Resources for Community Organizers

by Kim Pengelly

A curious contradiction has arisen. On the one hand, cities are showing growing interest in neighborhoods and making ever greater demands on neighborhood organizations. Minneapolis has started an ambitious twenty-year neighborhood revitalization program. St. Paul’s mayor has identified neighborhoods as a key to the city’s future. The Metropolitan Council is studying neighborhoods for the first time. Residents and officials in older suburbs, for example Brooklyn Center and Hopkins, are discovering the advantages and drawbacks of neighborhood associations and organizations. In most central city neighborhoods, there are staffed organizations with programs ranging from cultural feasts and festivals to crime patrols and housing rehabilitation.

On the other hand, few young people are becoming organizers, and, according to a recent CURA survey, more than half of the neighborhood organizers in Minneapolis will be leaving their jobs within the next five years. In April of this year, there were four neighborhood organizations in Minneapolis looking for staff directors.

Older, experienced organizers are not planning to stay in organizing, and young people are not entering the field to replace them. The CURA survey found that fewer than 10 percent of Minneapolis and St. Paul organizers intend to make organizing a lifetime career; a third (over half in Minneapolis) intend to stay in organizing for less than five years. Of current organizers, over half are in their thirties. And while people in their twenties represent 32 percent of the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area labor force, they are only 22 percent of organizers.

Around the country, the shortage of organizers has prompted the development of innovative recruiting and training strategies. In Washington, D.C., the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute provides a paid training program that includes classroom training, an apprenticeship, and help with job placement as a union organizer. In the Southeast, the Southern Empowerment Project provides a six-week summer training program to recruit new organizing staff for its eight member organizations. Organizing networks such as the Industrial Areas Foundation are actively recruiting organizers for paid apprenticeships, as part of their effort to expand into new cities.

Similar recruiting efforts are beginning in the Twin Cities. In the CURA survey, many organizers reported that a supervised apprenticeship is the best possible way to learn organizing, but noted that such opportunities are rare. The Apprenticeship Group—an ad hoc group of organizers, funders, and other friends of organizing—is currently seeking funding for a six to nine month apprenticeship program in organizing. Under this proposal, apprentices would learn through ongoing discussions and seminars with the apprenticeship coordinator and through supervised work with an experienced community organizer. By paying a stipend to both apprentice and supervisor, the Apprenticeship Project seeks to make such training opportunities more possible.

Current organizers also indicated it would be helpful to have information about training opportunities available for community organizers, both new and experienced. In response to this need, CURA interviewed the staff of national training organizations, local community organizations, funding programs, volunteer programs, and internship offices to find out what training is available, what young people considering occupations are looking for, and how community organizations and would-be organizers can find each other. The results are being compiled in a directory called Resources for Organizers.*

The directory provides information for organizers seeking further training, for young people interested in exploring organizing as an occupation, for directors of organizations looking for ways to recruit new organizing staff, and for organizations needing specialized technical assistance ranging from updated telephone technology, to community economic development, to nonviolence training.

Workshops, seminars, apprenticeships, church-affiliated volunteer programs, and student internships are listed. Both local and national opportunities are included. Organizations with special expertise—such as organizing in multiracial organizations, rural organizing, and labor organizing—are highlighted. Programs that provide academic degrees in community organiz-


* To order a copy of the directory, which will be available free-of-charge, call CURA at 612/625-1551.
or social action are described. Organizations that offer technical assistance and/or training in community economic development, nonviolence, conflict resolution, and multiculturalism are also included.

The directory places special emphasis on internships, both because they are seen as a cost-effective way to recruit young people into organizing, and because there is growing interest on college campuses in experiential learning and learning through community involvement. Faculty are beginning to design courses with an internship component. National student organizations have launched major efforts to promote student involvement in the community. And several schools offer scholarships to students who take internships in nonprofit organizations.

For community organizations interested in recruiting interns, the directory lists college internship offices along with information about their student bodies, their internship requirements, their expectations of organizations that sponsor interns, funding available for student interns, and their application deadlines. In addition, faculty who are supportive of organizing are listed for each school. In many cases, supportive faculty are a better first contact than an internship office, because they are personally acquainted with students. Many organizations have expressed interest in having interns, but lacked staff time to recruit. The directory makes the recruitment process easier by putting the information about all the schools together in one consistent format. Some organizers assume that because they can't afford to pay a stipend, they can't attract an intern. A significant amount of money is available, however, for students to work in nonprofit organizations. The directory explains how to advertise an internship as scholarship- or work-study-eligible. Some programs, such as social work and public affairs, require their students to take internships. These students are willing to work for academic credit. For students interested in finding a good internship, information about the needs and expectations of community organizations is provided.

Many communities and their associations will never need paid organizers. But for others, particularly large central cities, the expectations of neighborhood organizations will continue to grow and the range of problems and programs they are expected to deal with will expand. The gap between this need and the availability of experienced, trained organizers may increase from contradiction to crisis unless more trained and experienced organizers are recruited and retained. Without these organizers, we will never know whether neighborhood organizations were capable of all we asked of them.

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**Access to POLL Database Available through CURA**

CURA is a subscriber to POLL (Public Opinion Location Library) at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research with offices at the University of Connecticut. POLL is an electronic database of 150,000 survey questions on a wide range of social, economic, and political issues. All the prominent public and news polling organizations provide their survey results, often within a week. Some sixty U.S. polling organizations contribute to the database, and about 1,500 new questions are added each month. Beside results from current polls, coverage is being extended back in time, with the earliest entry now dating from 1940. Coverage is virtually complete from 1960 to the present, making it possible to trace changes in attitudes and behavior over the last thirty years.

Recent CURA searches have covered such wide-ranging subjects as honesty and ethical standards for people in different occupational fields; compulsive gambling; the effect of the 1976 presidential debates on the ratings of Carter and Ford; warnings by doctors on the dangers of smoking; the effect of computers on the quality-of-life; and perceptions of Oliver North as a hero and patriot.

A question-level retrieval system makes it easy to find information on very specific topics. For each item matching a search term, POLL supplies the exact wording of the question in which the term appears, the percent of the sample giving each response, and such survey-level information as the name of the organization conducting the survey, interview dates, and a description of the sample.

Access to POLL and assistance in formulating and conducting a search is now available through CURA, with first priority going to University faculty and students. There will be no fees or long-distance charges for short requests or exploratory searches. More substantial queries will require users to provide their own funding. Details about arranging a computer search are available from Peggy Wolfe at 612/625-1551.

* The subscription is shared with Professor David Fan, Department of Genetics and Cell Biology.