Community Voices Heard

Changing people and public policy through low-income organizing

This report describes successful strategies for organizing low-income individuals to be a powerful voice that forces real and lasting political, social, and economic policy change.

These strategies are illustrated in the story of one grassroots organization, Community Voices Heard, which evolved from an unknown group of welfare recipients fighting local workfare requirements to advising local, state, and federal policy makers on welfare reform and regulation.

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Summary of key findings

This report describes successful strategies for organizing low-income individuals to be a powerful voice that forces real and lasting political, social, and economic policy change. These strategies are illustrated in the story of one grassroots organization, Community Voices Heard (CVH), which evolved from an unknown group of welfare recipients fighting local workfare requirements to advising local, state, and federal policy makers on welfare reform and regulation.

Not only did CVH overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but its core value – developing grassroots leadership among women on welfare to recognize and exercise their power to impact public policy – was both adhered to and strengthened in the process.

As a result, CVH has emerged as a model of member-led organizing. It has developed and honed its strategies through successfully executing targeted campaigns. CVH members engage with agency commissioners, elected officials, and executive and legislative staff of local, state and federal government. They do so with clear goals that have achieved results.

The consensus of policy experts, advocates, and labor leaders is that CVH is an essential and formidable player in bringing the voice and influence of low-income people to the process of political decision-making.

The research conducted for this report points to two overall conclusions. The first is that CVH has developed effective methods for engaging large numbers of low-income constituents in the public policy making process. Second, CVH uses innovative campaign strategies that result in concrete changes in policies that impact the lives of CVH members. The following is an overview of the primary findings of this research.

Research finding one

CVH effectively engages low-income constituents to participate in public policy processes, including efforts to create new policy initiatives and to improve the administration of government programs. CVH also succeeds at getting low-income people to become members of the organization, and to stay members.

Building leaders invests in movement building
Leadership development supports individual growth that meaningfully connects members to a political movement. CVH members remain engaged with, and loyal to, the organization long after specific campaigns finish because they feel they are valued as community leaders, policy experts, and contributors to a movement. They experience personal growth, which fosters and sustains long-term political engagement. In addition, they successfully impact public policy. Winning the fight, as it were, deepens members' confidence and their commitment to issues of economic justice.

Constant contact gets people involved
Constant and targeted contact with constituents encourages a long term investment in the organization. Identifying constituents' needs and issues, and following-up with persistent invitations to events and meetings that are personally significant, effectively gets constituents in the door and immediately active in a meaningful and lasting way. The effective and targeted use of a membership database program has been critical for building the organizational capacity to engage in this activity.

Focusing on engaging people means they stay involved in the organization
CVH excels at getting people in the door. But why do they stay? In addition to the reasons listed here, members express significant gratification at being heard, being respected, and being needed – all things they feel upon connecting with CVH. In addition, members witness the growth of their peers within the organization – ascending the ladder of membership, eagerly accepting more ownership of the organization and, in turn, their own lives.

Action-focused base building gets people interested in social change
To engage a politically disenfranchised constituency in a social movement, organizers and members must link people's struggles to broader, shared goals and express them in vocal, public, direct actions. These actions, when part of a well-planned overall strategy to influence power brokers, work on many levels. Not only do they help change policy, they also introduce constituents to a larger community of low-income cohorts, to political organizing, and to successful policy change. Exposure to these elements connects and unites people who are relatively isolated. It connects constituents to each other – the base – and to the organization in a vital and lasting way.

Research finding two

CVH utilizes a diverse and innovative set of strategies that have proven to be successful in shaping public policy.

Public policy creation is strengthened through constituent participation in policy making
Being a membership-led organization from its genesis has given CVH a unique and powerful understanding of the struggles low-income people face. Its first-hand perspective from the front lines of welfare and workfare reform gives it an ability to shape public policy and empower constituents. CVH members display a commitment to the organization's stated policy goals because the goals are their own. Consequently, CVH members are public policy stewards, generating and monitoring the implementation of policies that affect them and, in turn, the policy makers who implement and oversee them.

CVH fills the knowledge gap through its members' personal knowledge and community driven research

Direct contact between members and public officials is reciprocally beneficial. Public officials acknowledge that in the workfare debate, the voices of those most affected provided the expertise needed to understand the impact of relevant policies – often the only first-hand, accurate anecdotal information they received. On the other side of the table, and equally important, members express deeper feelings of confidence, political engagement, and ownership of the organization after sharing their experiences with those in power.

CVH's grassroots-driven research projects stand out for its constituent-led data collection and reporting. The research produced by CVH has addressed critical questions and provided substantive information to fill a meaningful void in discussions about welfare-to-work strategies.

Membership base building drives effective and clear media work and winning alliances

CVH employs numerous campaign strategies, often concurrently, in order to achieve maximum results. Among those noted in these pages, CVH's media strategy – often a result of direct actions or published research findings – is provocative without compromising the clarity of its message. CVH has consistently clearly communicated the objectives of its campaigns, while highlighting the voices of low-income individuals in public debates. In turn, the public and policy makers cannot easily ignore the experiences of those most affected by welfare-to-work policies.

Building relationships with other membership-based groups can transform political dynamics and strengthen the political base. CVH's alliance with labor unions, and with other groups that share common goals, has been instrumental to changing public policy, especially when it has resulted in shifting policy makers' and the public's perceptions of the low-income populace. The ability of CVH to turn out its members and low-income people has been critical to moving these allies to support CVH's agenda. At the same time, personal relationships among members both within and across organizations help to transform individual struggles into a political movement.

Direct action is an empowering organizing tool and a winning strategy

Direct action – the process of getting CVH members in direct contact with policy makers and administrators to make clear and concise policy demands – has been an effective way to shape public opinion, gain media attention, and pressure policy makers to address CVH's agenda. CVH direct actions include, but are not limited to, turning out large numbers of people to strategic events and mass meetings with political leaders. At the core of CVH's tactics, direct action impacts everyone involved – it challenges decision-makers, changes public perception, manages the media, and both broadens and deepens members' experiences of organizing, community building and political engagement.

The following report includes information about CVH's origins as well its deep investment of time, financial resources and the energy of hundreds of

individuals to build a membership base engaged in changing public policy. It provides an overview of three specific campaigns that illustrate how CVH's organizing success is based in membership strength, and the expertise and life experience of the members driving the campaign. It highlights CVH's work with stakeholders and public officials as well as its public policy research, media management, relationship building, and direct action. It shows how CVH's organizing strategies include three basic tenets: 1) training members to be leaders, 2) building enough political capital to get them a place at the table of power brokers, and 3) letting their expertise inform, challenge, and change public policy.

These strategies may serve as illustrations for other grassroots organizations equally invested in winning the fight for job creation and economic justice, and maximizing the participation of the people they work with in the political fabric of their community.

Research questions and design

This research attempts to examine what it currently takes to organize low-income individuals in the United States to shape public policy, and it does this by examining the work of one organization – Community Voices Heard (CVH). Over the last decade, CVH, a grassroots advocacy organization located in New York City, has organized low-income individuals and families living in neighborhoods throughout New York City to fight for public policies that reflect their interests and concerns. The study examines when and how CVH's work has led to clear policy "wins," or achievements.

A team of three researchers collected data spanning ten years of CVH's history from its beginning in 1994 to 2005. Three different organizing campaigns were examined, allowing the team to recognize CVH's organizing model, to identify practices that were common or different across campaigns, and to better understand when and perhaps why procedures "worked" in some contexts but not in others.

The research design used traditional ethnographic and interviewing methods. The bulk of the data for this study came from a series of semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders and participant observation of the organization's activities over a period of twelve weeks beginning in January of 2005.

The research team carried out 26 in-depth interviews with CVH members, current and former CVH staff, policy researchers, and representatives of local labor unions, funding agencies, government agencies and offices, and other grassroots advocacy groups. In a few cases, particularly among public officials, less formal conversations provided the relevant data. Individual interviews enabled the researchers to ask both focused, factual questions and more probing questions to unearth deeper reflections on CVH and its many events over the years. All interviewees were promised full confidentiality; therefore real names are used and speakers identified only if the research participant explicitly gave consent.

Additionally, four focus groups (i.e., two with current and former staff, two with members), revealed both collective understandings and disagreements about processes and events. Observations of CVH activities included member meetings (i.e., campaign strategizing and planning), staff meetings, meetings with allies, meetings with public officials, legislative briefings, and public actions and events. Most observations took place in CVH's offices in East Harlem, but many hours were also spent at events throughout New York City, some of which were not necessarily organized by CVH, but included CVH members. As participant observers, the researchers interacted informally with members, staff, and outsiders and, thus, were able to hear from many more people about the events and activities of the organization. In addition, they viewed documentary footage of activities involving CVH. A vast assortment of archival materials from CVH, such as agendas, worksheets, surveys and reports from teach-ins, workshops, strategic planning sessions, lobbying sessions, etc., were also examined. Other sources of data include organizational and government press releases, legislative testimonies, political essays, and popular press.

This research applied grounded theory methods to discover themes, conceptual categories, and patterns of events that address the research questions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Close reading of individual interviews (i.e., field notes and transcripts) revealed common experiences and beliefs, or theories, about what Community Voices Heard (CVH) does and what the challenges have been. Only those themes which emerged across multiple sources are reported in the findings. Substantive differences across sources or stakeholder perspectives are noted. Observational data (i.e., field notes and transcription) provided rich detail about CVH's internal processes and how these relate to the goals of the organization. With a small sample and a short period of observation, this report cannot claim that these findings will hold for other organizations, communities, policy contexts, or time periods. However, details are provided, wherever possible, to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about the implications.

Research questions and organization of the research study

Three central questions drove the research design of the study and the organization of the final study report.

1. What strategies and procedures have been effective for engaging low-income constituents and building a membership base?
2. What organizing strategies and procedures have been successful in changing public policy?
3. What are the strengths and challenges for successful implementation of these strategies and procedures?

Introduction and background

The emergence of a protest movement entails a transformation both of consciousness and of behavior. The change in consciousness has at least three distinct aspects. First, "the system" – or those aspects of the system that people experience and perceive – loses legitimacy. Large numbers of men and women who ordinarily accept the authority of their rulers and the legitimacy of institutional arrangements come to believe in some measure that these rulers and these arrangements are unjust and wrong. Second, people who are ordinarily fatalistic, who believe that existing arrangements are inevitable, begin to assert "rights" that imply demands for change. Third, there is a new sense of efficacy; people who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to alter their lot.
–Frances F. Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements* (1977)

Americans have a strong belief in democracy, fairness, participation, and self-government. They believe in a government of the people, by the people and for the people. They believe in the equality of the ballot box, that everyone has a right to shape the decisions and policies that impact their lives, and a right to choose who governs them. Indeed, the early American commitment to universal free public education was predicated on the belief that a country needed educated citizens to shape, implement, and oversee a strong democracy.

