



WhyHunger

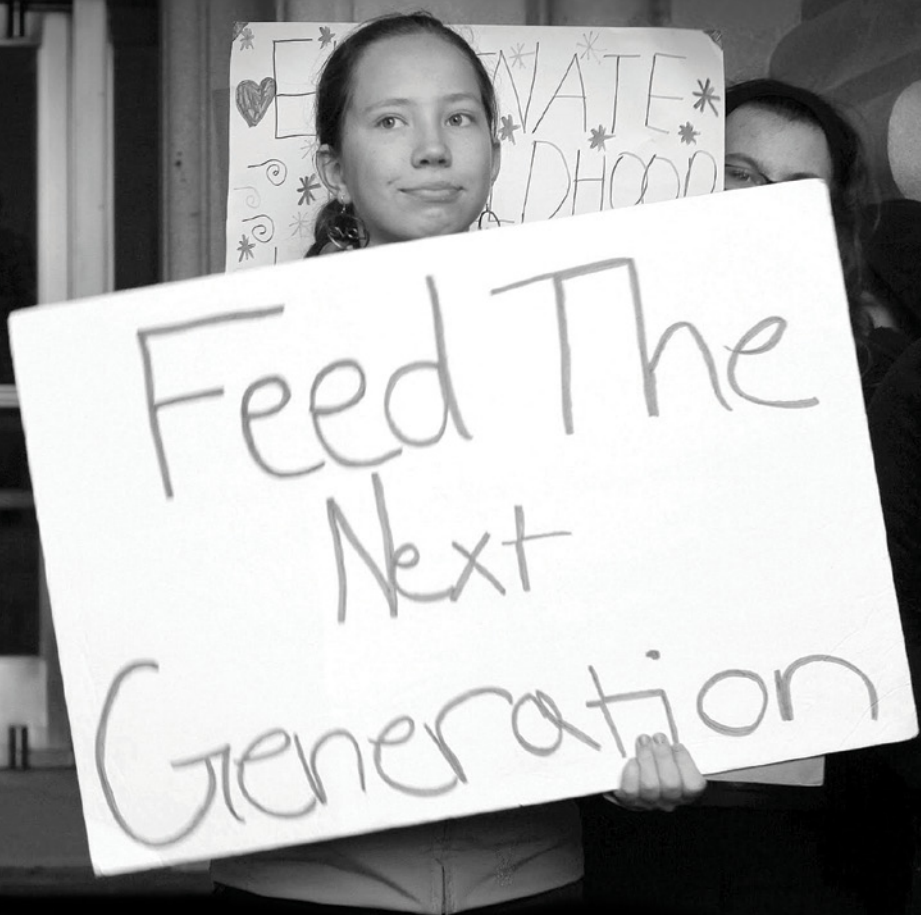
Rise Up!

Organizing in
Emergency
Food Programs



**“ We aren’t going to solve hunger
by handing out food.”**

Alameda County Community Food Bank



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Rise Up!

Organizing in Emergency Food Programs

Here's where we are: As of 2012, 46.5 million people (15 percent of Americans) live in poverty, including 16.1 million (22 percent) children under the age of 18; 49 million Americans live in food-insecure households, including nearly 16 million children¹. Based on annual income, 72 percent of all Feeding America client households live at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty line. More than half of these client households (54 percent) report at least one employed person at some point in the past year². At WhyHunger, when we speak with our partners around the country, we hear the same thing: the number of people who rely on emergency food providers for food is increasing, not decreasing, and we can't solve hunger solely through food distribution.

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We know hunger is a symptom of poverty. Among the root causes of poverty are income inequality, lack of affordable housing, high cost of living, structural oppression, the list goes on. If these are the real issues then as organizations, advocates and individuals who are committed to ending hunger we must work at the source of the problem while helping to alleviate the results of its symptoms. And by advocating for food as a right, we assert the responsibility to respect, protect and fulfill those rights. Advocacy efforts at many anti-hunger organizations tend to focus on protecting federal nutrition programs that stem the tide of hunger. We cannot

emphasize how important it is to protect these vital safety net programs; however, these programs do not fundamentally attack hunger at its root cause. Social movements throughout history have shown that sweeping systemic changes are most effectively advocated for and then protected when those most affected organize.

What else can be done? How do we stem the tide? Given the resources and infrastructure that emergency food providers have right now, what can emergency food providers do to address poverty and harness the collective power of the people we connect to at our organizations? **We can organize.**

Who are the emergency food providers that organize? They are food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and multiservice agencies. In this guide we've profiled four organizations who are organizing in their communities around the root causes of poverty as they connect to housing, wages, food, health, racism, and other issues. Although this guide has a small compilation of profiles it shows the range of emergency food providers that engage in organizing and the different ways organizing unfolds.

It is not just a numbers game; that is, the number of people affected by hunger. Enduring hunger and food insecurity prevents people from reaching their full potential. When you are constantly thinking about survival there isn't always room, resources or energy to focus on giving your skills and talent to your family and community. That robs our whole society.

