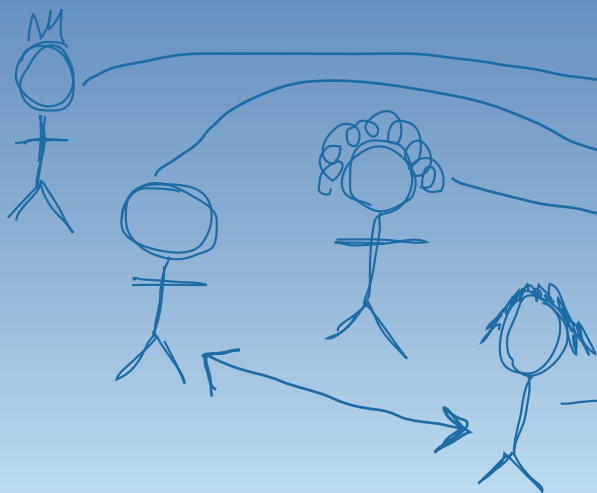


# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



When it was decided to develop this handbook, it was agreed that the concept of a community organizer would be something that may need some explanation. The word “organizer” may conjure up negative images, but those images are not the reality. A community organizer is a person that listens to, and mobilizes, people to make their community a better place. Some people may call this a community builder or a community coordinator. In this section you will learn about the history of community organizing. You will also be introduced to some tools and strategies that can help you organize your community.

## What's Covered

- What is an Organizer
- History of the Profession
- Let's Get to Work- Conducting Asset Inventories
- Campfires or Third Places
- Sometimes Problems Do Exist





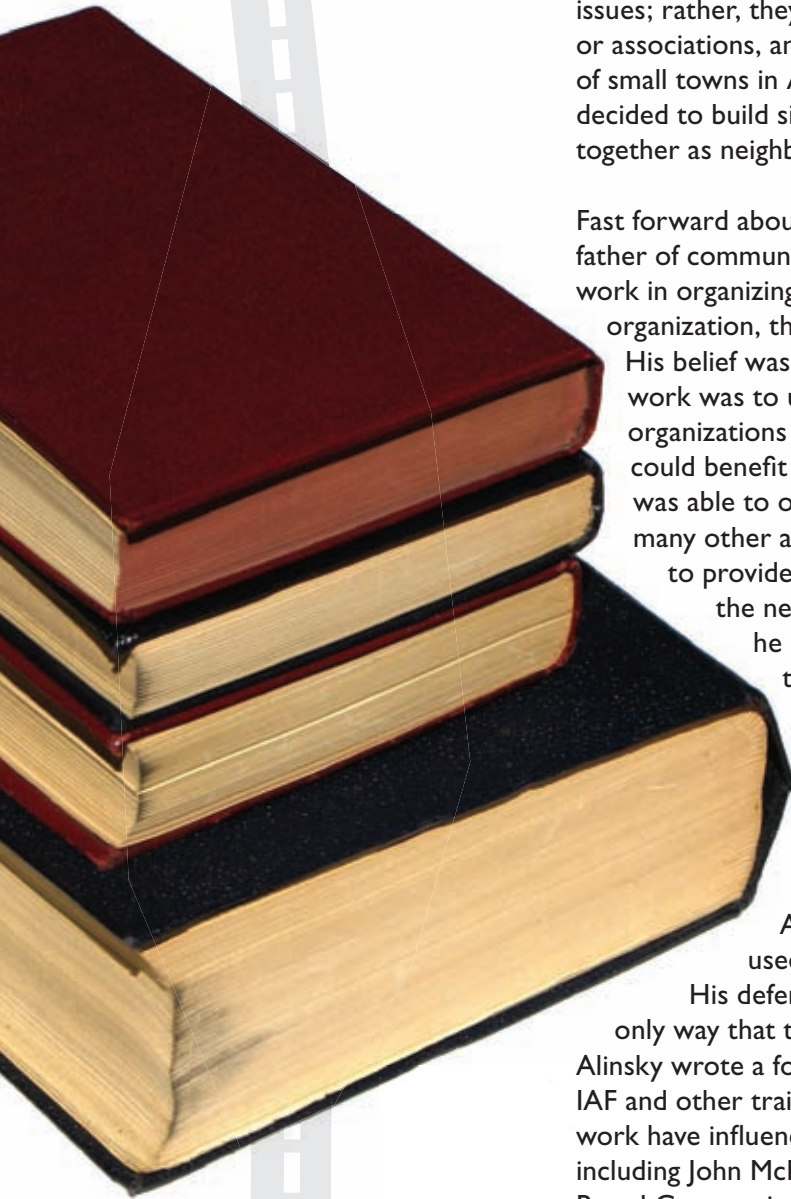
## THE HISTORY OF THE PROFESSION

One could probably trace the history of community organizing in the United States back to the earliest days of the country. You can get some great insights into this in Tocqueville's masterpiece, "Democracy in America" (Tocqueville, 2003). In this view of life in America in 1831, Tocqueville wrote about how, in America, people would not wait for the government or some authorized agent to come and fix all of their issues; rather, they pulled themselves together into small voluntary clubs, or associations, and took care of it themselves (2003). He told stories of small towns in America having issues getting around in town, so they decided to build sidewalks from building to building (2003). They came together as neighbors to improve their quality of life. Sound familiar?