But the history of the United States also demonstrates a deep ambivalence toward the poor. Poll and property taxes limited the franchise of liberty and the pursuit of happiness to those with assets until halfway through the 20th century; and public assistance for the poor was left to charities and local governments until the crisis of the Great Depression. The New Deal established a federal minimum wage for the first time (although a number of the lowest occupations were exempt) and mandated an inconsistent patchwork quilt of a social safety net (each state set eligibility rules and income levels). Policy makers and large swaths of the public, however, remained deeply skeptical of providing income support for the poor. In fact, most gains were only achieved when there was widespread civil unrest coupled with concern that demands for more fundamental social and economic change would gain sway.

Movements of the poor in the 1930s, however, were often movements of the majority or of a significant portion of the electorate. Today, when only 12 percent of the population is poor nationally (but up to a quarter in some rural and urban areas), a different calculus prevails. How do the poor voice their needs and interests in a political system in which they are a minority, in the face of a benign or neglectful political structure?

The following report describes how one organization of poor people have effectively made their voices heard in this arena.

Workfare and income support for the poor: an overview

Income support

Welfare or cash assistance to poor families has been controversial in the United States since its beginnings. The primary concern has been that the availability of even a minimum subsistence income will undermine "the work ethic" and encourage long-term dependency on charity, either private or public. As a result, most jurisdictions in the U.S. only allowed poor women with children, as well as the sick and elderly, to receive income support. But there were often stipulations of "good moral behavior" which were used to exclude racial minorities and/or unmarried women. In the late 1960s, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, these selectively applied exclusionary clauses were outlawed and the use of welfare subsequently increased significantly.

The expanded use of welfare by single mothers over the next two decades paralleled two related trends – an increase in divorce and out-of-wedlock motherhood (which fed the welfare rolls), and an increase in the percentage of women with children who worked full-time (which fed resentment of those who did not). Conservatives of both parties charged that the availability of income support induced women to have children in order to avoid work; liberals charged that the mother-only character of the social safety net undermined families. Conservatives won the argument with policy makers and the public. By the mid-1980s, many states were imposing "work requirements" or "job search requirements" as a condition of income support, with exemptions for having small children. Other states took a longer view and encouraged poor women to enroll in educational classes in order to improve their long-term labor market prospects.

The Work Experience Program (WEP)

New York State is unique in many respects from other states because Article XVII of the State Constitution actually mandates that care be provided to the state's needy residents. This means that ending all social assistance programs is simply not an option and provides the poor with some legal grounds for seeking redress.

The Work Experience Program (WEP) has existed in New York City since the 1970's. A WEP assignment requires an individual on welfare to work in a public sector agency or not-for-profit organization as a condition of receiving public assistance, without pay. At these unpaid "jobs," WEP workers, as they are commonly called, work anywhere between 20 to 37.5 hours a week and perform jobs and tasks that city workers and not-for-profit employees also perform, often right beside them. Work tasks include cleaning and maintenance work in City buildings, clerical support and aide work in City agencies, such as the Department of Health, and working as Case Management Assistants in community not-for-profits.

WEP is one of New York City's programs that fulfills the federal requirement that welfare recipients engage in work activities, known as "workfare." Other programs that fulfill this workfare requirement include job search and job development activities, education and training. They also include transitional jobs. These are temporary paid positions designed to prepare unemployed people and welfare recipients - usually people who have multiple barriers to work or have been out of work for a long period of time – to enter or re-enter the workforce. A transitional job usually lasts 6-18 months and provides a combination of paid employment, education and training.

However, rather than using these other options, New York City had already prioritized, prior to federal welfare reform in 1996, putting single adults on New York State's welfare program into WEP. The city was just beginning to push more mothers with children into WEP when the federal bill was signed. Afterwards, New York City's Mayor Giuliani and Human Resources Administration (HRA) Commissioner Jason Turner began a concerted effort to get every welfare mother who could work into a WEP assignment, often forgoing other work activities that would fulfill the same federal workfare requirement. Sometimes WEP workers are engaged in other activities like job search and job readiness workshops – but rarely job training or education.

"...you are never lost in the system when you are a part of an organization."
–Robin McCoy, CVH Member

1. Fighting back: CVH finds its beginnings in helping women help themselves

CVH was a means to build an organization that could be a vehicle for social change. We wanted the women in the mix, not on the sidelines. Nobody gave a damn what we thought – advocates, people in Washington, and that made me angry. I wanted CVH to be a place where we could do something productive and that would have an impact. I was tired of all the talk, all the process, all the BS. We were upset and angry and wanted action – in the streets, in offices, and CVH did that. It's why members loved CVH, we didn't just talk, we MOVED! –Gail Aska, CVH co-founder

Co-founders come together

After nearly a decade working in corporate offices, **Gail Aska** had been laid-off from her job and was living in a homeless shelter with her son. In addition to the grim reality of unemployment and shelter living, distressing rumors were circulating about the future of welfare and its recipients, particularly women. Lawmakers in Albany and Washington were threatening to drastically cut welfare benefits, increase work requirements, and even put the children of women on welfare in orphanages.

Gail got angry: "Let's get out of the house and see what everyone is talking about – cutting us off welfare, orphanages. I was angry and upset, and wanted to get women involved in something." She began attending a workshop on transitioning out of the shelter system at Graham Windham, a neighborhood social service agency that served low-income families. She and other women at the agency formed a task force to try to address community concerns about welfare reform, and they attended meetings organized by different advocacy groups throughout the city.

Meanwhile, **Paul Getsos** was experiencing his own frustration while working for the Hunger Action Network of New York State (HANNYS). "Food programs would want low-income people to mobilize around increasing funding for soup kitchens and homeless programs, and low-income people wanted something different. While these service institutions mobilized for HANNYS issues, they were not building a low-income-led project – a serious problem."

Paul had already met **Joan Minieri,** who was working on leadership development for Catholic Charities, while organizing demonstrations about poverty issues during the '92 National Democratic Convention in New York City. She shared his frustration with the limitations of developing leaders in the context of social service programs where control ultimately lay with the provider and not low-income people. In response, Joan and Paul began meeting individually with potential stakeholders, including church leaders, community agencies, and activists to see if there were any efforts to organize women who were receiving public assistance in New York City. There were not.

Paul met Gail at a meeting of welfare rights advocates and soon the two

began bringing other low-income people into discussions about welfare reform and training them to organize others. Soon after, Gail, Paul and Joan, bound by their shared commitment to the concerns of low-income people, brought together their respective skills and expertise to create Community Voices Heard. Gail explains: "After I met them [Paul and Joan], then I really had a place and a means for getting people involved, and a reason to organize them."

Community Voices Heard co-founders: Gail Aska, Paul Getsos, Joan Minieri

The first organizing meeting
Community Voices Heard: Welfare as We Know It

In June of 1994, the three activists assembled a citywide meeting of over 50 welfare recipients at a church on the Upper West Side. This first meeting, publicized as *Community Voices Heard: Welfare as We Know It,* aimed to educate welfare mothers and others about the proposals coming out of Washington DC – proposals that most people did not know were even being considered – and to discuss how to mobilize people to stop them.

The women in attendance described a deep desire to be directly involved in the national welfare debate – to sit across the table from policy makers and tell them what welfare recipients really needed to get off of welfare. The women also made it clear that they themselves did not want to be represented by "a white man in a suit." Instead, they wanted a partnership where learning, evaluation, and action would take place side-by-side; where those who were directly affected by the government's policies would make decisions.

While this meeting was a call to immediate action, it also became a template for what Joan describes as a primary philosophy of the organization: "This emphasis on welfare recipients directing the course of the organization was something we all deeply shared, but it was also part of why others thought we were doing the impossible. It was so clear to us, and I think one of the core things that united us in our vision."

Focus on power

The core of every meeting, every conversation, focused on educating members – particularly in the analysis of power and policy making – a core tenet of CVH's training to this day. Gail describes it specifically: "Paul was coming

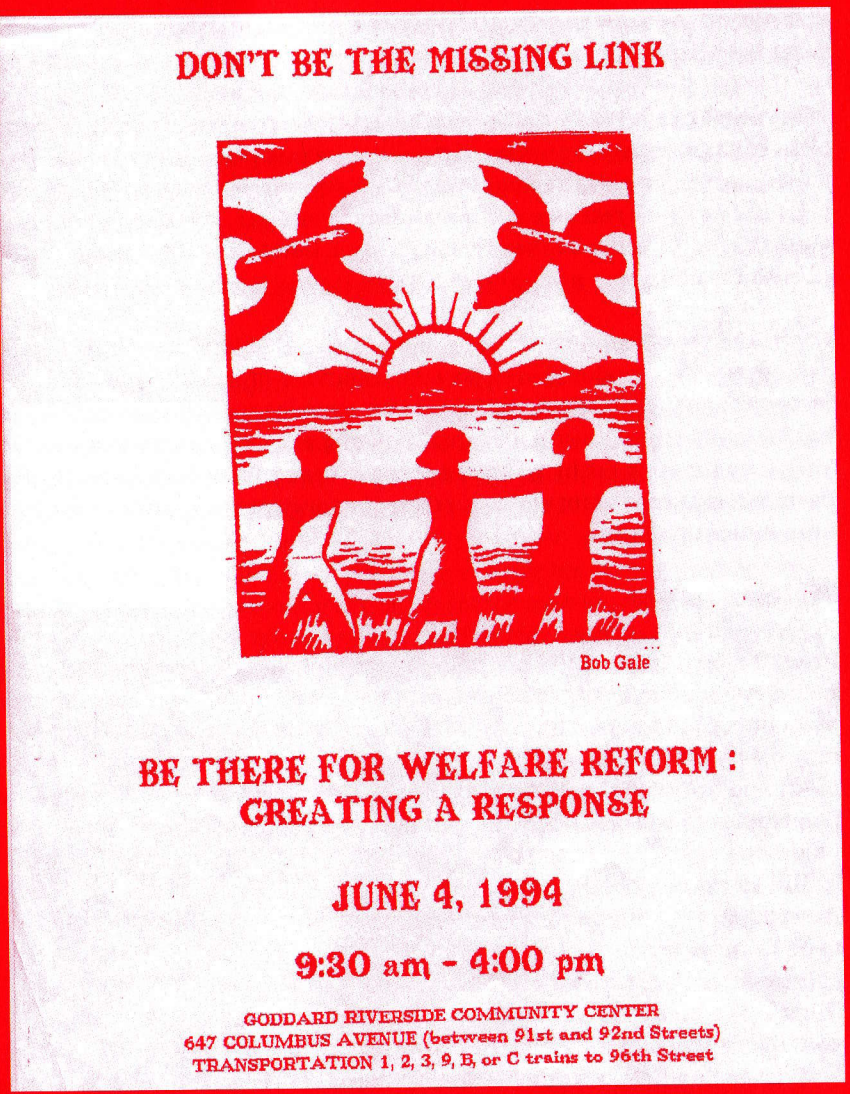
into our places and educating us. Educate low-income women about how to build political power and engage in politics. When I got involved with Paul, we worked to educate, educate, educate – not about welfare rights – but about who has power."