People think organizing is a scary word and a huge undertaking. It brings to mind civil disobedience and unrest, youth conducting sit-ins, marches and tear gas. And certainly direct action can be a tactic that emerges from organizing efforts. Yet, the process of organizing is, at its core, about building relationships with people – thoughtfully, intentionally – and building collective people power. It's about knitting together our personal stories – those that motivate us to make change – into a collective story of our community and the structures and systems that perpetuate injustices like hunger and poverty. Our relationships give meaning and richness to our work and to our lives. Relationships are the building blocks for all community organizing activities. We need lots of people to contribute their ideas, take a stand, and get the work done on matters that affect our lives. People power is a method that works. Every successful social change movement in US history has had the key elements of people

power that gains traction and ultimately erupts into a chorus of voices calling for change³. Collective power is about the ability to make something happen through harnessing the leadership of people to make concrete change that improves lives and challenges the power structure. It all starts right where you are. That is what emergency food providers do every day: connect with people and make things happen.

Our work at WhyHunger as a grassroots support organization is rooted in relationship building and storytelling. That is what this guide is all about; telling the stories of our partners whom we have cultivated relationships with. This is just a jumping-off point. We hope this guide is informative, inspirational and thought provoking. Ultimately, this guide was created to motivate you to take action. Set up voter registration; support a food justice or economic justice campaign; join a coalition or network; start an organizing campaign to address your community needs. **Act now.**

This is by no means a comprehensive guide of all of the organizations engaging in organizing work in the anti-hunger sector. It is only a taste. These profiles are part of an ongoing conversation we want to have. If your organization is engaging in this work or if you know of an organization that is, we'd love to hear about it.

Please contact us at **nourish@whyhunger.org**.

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- 1) Feeding America, Hunger and Poverty Fact Sheet; <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/>
 - 2) Feeding America Hunger in America 2014 Study; <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/the-hunger-study/>
 - 3) Organizing for Power; <http://organizingforpower.org/>



Alameda County Community Food Bank

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ALAMEDA COUNTY
**COMMUNITY
FOOD BANK**

The Vision

When the **Alameda County Community Food Bank** was looking for a new space in 2000, they approached the Oakland, CA city council for help. Many of the Food Bank's agencies attended city council meetings every week to speak on their behalf during the public comment section. The Food Bank greatly appreciated this support and recognized the valuable contribution the voices of agency staff and volunteers lent to their efforts. They also recognized that there needed to be a space for the voices and concerns of Food Bank clients and their agencies to be heard. That is how Community Advocates Against Hunger (CAAH) was formed as a vehicle for advocacy campaigns at the local, state and federal level.

The Model

An interview with Keisha Nzewi, Advocacy Manager

CAAH's staff members recruit advocates from clients and volunteers in their member agencies, Food Bank volunteers and individuals who call the Food Bank's helpline. What they look for in advocates are people who are interested in speaking out and sharing their stories. CAAH engages in campaigns of various lengths and on a multitude of topics related to hunger and poverty. This allows advocates to participate in campaigns that are aligned with their interests and stay involved for the duration of the campaign. Many advocates participate in CAAH's short term campaigns but CAAH also has a small core of advocates who have been involved for a long time throughout various campaigns. Many of these advocates are volunteers in other parts of the Food Bank and have been personally impacted by hunger. These are the advocates that can be called on the most and at a moment's notice to go to a meeting or participate in an action.

The role of CAAH's advocates is to tell their personal stories and to highlight how people's lives are impacted by legislation. CAAH's staff provides advocates with logistical and background information: who they are meeting with, their position on legislation and what to expect at meetings and actions. Some one-on-one training and practice is provided if an advocate is testifying during public comment at a Board of Supervisors meeting (the Board of Supervisors is the body that oversees the operation of county government in several states). Keisha Nzewi, advocacy manager at the Alameda County Community Food Bank says it's about telling stories in your own voice.

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“We want people to tell their authentic stories. The advocates don't need to be experts on legislation. They are experts of their own experience. We don't tell them what to say or edit them in any way. Advocates provide the good stuff and the CAAH staff will provide the facts and figures if necessary.”

Although Alameda County is a progressive area where most of their representatives agree with CAAH's positions, CAAH feels that representatives still need to hear from



“Advocates are real people with real lives...”



their constituents. *“We want our representatives to be strong advocates on the floor with their colleagues and our support helps them do that.”*

CAAH advocates have conducted voter registration in the fall since the general election in 2012. Advocates get out to agencies to register voters six weeks before Election Day. Recognizing that a lot of people are fairly transient, advocates confirm the addresses people will be at come voting day. They go out to agencies that have a population that would be eligible to vote and ask people if they've moved since they last voted. In 2012, California got online voter registration so advocates were able to register people on tablets on the spot. Additionally, advocates do voter education, host a candidate's forum and create a voter guide on how different propositions impact the Food Bank.

