

Nonpartisan Marin activist organization gathers to chart future course

By [RICHARD HALSTEAD](#) | Marin Independent Journal

October 25, 2019

A Marin activist group with deep roots in social justice issues is set to mark a decade of collaboration with a benchmark convention to celebrate its successes and set its agenda for the future.

Perhaps best known for creating the county's rotating emergency winter shelter program, which operated for 10 years before ending in April 2018, the **Marin Organizing Committee** will hold its 10th anniversary convention Sunday at the Marin Center Exhibit Hall.

Made up of more than 20 dues-paying institutions, including faith-based, nonprofit and civic groups, some 800 members of these organizations will decide whether to ratify a new agenda that includes mental health in schools, support for Marin's aging population, increased affordable housing and further tenant protections. MOC has been instrumental in convincing Marin County, San Rafael and Fairfax to adopt various renter protections, such as mandatory mediation and just cause for evictions.

"MOC leaders have talked face-to-face with more than 500 of Marin's residents over the past year," said the Rev. Jan Reynolds with Marin Interfaith Council in a statement. "These are the topics that have come up again and again as problems facing our communities, and these will be our priority in the coming months."

A number of public officials and civic leaders will be in attendance. As at most MOC meetings, some of the officials attending will be asked to publicly commit to working with MOC on certain issues.

San Rafael City Schools Superintendent Jim Hogeboom and Dr. Jei Africa, Marin County's director of Behavioral Health and Recovery Services, will be asked to work on improving access to mental health services for Marin's youth. Andrew Hening, San Rafael's director of homeless planning and outreach, who will be standing in for San Rafael Mayor Gary Phillips, will be asked to do more to educate the public about existing renter protections.

Although MOC will be celebrating a decade of conventions, the grassroots organizing that resulted in its creation began six or seven years earlier. The spark came when Stephen Fierberg, a member of Congregation Kol Shofar, introduced Larry Gordan, an Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) organizer, to a group of Marin clergy members who had been meeting at the rectory of Saint Raphael Church to share their dissatisfaction with the status quo in Marin.



Supporters of tenants' rights hold signs during a press conference and rally in front of Saint Raphael Church in San Rafael, Calif. on Friday, Aug. 17, 2018. Marin Organizing Committee and Legal Aid organized the event to protest 40 percent rent increases for apartment buildings in the Canal neighborhood. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

The IAF, of which MOC is an affiliate, is a national community organizing network established in 1940 by the man considered to be the father of modern community organizing, Saul Alinsky. After Alinsky died, his successor as IAF's director, Ed Chambers, focused the foundation's energies on the training of organizers and local leaders. Chambers also modified the IAF's organizing model toward a congregation-based community organization approach.

"It's not like any other organization I've ever been a part of," said Gail Dorph, a member of Congregation Kol Shofar, who was recruited by Fierberg to attend MOC's first convention in 2008 and has been working with the organization ever since. "They've developed an organizational template that is built on people developing deep relationships and being willing then to stand up for each other."

Dorph said each institutional member of MOC has a core team that organizes regular "house" meetings of the institution's members to discuss issues that are important to them. Each institution then sends one or two of its members to leaders' meetings that take place every month to six weeks; they report back to their institution. Most decisions are made by consensus.

"It's really interesting being in an organization with shared leadership and shared power and having to vet everything with your peers," said Suzanne Walker, deputy director of St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin. Walker also began working with MOC in 2008.

"It's messy," Walker said. "Sometimes we need to have 10 meetings to make a single decision but it really works in terms of gathering energy and talent and getting people on board."

Dorph said, "This is a collective kind of activism, where as a group we take on issues that we think we actually have some potential to win on."

Anna Eng, the IAF organizer assigned to work with MOC, said, "If an issue is going to divide the organization we're not going to take that issue on because you have to live to fight another day. The purpose of this is long-term sustainable power in a community. That is the most important thing."

MOC is nonpartisan. It doesn't endorse candidates, although during elections it does hold meetings to make clear where candidates stand on the issues it cares about.

"No matter your party, the issues are what matter to us," Dorph said.

Eng said, "Because there are no permanent enemies and there are no permanent allies."

Eng serves as the executive director of the Bay Area Organizing Committee, which serves as MOC's nonprofit. The Bay Area Organizing Committee includes Common Ground in Solano and Napa Counties, and the Silicon Valley Sponsoring Committee, a fledgling effort to found an organization similar to MOC there.

Dorph, who moved with her husband to Marin from New York City 14 years ago, said Eng does some teaching at each of the leaders' meetings and there is assigned reading of books written by theologians, philosophers and economists.

"It is a real intellectual endeavor," she said. "This has been a real education. It's a real education for most everybody who is a MOC leader."

Lisa Leavitt, a pediatrician at Marin Community Clinics, which became a member of MOC in January, said, "Many of us choose to work at Marin Community Clinics because of its mission to serve, but the situations we hear from our patients can make us feel helpless. Organizing through MOC is a powerful antidote to the stressful nature of our work."