In the initial years, CVH accomplished much while operating as a unit of HANNYS. Over 1,000 women participated in workshops and training sessions about welfare reform proposals in shelters, welfare centers, and community agencies. In partnership with a neighborhood tenants' organization, Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), CVH organized nearly 100 mothers to meet with policy makers in Albany and with high-level staffers in Washington, DC, and CVH's Board decided to join the Fifth Avenue Committee and the Urban Justice Center in forming *WEP Workers Together,* a coalition dedicated to organizing workfare program participants.

CVH also organized the first of many leadership retreats in October of 1995 that took 27 women to Connecticut to train intensively with organizers from the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national network of community organizing groups based in religious institutions. For the early part of its development, from 1994-1997, CVH was exploring a relationship with the IAF that was initiated with this first training. The core principles of the IAF - relational organizing based on collective action, self-interest and extensive leadership development – helped to lay some of the initial organizing philosophy of the budding organization. From that retreat emerged leaders, many of whom remained active in steering the organization's activities until 1998, who would help define long-lasting CVH strategies.

In the spring of 1996, the three founders and the leaders of CVH realized that the organization needed to separate from HANNYS due to fundamental disagreements about organizational structure and direction. Paul explains, "CVH split from HANNYS when it was clear that power and decision-making would lie not in members or low-income people, but staff or a non-low-income board of service providers."

Now an independent organization, member-led and directed, CVH needed a home. With funding from the New York Foundation, CVH hired Paul to be a full-time organizer, made Joan a Board member and Gail Board co-chair, and set up shop on East 23rd Street in Manhattan. Housed, staffed, and with $20,000 in the bank, CVH looked ahead with determination and vigor.



The first official meeting of Community Voices Heard was held in 1994 when CVH was a part of the Hunger Action Network of New York State (HANNYS).

2. They said we couldn't do it: CVH builds a strong membership base

There was long a belief that you couldn't organize welfare recipients; a long period between the demise of the welfare rights organizations in the 70s and in the 90s when it was just thought it was impossible, and CVH proved that's not true. They built a real organization with a real base and real leadership made up of welfare recipients.
–Seth Borgos, Director of Research and Program Development, Center for Community Change

Political analysts identify CVH as one of the most effective member-led grassroots organizations in the country because of its ability to mobilize low-income people. Unlike the welfare rights movement of 25 years ago, CVH has been able to sustain an organization of low-income individuals in New York City for 10 years by remaining true to several key principles: leadership development, consistent contact, rewarding engagement, and action-focused base building.

Training leaders

From the beginning, CVH has believed that leadership development keeps members politically engaged and loyal to the organization. Leadership development is fundamental to CVH's organizing model, and it clearly shapes the organization's identity and impact in the organizing and policy worlds. Many allies and influential outsiders recognize that CVH's ability to build leaders contributes to a sustainable political mobilization, rather than simply to campaign-specific achievements.

Bill Henning, Vice President, Local 1180, Communications Workers of America (CWA) attests to this: "CVH actually trained rank and file members to be the spokespeople, to tell their own stories. They weren't getting some college-educated, trained organizer speaking on their behalf. I can't say anything about being inside the organization, and how it happened, but I can tell you that the results were very powerful."

Tyletha Samuels, a former CVH member who went on to become a professional organizer concurs: "What makes CVH successful to me is its leadership. Its leadership development component."

Within CVH, staff and members describe an ongoing development process that draws out individuals' innate leadership abilities. Members are assisted in presenting themselves effectively and with confidence through various methods of training and preparation. They often describe the importance of workshops or teach-ins on both skill development and topics such as how government structures work. Leadership training retreats – where members are encouraged to bring their children, and where full translation services, childcare and quality children's activities are provided - have been found to be one of the most important ways to develop and nurture leaders.

In 2002, for example, CVH spent $30,000 to bring 27 members to an extended leadership retreat outside of the city, building on its first intensive IAF-led training several years earlier. Sessions included: how to understand self-interest and the concept of power; how to effectively work in a democratic, collective organization; the history of social movements; and how to successfully negotiate with powerholders. The members who attended this leadership retreat went on to become core leaders in all three of the campaigns described in this report.

Devoting resources to preparation and evaluation

CVH is a learning organization – one that consistently and honestly assesses its efforts to continually improve. In order to ensure that members are prepared to critically analyze and make decisions about campaign and policy goals, strategies, and actions, CVH staff and its more seasoned members are constantly educating members about government policies and procedures, as well as about the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to organizing. This happens formally in "prep" meetings, workshops and training sessions, and informally in one-on-one meetings between a member and an organizer. Furthermore, every action, event, or meeting is immediately followed by an evaluation. Members and staff reflect on "what worked?" and "what did not work?" or "what can we do better?"

CVH devotes considerable staff time and resources to preparing for and evaluating meetings with people in power.

Substantial organizational resources – both staff hours and funding – are devoted to preparing and evaluating these direct interactions with power holders. For example, to prepare for a meeting with an appointed official in the New York City Department of Small Business Services, a group of five members met with staff for approximately two hours beforehand. During this "prep meeting," staff members described the relevance of the particular city agency, the background and current responsibilities of the Commissioner, and how the meeting came about. The five members determined what the

goals of the meeting were, what they wanted to accomplish, what they wanted to ask of the Commissioner, and what role each member would take at the meeting. Immediately after the meeting with the Commissioner, CVH members and staff sat in a nearby deli and evaluated what had happened.

While members gain confidence from workshops and trainings, members-turned-leaders ultimately believe that their capacity to analyze public policy and to "think on their feet" comes from experiential learning – speaking publicly, meeting with a public official, and the prep and debrief sessions around these events. They learn that they can make a difference when they have been heard and when they witness their collective "wins." Their experience of speaking out publicly amplifies their sense of urgency and power.

Numbers of CVH members and leaders

Any person who signs a meeting roster or an information card is considered a CVH member in practical terms – they will receive information from CVH and will be invited to participate in CVH events and campaigns. They may attend an occasional action or a meeting, but they do not necessarily feel any ownership of the organization.

In contrast, active members have been emotionally impacted by their experience with CVH, resulting in regular participation in CVH activities. These active members are encouraged by staff to serve in leadership roles at CVH – as group facilitators, calling members, and volunteering in the office. The most persuasive factor in becoming a leader, however, is witnessing other leaders delivering speeches, meeting with public officials, debating campaign strategies, and asking provocative questions. Active members do not all become "leaders" within CVH, but they frequently serve as leaders in their own communities, workplaces, and in other organizations. As several members said on separate occasions, "Each one, teach one. Each one, reach one."

The number of people involved with CVH are relatively high for an organization of low-income people. In 1994-2000, CVH's core leadership was about 20-25 people who were active in campaigns. CVH contacted about 2,000-3,000 people a year. Its smaller actions would draw about 15-30 people, and its 2-3 larger actions per year drew 80-150 people each. The organization, with more staff and resources since 2000, has a core group of about 50-60 active leaders. CVH turns out 50-60 members on a regular basis. Larger actions occur three to four times each year and consistently get 100-300 people into a room with a public official or power holder.

During 2002 and 2003, CVH's membership recruitment and participation numbers were as follows:

8,421	**People who signed a meeting roster or information card**
1,932	**Attended one action or internal event**
1,287	**Attended two to five actions or internal events**
167	**Attended five to ten actions or internal events**
54	**Engaged in intensive leadership and building the organization**

Some leaders who have been around longer, who have a deep appreciation for CVH's mission, and who can be critical of the organization's procedures, are invited to serve on the Board of Directors. The vast majority of Board members are actually members of the organization; however, founders and former staff members have served as well. In 2005, the Board consisted of five members and one former staff member. The Board has input in the hiring of staff members, the organization's budget, and a variety of organizational procedures. CVH Board members feel a deep sense of ownership over CVH that is reflected in their dedication to the organization and its work.

Consistent contact: the importance of a database

CVH's success in getting constituents engaged relies on consistent outreach and communication. CVH organizers identify individuals' needs and political issues, and they follow-up with persistent invitations to events that are personally significant to them. Members stress the impact of reaching-out to individuals with information that they can apply directly to their own situation, such as clarifying one's rights as a welfare recipient and how to speak with caseworkers. This effectively gets constituents in the door and reminds them that they are valued members of the organization.

Sheila Ireland, a CVH Member, relates her experience: "How I got involved was when I was at a welfare center. I wanted to commit suicide and give up because I was at the lowest point in my life. CVH really reached out to me – it was the consistency of being out there – they were always contacting me. You have to be out there doing things, and reaching out to people."

The membership database is a particularly valuable tool for engaging constituents repeatedly and consistently. The database includes information about every person who has had contact with CVH. The bulk of entries are constituents who have attended CVH outreach events or have been approached off-site by CVH organizers. In addition to basic contact information, such as addresses and phone numbers, the database contains salient details about each person including the point of entry or initial contact with CVH, the issues that most matter to them, employment/assistance status, and CVH events that they have attended.

The database is an important organizational tool to which the staff dedicates considerable time and resources. Its development and constant evaluation is a topic in many staff meetings and the organization has strict rules about who can use the database and who has access to it. For example, organizers are required to input all of their contacts and notes about individuals. Likewise, contacting members is extremely important and resource heavy. In 2003 and 2004, CVH spent approximately $50,000 on printing and mailing notices, flyers, and invitations to events to members in its database each year.