Successes and Strengths

One of CAAH's biggest successes was 17 years in the making. When the Governor signed the state budget in June 2014, it included an end to the lifetime ban on **Cal Fresh** (California's name for SNAP) for people who have been convicted of certain drug felonies. One CAAH member has been involved in that battle for 15 of those 17 years. *“We can claim that as our biggest victory.”* Another previous success that advocates have worked on for years is the campaign to eliminate the finger imaging requirement for Cal Fresh. Locally, during the recession and the huge budget cuts, the general assistance program that administered cash aid to adults without children had its time limit slashed to only three months from its original one year. A task force was created with several members of the Board of Supervisors and other invested groups. CAAH advocates were consistent and persistent in representing the Food Bank on this taskforce. They were able to get another month added to cash assistance. The task force is working to get the period of general assistance back up to a full year. What has helped make CAAH such an effective model is the power of storytelling. *“Real people telling their stories in their own words.”*

CAAH advocates have also played a key role in keeping the Food Bank accountable and serve as a great feedback loop.

“The advocates are willing to tell it like it is; not just in legislative meetings but to the Food Bank itself. Even when CAAH advocates are doing voter registration at Food Bank's agencies, they bring back what they are hearing about how the Food Bank can better serve agencies.”

Challenges

The biggest challenge for CAAH is expanding and diversifying the group in every way possible (age, background, ethnically, socioeconomically). It's a challenge the Food Bank has recognized for a long time but has not yet overcome. They are successful in getting a wide range of people out for **Hunger Action Day**, a state wide, multi-organization lobbying day in Sacramento to which CAAH can take up to 100 people, but the challenge is how to keep people engaged throughout the year and become a regularly committed advocate. People are often committed to particular issues and CAAH can go back to them when they need them but it can be difficult to get people to commit to the core group which involves attending monthly meetings. That can feel like too much of a time commitment.

Another challenge is the changing life situations of advocates.

“Advocates are real people with real lives and when real life gets in the way you have to be extremely flexible. You may have no shows, you can’t take it personally. Things change. The morning of Hunger Action Day last year three of our advocates that greet all the groups had to cancel at 7am that morning. And they were all for really good reasons.”

Why Organize?

“If we are trying to end hunger and poverty, like other basic needs providers, emergency food providers are the closest to the problem, have a unique view of the problem and the best knowledge of the situation. The folks that help us do that and the folks that are helped by what we do are best positioned to convince policymakers to do the right thing.”

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“We want people to tell their authentic stories...”



When asked why CAAH organizes around poverty issues like the living wage, for Keisha the answer is simple:

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“ We believe strongly that you can’t food bank your way out of hunger and poverty. That requires looking at any issue that impacts our clients’ ability to feed themselves which usually has to do with their pocketbooks. Any issue that impacts how much money a household has available to them, especially when they are working, is really important. ”

Words of Wisdom

“ It’s totally worth it because we aren’t going to solve hunger by handing out food. It takes a lot of people’s time. You have to be extremely flexible. Things won’t go how you planned and you have to be ok with that. It can be tempting to script people who are advocating in your name, but I think we shouldn’t and can’t do that because people know their experiences the best and should be able to express it however they want to. Organizing can be a scary word to people. It’s just volunteer management and putting yourself out there which many emergency food provider workers are keenly skilled at. ”

Bread for the City

Please bring a photo of yourself
we are open
Donations will not be accepted
generally available to the public
we are open
Please call
(202) 265-2400
for hours of operation

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The Vision

Organizing at **Bread for the City**, a frontline agency that provides multiple services to Washington DC's residents, has taken different forms throughout the years, all based on their long standing mission to both *"alleviating the suffering caused by poverty"* as well as collaborating with clients to address the root causes of poverty. In 2004, several staff members became involved with local advocacy and community organizing work with clients. Around the same time the organization as a whole began to have conversations about advocacy, policy work and client engagement. An immediate result of this dialogue was adding the word *"justice"* to Bread for the City's motto (Dignity, Respect, Service, Justice). After a few years of less formally coordinated organizing, they began hiring community organizers four years ago, and hired their first Advocacy Campaign Director.

The Model

An interview with **Joni Podschun-Hansen**, Senior Advisor on Strategy and
Tavia Benjamin, DC PLACE MATTERS Equity Fellow

Now, Bread for the City has moved from a separate, centralized department of advocacy and community engagement to an organizing model in which each department has at least one staff member devoted to community organizing so that the social change aspect of their work is more connected to daily client interaction. With this model, each department's organizing work is unique and works to build relationships, recognize client leadership and build more client leadership. What is central to Bread for the City's organizing is their use of storytelling as an organizing tool. This strategy helps to bridge Bread's client engagement work with their advocacy.

