- (b) Community Action Agencies: Where there is such an agency, they probably have some community leaders on their board or in their areas. Sometimes a good external contact there can give you names of people who they have worked with and have a value judgment on. Their field workers can give you a sense of the issues and people.
- (c) Churches: Ministers, in general, and especially of smaller, neighborhood churches, often not been overly active. He can also give you names of people in the church who have had low-income problems and might be naturally more sympathetic. (Appendix C)
- (d) Grocery Stores: Small grocery store owners and personnel can often give you a sense of the area and some names. They are often community institutions where people talk freely depending on the

owner. They know their customers. They know who has lived there the longest.

- (e) Larger Grocery Stores or Shopping Centers: This is an effective though more at random method to get contacts. Set up a table in or outside of the store with the permission of the owner or manager. Use a sign which catches the eye and interest of the passerby. Have flyers, or something to give them, on the organization, or the drive, or what could be done in the area. Ideally, someone local would be better, but an organizer can pull it off alone. The key is to aggressively go out to people, give them a flyer, and engage them in conversation concerning the neighborhood. Have a list to have them sign with their name, address, phone no., etc.
- (f) Community Centers: Any kind of center will have some knowledge and names in the area, no matter how scarce. Recreation, day care, neighborhood centers are examples.
- (g) Hang-outs: Places where people meet could have you a contact if necessary. Examples: union halls, food stamp lines, welfare offices, public meetings. Most of the contacts made this way are sloppy. Bars are always a waste of time. People do not go to talk, when they do, they do not remember it, or they will always associate you with it.
- (h) Newspapers: Selling some ACORN newspapers could give you a way to meet people and a reason to talk to them. Just make sure you get the names down.
- (i) Lawyers: Names of clients in our constituency or neighborhoods.
- (j) Doorknocking: If no other alternatives are present, hit some names at random from your lists.
- (k) Petitions: Circulating a “safe” petition at random could give you contacts from a gathering place. This is not a raw list of contacts, because at least you know they can be interested in something enough to do something about it.
- (l) Mailing: If necessary send a “feeler” out in areas of the neighborhood to involve individual responses. This is only used in forcing a drive.

8. Lists: Without a list there is no drive. The priority on lists is the names, addresses, and phone numbers. Your lists should be as comprehensive as possible, in order to make the final decision on which neighborhood to enter on your initial drive. Lists can be built from a variety of sources:

- (a) City Directories: Once you have sketched out the geography in your neighborhoods with the corresponding border addresses, you can find the name, address, and phone of every individual house. It also shows you who owns and who rents.
- (b) Voter Registration Lists: Once you know the streets and the precincts or whatever political subdivisions exist in the area, you can find the

name and addresses of everyone in your area who is registered.
Should be public information.

- (c) Criss-Cross: Names and addresses in one section and phones and names in another. If you match them up, you have a good list.
- (d) Phone Book: If the area was rural and small enough, you could get it straight from the area phone book.
- (e) Supplemental Lists: Add up the bits and pieces from your contacts or store tables or whatever. Additional lists might be obtained from food distribution centers or any list you have gotten from specific sources, Title I lists, etc.
- (f) Computer Cards: Put them all up for labels and to keep a record for later.

Decision on the Organizing Plan: Consolidate all the information you have accumulated in and outside the neighborhoods. Once the plan is made you will have to live with it, so make it good and tight, and take the time to do so.