Getting engaged means staying engaged

Equally important is the quality of engagement. Constituents feel that their

experiences and opinions matter at CVH. In all of CVH's organizing and public education efforts, individuals are encouraged to talk about their own experiences with "the system." Once a constituent attends a CVH meeting or speaks with a staff member, they see that they are not alone in their struggles. In addition to listening, practical information is shared with respect and clarity and often demystifies the bureaucratic morass of the welfare system. Often, this is simply learning what "family sanctions" are, that they are entitled to a translator at the welfare office, or that they are not the only person who has been insulted by a case worker.

CVH members speak often of finding in the organization a place unlike any they had known, that was welcoming not just for them, but for their families as well. Tyletha Samuels explains: "My son has on his wall from CVH a certificate for bulk mailing. My son at three and five years old would come here and stamp letters. We had a day of certification for the kids. That's awesome. He's so proud of that. That whole aspect of becoming a member was worth it."

CVH members in action at an official federal "listening session" on the impact of welfare reform. Low-income people had not been invited to participate.

Action-focused base building

Allies and analysts with knowledge of community organizations across the nation acknowledge that CVH takes base building much more seriously than most organizing groups. Most observers agree that CVH's greatest impact on policy lies in the organization's ability to put people in direct conversations with those who have the power to create policies that impact CVH members' lives.

Action-focused base building is a two-way street – it keeps members invigorated and on the front lines and it shows constituents that the organization is comprised of people just like them. Teach-ins reach groups of people in social service agencies, homeless shelters, schools, religious organizations, or wherever they are allowed to provide "workshops." One-on-one meetings, which are structured conversations where an organizer usually listens to the ideas and interests of a potential member or leader, reach individuals mostly at their homes. "Door-knocking" involves hitting the pavement and knocking on people's doors. Often, however, when members and organizers learn of someone dealing with a particular issue that they can address, they will seek the person out at a work site or job center and speak to that person there. These tactics draw from, and validate, people's lived experiences. To engage a politically disenfranchised constituency in a social movement, members link people's struggles to broader, shared goals and express these in action. These actions contribute to political transformation by connecting and uniting people who are relatively isolated.

Changing lives, changing public policy

Time and again members and allies talk, from their experience either inside or outside the organization, about how CVH is defined by, and derives its power from, its members. CVH members are its constituents, volunteers, staff, leaders, and members of its board. Members gain self-confidence and organizing experience, and most importantly, create real and lasting positive change in their lives. Building leaders, consistently connecting with constituents, engaging with them in meaningful ways, and utilizing action-focused base building has helped give CVH authority in the struggle for economic justice and job creation in New York. This replicable model of grassroots organizing creates members who are powerful agents in their own lives, who are valued participants in a larger collective, and who are committed to a political movement. Tyletha Samuels puts it this way: "I don't think I would be where I am today if they had not developed the leadership I had within me. I think I would not be where I am today. I'm not saying they did all this. I mean they just brought it out in me, and that's what we do. We [CVH] give people the tools to go out and advocate for themselves."

CVH changes lives while changing policy. One example is Tyletha Samuels who developed from member, to leader, to staff organizer mobilizing others for social change.

3. Power changes policy: CVH creates a transitional jobs program

It's one thing if all you want to do is to create a permanent workfare workforce. But the fact is that we are supposed to go from welfare to work, not from welfare to workfare. –City Councilmember Stephen DiBrienza, as quoted in the *New York Times*, April 12, 1998

Getting attention with creative direct action

Between 1994 and 1996, CVH focused its attention on all three levels of government. At the federal level, CVH picketed the White House and mobilized with GOLES to educate NY's representatives in Congress, as well as the Senate Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate, about the impact of welfare reform here at home. At the state level, CVH worked to oppose Governor Pataki's proposal to eliminate NYS's general assistance program for single adults, his proposal to cut the family grant size, and his efforts to increase penalties on welfare families. CVH demonstrated at Governor Pataki's farm in Peekskill, NY and at the state capital.

In New York City, CVH mostly focused on education and working to get people involved in the organization. In one exciting action, while still a part of HANNYS, CVH joined members from Urban Justice Center Organizing Project and Housing Works to conduct an Eligibility Review Verification visit to the architect of most of Mayor Giuliani's welfare reform and workfare expansion proposals.

On a sunny morning, 10 low-income people appeared on the Deputy Mayor's doorstep on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and asked him to go through an eligibility review process similar to the ones that his directive to the Human Resources Administration (HRA) was forcing many welfare mothers to go through. The purpose of the action was not only to garner media attention to the issue, but also to make the creator of the policy feel – if even for a moment – what the impact of his policy directive felt like.

Establishing an organizing committee

The organization also focused on leadership development. CVH trained members to run actions and to analyze the policies of power holders while working in a democratic, membership-led collective. CVH continued to engage with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) for training, conducted one-on-ones and house meetings, and worked to build a strong organizing/leadership committee. This committee was comprised of mothers who came from homeless shelters, co-founder Gail Aska's personal network of friends, newly met welfare recipients, as well as a women's empowerment group, Sister Circle, run by a service provider in Brooklyn. CVH at this time also attracted welfare recipients involved in advocacy organizations, but who were drawn to CVH's member-led philosophy and the supportive and nurturing nature of the CVH space, where children were always welcome, food was plentiful, and where members who needed them received service referrals.

The Work Experience Program (WEP)

When CVH was formed, New York City had more than 1 million people receiving welfare and the largest workfare program in the country: over 10,000 welfare recipients were participating in the Work Experience Program (WEP), which mandated that they spend approximately 20-37.5 hours a week "working off their benefits" in a combination of unpaid work assignments and job search activities. Most were cleaning parks, streets, schools, and housing projects, but many others were also doing clerical work, answering phones in city agencies and filing. Recipients could be exempt from these work mandates if they were disabled, were victims of domestic violence, or could not access childcare.

Although the rhetoric about WEP touted its value to welfare recipients, many CVH members did not see how cleaning up was "valuable work experience that would teach them the skills they needed to become gainfully employed in the private sector." In fact, they had learned from experience that listing WEP on a job application was a sure way not to get the job. Moreover, WEP workers, who did the same work as the union members who often worked right along beside them, received only welfare and food stamp assistance (below the federal poverty level) in return. CVH members felt that WEP wasn't fair, and wasn't working.

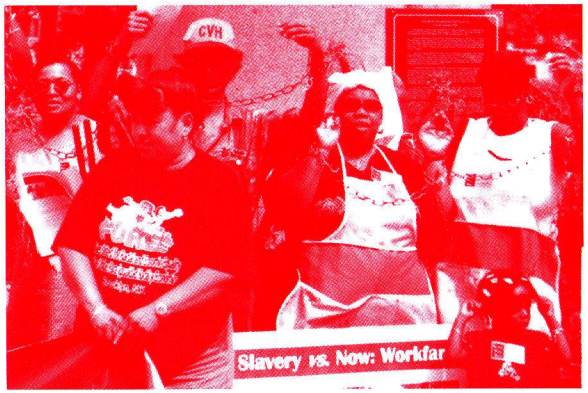
When the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) was signed into law in August 1996, it had the following effects on New York's welfare system: new, more stringent work requirements were put in place (a new 30 hours per week minimum), exemptions were limited, a five-year lifetime limit on welfare receipt was established, and women could no longer count attending school against their work requirements. The result was that many more people were expected to participate in workfare (up to 40,000 at its New York City peak) or other work requirement programs for longer periods of time.

CVH takes on WEP in New York City

In the final months of 1996, CVH hit the streets – actually, the welfare centers, parks, schools, subways, and housing projects where WEP assigned welfare recipients work – to find out how workers were experiencing the program, and to invite them to CVH events. In these conversations, many people agreed that workfare was not helping them get off of welfare and that real jobs and training were what they needed. The primary complaint, however, besides maintenance workers not having the much needed gloves and boots worn by their unionized counterparts, was much more basic – they wanted a paycheck.

Joining with other groups throughout the city in a coalition called WEP Workers Together, CVH members participated in a series of demonstra-

tions and rallies at WEP worksites throughout New York City. These actions disrupted work activities while giving voice to WEP workers' need for safer work conditions. In July of 1997, coalition members, including CVH, Fifth Avenue Committee, Urban Justice Center, and nine WEP workers filed a hugely successful class-action law suit that challenged New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration for violating state law by assigning welfare recipients to workfare without providing adequate health and safety protections. The Welfare Law Center, National Employment Law Project (NELP), and the New York Legal Assistance Group represented the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, which applied to 5,000 WEP workers assigned to the Departments of Sanitation and Transportation. In August, a New York State Supreme Court judge ordered HRA, the city agency responsible for welfare, to stop assigning workfare workers to these agencies until they provided them with appropriate conditions, including access to toilets, drinking water, washing facilities, personal protective equipment, training, protection from traffic, and freedom from retaliation by supervisors.



CVH keeps problems with WEP / workfare in the public eye. Above, members use street theater to educate the public about similarities between WEP and slavery.

State level policy change

At the same time, CVH members were protesting state-level plans to expand workfare, to adopt welfare time limits, and to cut state funds for welfare. Through the course of the campaign, CVH, with one-and-a-half staff people, organized nearly 500 people at almost 20 actions throughout New York City and at the State Capitol in Albany, in an effort to dissuade New York State from implementing a deeply flawed version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). A critical grant of $25,000 from the Center for Community Change Grants Pool Program – augmented by member fundraising and support from union and service allies– paid for buses, food, organizing meetings, childcare, and some staff time, enabling CVH to execute a disruption campaign that effectively drew the media's attention to CVH's agenda.

In one day of action in Albany, for example, members flooded legislators' offices and halted proceedings in the State Assembly by unfurling a black banner stating "Vote NO on Welfare" and shouting their demands from the public gallery: "We Say No to Welfare Cuts." The Democratic-controlled New York State Assembly, with a large number of African-American and Latino legislators representing districts with a lot of welfare recipients, ignored the protests and adopted the legislation anyway.

CVH protests social service cuts at the NY State Capitol.

Shifting to a proactive approach

In response, CVH grew tired of a "No" campaign and sought to be more proactive – they wanted to fight for real jobs that would help them become self-sufficient. So they did. Rather than continue to focus the majority of its energy on the fight to save welfare in New York State, CVH members set about creating a proposal for state job creation and began to focus its organizing energy on a proactive campaign. This shift in focus, however, caused a rift among members. Several members felt strongly that the organization's emphasis should remain on welfare reform and should not get diverted by a fight "to fix workfare." Some members left the organization when the majority decided that CVH would move forward with emphasizing community jobs creation.