According to Joni Podschun-Hansen, Bread's Senior Advisor on Strategy:

“*Story-based strategy works well for the type of organizing we want to do. If it is led by people most affected, storytelling can be a really great way of healing and finding your voice. I think that makes it in theory much more responsive and creates a solution that is much more inclusive to what you want and what the community needs. It's a more holistic way of organizing for us, based on a story. Working with each other to find our voice and telling our story. Advocating for issues that are important to us.*”

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Another central theme to their organizing work is using a racial justice framework to discuss roots causes of poverty.

“*Most of our clients – about 92% of our clients – are people of color. In DC, it's impossible to deny the connections between structural racism and inequality. I think we have the biggest racial wealth gap in the country. Most of our white residents have pretty good access to resources and a fair amount of financial options. In communities of color in DC, it's much more diverse. We do have one of the biggest Black middle classes but it still looks very different for the White community than the Black community in particular. So it's sort of impossible to— well, many people do— continue to ignore the implications of race and why our clients are coming through the door for help in the first place. And then I think even if we weren't in such a racially divided and divisive environment, it's an important way for us as an organization and as individuals that this is the one really important lens to understanding structural injustice, period. So it's easy to apply the lessons around race to other kinds of oppression. Race is the one that people are usually the least eager to discuss. It's the most contentious and we've been really socialized to ignore it or avoid it and starting from there has been really helpful to us as an organization and allows us to apply to other things like the rights of trans people or disability justice.*”

Another key aspect of their organizing work is Bread for the City's participation in coalitions. One of the major coalitions they are a part of is **Healthy Affordable Food for All (HAFA)**, a coalition of advocates, service providers and local food activists working to increase access to healthy, affordable food in all DC neighborhoods. Each year at the Rooting DC conference, a conference that focuses on urban agriculture, HAFA has an open workshop track in which community members can collaboratively work on creative solutions to food and social justice issues. This year, HAFA used this workshop space to prep people to testify in favor of a new **DC Food Security Bill** coming down the pipeline, an advocacy campaign that was ultimately successful. In 2014, HAFA disbanded in part due to the creation of a **Food Policy Council** in DC.

Bread for the City is also a part of the **DC PLACE MATTERS** coalition. PLACE MATTERS is a national initiative of the **National Collaborative for Health Equity**, whose goal is to improve the health of participating communities by addressing social conditions that lead to poor health. The program has 25 sites around the country, one of which is in DC. The team's vision is to see that DC is a place where health equity is prioritized in all policies and where we live no longer determines how healthy we are.

Tavia Benjamin, DC PLACE MATTERS Equity Fellow working out of Bread for the City sums it up: *"It's about creating healthier life outcomes by battling social inequity."* The DC PLACE MATTERS team works with the community to develop and implement strategies and policies that focus on fundamental causes and systemic roots of health issues to promote equitable health in DC. *"We work on issues that are coming up and important to where you are, so for DC that is food equity and racial equity. It's very public health focused as well and it links our urban agriculture work and lends some storytelling around the equity work we do with some of the work around health and healthy eating that they do."*

Yet another coalition Bread for the City is a part of is the **Service to Justice**, a coalition of direct service organizations that are asking the question of how to balance the work of solving daily crises faced by low-income residents with addressing long-term structural solutions. The coalition examines what tools organizations need to put more power in the hands of their clients and how justice work can be supported in each member organization. As Tavia puts it, *"It's about moving service provider and direct service work to a more justice based lens and talking about the work it would require to make the move to more justice-centered work with the people who are most affected. And uplifting that and making the work more inclusive and not being a top down model but working in solidarity and empowerment and uplifting everyone."*





Bread for the City supports becoming involved in coalitions if they are effective and able to work across issues that influence and affect people lives.

“ Nothing happens in isolation, it’s very connected and I think working in coalitions allows you to be flexible. If something isn’t your organization’s issue or expertise you can support the work of those who are doing that work effectively. It’s a way of being a part of the work but not spreading yourself thin. It’s also a way of showing solidarity. ”

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Challenges/Lessons Learned

As with any new initiatives that an organization takes on, it takes time and education for the whole culture of the organization to shift. Additionally, the ever present challenge of limited resources prevents Bread for the City from undertaking as much organizing as it would like.

Strengths and Successes

What has made Bread for the City’s organizing so strong has been the support of their CEO. He has created a safe environment for staff to voice their concerns and be able to discuss challenging issues. He has modelled leadership by organizing the people he comes in contact with through his role as CEO.

Bread of the City’s organizing would be nothing without the commitment of their volunteers. That is reciprocated by the deep respect and appreciation Bread for the City’s staff has for their clients.

To date, they have trained 50 staff, clients, and community partners in a three-part series on storytelling, in collaboration with the **Center for Story-Based Strategy**, **Grassroots DC**, and **The Black Land Project**, which discussed how the black community’s relationship to land in DC can help frame issue-based organizing. Client advocates played a big role in advocating for the passing of the **Fair Criminal Records Screening Act (Ban the Box)**, an act where individuals with criminal or arrest records will not have to check a box on an application that identifies them as someone with a record.