1. Contacts and Lists: The better they are the better your chances of a tight drive. But, if the other factors fit better elsewhere, this should not be your criteria for the drive.
2. Issues: They must be realizable, specific, immediate, and have multiplier effect. With a good enough issue you can make a drive anywhere, although you will have to do more cleaning up on it.
3. Size: The size of a neighborhood to be organized in making the plan should be determined by natural boundaries, contacts for the organizing committee, area of the issues impact, etc. If the size is unwieldy for one drive, then block clubs or smaller units on the drive should be considered. The questions on block clubs should be whether you will be able to generate enough local issues to sustain them and whether you will be able to effectively coordinate them into one large community group. Another component in the size question is density. Four hundred on a list is manageable, but if they are spread out to the extent that people do not feel the issues or identify with the area, it would be easier to have a 1,000, if it were more concentrated. Never make a drive bigger than you can run and control.
4. Timing: Much of your organizing plan revolves around its ability to create a happening--momentum. A drive that runs past a month can become almost anticlimactic as well as, deteriorate the stability of your work forces. You can not lose your immediacy, or you will lose your issues and their appeal. It would be better to cut the list if pressed, than to lose the immediacy since you can clean one up, but not the other.
5. Agenda: Make it complete and be thoroughly comfortable with it. If you are not, you will be unable to move people without great difficulty.
6. Politics: In organizing, politics is everything that makes things move. Direct your organizing plan to as near as we can get to the core of it. Neighborhoods are not organized to solve problems, but to build power in that area for the

organization. If the plan is oriented to the core, it can accomplish all the goals. If it is organized just to the specific neighborhoods, it may not even enter into the arena. Nearsightedness is the fatal weakness of any organizing plan. The entire future of the organization is not built from the action or from the drive, but from the very beginning.

III. Running the Organizing Drive:

A. Establishing the Organizing Committee: The organizing committee is your manpower on the drive, your legitimacy, your potential leadership, and the focus on the issues. The group can be made or broken depending on the quality of your committee.

1. Making the Meeting: The OC is organized from the contacts you have made in the neighborhood, as well as anyone else they bring in with them. You want to hold it at one of their houses, or if necessary, at a central location. You will have already set up the basic agreement of creating an organization to deal with the issues in the area before the meeting. You want strong people who will work. You want to cut away possible conflict or disagreement. You want a cross-section of the neighborhood. Sometimes it is helpful to get the person holding the meeting to help in the final invitation process.

2. Holding the Meeting: Invariably, the organizer will end up guiding the OC meetings, especially the first one. Draw people out to take roles in moving and running them. You will always have to maintain a complex dynamic in the OC, which allows for "testing", digressions, humor, enthusiasm on the issues and events, and consensus on the techniques, responsibilities, and commitments which members of the OC will be forced to make. These meetings should be held weekly during the drive.

3. Agenda for the Organizing Committee:

(a) Introductions and Purpose: You are only cement in the meeting. Make the introductions. Decide when to start it. Lay out what the meeting is about and why. Play it off against the person whose house it is.

(b) Issues: Test the visible issues and those issues which people have mentioned to you. Get response. Anticipate other issues and differing emphasis than you had expected. Get consensus on the first issue and the first campaign. This part of the meeting usually takes 50% of the time.

(c) Elections: The group must be democratic. Election of officers must be agreed upon from the first meeting.

(d) Organizing Letter: Have a sample from another drive and pass it around. Get agreement on the format and the basic wording. Get agreement on their signatures.

(e) First meeting: Get a date and time.

(f) Membership: Stress it. If you forget, people will feel deceived at the first meeting. It helps to have them sign up at the OC meeting.

(g) Name: Have one ready, do not be willing to concede on one which is ridiculous or duplicates.

(h) Contract: Make clear what they can expect from ACORN (services, research, assistance, contacts, political power, literature, etc.) and what ACORN expects of the group (dues, affiliation, news distribution, etc). Define your role, as well as, the future independence of the group.

(i) Doorknocking: Get agreements on when, not if.

(j) Future OC: Set the time, place, and date. At future meetings go through the progress, other issues, expand on your original themes. On the last meeting, prepare an agenda for the first big meeting.