One of things that CVH learned in this process was that not everyone around the table will be happy with the group's final decision. Though there was considerable concern that members would leave the organization, it was agreed that issue consensus was not an option and a rare decision was made to move forward without unanimous approval.

CVH's work now centered on creating a transitional jobs program at the local and state level, a two-pronged approach that provided welfare recipients with a paid job experience and the training necessary to compete in the labor market. For assistance, CVH turned to powerful allies, such as municipal labor unions DC 37, CWA Local 1180, Civil Service Employees Association,

Fiscal Policy Institute, New York State Catholic Conference, and NELP.

In the autumn of 1997, Mayor Giuliani ignored the state court's order to stop unsafe workfare assignments, denying WEP workers the training and protective equipment required by state law, as well as the assurances he made to labor leaders about not using WEP workers to replace transit and municipal hospital employees. Using WEP workers in city positions – to do the work done by city employees who were receiving a wage - amounted to a form of displacement. Displacement occurs when an employee can be replaced by another employee doing the same work for less money. In this case, city workers – especially workers in low-skilled and maintenance positions - could be easily replaced by WEP workers. As unionized employees working for the city retired or took early buy-out packages, entry-level positions were increasingly filled by WEP workers doing basic tasks. The Parks Department, the Department of City Administrative Services (which did maintenance in city buildings) and the Department of Sanitation were easy places to put WEP workers when the number of city employees started to decrease. In an ironic twist, HRA used WEP workers for basic clerical duties that helped to run the agency.

Engaging powerful allies

Actions in New York City moved labor leaders and even some political allies to join in the fight, despite the political costs. In response to the political realities, the Mayor's refusal to separate union positions from WEP work, the opportunity to increase their base, and the pubic relations boon it would offer, several labor unions joined forces with workfare participants and marched on City Hall. "The unusual coalition" of workers demanded that New York City government permit workfare participants to have union representation, a formal grievance procedure, and more formal job training.

The actions in New York City put a human face on WEP. Many who were mobilized were women too old to be working or young women who should be in school. They showed people's anger about the WEP mandate, which helped promote understanding that the program wasn't community service - it was unpaid labor. At one protest, Gail Aska, an African-American woman, was running a press conference while 50-60 African-American and Latina women were being refused access to the steps of City Hall. The political hierarchy was clearly illustrated – women of color and welfare recipients were at the bottom and CVH showed its power to mobilize the disenfranchised.

Maurice Emsellem, Project Director of NELP described the protests: "I remember a couple of times, there was a rally on the steps of the City Council. It was the first time that the union leaders really saw, first hand, what this organizing group could do – that they were real, that they could organize workers, you know, that the workers were highly motivated, and they would hug each other and... it was really... you know those moments. It sounds kind of corny and goofy, but it really makes a difference – it's transformative."

In 1998, as the Mayor and the Governor proudly reported a decline in the welfare rolls, the press and City Council increasingly asked for other numbers: How many of the former TANF recipients were now self-sufficient? Were workfare participants gaining marketable skills? How many workfare participants went on to get permanent jobs? HRA provided no answers, so the City Council began to rely on the testimony of CVH and other coalition members, who described their experiences with WEP.

CVH members engage allies to support them in their struggle. Above, District Council 37 joins CVH on the steps of City Hall in the fight against unpaid WEP.

Proposing transitional jobs bills in City Hall and Albany

In the meantime, CVH members and labor leaders were discussing a proposed Transitional Jobs Program in informal meetings with public officials in New York City and in Albany. These meetings, often brokered by allies who were established players in the workfare debate, served to educate policy makers and to identify potential sponsors. CVH members testified about the flaws of New York City's workfare program with personal accounts of their own experiences in WEP, and suggested that a jobs bill, featuring a living wage and job training, would better meet their needs.

A suitable ally in this fight was soon found in the Chair of the City Council's General Welfare Committee, Council Member Stephen DiBrienza. The General Welfare Committee had called on CVH members for "productive discussions" and "to work together to develop policy" that would more effectively meet the goals of welfare reform, according to Rob Newman, former advisor to the General Welfare Committee. DiBrienza wanted more control over HRA and was willing to work with community groups to demonstrate the need for more oversight. The fact that DiBrienza liked confrontation made him and CVH a very good pair.

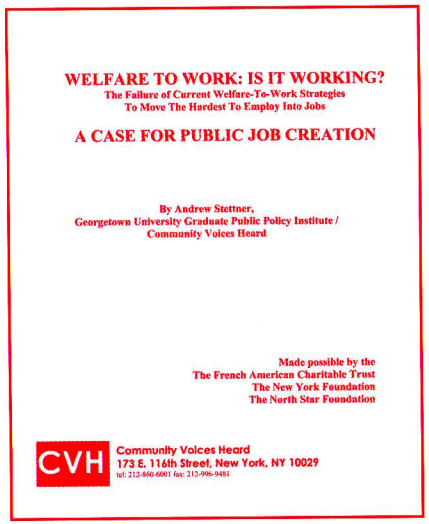
A coordinated effort soon took place from Manhattan to Albany. DiBrienza sponsored the CVH member-created Transitional Jobs Program bill and a bill to establish formal WEP grievance procedures. In Albany, State Assembly Members Roberto Ramirez and Nicholas Spano introduced the

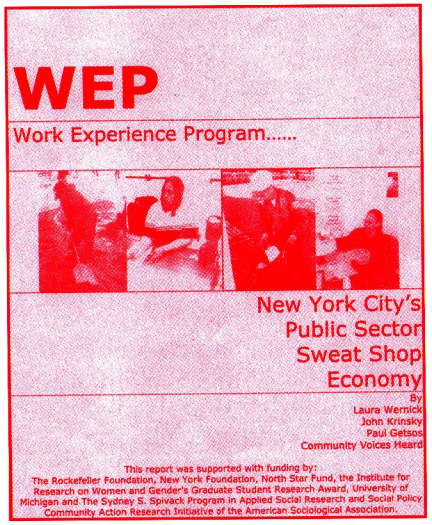
Empire State Jobs Bill, which would establish a pilot program using the $110 million state surplus from the federal welfare grants to provide temporary subsidized jobs for 4,000 welfare recipients. Meanwhile, CVH members were regularly providing testimony and discussing programs alongside seasoned lobbyists in Albany. Other members joined with over 90 labor, civil rights, and religious organizations in the Ad Hoc Coalition for Real Jobs to show their support by waving signs from the public galleries. Because these demonstrations successfully attracted media attention and put additional pressure on legislators, they also helped solidify union alliances.

CVH documents the ineffectiveness of welfare to work

At the same time, CVH began systematic research to expose the flaws in workfare. First, the report *Welfare to Work: Is It Working?*, written by staff member Andrew Stettner, documented the inefficacy of workfare in helping participants to find employment. Simultaneously, CVH surveyed 483 welfare recipients at workfare worksites, welfare centers, and social service agencies across New York City, finding that only 5 percent of WEP participants had found permanent employment after five months in the program.

One year later, CVH surveyed 649 WEP workers at 131 worksites. The report resulting from this research, *WEP (Work Experience Program), New York City's Public Sector Sweat Shop Economy,* documented that WEP workers were effectively displacing unionized workers from their jobs and were receiving substantially less pay than the union workers.





Grassroots-driven policy research is a critical component of CVH's work. Reports shown above were some of the only real evidence about workfare at the time.

Both of these reports provided policy makers with some of the only real evidence about workfare that was available at the time. They increasingly

came to rely on the members of CVH and other coalitions as experts, using their own research and the personal testimonials on WEP and other welfare-to-work programs as their evidence base. Tyletha Samuels elaborates: "They didn't write the speeches and say, 'Here go read this,' you know. YOU were the expert. YOU talked about what you had going on. You were talking about stuff that affected YOU, and that really made me get involved." In turn, the City Council's General Welfare Committee called on CVH members for "productive discussions" and "to work together to develop policy" that would more effectively meet the goals of welfare reform.

Gains on two fronts: a pilot wage subsidy program and 7,500 jobs

In Albany, CVH's work was also having real impact – conversations with policy staff and strategic demonstrations resulted in first, $12 million, then an additional $45 million being allocated for a pilot Wage Subsidy Program in 1999 and 2000. Although this was not the program that coalition members had envisioned, it was a major achievement and both a step closer to a transitional jobs program and a win that CVH members and organizers alike could point to in order to sustain themselves and attract others to the organization.

Soon after New York State approved the Wage Subsidy program, the City Council passed CVH's Transitional Jobs Bill; however, Mayor Giuliani vetoed it. The City Council then overrode the veto. The Transitional Jobs Program was adopted in March 2000. A bill drafted by welfare recipients created 7,500 paid community jobs. More specifically, the pilot program would, over three years, subsidize city agencies and non-profit organizations to create a total of 2,500 one-year positions paying welfare recipients a minimum wage of $7.50 an hour. By receiving a paycheck rather than a welfare check, participants in the program would be eligible for federal tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Social Security. This would help to raise a participant's total cash and benefits from a maximum of $9,000 per year under workfare up to about $18,000 per year. In addition, program participants would take part in vocational training for an average of eight hours a week and would have a case manager to help them discuss work issues and find permanent jobs.

Though not the end of the story for transitional employment, CVH was justifiably proud of its work – its members and leaders had made major gains in job creation and economic justice at both the state and local level, at the same time. Strategic relationships, base building, a well-trained and committed membership, critical funding, and attention-getting direct actions gave lawmakers no choice but to come to the table with CVH, ready to work. Tyletha Samuels illustrates the thrill of seeing the positive outcome of her efforts: "You felt fulfilled. You felt like you were doing something and making change. Forget the man outside, forget my mother, forget my sisters and my brothers who do not bring change to my situation. I got a place where my voice will count and people who make rules that affect my life, they are listening to me, and my voice counts."

4. Making change happen: fighting for implementation of the transitional jobs program

Nobody wants to deal with Community Voices Heard. They have to. [Interviewer: Why?] Because they're aggressive, they're well-organized, and they have a permanent presence. –Leader of labor union [D]

After the New York City Council adopted the Transitional Jobs Program in the spring of 2000, Mayor Giuliani's administration refused to implement the program. The members of CVH were outraged, so they decided to pressure him to obey the law using three specific strategies: an "earned" media campaign, litigation, and research. This campaign was funded by a two-year $250,000 grant from the Mott Foundation that, among other things, funded an intensive training program that resulted in increasing CVH's capacity by four additional staff people.