Why Organize?

Emergency food providers may not be traditional places for organizing but they have the potential for organizing because their purpose is centered on food. *“It’s an important place for organizing work to happen,”* says Joni. *“EFPs don’t offer a lot of agency for people by just giving out food but they are places for sharing food. Food is a powerful place for organizing to happen because it has a natural connection to culture.”*

When getting started, Tavia advises to start where you are and look for the skills in the people around you.

“Think about the relationships that already exist. Look for the natural leaders. Look for ways to develop leadership. At the end of the day, whether through informal conversations or community events, organizing is about relationships. The process of getting people together and on the same page is as important as the outcome.”



“You can choose to look away, but never again can you say you didn’t know!”

Mother Hubbard's Cupboard

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The Vision

Mother Hubbard's Cupboard (the Hub), a food pantry in Bloomington, Indiana, wanted to expand their work on nutrition and gardening education and be a part of the larger conversation around food. Their first step was co-founding the local food policy council, playing an active role on the education committee and spearheading the annual Food Day events in Bloomington. The food policy council tended to draw the usual suspects from the good food movement: people from the local co-op, farmers, etc. What the Hub wanted to do was engage people on the outside of the good food community and bring more people to the table and into the conversation – to bring together those who have the power to make change and those who are most affected by food policies.

Beyond the food policy council, The Hub was feeling the need to do more. There was lots of enthusiasm, yet there were limitations on an organization that is primarily an emergency food provider. After moving into a new facility the numbers of people using the pantry skyrocketed which meant more resources were diverted to the daily operations of the pantry. These limitations and frustrations in their day to day work motivated them to create a space to engage with their patrons (the individuals who use their services) on a deeper level.

The Model

An interview with **Amanda Nickey**, President and CEO

Their original idea was to create a patron advocacy council where patrons could take on food justice issues that interested them. The Hub would provide the resources and space for patrons to meet and organize. This idea was developed by the staff and led by them. They learned very quickly that it was the wrong way of approaching organizing. For example, they held meetings when the pantry was closed. The people attending the meetings were mostly pantry volunteers and they were mostly concerned with operational issues. The hope was that the conversation would move beyond what was happening within the pantry walls to wider food justice issues. So the Hub shifted gears and held the first of what would become known as family meetings. They centered these meetings about food around food. They held their first family meeting during the regular operating hours of the pantry. The **Americorps VISTAs** working at the Hub cooked patrons a meal of beans, greens and cornbread. People were drawn by the smell and taste of the food. This brought in patrons who hadn't previously engaged in any programming at the Hub. At the meeting they talked about SNAP market bucks and upcoming education classes.

At another family meeting, a volunteer prepared kimchi for patrons (fermented foods are a favorite of staff and patrons). The meeting drew patrons who came specifically for the family meeting and weren't using the pantry at the time even though the pantry was open. This family meeting led to a discussion about fermentation and its health benefits and evolved into one about food as a tool for health and the connection between what you eat and how you feel.

Amanda Nickey, Mother Hubbard's Cupboard President and CEO, recalls the experience:

“A lot of people were just talking about their own experiences with food and how they feel. It was an interesting conversation. It wasn't what I had expected it to be. It wasn't this issue-heavy policy conversation but it was something that seemed important to people and they seemed really interested in as a topic. What kinds of foods can I eat that will make me feel different, that will impact my health? There was a lot of talk about kimchi and the health benefits of kimchi. Just a regular day at the Hub.”

Strengths and Successes

The success of the family meeting model at the Hub can be partly attributed to their warm and welcoming space and staff. Their facility is warmly lit and is painted in bright and cheerful colors. On the walls hangs artwork painted by patrons and staff. The food pantry is set up like a grocery store with fun and helpful information about nutrition education, cooking and gardening. The Hub's indoor microgreens installation is inside the pantry area for patrons to see, taste and take home. Outside the building lies the Hub's demonstration garden with colorful labels to identify the various vegetables and herbs growing in every kind of space imaginable, from directly in the ground to inside of tires to bales of hay. Patrons often comment on how welcome and understood they feel.

“People feel like it’s a place they can trust. For us that’s really important in being able to accomplish anything. That can be a big hurdle for organizing work. If you are not coming from the community and making it happen as a member of that community, it’s really hard to get a community of people to trust you as an outsider. The strength we have is that as an organization we are not seen as an outsider.”

The lunch format has been an effective tool for organizing. It has allowed the Hub to connect with a subset of their patrons that did not engage in programming other than the food pantry.