B. First Mailing:

1. Organizing Committee Letter: The organizing letter has several purposes: to give the drive local "neighbor-to-neighbor" legitimacy, to define the first issue, to serve notice of the doorknocking, to create a receptive visit on the doors, to turn people on, to invite them to join the committee, and to notify them formally of the first meeting. Must be signed by all the organizing committee. Do not mail it to those people you want to exclude. (Appendix D)

2. Flyer: This should be your basic identifying card, consistent throughout the drive. It should be brief and to the point (25 words). It should highlight the time, place, date, and issues. Doing flyers is not art, but it is an art. A sloppy one will kill you, and make the drive look amateurish. There is no excuse for it. Where you bunch words, type it. (Appendix D)

3. Organizing Letters: Depending on whether you need it to get in the door, or to get people to the meeting, you should use an organizing letter here for your credit card. Select the letter to use depending on your constituency and what problems you predict. (Appendices A & C)

C. Doorknocking:

1. Reason: there is no substitute for personal contact in convincing people to become active in the organization. Doorknocking does it best. It gives the doorknockers a chance to answer questions and create the impressions of the organization. It allows you to bring people in and define some people out. It gives organizers a feel of what the meeting and organization will be like, and whether you need to make any special plans or adjustments.

2. Teams: Doorknocking in teams mutes the outsider role of the organizer and reduces the foreign experience of an organizing drive when you are using local people. Men and women teams are best, women teams second, and men teams third in neighborhood organizing. Having two people on the doors in also insurance against forgetting important things which need to be said. Alone is never good, but better than nothing. It's not so bad if a single is from the area, and not an organizer.

3. Techniques:

(a) Get in the door whenever possible.

- (b) Keep it less than 15 minutes. You were not invited, so do not make yourself unwanted. Avoid being trapped into coffee and socializing--primarily, you are there for critical, though not somber, business.
- (c) Know the name, it makes all the difference.
- (d) Do not set yourself off past common understanding, or within common stereotypes in dress styles and delivery.
- (e) Keep your organizing cards to yourself. It turns people off to think they are one of the millions in their own organization.

4. Rap: You have to do many things with little time, so plan it carefully. Brief your doorknockers carefully and plan out who takes what pieces of the rap.

- (a) Set the scene. What's happening, when, where, and what about.
- (b) Pull them out on the issues and find out what moves them. Engage.
- (c) Stress power; people, pressure, accountability, change; what organizations have done and what they can force people to do.
- (d) Give them a good sense of exactly what is going to happen at the meeting: election, dues, issue discussion, agenda, plans for action with examples. If people know what to expect, they won't be surprised and the meeting will be smoother.
- (e) Explain ACORN and never forget to mention membership dues.
- (f) Get the phone number, if you don't have it.
- (g) Get a commitment on attendance at the first meeting.
- (h) Give them a flyer to remind them of the facts behind the meeting and when it will be. Give them whatever other materials you have prepared as well.

5. Organizing Cards:

- (a) Make a card out for everyone on the list with name, address, and phone number.
- (b) Mark their response on the attendance with yes, no, or maybe from your analysis of the meeting and the nature of the commitment, not from what they say. Put it in the upper right hand corner.
- (c) Put any relevant comments on the bottom of the card. Example: other issues, special problems, need for transportation, etc.
- (d) Make sure you keep them organized so that you know whether you have seen them, or they were not at home, or whether you still have to do them, or whether you are dealing them. (Appendix F)

D. Second Mailing: If the second distribution is through the mail, send it during the last week as near as you can time it to arrive before the first meeting without risk. If done by hand, do it the day before. This mailing constitutes a reminder. In some cases it will be the first mailing that some people on the drive have ever seen, so don't underestimate it.

- 1. Flyer: Basic reminder. Same color as the earlier flyers. Brief, but with more of a sense of the agenda. Keep it the same basic style. (Appendix G).
- 2. Organizing Letter: If you think it is necessary, or if you have more than one, or if you have saved your organizing letter as a final incentive, then send it now.

