

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN THREE SOUTH SIDE CHICAGO COMMUNITIES: LEADERSHIP, ACTIVITIES, AND PROSPECTS

Prepared for the Woods Fund of Chicago
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Chicago, Illinois
September 2004

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2003, the Woods Fund of Chicago requested the Center for Impact Research (CIR) to conduct an assessment of community organizing on the South Side of Chicago. Through its own process of strategic planning, the Wood's Fund had identified the South Side as an area that is not receiving the resources it needs to support effective community organizing activities. This study identifies barriers facing groups and leaders that limit not only their capacity for organizing but also their ability to attract resources for their work. The findings also provide key data on current activities at the grassroots level, with particular attention to groups and leaders that have the potential to expand the scope of their efforts to larger, community-based initiatives. In addition to assisting the Wood's Fund in its efforts to better serve South Side communities, the study's findings and recommendations might also be useful for other grant-makers as well as community organizers and decision-makers.

METHODOLOGY

In consultation with Woods Fund staff, CIR identified three communities with high levels of poverty on Chicago's South Side that would form the focal points of the study: Englewood, Washington Park, and Riverdale. At the outset of the project, CIR reviewed recent U.S. Census materials to obtain key demographic and socio-economic data on each community. This information provides a statistical profile of the communities and a context for the specific issues facing them individually and as a group.

CIR then identified and interviewed key community members in each of the three communities (28 in Englewood; 12 in Riverdale; 13 in Washington Park). CIR conducted these interviews between September and November 2003, and had follow-up conversations with many of the interviewees in February and March 2004.¹ These interviews targeted people involved in a variety of community sectors such as aldermanic offices, social service providers, religious institutions, health care providers, community development organizations, and community

¹ CIR is grateful to the individuals and groups in Englewood, Riverdale, and Washington Park who provided insight and information about their communities. They are listed in Appendix Two of the report.

policing groups. In addition CIR sought input from four experienced community organizers working in other communities.

CIR planned to conduct a series of focus groups to bring together community members to discuss past and current organizing activities and issues of concern to the community. The group was also to assist CIR in identifying local leaders and activists for subsequent interviews. However, it became evident that political and organizational tensions within the communities made focus groups an inappropriate research strategy for this project. Accordingly, during the course of individual interviews, CIR was able to identify local leaders and activists for subsequent interviews and did not use the focus group format for obtaining this information. Thus, in addition to contacting well-known community members for interviews, networking and referrals were the two most common methods for identifying interviewees.

KEY FINDINGS

Major Issues Facing the Communities

All three communities have extremely low median household income levels (\$13,000 in Riverdale; \$15,000 in Washington Park; and \$19,000 in Englewood) and high levels of unemployment (25 to 34% of “active labor participants” and much higher levels when including people who are no longer actively seeking employment). These three communities are confronted with many of the same social and economic problems that face other low-income minority neighborhoods in Chicago and across the country: high levels of drug and alcohol abuse; a large number of youth and adults participating in the illegal drug trade;² high crime rates and levels of gang involvement; insufficient and substandard housing stock; a lack of quality youth activities and after-school programs; a lack of jobs that pay a living wage; insufficient job training programs that prepare people for living wage employment; an increasing number of former offenders returning to the community who face barriers to finding employment and housing; high rates of HIV/AIDS; poor infrastructure; a lack of City of Chicago services (missing garbage cans, irregular garbage collection, infrequent rat abatement in alleys); a polarized political climate; and ineffective policing, police corruption and brutality, and racial profiling.

Community Organizing Capacity

CIR’s research finds the scale and amount of community organizing activity on the South Side to be limited. Furthermore, CIR’s interviews with community leaders and residents indicate that most did not have a clear understanding of the purposes and activities conventionally associated with community organizing and the capacity of organizing to create systemic social change. Interviewees consistently specified the community’s organizing approach as one that focuses on delivering social services and quality of life programs. Interviewees justified their current direct service efforts as necessary to address the community’s urgent needs.