Media, research and legal strategies

CVH's media strategy used a combination of actions and public demonstrations that sought to involve a broader base of people – those not directly involved with welfare – to keep the Transitional Jobs Program in the Mayor's morning paper. For example, the Mayor decided at the last minute to cancel the free annual New York Philharmonic Orchestra concert in Central Park in July, in order to spray for mosquitoes that might be infected with the West Nile virus. Hundreds of disappointed concertgoers were turned away by police and Department of Parks workers, and were greeted by 30 enthusiastic CVH members with flyers encouraging people to write to the Mayor to demand the implementation of the Transitional Jobs Program. And in October, more than 50 CVH members wearing Giuliani masks demonstrated in front of Gracie Mansion, chanting "stop trick-or-treating welfare workers." Both actions garnered significant attention from both the print and television media.

At the same time, CVH members were pursuing legal and research strategies, receiving legal advice from NELP and the Legal Department of District Council 37 about how to sue the city for failing to implement the Transitional Jobs Program. CVH also released a second research report on WEP, *Count Our Work*, which also effectively captured the attention of the press in order to change the public's perception of WEP. However, the Mayor continued to ignore the law.

The Parks Opportunity Program (POP)

The legislation required that the Mayor implement the program beginning January 1, 2001. In late February, as the City Council focused more attention on the Administration's defiance of the law, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) announced the creation of 1,000 subsidized jobs in the

Department of Parks and Recreation paying welfare recipients a union equivalent wage as "City Seasonal Aides." Spokespersons from HRA insisted that the temporary job creation program, called the Parks Opportunity Program (POP) was an effort to help families approaching the five-year time limit on federal assistance. No matter how it was pitched, the program was a job in the New York City Parks Department, paying a minimum of $9.38 an hour, which bestowed union status and qualified people for the Earned Income Tax Credit. All this was a significant improvement over unpaid WEP jobs, and was believed to be a quiet and stealth response to the New York City Council's Transitional Jobs Bill.

When advocates, community groups, and labor leaders learned of the program, there was a mixed reaction. Parts of the program were good, even better then expected – wage levels were high and they were union positions. However, the one-year long positions were far short of the 18-month long positions that CVH was pressing for. Also, the POP jobs were only in the Parks Department, affording welfare recipients little to no opportunity, outside of WEP, to garner much-needed clerical and office work experience. That said, people in the program generally had very positive views of the work, but far less so as a means to prepare for private sector employment.

CVH responds to POP

CVH members decided that they would fight for what they deemed to be a legal right to the jobs program they had created. Their jobs bill was passed and they should be able to take advantage of it. They were motivated not just by a desire for paying work, but also by the Mayor's refusal to implement the bill, which many took as an affront to their pride and dignity.

In the spring and summer of 2001, still with no Transitional Job Program in place in the vast majority of city agencies, and with plenty of people still seeking employment, CVH initiated a hard-hitting and ultimately effective job application campaign. In two and a half months, two organizers collected 2,500 job applications at WEP sites, street fairs and welfare offices. Those applications were then delivered directly to city agencies, the Mayor and HRA's Commissioner. The job application campaign had a dual purpose: first to prove to the media, the Mayor and the general public that there were, in fact, at least 2,500 people on welfare who wanted to work; and second, to build a list of WEP workers willing to mobilize to action.

Next, with a Mayoral election in sight, CVH and the New York chapter of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (NY ACORN) planned a Mayoral Candidates' Accountability Session and invited the four major Democratic mayoral hopefuls to a forum to respond to questions and concerns from New York City's low-income residents.

The mayoral candidates' accountability session

To deliver their goal of 600 people for the forum, and to continue to collect

job applications, CVH reached out to people at HRA Job Centers, WEP worksites, homeless shelters, food pantries, and door-to-door in many neighborhoods. As a result, CVH's database had reached 5,000 names two weeks prior to the Mayoral Candidates' Accountability Session. Over the following two weeks, members and staff made approximately 7,000 more phone calls, securing 60 volunteers to staff the event and 300 people who committed to attend. CVH and NY ACORN's combined organizing efforts resulted in a packed event, with 600 people facing three of the four Democratic mayoral hopefuls in a labor hall a block away from Union Square. On the agenda were questions about the six critical issues that concerned low-income communities, including the creation and implementation of a real Transitional Jobs Program. Holding signs that read "40,000 WEP WORKERS VOTE!", the large crowd clearly impressed the candidates. Reports of the event led the missing candidate to arrange a meeting with members at CVH's office weeks later.

Partial implementation of the jobs program

CVH capitalized on the success of the Accountability Session by carrying out a series of small actions targeting key public officials in city agencies. In groups of 5 to 20 people, CVH members hand-delivered over 2,500 additional job applications to municipal offices to demonstrate that people wanted jobs. In this way, they managed to encourage several agencies, including the Department of Transportation, to consider creating transitional jobs. This combination of public education and direct action led to the partial implementation of the Transitional Jobs Program in August 2001. Finally, HRA issued an "Invitation for Bids" for city agencies to provide transitional entry-level positions that would last twelve months and pay the comparable union scale wage for the position that was filled.

Once again, CVH demonstrated that a member-driven strategy of media outreach, litigation, and research could not only get public policies established, but could also pressure administrators to actually implement new programs that had been identified (and, in part, created) by constituents as better ways to meet to their needs. And through substantive work, members had experiences that left them feeling empowered, more politically engaged, and committed to future work. Remaining flexible in its tactics, but firm in its resolve, CVH's members didn't abandon their efforts in the face of Mayor Giuliani's recalcitrance; rather, they dug in and made real change happen.

5. We want more: saving the Parks Opportunity Program while working for employment opportunity at every level of government

Power and politics in New York City really comes from when you're dealing with somebody you expect that you're going to have to deal with them down the road. And that's key. If people thought that Community Voices Heard wasn't going to be here in a year, they wouldn't deal with them. They wouldn't even meet with them. They wouldn't have to. The expectation is that they're going to be around. –Leader of a Labor Union [D]

The Human Resources Administration (HRA) had created the Parks Opportunity Program (POP), ostensibly to provide welfare recipients who were approaching their five-year time limit with paid jobs and vocational training for eleven and a half months. However, midway through the first year of the program, Mayor Giuliani, in one of his last mayoral mandates, threatened to privatize the program and cut it to six months.

Fighting for POP

What CVH learned doing POP research in every park in the five boroughs, was that POP workers were concerned that their jobs would end sooner than they had expected and that they had insufficient job training and poor vocational services. Some workers had their transitional benefits (i.e., food stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies) cut off by HRA, which was slow to correct its mistake. Moreover, the union that was supposed to be representing POP and other transitional jobs workers, District Council 37 and its Local 983, were doing little field organizing to address the needs of these new members, especially the population moving from welfare to work. To resolve concrete issues that members were having transitioning from welfare to a paid job, CVH members and POP workers needed to take immediate action to pressure HRA to resolve complications with transitional benefits and to continue fighting for real transitional jobs in other city agencies.

Newly elected Mayor Bloomberg, following his predecessor's last directive aimed at welfare recipients, attempted to transfer POP's administration to a private temporary employment agency called TempForce in January 2002. As employees of TempForce, 3,200 POP workers would be doing exactly the same jobs they had been doing, but would make $2 less per hour and would lose the benefits and job security that they had received as city employees and union members. CVH organized a rally on the steps of City Hall, attended by over 100 workers, union leaders, and City Council members who opposed privatization and the shortening of the transitional jobs program. Local 983 of District Council 37 officially joined with CVH members to fight for POP.

A month later, CVH members came together again to express public support for a City Council Resolution that called for strengthening POP, guaranteeing its 11.5-month length, and improving the training, education, and job

search components.

CVH stopped POP from being shortened and privatized as a result of these quick and effective POP worker mobilizations, the strong arguments against privatization and cutting the program length from the workers themselves, an effective press strategy, and a new Mayor who cared about his image yet had little understanding of how the politics of protest and media would impact his Mayoralty.

Soon after, CVH organized transitional workers in the Department of Transportation who had been dismissed after six months from work on the Staten Island Ferry and Westside Highway, to leaflet the Ferry commuters and tourists to preserve the jobs at the Terminal. Working with Staten Island Legal Aid in a combined organizing and legal advocacy strategy, CVH got commitments from the city to place the dismissed workers in six-month POP positions with access to training and education.

CVH confronts NYC welfare agency Commissioner Verna Eggleston about the proposed privatization and shortening of the transitional jobs program.

Building strategic relationships

In the fall of 2001, the New York State Office of Temporary Assistance and Disability (OTADA) held a series of listening sessions to provide input on implementing the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program at the state level, and to help inform their own state recommendations on federal TANF re-authorization, which was scheduled to happen the following year. These listening sessions were held at a series of town hall meetings across the state with State Welfare Commissioner Brian Wing.

CVH members came to these meetings, not chanting or holding signs, but armed with information and concrete policy recommendations. Members would blend in with the rest of the attendees and participate in the meetings on an equal level with advocates, local welfare officials, and service providers. CVH's presence enabled the Commissioner to see organized low-income people in a new light: experienced and well-informed. Finally, at a New York City meeting, CVH members presented the Commissioner with an invitation

to meet with CVH at their offices, which he accepted.

That meeting, held in February of 2002 at CVH's East Harlem headquarters, was an exciting and successful accountability mini-session on all of CVH's campaigns – TANF reauthorization, HRA welfare administration, the New York State TANF campaign, and the POP campaign. CVH persuaded Commissioner Wing to bring the new HRA Commissioner Verna Eggleston as well. Speaking to 85 CVH members in CVH's cramped offices, the state and local commissioners listened to the complaints that CVH members laid out about the POP program, state TANF implementation, the administration of local welfare offices, and their recommendations for improving welfare centers, and improved notification of welfare recipients hitting their five year time limit.

Engaging state and local commissioners

Before the session, members familiarized themselves with state welfare policy and program proposals. They conducted research about both Wing and Eggleston, and spoke directly and confidently to both Commissioners. Members began with brief one to two minute personal testimonies about the impact of public policies on their lives and the lives of their families, then quickly moved into presenting their recommendations for certain policy or administrative proposals that would both improve the lives of welfare recipients and enable the Commissioner to increase the efficacy of the system.