E. House Meetings:

- (a) House Meetings are especially effective in rural areas. House meetings organize people in the same way that organizing committee meetings do. Where you can depend upon people to take a major role in putting them together with

their neighborhoods they are effective. If not, doorknocking is a more efficient use of them generally, since our goal is mass organization.

(b) House meetings are good ways to involve people on your OC who would not be effective on the doors.

(c) House meetings are excellent ways to build in reinforcement, if fear is widespread or if you have some especially weak people, or if you have a number of special-problems people with an important, but limited issue in the area.

4. Housemeetings take different skill compared to doorknocking. The testing can be more severe. The control is weakened. Territory is a shifting issue. When done well they are tremendous organizing processes.

F. Media

(a) Poster: Posters and flyers displayed prominently throughout the area, spread the word, reinforce the doorknocking, and contribute to the happening effect. We make the organizing drive the biggest thing to ever occur in the neighborhood. The posters should be of the same general theme as flyers, with similar design.

(b) Radio: Radio announcements of the meeting are especially effective during the end of the drive, not so much in drawing new people, but in reinforcement.

(c) Press: If you can get an announcement without having to have a story written about the drive or a reporter at the first meeting, run something. If not, don't. It doesn't help substantially.

G. Telephone Calling: The last night or two (depending on the size of your list) have your organizing committee call your list. Remind them of the time, place, etc. and get a commitment on attendance. Identify yourself, be brief. Be careful of overkill. Get a count on your cards. Make sure you checked during the doorknocking on the correct numbers with the people, that way they also expect this call.

H. Developing Leadership: Your organizing committee will in many cases end up being the primary leadership of the group. Make sure you spend enough time with them so that they understand what a drive consists of and what we do.

I. ACORN Representative: During the organizing drive, select and begin training the ACORN representatives for the group. His/ her ability to see the unfolding process of the drive, as well as training him in the skills to operate basic organizing situation, will prepare him for his/ her future role. Get him/ her to see the process from the eyes of an organizer, rather than the eyes of the members.

IV. First Meeting:

A. Time: Almost invariably the best time for the meeting is at night (or possibly the weekend), since the vast majority of our constituency works.

B. Place: Location should be central and positively defined. Concentrate on churches, union halls, schools, etc. which all have positive or neutral connotations.

C. Numbers: You have to know what to expect in terms of a crowd, simply in order to be prepared. Having a hundred cups of coffee for ten people devaluates the ten--and you'll need them to build on. Most ACORN community organizing drives will net 15-25% of the list. Numbers are important because this is a mass organization directed at political power where might makes right.

D. Materials:

(a) Meeting Agenda: Items and the names of who will do them. (Appendix G)

(b) Attendance List: Names, addresses and phone numbers are absolutely essential. Don't lose it. Always make sure the name on the list is done correctly. If it is not, everyone who signs will duplicate the error and the list will be worthless. Make sure you pick it up.

(c) Blackboard and Chalk for Elections: Elections are public, not private events. It will decrease hard feelings.

(d) Extra pencils in case you fill out any forms.

(e) Relevant ACORN literature.

(f) Refreshments, if you decide to have them.

E. Membership: Membership is \$5.00 to join and \$5.00 per month, except if they pay for 6 months in advance it is \$30 or an entire year is \$60. You want everyone to join and you want them to join in advance. Collect the dues as people come in and go by the organizing table to sign the sheet and pick up materials. Have an aggressive member of your organizing committee to do the job. Make it part of your agenda to catch everyone who slipped by the table during the meeting. Dues tie in our people and are our life blood, so collect them when your opportunity to do so is highest.

F. Forms and/ or Petitions: As a general rule of thumb, forms are for membership actions and petitions are for pre-membership or non-membership. Forms give you bulk and individuality of request. It helps to have something that constitutes action right from the first meeting and forms/ petitions can do some of it. We don't want people just to sit and listen, unless it's a funeral. (Appendix H)

G. Elect Temporary Officers: Temporary, until you are sure they are stable in the group and are good enough to run the organization. Basic officers are: Chairperson, Co-chair, Secretary, Treasurer.