With the exception of older persons who had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement, community groups and residents do not have a strong history of working collaboratively to develop social change. Some of the interviewees claim that they are open to the idea of collaboration but they do not know how to successfully build a coalition. Others explicitly stated

² Given the high rates of unemployment and lack of jobs that pay a living wage, many of the youth and adults in these communities turn to the illegal drug trade as it provides an accessible source of income.

that they have no interest in collaborating. Intense competition for limited resources gives rise to a pervasive fear that individuals and groups who collaborate on issues may be forced to compromise their views or share their resources.

Current Resources and Organizing Activities

Englewood, Riverdale, and Washington Park vary significantly in terms of their individual and institutional capacity to provide the leadership necessary to attract resources and coordinate community organizing efforts. The full report presents details of current resources and discusses the potential to expand organizing in each of the communities.

Current efforts to organize in these three communities vary substantially. Activity was most evident in Englewood and to a lesser degree in Washington Park. However, in Riverdale community organizing was almost entirely absent. In most cases, groups in these communities that are organizing are not building alliances with other community groups or constructing coalitions across groups. Most groups are less than five years old; with a few exceptions, ongoing organizing efforts that are older tend to be comprised of one or two people who are committed to change but have not been able to construct a coalition within the community around the issue.

Institutions and Individuals with Potential to Create Change

In order to understand the range and extent of community organizing activities in Englewood, Riverdale, and Washington Park, CIR conducted a series of interviews with stakeholders including community residents, activists, leaders, direct service providers, and elected officials. Interviewees were asked to describe their knowledge of current and past organizing in their community. Most interviewees responded to CIR's questions about organizing by describing their frustration over an event or course of events as well as their individual and collective efforts to influence an issue. Most of the community groups interviewed by CIR were not conversant with conventional definitions of community organizing. Community organizing was rarely defined as the ability of a community to mobilize its members and leverage resources to influence social justice or economic equity. Instead, community organizing was most often understood to be the effort by an individual or the community to apply an immediate service-oriented solution to a specific problem in the community. Often, community organizations are based on a specific locale, issue, or interest.

CIR identified several specific barriers to organizing efforts in each of the three communities. Political fragmentation within these communities is perhaps the most apparent and frequently cited barrier. Whether it is a lack of cooperation or a lack of incentives for cooperation among multiple aldermen who represent the same community, or the fact that re-election does not depend on an incumbent's responsiveness to the community and its needs, the current political landscape does not foster collaborative, community-building initiatives.

Additional Issues in South Side Organizing

The predominant type of community activity that CIR found in these neighborhoods is oriented to social services. To a lesser extent there are sporadic episodes of "reactionary activism," when community members were upset and spoke out about particular incidents, but did not pursue any other organized or sustained response. However, CIR also identified a small number of South Side organizations that take a much different approach to organizing. Their proactive and systemic approach to problems can lead to substantial changes within the community.

The efforts of such organizations focus on educating constituencies, creating collaborations with other organizations, and pushing the opposition to change when necessary. However, they characterize their approach as different from other community organizing groups whose more oppositional and aggressive style they see as the norm. These organizations find a collaborative model of building community support to be more effective in achieving long-term outcomes that benefit their constituencies.

This group of organizers not only speaks about its distinctive style of organizing, it also comments on the differences between the work undertaken by African-American organizers within their own communities and that of outside community organizing entities that come into African-American communities. They regard locally based African-American community organizers as more in touch with the specific needs of the residents and the community. However, at the same time, they expressed an awareness of and frustration with those African-Americans who use their leadership positions within the community to opportunistically pursue their own personal agendas to the detriment of the larger interests of the community.

There is a lack of organizations on the South Side of Chicago that are doing any work that broadly falls within the parameters of community organizing. There are even fewer that have demonstrated the capacity to sustain this work at a high level of efficacy, and still fewer that are run and staffed by African-Americans. Strengthening competent African-American organizations and working with them to build on their successes would be a strategic approach to establishing community organizing as a viable response to systemic social and economic injustice in these South Side neighborhoods.