

# Austin Interfaith celebrates 30 years of social empowerment

LOCAL

By [Liliana Valenzuela](#) - ¡Ahora Sí!



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In 1988, then-East Austin resident Ofelia Zapata was among the first helped by a new group whose mission is to build stronger communities by teaching residents how to organize and leverage their political capital.

Born poor and with visual disabilities, the young widow with three daughters joined [Austin Interfaith](#), a non-denominational, non-partisan umbrella organization of various churches, temples and charitable community groups.

Zapata first got involved when she was a member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. She wanted to ensure her daughters' schools provided an education as good as more affluent schools across town, she said. Austin Interfaith members worked to help pass bond propositions to build parks and schools in East Austin, where she lived at the time.

The organization “takes time to develop us as leaders,” she said. “We ask ourselves, ‘What are the pressures our families are facing?’”

Austin Interfaith has pushed for improvements to local education, health care, affordability, living wages, utility rates and criminal justice. Membership include churches, schools, unions and other organizations. The Texas organization celebrates 40 years of existence this year. The Austin chapter is 30 years old this year.



In this September 2010 file photo, Ernesto Salazar, left, and Ofelia Zapata canvas the Dove Springs neighborhood of Southeast Austin to ... [Read More](#)

Members have worked to make sure city and school bond money gets distributed evenly; ensure accessibility to quality health care for low-income areas, such as the Central Health-affiliated CommUnityCare clinic in Dove Springs; negotiate a now-\$13 wage floor for city and county employees; and help communities after disasters, such as the Halloween and Onion Creek floods of 2015, Zapata said.

Zapata today is one of hundreds of leaders at Austin Interfaith who are making changes. She said the organization “identifies ordinary people to learn to participate in the political arena.”

Another member, Kurt Cadena-Mitchell, got involved in Austin Interfaith through the Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church. A social worker by profession, he got tired of seeing his efforts trying to improve the lives of Eastside Memorial High School students come to nothing, he said.



In this August 2014 file photo, Ofelia Zapata, a leader with Austin Interfaith and vice chair of the Dove Springs contact ...  
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Cadena-Mitchell has been a member of Austin Interfaith since 2010 and is now a staff organizer.

“I always felt I was on the losing end. Austin Interfaith taught me to win. It was a big deal,” he said, of efforts that have produced concrete results in low-income communities.

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## ***About the Author***



**LILIANA VALENZUELA** Liliana Valenzuela is the Spanish language writer for Ahora Si&nbsp;and www.ahorasi.com.



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