H. Issue and Action Discussion: Leave most time for discussing the issues and getting agreement on a definite, specific plan of action on the issues. If people don't see that something happened at the first meeting, they won't be back.

I. Introductions of the Committee: Introduce the members of the organizing committee and have them take part in the agenda.

J. Opening with Prayer: Opening the meeting with prayer produces order in the meeting, sets off uncertain expectations, and gives legitimacy to your purpose.

K. Committees: Committees are not something to be entered into lightly. They can divide the activity and identity of the group. They take a lot of time to function. Interest is usually low in committees and elections on first meetings, because of the diverse reasons that people came and the testing. If you do committees, make them specific with realizable tasks.

L. Next Meeting: Remind people of the date and time for the next meeting. It should be on the bottom of the agenda.

V. First Campaign: The plan was made during the drive, so now it is organized and ready by the time of the first meeting.

A. Analyzing the Issues: Remember the importance of being multi-issued, so that the group doesn't over extend itself on just one. Have the second issue ready to go. Keep the issues specific, concrete, and realizable. If the issue develops as long-term, fill the gap with something immediate.

B. Analyzing the Tactics: You always want an action of some kind. The membership either has to go to the target, or the target has to come to them. Tactics are as endless as your imagination. Judge them on two levels: (1) What will they do to advance the issue, (2) What effect will they have on your long term goals. We don't want our tactics to be a question of winning a battle and losing the war. Take conservatism of your membership and the community as a general assumption. If you want to use more hard-hitting tactics, build your membership up to them as the campaign escalates. In choosing specific tactics, remember that public meetings are open forums with their own given legitimacy of mass action. Petitions, public hearings, dramatizations, demonstrations, etc. are all standard tactics. Choose carefully and focus on the particular situation. There is nothing wrong with a tactic which ridicules a target, rather than running him over.

C. Leadership: Prepare your leadership carefully to handle the action and the issue. Warn them of the possible responses. They should be organized, not only on the goal of the campaign, but also on where to settle in negotiation or action. If they aren't, you may stumble and win, but more probably, you will lose.

D. Make sure there is always a direct and clear view of what you want, and what you expect to achieve. If there isn't you will be hard pressed to define the action once it is over as a win. The action is always defined in the mind of the membership after it is over, not while it is in progress, so keep your perspective.

E. Target: A crucial organizing mistake is often made in how organizers pick the target, or if there is more than one, how they pick the order of setting up the targets for the campaign. Know something about him and his structure, so you can determine the difference between concessions and smoke screens.

F. Timing: If you lose momentum, you lose. Don't wear out the campaign, the press, or your members. Remember if the question is between the issue and the organization, sacrifice the issue with whatever you can get out of it. Two weeks is ideal, a month is pressing it, more means you better start injecting the second issue.

G. Other Factors: Obviously, we set up most campaigns on the principle of numbers and their potential power. Our ability to utilize the maximum number of variables against the target supports this concept.

- (a) Our ability to use the press to keep the issue a public concern is important.
- (b) Our ability to seem "morally" and actually right on the issue or campaign is key. (Appendix H)
- (c) Our ability to change the tactics from the target's expectations.
- (d) Our ability to exploit the political situations.
- (e) Ability to escalate the campaign, make us appear reasonable and justified, and maintain momentum.
- (f) The threat is more powerful than the action, although you must at some point prove your strength and your ability to actualize the threat.
- (g) Ability to go to court if forced, if for no other reason, as an exit on the campaign.

H. Models and Histories: On any campaign make sure you have checked with the state office to see if there is a history on a similar issue or campaign, or a guide model on the elements of such a campaign. These are not the ten commandments, but they could help you see what the critical factors are, what past mistakes have been made, and how to avoid them.