Fast forward about a hundred years to who many people regard as the father of community organizing, Saul Alinsky. Saul is most famous for his work in organizing what many people believe to be the first community organization, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in Chicago. His belief was that people are already organized, and that the real work was to use their self-interests to build an organization of organizations that could come together when there was an issue that could benefit those shared interests. In Back of the Yards, Alinsky was able to organize the labor unions, the Catholic Church and many other associations to win bargaining rights for the union, and to provide thousands of hot meals every day for the children of the neighborhood. Alinsky documented his ideas and what he learned in Chicago into what many people believe is the single best resource for young organizers, "Reveille for Radicals" (Alinsky, 1989a). Alinsky continued to organize groups in Chicago and around the country. He helped found the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) as a training school for young organizers who wanted to learn the trade.

Alinsky's style is often criticized for the tactics that he used and for the way he used controversy as a change agent. His defense was that controversy and organized people were the only way that those with power would ever concede.

Alinsky wrote a follow-up book, "Rules for Radicals." (Alinsky, 1989b) The IAF and other training schools who offer programs based from Alinsky's work have influenced just about every community organizer in the country, including John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, the co-founders of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute.



## LET'S GET TO WORK

Core to what a community organizer needs to do is build relationships. If you do not know the people that you are trying to organize, you will be fighting a losing battle. It is important to build relationships with all the people in the community. This includes first and foremost the neighbors who may be disenfranchised, or have never had their voice listened to. Find out what they are interested in. Find out what it is that will make them want to act. Once you know what makes them want to act, connect them with other people who feel the same way.

Alinsky-style organizing would have you go door-to-door asking people what is wrong with their community. Once you find enough people with the same problems, then you organize around that. This kind of strategy can and has been very effective, but it is not the only answer. Sometimes “us versus them” is not the only approach available. Organizing from an asset-based approach would have you start by taking an inventory of what is going right and organizing around that. Over the long-term, this is much more sustainable because when people organize around problems, they typically disorganize once the situation gets better. But, when people organize around the positive attributes in a community, there is no endpoint.

Conduct an asset inventory of your community. Find out from residents what skills and talents they have that they would be willing to share with the rest of the community. Find out what associations, or voluntary groups, exist in your community and determine how they could be used. Identify the local institutions and strategize about what resources they have that could be used in the neighborhood. Inventory the land or physical assets of the community. Begin to document the exchange that takes place in the neighborhood, and start thinking about the exchange that could happen. As stated in the section on ABCD, how can you know what you need until you first know what you have?







## CAMPFIRES OR THIRD PLACES

One of the most important ways to build relationships in a community is to have those places that are safe for neighbors to come together. You can think of them as community campfires. These are gathering places where neighbors can connect, share stories, and begin to rebuild that social capital that so many think are eroding. Use the metaphor that Ray Oldenburg uses in his works about the “Third Place” (Oldenburg, 2002). He says that our home is our first place and that our work is our second place (2002). This leaves all the other places where we spend time with others as the Third Place (2002). He is convinced that these third places are vital to “construct the infrastructures of human relationships,” (2002, p. 2).



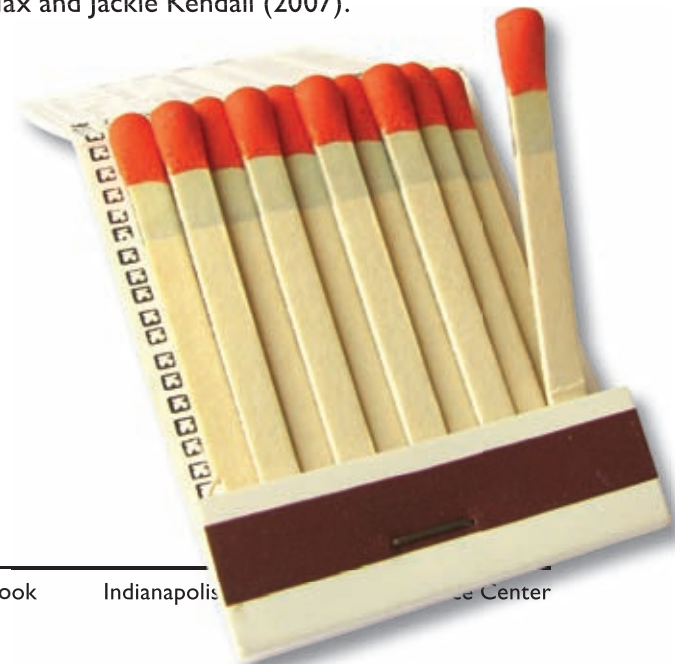
An important job of an organizer is to ensure that such places are identified, and that neighbors are aware of them. The Brookside Neighborhood on the Near East Side has taken this idea to heart and has reclaimed an old tavern in their neighborhood and has promoted specific times when neighbors should come and get to know each other. Maybe it is not a tavern, maybe it's a coffee shop or a library. It really does not matter what the third place or campfire is; what matters is that they exist and that neighbors are connecting.