“They are not at a point in their life where they can borrow a tool from the tool share. Maybe they don’t have a home or a space to cook or they are not coming and learning how to make bread and they are not coming to learn how to garden because where are they going to do that? There is a pretty large segment of the population that is homeless and we are able to connect with this group of people through the lunchtime family meetings. These patrons are being nourished through the food that the Hub staff is preparing and they are being nourished through the connections they are making with other patrons through the family meeting conversations. A conversation with someone who cares and will listen to what they have to say. They leave feeling like they have connected with someone. I feel like that is the best of what we can do. The relationship is everything for us. What people do beyond that and what we are able to do beyond that is just a bonus. That lack of connection is what makes it easy for us to not care about our food system. I don’t have to care about whose picking those blueberries I’m eating and what conditions they are working in, or whether they are able to feed blueberries to their families, if I don’t feel connected.”





Challenges/Lessons Learned

What was challenging for the Hub staff was breaking with their idea of what organizing looks like.

“ We aren’t signing people up to vote or taking petitions out. It looks a little different here and it’s growing from the way that we do things. We don’t fit this traditional model of organizing. That’s been challenging but it’s been part of what has made it feel more natural. It’s been challenging to get over our own ideas of what we want things to look like. ”

What helped change that was recognizing what felt right for their patrons and the discussions that were naturally evolving from the family meetings. What was of greater importance and what was in line with Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard values was being a vehicle for building relationships.

“ We are connecting people to each other, ourselves and information. For us it's more about creating space and having patron-led discussions, instead of us trying to force feed a topic. We are just providing a space and facilitating it to whatever degree we can. At the end of our last meeting, people were talking about sharing kombucha cultures, which are called scobies. It's this thing that is growing literally and figuratively in this really interesting way. We want that sense of community and we want people to come out feeling that sense of community with each other. ”

Trying to convey this new vision of reimagining the role of a food pantry with some donors' traditional understanding of how food pantries operate can also be challenging.

“ There is a certain language that food pantries have to speak to keep their support because there is a certain language that donors expect. For example 'give us more money and we can feed more people.' No one wants to hear that if you give me more money, we still might not be able to feed more people. And maybe feeding people through this way, through emergency food, and waste food is not what we should be doing anyway. Nobody wants to talk about that because then you leave your old school donors who have a certain idea of what charity is and that is a whole different beast. Internally, we struggle with that because we know for some donors it's just about groceries out the door and then there are some donors who are motivated by our education programs and advocacy. They want us to be a part of a greater and more active solution. Old school donors want to see the number of pounds you gave out and they want to see that number go up. Do you know what that means? It means more people need food. You actually want to see that number go down. ”

Why Organize?

“ Who else should be doing it? It should be the people who are most connected. The people that are closest to the work that's actually happening, people who are working on the ground with communities who are affected by these policies that everyone wants to talk about, have a lot to contribute and have a lot of expertise. ”

The Hub sees organizing as an opportunity for emergency food providers to contribute to the conversation around food security and food justice in a meaningful way. They have the experience and expertise of their work and can see and speak to how policies are affecting people in their everyday lives. All they need to do is step into their food pantry.

“ I can go into the food pantry and see that we’ve had this percentage increase of people coming here since SNAP has been cut. Not only am I giving you a number but then I can let you speak to one of our patrons about how it’s affecting her family. Organizing gives a face to policies and issues and it provides an opportunity for the people most affected to become engaged. For us that’s the important part – providing the space for people to realize that they have agency. They have the right to speak up and the right to demand change. For low-income folks, they don’t often feel like they have the right to do much. That it’s not a conversation they can be a part of. If the folks that are most affected aren’t in the conversation at all, what are we talking about? Emergency food providers are perfectly poised to be involved in that. ”

Ultimately, EFPs should engage in organizing because emergency food cannot address the problem of food insecurity at its root cause.

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“ There’s only so much we can do through the traditional programs of providing food. That’s not going to solve that problem. It’s hardly even making it less of a problem. I’ve just seen our numbers grow and that’s not something we are proud of. But it’s not something we have a whole lot of control over. ”

Organizing is an opportunity to address the real issues around hunger with the people most affected by it.

“ Organizing is about creating an opportunity for people with the expertise and the connection with the population that are most affected to take a more active and meaningful role or a more effective role or a role that has a more tangible outcome. ”



“They want us to be a part of a greater and more active solution...”

Neighbors Together

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The Vision

For **Neighbors Together**, a dynamic soup kitchen and community center serving the Bedford–Stuyvesant, Ocean Hill and Brownsville neighborhoods in central Brooklyn, organizing work falls directly in line with their mission to end hunger and poverty.

Founded in 1982, Neighbors Together’s original mission was to alleviate hunger and poverty, but over the years Neighbors Together’s vision extended beyond easing the burden of hunger in their community – they want to see an end to hunger. Neighbors Together’s staff and Board eventually made a decision to change the language of their mission to ending hunger and poverty, and began to engage their members in community organizing and advocacy efforts to effect real systemic change.



The Model

An interview with **Amy Blumsack**, Community Organizer

It is critical in good organizing work that any directly affected population has agency and voice in changing or determining policy that affect their daily lives, states Neighbors Together's community organizer, Amy Blumsack.