I. Research: Having sufficient and correct information is essential on all elements of the campaign especially on the information your membership supplies to you. Always remember that your first (or any) campaign can be your last. It is not nearly as defeating to lose on an issue of merit, as it is to beat yourself.

VI. Cleaning Up the Organizing Drive: Too often the later stages of building an organization are neglected in the relief of the drive's end, the climax of the first meeting, and the pressure of the first campaign. We pay for neglecting to clean up the drive in maintenance problems, low membership, poor dues collection, and loss of some of the group's potential.

A. Maybes: After the first meeting get back to the "maybes" developed in the drive. The later you wait the more improbable the task becomes. People will feel the structure is set. They will be hung up that they didn't come when they said they would. They will lose contact and interest. Furthermore, if you win, they will get the benefits without effort, making their membership seem irrelevant. Use the new officers for this, especially if they were not part of the OC. Send them a mailing for the second group meeting after this contact.

B. Attendance List: Get back to the people who were at the meeting in order to (1) collect their dues, (2) increase their information and involvement; (3) define the meeting; and (4) feel them out on what they want to see and problems they had.

C. Executive Board: Get the board together to go over the meeting and their roles in order to build leadership.

D. ACORN Representative: Extend your work with him/ her throughout this time. Build the personal relationship and the contact with the office. Get him collecting dues and distributing the newspaper. Show him how to keep up the lists. The clean up will simulate the drive and make excellent training.

E. Computer Cards: Transfer the relevant information on your organizing cards to the computer cards in the state office as a permanent record of the drive, etc. Don't make flippant judgments which you will regret a year later or irrelevant in dealing with the person later. (Appendix E)

F. Secondary Leadership: The cleaning up process will enable you to bring out and spot potential leadership outside of the elected structure. If they aren't hooked up and involved early, you will lose what could have been the backbone of the group.

VII. Maintenance: The beginning always predicts and prejudices the end. At this point, 90% of the fundamentals of the group have been laid. The process does not simply repeat, but becomes more sophisticated.

(a) Issues: You always want the group to be moving on some issues and projects which involve the maximum number of your membership. Your ability to be ahead of the potential issues and your skill at laying all the fundamentals, will guarantee the basic maintenance of the group.

(b) Attendance: The majority of first meetings are the biggest meetings that groups will ever have, depending on the quality of the issues. Build a core which you can depend on for consistency in the group in both size and quality. This is a natural organizational event. You must convince the group, though, that they never have enough people to be satisfied, but don't allow numbers to depress their activity or stability.

(c) Leadership and Membership: Leadership is built in actions, talk is never an adequate substitute. Transferring vast numbers of organizer roles to the membership is critical, so these roles must be clear and simplified for effective execution.

(d) Politics: If you don't move your membership into the political arena, the long term goals of the organization will never be realized. People relate to the elective process, so use it as a power building vehicle. Their role and potential impact in this arena should be understood and planned for by the group. The membership needs to move on the political agenda when the time comes, so prepare them from the beginning and throughout their history.

(e) Discount System: Expanding the discount system to increase benefits, as well as continually delivery those things which are the rights of membership (lit, news, etc) will help maintain the group on the day-to-day basis.

(f) Maintenance and Historical Models: Check with the office for what is available and useful to your group in terms of future campaign guides.

(g) Research: Most of the research for the group will be handled out of the state office on any issues and activities the group is interested in pursuing.

VIII. Organizer/ ACORN Representative System:

1. Criteria for Selection: Since his/ her job is to serve as a liaison between the group and organizer in terms of coordination, information and responsibilities, get someone you can work with well. Preferably the AR should be someone who is going to be reasonably stable both in the eyes of the group and in residence in the community.