## SOMETIMES PROBLEMS DO EXIST

As discussed in the section on ABCD, just because you focus on the full half of the glass, does not mean that the empty half does not exist. From time to time, your community will come up against problems that need to be addressed. The Midwest Academy ([www.midwestacademy.com](http://www.midwestacademy.com)) has identified the steps necessary to advocate on your neighborhood's behalf. The steps are examined in their, “The Six Steps of Direct Action Organizing” which can be found in the book *Organizing for Social Change*, written by Kim Bobo, Steve Max and Jackie Kendall (2007).

### **The Six Steps of Direct Action Organizing**



When we engage in Direct Action Organizing we organize a campaign to win a specific issue; that is, a specific solution to a specific problem (Bobo, Max, & Kendall, 2007). An issue campaign usually goes through this series of stages.

1. People identify a problem

The people who have the problem agree on a solution and how to reach it. They may define the issue narrowly: “Ensure that our landlord returns our rent deposits when we move out.” Or, they may define it more broadly: “Make the city council pass a law requiring the return of rent deposits.”

If the landlord owns only the one building, the tenants may be able to win on their own. But, if the landlord owns many buildings around the city, then building a coalition to pass a law might be the best way.

2. The organization turns the problem into an issue.

There is a difference between a problem and an issue. An issue is a specific solution to a problem that you choose to work on. You don’t always get to choose your problems. Often your problems choose you. But you always choose your issues, the solution to the problem that you wish to win. Air pollution is a problem. Changing the law to get older power plants covered by the same air quality regulations that apply to newer plants is an issue.

3. Develop a strategy.

A strategy is the overall plan for a campaign. It is about power relationships and it involves asking six questions:

1. What are your long and short term goals?
2. What are your organizational strengths and weaknesses?
3. Who cares about this problem?
4. Who are your allies?
5. Who has the power to give you what we want?
6. What tactics can you use to apply your power and make it felt by those who can give you what you want?

4. Bring many people to meet with the decision maker.

Use large meetings and actions to force the person who can give you what you want to react. That person is the decision maker. The decision maker is often referred to as the “target” of the campaign. The decision maker is always an individual person or a number of individuals, never a board or elected body as a whole. Decision making bodies must be personalized. So, if you are trying to get something passed by the City Council, for example, you don’t say the decision maker is the City Council. Rather, you need specific members of the council to vote on an issue. Who are they? Name them. What is your power over them? Do you have members in their districts?

5. The decision maker reacts to you.

You either get what you want or you have to go out and organize larger numbers of people for a second round of the fight. Sometimes it takes several rounds before the fight is won. That is why we think of organizing as an entire campaign, not just as a series of one-time events.

6. Win, regroup, and go on to next campaign.

*Note: From Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists, by K. Bobo, S. Max, & J. Kendall, 2007, 3rd Edition, Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press. Adapted with permission.*

“Social advance depends as much upon the process through which it is secured as upon the result itself.”  
*Jane Addams*

# TRY IT!

Think of a problem that exists in your community that you believe needs to be addressed. Walk through the first three steps referenced above. To help you better organize step 3, use the “Developing Your Strategy Chart” that is available on INRC’s website at [www.inrc.org](http://www.inrc.org). There is also a sample that has been filled out for your reference.

## DIRECT ACTION ORGANIZING

- ① Identify a Problem
- ② Turn the problem into an issue
- ③ Develop a strategy



Tom and Sarah Glass became concerned about a business in their west side neighborhood. The business, a crematorium, emitted unpleasant odors and created a general nuisance for the neighborhood. To the Glass's, it appeared that the crematorium was operating with little regulation, or oversight. It was clearly hindering the quality of life in their community and current zoning code seemed inadequate or was being violated.

Moved to act, Tom and Sarah began having conversations with others. They spoke with people from the neighborhood, newspapers, city officials, environmental specialists and other neighborhood leaders. The message they received from all of these conversations was twofold: the current zoning ordinances for crematoria were inappropriate and they needed to engage their neighbors around this issue to make a lasting impact.

Tom and Sarah hit the streets of their neighborhood. They informed neighbors about the issue, gathered their neighbors' interest in making change, and successfully organized a resident-led neighborhood association for the area, 500 View Neighborhood Association. "We made sure we had neighbor support. That way, when we needed to approach city officials, it meant more." Tom explains.

Together, as an organized group of neighbors, residents of the newly formed 500 View Neighborhood Association worked with city officials, planners and environmental experts and successfully changed important regulatory requirements for stand-alone crematoria. Eventually, with several successes in their back pockets, residents in the 500 View Neighborhood were able to force the crematorium to change its practices and stop taking away the quality of life in that neighborhood.

## REAL LIFE SCENARIO



### TIPS

- There are two types of power: organized money and organized people.
- Spend a lot of time developing your plan. Organizing is not only about action, it is also very strategic.
- Organize for the long-term. Don't quit connecting with each other after one or two victories.