The organizing at Neighbors Together is carried out with the goal of involving their members (the low-income individuals and families who eat in their Community Café) in improving the many policies that adversely affect their daily lives. Neighbors Together's organizing model is one that creates a variety of opportunities and levels of involvement for their members via the **Community Action Program**. The simplest way members can get involved is by signing a petition or postcard campaign when they come into the Café for a warm meal. From there, members learn more about Neighbors Together's Community Action Program and can participate at deeper levels of engagement, such as attending weekly membership meetings, participating in educational or skill building workshops, coming to a rally or a lobby day event, or participating in their intensive 14-week **Leadership Development Program**.

Membership meetings and the Leadership Development Program are at the core of the Community Action Program at Neighbors Together. Membership meetings occur weekly and are a space for members to discuss both internal operational/ programmatic issues at Neighbors Together as well as organizing campaigns that they are interested in. This weekly space is an opportunity for members to talk about current events and policy issues they are interested in and/or affected by. The Leadership Development Program is the most involved and committed way for members to engage in the Community Action Program. The three month program is designed for Neighbors Together's most active members to hone and deepen their organizing and advocacy skills.

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“At the end of the course, members are ready to fight for the change they want to see in the world.”

The Leadership Development Program is broken down into three distinct parts: **Government and Politics 101, Community Organizing 101 and Interpersonal Skills.** Amy explains: “We cover those three areas so that people can have, hone or increase



“...people have to address what's most important for them.”

their foundation of knowledge to better understand how organizing works and why we do what we do when we're involved in an organizing campaign."

Content in the Leadership Development Program covers some of the following: identifying which level of government a policy is being implemented at, getting familiar with how a bill becomes a law, what our political system looks like in the United States, who has power, what power looks like, community organizing strategies and tactics that are used at Neighbors Together, identifying strategic targets and who the different players are in an organizing campaign. This information is then layered with training on important interpersonal skills, such as active listening, conflict resolution and self-awareness. These interpersonal skills are particularly important to organizing work, but are also very useful and transferable to any aspect of member's lives, including securing permanent housing or employment. Neighbors Together organizes around a variety of issues: protecting SNAP benefits, protecting emergency food funding at the state and city levels, income equality, and broader economic justice initiatives as part of the Empire State Economic Security platform. Neighbors Together also works with a number of coalitions around New York City.

A unique aspect of Neighbors Together's work is their in-house campaign around **Three Quarter Housing**. A Three Quarter House is a private home or building that rents beds to single adults. These residences often present themselves as supportive programs, however they are not licensed or regulated by any government body or agency. A Three-Quarter House is a private for-profit underground industry which has grown due to the lack of affordable housing in New York City. Many Three Quarter Houses mandate that tenants attend outpatient drug rehabilitation programs, whether they need one or not, and tenants have no say in which program they attend.

Neighbors Together noticed there were a large number of people in the area living in Three Quarter Houses who were experiencing many kinds of terrible abuses and conditions in these homes. In 2010, Neighbors Together brought residents of Three Quarter Houses and organizations that work with tenants together for an inaugural tenant forum, which led to the creation of the **Three Quarter Housing Tenant Organizing Project (TOP)**. *"TOP is a group of current and former Three Quarter House tenants who are fighting for justice for themselves."*

“Fighting to raise public awareness and educate people about Three Quarter Houses and fighting for policies that will make Three Quarter Houses more dignified places to live.”



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Strengths and Successes

Neighbors Together is one of the few emergency food programs in New York City that engages in organizing work. Community organizing is an integral part of their mission and is enmeshed in their everyday operations. They have created opportunities for their members to participate in organizing in many ways and at different levels of commitment.

“*Having a variety of ways that people can get involved that works with where they are at in terms of their availability and interest has been something that’s really worked well here. You have to meet people where they are at. If you can get someone interested in signing a postcard, it’s a way to talk to them about the issues. Then there will be people who want to come to a three month Leadership Development Program series, and we want to be able to have something for them, too.*”

Another strength of Neighbors Together’s organizing is their focus on honing the leadership skills of members. For example, members are not only asked to come to membership meetings but to facilitate these meetings, train other members to facilitate and then to debrief and offer constructive feedback to one another on their facilitation. “*Members support each other as they are learning those skills and taking on the next level of leadership. That’s been really important for us as well.*”

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This model has helped lead to the great success of the Tenant Organizing Project. Being one of a few organizations working on Three Quarter Housing, [TOP’s work has been critical](#). Organizing efforts have included education and awareness building through presentations at numerous NYPD precincts to address the issue of illegal evictions of Three Quarter House tenants. In collaboration with **John Jay College’s Prisoner Re-entry Institute**, **MFY Legal Services** and other stakeholder organizations, Neighbors Together released a groundbreaking report on Three Quarter Housing in 2013 based on focus groups that documented the first hand experience of tenants. As a follow up to the report release, Neighbors Together and MFY Legal Services worked to analyze policy solutions to help improve the Three Quarter House industry, and to bring together stakeholder organizations. In July, 2014 Neighbors Together and MFY Legal Services launched the Coalition for Three-Quarter House Reform, with 19 organizations in attendance. The Coalition has been holding regular meetings since then, and has worked to establish a policy platform that TOP is beginning to advocate for with city and state elected officials and government agencies.