2. Who:

- (a) Outside Contacts: VISTAS, graduate students, ministers, OEO personnel, housewives with time, or other volunteers you believe in and trust.
- (b) Membership: Someone from the ranks who appears able to take on the job. Example: The first person who invited us into the area or someone from the original organizing committee.
- (c) Leadership: If necessary, we can space out the roles of the representative with the executive board and some sub-officers. The chair could do the analytical and pushing roles. The treasurer could collect the dues. Elect or appoint someone to distribute the newspapers. The secretary arranges the meeting places and the mailing or flyers used for notification.

3. What:

- (a) Issues: The AR will keep abreast of issues in the community, and alert the organizer to future needs or developments.
- (b) Services: The AR will know what ACORN and the organizer will have to offer in order to maintain the value of the ACORN/ group relationship.
- (c) Expectations: The AR will keep up the supervision of the contract in terms of what the group is required to deliver (dues, circulation, elections).
- (d) Lists: The AR will keep up with the fluctuations in addresses and contacts to be sent to the organizer or the state office.
- (e) Conflict: The AR will keep up with any emerging internal or external problems with the group, so that the organizer can respond if necessary.
- (f) Leadership: The AR will make sure that leadership is operating democratically and is doing the organizing jobs they are responsible for.
- (h) Communication: The AR will many times serve as the best source of information of activities in the rest of ACORN and his/ her general area, because of his/ her close contact with the organizer. He/ she will also have a major role in setting up the leadership and membership for statewide issues, which are multi-grouped.

B. The ACORN Organizer: The organizer will keep in touch with the AR as much as is necessary to continue the activities of the group. The organizer will make wide ranging decisions and give advice based on the AR's information on the group's condition, issues, progress, and conflict.

- 1. Plan: The Organizer and the AR will develop future plans for the group, as well as lay out the organizing agendas.

2. Step Ahead: The organizer will make sure that the group and the AR are continually getting the information they need to embark on any issue in discussion or planning.
3. Actions: The organizer whenever possible will be at the group's public actions for assistance and advice and to keep ACORN's hand in the relationship visible.
4. Meetings: At least once a month the organizer will probably make some sort of group event so he/ she can talk and meet with the folks: executive board meetings, group meetings, etc.
5. Contact with the AR: The organizer will talk continually with the AR and the chairperson. He/ she should meet with them at least once a month to keep the group active and moving.
6. Obviously the organizer becomes a strong background figure: a professional service provided by the affiliation with ACORN.
7. Goals: The organizer will continually keep the group in tune with the goals, political developments, and emerging issues in the rest of the organization.
8. Monthly Report: Any number of systems might be devised by an organizer to keep up with the AR and the groups progress. A monthly organizer's report to the group with suggestions and tips might be one way.
9. Responsibilities to the State Office: The state office will keep a calendar made by the organizer on his/ her whereabouts and needs. They will also receive a weekly sketch on each of the groups within his/ her jurisdiction in order to keep the support ahead of time and information flowing. The state office will condense all organizing reports and send all organizers (and AR's) the synopsis.

Written by Wade Rathke, 1973

Appendices

- A. Sample External Organizing Letters (2)
- B. Sample Discount Letter
- C. Sample Local Organizing Letter -- Church endorsement
- D. Sample Flyer
- E. The Cards
 - 1. Organizing Cards
 - 2. Biographical Cards
 - 3. Computer Cards
- F. Sample Reminder
- G. Sample First Meeting Agenda
- H. Sample Forms
- I. Sample Press Release

Appendix A

#1:

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas State AFL-CIO endorses the organizing of community organizations being carried on by the Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). It is our opinion that it is to the benefit of everyone in Arkansas, and low-income and working class people in particular, that this work succeed.

We recommend participation with and in this organization.

Always with a good wish, I remain

Sincerely yours,

#2

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Council of Churches, remembering the deep concern of our Lord Jesus Christ for all of God's children who are poor or disadvantaged, endorses the principal of community organizations organized for the purpose of informing low income families in effectual solutions of their individual problems through organized and principled effort. And we, therefore, approve of the type of organizational activity being carried on by the Arkansas Community Organization for Reform Now (ACORN) and commend the activity of this organization to the careful consideration of the people of the State of Arkansas.