The State Welfare Commissioner, already having experienced dialogue with CVH members at the regional town hall meetings, listened with an open mind, debated proposals, and asked questions. On the other hand, the new HRA Commissioner, just recently having been appointed by the Mayor, was more interested in showing CVH members that she had all the answers and that she would serve as an advocate for her "clients". She told the room of CVH members that this was a different Mayor, and a different City Hall, and that, in turn, it would be a different HRA. In the end, it became clear that the new Commissioner was not as interested in CVH's recommendations as the State Commissioner was. This signaled the beginning of a challenging relationship with the new Commissioner of HRA.

Yet, as a result of this meeting, Commissioner Eggleston reserved two positions for CVH members on HRA's Citizens' Advisory Board, which reviews the agency's programs; promised to investigate welfare procedures to ensure that eligible citizens are not denied assistance; and began to consider a grievance procedure for welfare offices. She followed up this meeting with a memo received by CVH on March 12, 2002. In it she wrote: "I wanted to extend thanks to you [staff member Sondra Youdelman] and Community Voices Heard for inviting me to your agency. I was incredibly impressed by the energy of the staff and consumers. Again, I want to extend my deepest apologies to all, for any ill treatment you or your constituents might have received from the Human Resources Administration (HRA)." She went on to describe in detail how she planned to address many of the mem-

bers' grievances.

Commissioner Wing also joined CVH members later in February to spend a "day in the life of a welfare recipient" by touring welfare offices, and workfare and Transitional Job Program sites. During that tour the Commissioner saw first-hand the problems with the fair hearing system and the poor conditions at one of the worst welfare centers in the city. Soon after, Commissioner Wing implemented members' recommendations regarding earlier welfare time-limit notification for families.

Direct action in the capital and at home

Though CVH had access to HRA, that relationship did little to help realize policy change in the Parks Department-controlled POP. In addition, the relationship between HRA and the Parks Department was fraught with tension, confrontational, and non-cooperative, making HRA access both limited in use, and at times, a detriment. Realizing this, CVH continued to exert its organizing and mobilization muscle to gain access and make change across city government.

With a significant amount of committed national funding – most were multi-year large grants from national foundations – and support for CVH's national TANF campaign from the Center for Community Change, CVH was able to build its organizing reputation with public officials and allies alike, while simultaneously operating effectively in all three spheres of government on a connected range of issues. Support from these foundations helped CVH increase its capacity to develop policy, staff coalitions, and train and work with members in policy and leadership development trainings. Support also enabled CVH to have two experienced senior organizers, one organizing POP workers, and another managing and training three organizer trainees from the community. Ongoing support also allowed the Executive Director to participate more fully in critical strategizing conversations at the national, state, and local level.

The benefits of this increased capacity were most in evidence in late April 2003 when simultaneous actions took place in New York City and Washington DC. In New York City, 400 CVH members scored an important and visible win when they attended a hearing before the City Council's General Welfare and Parks Committees to show their support for the POP program. As a result of this hearing, the City Council, Parks Department, and General Welfare Committee Chairs committed to fund the program in the next year's budget, guaranteed that the program would pay a living wage, and would continue to work to help people move off of welfare.

On the same day that CVH members and POP workers were gathering at City Hall, another two busloads of CVH members were in front of Senator Hillary Clinton's house in Washington DC. Carrying waffles, and joined by other groups from New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington DC as part of the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support, the group was there to deliver a message: "Don't Waffle on Work Requirements". At the time, the

Senator was changing her position on work requirements as well as education and training as part of the TANF re-authorization bill. The action was a success. Weeks later, the Senator asked a CVH member who had gone through a variety of WEP placements to testify about her experiences in a committee meeting, and asked CVH to provide testimonies of other WEP workers, which she then distributed to Senators during the TANF bill debate.

POP survives, but action continues

In May 2003, HRA and the Parks Department announced plans to continue POP and to place 6,000 more individuals in six-month positions over the following year. But CVH wasn't satisfied. The organization committed to continue to fight for the full 18-month to two year POP program length and for the expansion of the program into other city agencies.

The new Mayor's position on workfare was unclear. In June, 150 CVH members went to the Mayor's private home to invite him to meet with POP workers. Members planned this event in light of his highly publicized dinner parties with business leaders and celebrities to discuss public policy. CVH members brought dinner with them, inviting him to dine from the "Poor People's Menu": Vienna sausages, Spam, rice and beans, and Kool-Aid.

The Mayor responded by arranging a meeting between CVH members and Commissioner Adrian Benepe of the Parks Department – the first time the Parks Commissioner agreed to meet with POP workers. At this meeting, CVH members asked the Commissioner to get his department to fix the problems people were having accessing education and training, and called on him to extend the length of the program. While the Commissioner said the length of the program was not his jurisdiction, he made a commitment to find out what was wrong with the education and training component of POP.

Members continued to execute several other direct actions at events the Mayor attended but soon realized that media-grabbing events would not be effective because this Mayor enjoyed media attention and deflected it with equanimity. Changing strategy, 150 CVH members delivered letters from POP workers to the Mayor's office. The letters were invitations to meet to discuss the need for better training and education. Once again, CVH members were directed to the Parks Department and HRA, reinforcing the assessment that this Mayor delegated the operation of programs to his Commissioners.

These meetings, the eventual "win" in saving POP from privatization, getting the city to commit to its continuation, and the reinstatement of 120 workers all resulted from the execution of different organizing strategies: a combination of direct action with medium-to-large scale community mobilizations, policy recommendations articulated by and discussed by the affected constituency – welfare recipients – and the ability to have civil, if lively, conversations about policy and program administration. Much of this was made possible because of CVH's ongoing and deep leadership development work, training low-income people in the intricacies of public policy development, civic and political structures, and training people how to engage deci-

sion makers in productive and concrete conversations.

Does POP work?

Despite restoring the paid Parks Opportunity Program, members still had questions about its overall effectiveness. Was POP improving participants' lives? What skills did POP workers gain? What happened to POP workers once their program term ended? Many POP workers who became active members of CVH found themselves no better off when the program ended, than they were before it began.

CVH decided that a formal report and evaluation on POP policy could improve the public campaign and aid in calling for policy change. CVH initiated a research project – its fifth since 1994 – with the assistance of Local 983 and DC 37. CVH spent many months reaching out to thousands of workers in POP, eventually creating a ten-page survey based on the informal discussions. CVH went on to administer that survey to 100 POP workers in 2003. Once again, the organizing and research worked hand-in-hand. People were not only asked for pertinent information, but also asked to join an organization which would fight for fair and equitable treatment of POP workers and effective public policies that would improve the lives of low-income families in New York City.

Downgraded POP positions: CVH responds

CVH remained active in understanding and monitoring POP's efficacy. However, while working effectively to get improvements in education and training access, benefits issues, and even some issues around worker health and safety, CVH was not the organization with the legal right to bargain for the workers. That right to collectively bargain for the workers lay at the hands of DC 37 and the locals representing the workers. The Mayor, in negotiations with DC 37 regarding the workers' wage and other issues, as well as facing serious city budget deficits, reduced POP wages from $9.38 to $7.50 an hour in the summer of 2003, thereby downgrading the POP positions to a non-union status.

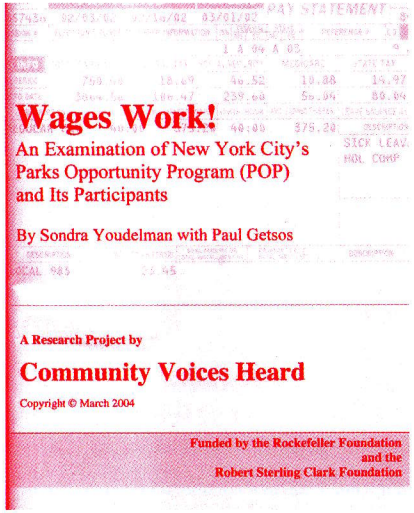
Approximately a year after CVH initiated the project to document the impact of the original POP program, and a year after intense organizing in the Parks Department after the program was downgraded, CVH moved to initiate a second phase of the campaign. It delivered petitions to the Mayor, the HRA Commissioner and the Parks Commissioner calling on the city to reinstate the workers to the original union status and wage level of $9.38 an hour, and to provide concrete changes to the training component of the program. The action drew both press and attention from the City Council and labor leaders.

A month later, in March 2004, CVH published the findings from their research in *Wages Work! An Examination of New York City's Parks Opportunity Program (POP) and Its Participants.* The study documented the

motivating success that jobs with wages, titles, plans, and clear supervisory structures have on an individual's desire to be and stay employed. This type of employment, the study showed, was far more successful in inspiring people to stay working than WEP. Non-WEP work also had a positive effect on families, where women were able to save money and become a positive role model for their children. While there were serious problems with education and training components of the program, and only one in five people went on to receive employment, this number was much stronger than other programs' placement rates.

CVH gains legitimacy representing workers

Since the release of *Wages Work!*, the action at City Hall, and the delivery of hundreds of petitions to the Parks Department, CVH is now considered a legitimate representative of POP workers. Its members now meet regularly with appointed officials, including Robert Garafola, Deputy Commissioner for Management and Budget at the New York City Parks Department, to discuss the shortcomings of the job training programs and how to improve them. As a result of these meetings, Commissioner Garafola has promised to develop training opportunities which do a better job of linking participants to market-driven trades, such as nursing and computer technology.



The success and scope of CVH's work during the period of the POP Campaign would not have been possible without generous multi-year general operating support. In 2002, for example, CVH was operating with the previously mentioned $250,000 multi-year grant from the Mott Foundation; multi-year grants in the amounts of $150,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation, $100,000 from the Ford Foundation, and $35,000 from the Solidago Foundation; and it was in the midst of another multi-year capacity building grant from the Open Society Institute. The New York Foundation also

provided support to the POP worker organizing campaign for three years at $45,000 a year – the second grant for a project from the Foundation. These resources put CVH at the apex of their funding and staffing capacity, and as a result, they were able to execute campaigns at the national, state, and local level concurrently. That work had – and continues to have – an indelible impact on job creation and economic justice.

The POP Campaign also illustrated some of the limitations community-based organizations' experience when trying to impact public policy in a metropolis with myriad constituents and divergent needs and agendas. CVH's strategic relationship building, for example, built bridges to policy change, while impeding others. This was true for the relationship with HRA as well as CVH's alliance with labor. CVH Executive Director and co-founder, Paul Getsos, explains: "The ultimate goal of the Transitional Jobs Campaign was not only to create a transitional jobs program for welfare recipients, but to call for a reinvestment in the public sector. This re-investment would mean the creation of new public sector jobs, which we saw as the true job creation strategy for low-income and middle class people in New York City and would also mean an increase in public services for all New Yorkers, poor and rich alike. However, to our frustration, we found out that many of our potential allies for that campaign – including some people in the labor movement – thought we were crazy for trying to wage that fight. That said, when the public saw clean parks, clean ferry terminals, and people watching over their kids in the local park, they supported our call for more tax dollars to fund public sector job creation. So maybe we're not that crazy."