Challenges and Lessons Learned

The biggest obstacle to organizing at Neighbors Together and in many spaces is the reality that the many challenges people face in their day-to-day lives can prevent them from participating in organizing on a consistent basis.

“ Sometimes our members want to be here consistently but they have to go take care of their public assistance benefits or they have to deal with a health emergency or they were illegally evicted so they have to find other housing. It can be challenging to keep up with our members who have a huge variety of other challenges. It’s the nature of the work we do and the people that we’re working with and that’s okay. People have to address what’s most important for them. ”

One way Neighbors Together has addressed that challenge is by creating a consistent environment around their organizing and being a stable presence in the lives of their members.

“ We have membership meetings every Tuesday at 2:30pm. Even if the attendance is small or the weather is bad, it’s really helpful to create stability so that people know if they haven’t come around for a few months and they are able to again, we’ll be here and they can pick up where they left off. I think that’s really important. For us as an organization, consistency also speaks to the value we put on the organizing work that we do. It’s not just something we do here or there, we do it regularly because it is of such value to us. ”

Another important lesson when working with any large number of people with pressing issues to attend to is that it’s important to organize around issues that personally and directly matter to them. “Neighbors Together does not set our organizing agenda without our members. What our members want to organize around is what we organize around.” Amy adds that whatever your group organizes around, be persistent with it. “Keep holding your events and keep doing the organizing work and keep holding meetings and people will come. Keep doing outreach and you’ll get the same faces and you’ll get new faces.”



Why Organize?

Organizing helps to address the larger structural issues that create the need for direct services like emergency food.

“Emergency food and direct services are critical. There are so many people who have so many needs. We have to keep providing the things that people need whether through direct services, a hot meal or a pantry bag. However, if we want to see those lines dissipate, then we need to start zooming out and looking at the larger structural problems which create the need for emergency food in the first place.”

Organizing can be a powerful tool for structural change and harnessing the collective power of the people most affected.

“Organizing is the way we believe we make long-term change. Organizing is important because the people who come to emergency food programs have important things to say about hunger and poverty. They are smart, they have direct experience living their life every day and they have important input for what kind of policy changes need to happen. Our members are a hugely valuable resource and there is such potential to mobilize people who are accessing emergency food programs to make lasting change.”

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The nature of emergency food programs lends itself to community organizing.

“ One of the things that has been really great for me as an organizer and very hopeful is that inherent in the model of emergency food programs is access to a huge number of people. That’s a great benefit to an organizer. ”

If you are starting to organize, keep it manageable and dedicate resources to it. “You can start small. Take advantage of resources that are already out there. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. There is a lot of good information, tools and policy groups that are already out there that you should use. One of the things that has been really critical here at Neighbors Together is dedicating resources to having a staff position devoted to organizing work. Creating a staff position for a trained Community Organizer reflected to our members, staff, board and stakeholders the value that we place on this work. If your efforts feel successful, whether full-time or part-time, a dedicated staff member can really help take your organizing efforts to the next level”.

“ Emergency food and direct services are critical... ”



“ If the folks that are most affected aren’t in the conversation at all, what are we talking about? ”

Neighbors Together



Organizing Resources

Books

[Organizing for Social Change—Midwest Academy Manual for Activists](#)
by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall and Steve Max

[Tools for Radical Democracy](#)
by Joan Minieri and Paul Getsos

[Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action](#)
by Michael Gecan

[Lessons in Community Organizing](#)
by Rinku Sen

Websites

[Organizing for Power, Organizing for Change](#)

[Real Food Challenge—Campaign Toolbox](#)

[Resources for Organizing and Social Change—Publications](#)

[Community Toolbox](#)

[Racial Equity Tools](#)

[New Organizing Institute—Organizer's Toolbox](#)

[Race Forward—Tools](#)

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Organizing Models/ Trainings

[Center for Story based Strategy](#)

[PICO National Network Faith Based Community Organizing](#)

[Gamaliel](#)

[Oregon Food Bank FEAST \(Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together\)](#)

[Virginia Organizing](#)

[Alliance for Community Trainers](#)

[Food Solutions New England](#)

[Interaction Institute for Social Change](#)

[People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#)

Movement Building

[Movement Strategy Center](#)

[Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project](#)





WhyHunger

This is just a jumping-off point. We hope this guide is informative, inspirational and thought provoking. Ultimately, this guide was created to motivate you to take action. Set up voter registration; support a food justice or economic justice campaign; join a coalition or network; start an organizing campaign to address your community needs.

Act now. Act together.

WhyHunger

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