

# Using Grassroots Community Organizing To Build Powerful Disability Right Organizations

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# A Brief Introduction:

- Statewide Systems Advocate for ARISE, Inc.
- Center for Independent Living in Syracuse, covering five counties in Central New York.
- ARISE promotes independent living opportunities, choice and civil rights for people of all disabilities.

- Prior to starting with ARISE in 2014, I was a community organizer for 20 years with Syracuse United Neighbors (SUN).
- Worked to improve housing, reduce gun violence and eliminate bank redlining in low income neighborhoods of Syracuse.
- SUN leaders pursued change by hosting public meetings, testifying at hearings, holding direct action protests and negotiating legislative and policy changes on the local, state and federal levels.

# Workshop Objectives

- Show the common ground of Disability Rights and other organizing movements
- Stress necessity of collective action to achieve social change
- How to recruit and train the new generation of disability rights leaders
- How to get your CIL to move to action on local disability rights issues

# Disability Rights



# Why Is There A Disability Rights Movement?

## How our community has been labeled

- Victims
- Burdens to family and society
- Childlike or special, having special needs
- Unable to make own decisions or choices
- Not teachable

## What we are (still) fighting for

- The ability to live independently
- The right to make our own decisions
- Equal services in education, health care, transportation, public access and communications

**The Disability Rights Movement is part of a vibrant tradition of the struggle by the oppressed for their rights and their freedom.**

**All these struggles have made the same demand:**

**“Nothing About Us, Without Us”**

# Collective Action For Social Change





History  
teaches us  
how social  
change  
happens



# The 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott

## Popular Story

- Rosa Parks was just a “tired seamstress”
- Rosa Parks acted alone
- Spur of the moment decision
- Rosa Parks’ action ended segregated Montgomery buses.

## Full Story

- Rosa Parks was secretary of local NAACP and trained at Highlander Folk School
- Teachers, students, clergy, taxi drivers, ordinary citizens
- Not even first arrested for this offense. Issue had been alive for several years.
- Boycott lasted over a year and overcame violence and legal harassment.

# Lessons For Organizers?

- Actions benefit from a compelling personal story . . .
- . . . but actions need cooperative action to be successful.
- You must be dedicated and prepared for opposition.

“If you want to go fast, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go together.”

--African parable

# Recruiting and Training



# Identifying Leaders

- organizers v. leaders
- anger
- will they take suggestions?
- will they take responsibility?
- practice

# Centers for Independent Living should talk to every single person who walks in their doors.

1. **A person with a disability:** hear their concerns and ask them to join the organizing effort.
2. **Your CIL staff:** teach them to recruit others to the organizing effort.
3. **Other agencies:** ask them to host a presentation from your organizing team.

# Three Types Of Recruiting

- **Fishing: Searching for an issue**
- **Selling: Getting consensus on an issue**
- **Pushing: Asking for a commitment**



# Exercise #1

- Break into pairs.
- One person will be the organizer, the other the recruit.
- Practice talking to the recruit in each of the three modes of recruiting.
- Switch roles and repeat.

# “So, How Did It Go?”

Nervous?

What went well---what didn't go so well?

How can you get CIL staff to be involved in something like this?

# Issues & Moving To Action



# Identifying Issues

- The issue is specific, not vague.
- The target should be a person.
- Issues must be pitched to the self-interest of the people involved
- Issues should be winnable.
- Find the fun

# Exercise #2

- Option # 1: People with several of their CIL colleagues in workshop will identify an issue to work on—answering the questions on “Identifying Issues”
- Option #2: People without several colleagues from their ILC work together in their own group—answering questions on strategy for a potential disability rights issue developed for them by the presenter.
- One member of each group will report back to the whole group on their work on strategy.

# “So, How Did It Go? Pt. 2”

- Report Back from Groups
- What action or idea do you really like?
- Anything your group would do differently?

# Resources used to create this presentation

“The Disability Rights Movement”

Doris Z. Fleischer and Frieda Zames (2001 Temple U. Press)

“Basics Of Organizing” Shel Trapp

(1986 National Training and Information Center)

<http://www.tenant.net/Organize/orgbas.html>

“Organizing For Social Change” Phil Prehn

<https://organizer.wordpress.com/community-organizing/>

**Thank You For Your Participation!**

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