Appendix B

Dear Sir/ Madam:

As a retail merchant participating in the ACORN discount system, I can recommend it and the organization for your participation.

I take pride in the part I play in making possible the expansion of this useful organization concerned with the interests of low-to-moderate income working people. I also appreciate the additional business I get as a discount store.

If you have any reservations or questions about whether you should offer a discount to ACORN, feel free to call me, and I think I can set your mind to rest.

Yours for a better Arkansas,

Appendix C

Residents of the Levy Community of North Little Rock:

As pastor of one of the churches of this area, and along with other ministers of our many fine churches in this part of North Little Rock, I am greatly interested in the total welfare of all of our people. Endeavors and projects that will benefit our community always have my support.

It is in this spirit of interest for our community that I write this letter recommending this endeavor, as a sincere attempt to assist our people. I believe that these efforts are worthy of your consideration.

I think that a community organization such as the one these citizens are attempting to lead in establishing could be exciting and beneficial to our people. I urge you to think seriously about it.

On behalf of our church, let me invite you to use our Youth Center at 35th and Schmer for your Community Organization meetings if you wish. We will be happy to have the first meeting on April 13th at 7:30 p.m.

Let us always work together for the good of the fine people of our Levy community and our excellent city.

Sincerely,

Appendix G

I. Prayer -- Rev. _____

II. What is ACORN? Wade Rathke

III. Introduction of Organizing Committee members:

Harold Medlock
Tom Lovelady
William Onsilent
Roxanne Peters
Rachel Pumpkin
Terrance Bratty
Aaron Gibbons

Clyd Shocker
Mainlyright Coppas, Jr.
Easter Hill

IV. Elections

- (a) Chairman
- (b) Co-chairman
- (c) Corresponding Secretary
- (d) Recording Secretary
- (e) Treasurer

V. Discussion and Plans

- (a) UNCO Petition -- late to present it. Harold Medlock
- (b) Jobs -- Emergency Employment Act, ESD. Tom Lovelady
- (c) Benefits. Harold Medlock
- (d) Private Employment Agencies. Wade Rathke

VI. Selection of Committees:

- (a) Jobs
- (b) Private Agencies
- (c) Legislation
- (d) Grievance
- (e) Recruitment

VII. Adjournment

REFRESHMENTS FOLLOWING

NEXT MEETING . . .

Appendix H

To: _____, Principal
_____ School

REQUEST FOR NON-PAYMENT OF FEES

This application is submitted for the non-payment of fees for
_____(name of child) during the _____school year.

My signature on this application verifies that I am unable to pay the required fee.

Signature of Parent/ Guardian

Local group in ACORN

Approved _____

Disapproved _____

Principal

School

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT:

LCIO Members Refuse to Pay School Fees

Today, the Lawson Community Improvement Organization affiliated with ACORN voted not to pay school fees until certain conditions are met by the Pulaski County Special School District.

Parents have looked at school books and found purchases were made from the Lawson Elementary School activity fund, which includes school fees, for such things as florist bills, Avon products, to pay a charge account at a local department store, and for other items which parents feel are unnecessary and of no benefit to their children's education. The group is asking the school board to give a complete accounting of how their school fees have been spent and to establish a district policy limiting the manner in which school funds can be disbursed.

"Because we have been met with a lack of concern on the part of the school administration and school board, we feel it necessary at this time to refuse to pay the school fees assessed to us until these matters have been properly corrected.", said so and so.

The LCIO/ ACORN was formed last March in response to parents concern over questionable school policies involving finances, discipline, personnel, sanitation, and the school cafeteria. Officers of the group have contacted to Prosecuting Attorney's office about what they feel are a misuse of school funds. They are also represented by an attorney are contemplating a taxpayer's suit against the school district.

--30--