The POP campaign illustrates the usefulness of an organizing model that combines action, research, media strategies, and direct conversations between welfare recipients and government officials. CVH's on-going leadership development work and the organizational belief that low-income people can participate in complicated policy discussions means that when low-income members of CVH engage public policymakers, they make an impression, not only because of their personal story, but for an even more important reason: their ability to present, discuss and debate sophisticated public policy proposals and recommendations. As a result, public officials in New York City, Albany, NY, and Washington, DC, recognize CVH – and its membership – as an organization capable of nuanced direct action and expert research and evaluation making them a credible, effective, and demanding partner in the development of public policies.

A labor leader [D] comments: Frankly, I think that the shit that they did around workfare was a miracle. The folks that they were trying to organize are very, very hard to put into an organization and to get that kind of discipline. [Interviewer: "Why?"] Because they're so poor and there are so many problems. It's a sacrifice for those folks. It's just one more thing that they've got to deal with. And they've [CVH staff] turned them into an organization... that both the City and the municipal unions wanted to try to deal with them. They didn't want to give them everything they wanted, but they didn't think they could ignore them.

Conclusion: building power works

When you call CVH, you talk to someone who knows, who's in the program. We ARE the community. Our voices are the ones that count, the ones that need to be heard.
–Yvonne Shields, CVH Board Member

Keeping the pressure on

The unique position CVH members occupy as low-income people allows them to act as monitors of policies that affect their lives. Policy makers and advocates observe that CVH members, with staff direction, follow through long after an action has taken place, while many other organizations do not remain engaged in changing policy and evaluating its impact. Allies and funders such as Kevin Ryan, Program Officer for the New York Foundation, value CVH's constant evaluation of actions, strategies, and campaigns, and they believe this adds to CVH's effectiveness. The campaign for a Transitional Jobs Program illustrates this well: members continued to pressure public officials after the law had been adopted to ensure it was implemented and implemented well.

The commitment to policy reform is effective not only because of the sheer size of CVH's membership, but due to its reputation for not inflating those numbers for organizational gain. An ally explains: "It has been my experience that, across the land, organizations tend to exaggerate their ability to turn people out and, generally speaking, CVH does not exaggerate their ability to turn people out. The accountability session with [City Council Speaker] Gifford Miller a few months ago, they said they were pulling really hard to get 250 people out and when I left, people were still coming in, and they had reached 200."

Allies and policy experts frequently describe the challenges and benefits that a membership-led organization poses. Some observers note that, as the membership of the organization changes, relationships with allies may need to be re-evaluated and individual campaigns can be weakened. They also note that CVH's commitment to "process" (i.e. checking in with the membership before making commitments) often "slows things down", can make it difficult to respond to a policy context, and compromises opportunities for getting positions into the public debate. Yet, the same observers generally admire CVH's deep commitment to being membership-led, and some note that their own members learn through contact with CVH.

According to Sondra Youdelman, CVH staff member: "With the upper-level leadership, there is no question that they think of themselves as the people who direct the organization, and we are their employees. If we ever came to them and said flat out, "This is what we should be doing," they would question that. One role for staff is that we are check-in people, like, "Is this something we would work on? Does it fit with our mission?" There is recognition that while they [members] are living their lives on a day to day basis, we have more time to immerse ourselves."

Filling the knowledge gap

CVH is also recognized for filling the knowledge gap. Members' life-experience, coupled with their training in presenting personal testimony, engages policy makers in a uniquely successful way. It creates a reciprocally beneficial relationship: the member is empowered by sharing her story with those in power, which creates real positive change in her life; and the powerful are directly, viscerally, connected to their constituents.

Policy makers seldom distinguish between advocates and CVH members at the negotiating table. This speaks to both the realization of CVH's organizing philosophy of putting people in the same room with decision makers, and to the success of their intensive, ongoing, and lengthy leadership training. Members are direct and authoritative in these meetings. They remain focused on their goals, which are based on their knowledge of the relevant policies and the particular official or agency they are meeting with. They normally direct the meeting, and they rarely allow elected officials to avoid answering questions or to redirect discussions to topics that put them in a more favorable light. By the end of each meeting, the message to public officials is clear and consistent. "We are your constituents. This is how the current policies affect us. This is what we need. Do we have your support?"

Allies admire the boldness of having CVH members communicate directly with public officials and public opinion leaders, and they recognize its significance in changing views and positions on policy issues. Public officials acknowledge that, in the workfare debate, the voices of those most affected provided the expertise needed to understand the impact of relevant policies.

CVH's research has also been an effective tool for filling the knowledge gap and shaping public policy. Allies, policy experts, and public officials stress how influential the research has been in changing public opinion and the views of policy makers regarding workfare. The research reports mentioned in previous chapters, especially those regarding WEP and POP, have provided substantive and critical information that filled a void in discussions about welfare-to-work strategies and generated responses in the policy world. During the critical period before adoption of the Transitional Jobs Program, the press cited CVH's research reports multiple times. In the policy and foundation communities, CVH's research is respected and has afforded CVH a certain kind of credibility with respect to changing policy that similar grassroots advocacy organizations do not have.

Shaping public policy

Influential outsiders uniformly agree that CVH has developed extremely creative strategies for organizing that have succeeded in shaping policy. Allies recognize CVH's ability to be more creative in campaign strategizing and in planning actions than national and more institutionalized organizations. Allies and funders value CVH's constant evaluation of actions, strategies, and campaigns, and they believe this adds to CVH's effectiveness. Similar

organizing groups recognize the innovation and strength of many of CVH's actions, and they openly admit to "borrowing" ideas.

The three campaigns featured in this report required three different plans in order to achieve their respective policy goals. In each case, CVH adapted the overall strategy not only to the particular goals of a campaign, but to the policy context, including the current power dynamics, the public targets, and the timeline without compromising its member-based values. In the campaign to create a Transitional Jobs Program, CVH's media strategy and coalition with labor unions and other groups effectively changed the lives of workfare workers in New York City and nationally. The campaign to implement the Transitional Jobs Program combined disruption and media strategies to keep the program and workfare participants on people's minds. Finally, the campaign to save POP once again necessitated quick and repeated mass mobilization, strategic relationship building, and research in order to save the program and have it remain a powerful and persuasive force for employment opportunity at every level of government.

Media strategy

Two elements that were common to these campaigns, and that are highlighted as particularly critical by political analysts, allies, and local and national observers, are the strategic uses of the media and of alliances. CVH's media strategy got the voices of welfare recipients and workfare participants in the press and, in turn, the public and policy makers could not easily ignore the experiences of those most affected by welfare-to-work policies.

Between 2000 and 2001, 75% of any press coverage mentioning CVH featured quotes from 11 different CVH members. The voices of CVH members were heard in a sophisticated context that went beyond the expected easy-to-disregard sad testimonial. The media proved a powerful and persuasive podium for members to share their expertise, thereby forcing people to consider the real consequences of welfare reform. A labor leader agrees, "They articulate what they're trying to do very well. So, people can see, "OK, this is what you want. This is what we're going to try to get you. [Interviewer: In private meeting or...?] They do it very publicly. If you Google them and you look at their press stuff, you see that they're very good at messaging what they want."

Occasionally, the press and some policy advocates suggest that members are used as poster children by groups like CVH to simply represent the views of the organization. However, only those who have little or no contact with CVH members believed this to be true. The "media speaks to members only rule", formally implemented in 1999, is considered by members to be a basic extension of the organization's core philosophy of being member-led.

Labor alliances

Outsiders view CVH's alliances with labor unions, and with other groups that

share common goals, as essential to their success in changing public policy. Maintaining these relationships despite differences of opinion or opposing positions on different issues is an important and long-term asset for policy influence, and CVH manages to do this with key stakeholders. Labor allies, in particular, express great trust in their relationships with CVH.

"CVH is labor," said one local labor leader and several policy experts. Partnering with labor unions contributed to changing the public's perception of workfare workers and welfare recipients. The labor alliance helped legitimize workfare reform by recognizing WEP participants as laborers and upholding long-established labor rights. By 2002, the press presented CVH and the labor movement as a unified voice. Labor leaders affirm the alliance to this day.

That alliance, however, was not easy to forge. Early on in the campaign to end workfare, the union representatives of public employees were not convinced about the value of such an alliance, and their public statements and actions reflected this unease. Yet, even the most skeptical union leaders could not ignore the crowds assembled by the staff of CVH during the workfare debate. Their early reluctance was converted by CVH's deep commitment to a historically disregarded constituency and, moreover, by its staff's ability to empower members. Over the years, labor allies have grown more convinced of their partnership with CVH. They truly believe that CVH is a permanent part of a movement to lift people out of poverty. This relationship shift has been important to both labor and CVH.

A labor union leader clarifies: "I view the labor movement as a whole as we're lifting people out of poverty. They're a big part of it. They, frankly, are dealing with a constituency that we, historically, have not been very good with. And they changed that. The fact that Paul Getsos and others from that organization can come here and we can have dialogue – that fundamentally changes the relationship that the trade unions have had with that constituency."

The importance and challenges of partnerships

In the campaign to implement the Transitional Jobs Program, collaborative efforts with other grassroots advocacy groups were also critical to the policy gains. The actions in Albany, as part of the Empire State Jobs coalition, and the Mayoral Accountability Session, organized with NY ACORN, are two examples of CVH members joining with members of similar organizations to work together. These coalitions were able to mobilize constituents with different priorities, in large enough numbers, to move political candidates and elected officials - which was crucial for changing policy.

Collaborations help move policy makers, but they also move members. Most members feel that alliances with other groups can broaden their own horizons and help them achieve their own goals. By linking their struggles with others, members become more aware of the larger causes of poverty and injustice and strengthen their own political resolve. CVH Member, Vernell Robinson, explains: "We need to support others [outside CVH] and network with them. We need to socialize and work on issues– it helps us stay strong... and together." Coalitions bridge cultures and broaden vision.

But partnerships are difficult. While individual members may describe the personal significance of working across groups, potential alliances are often viewed with skepticism among CVH members and staff. Members and staff say there is intolerance with CVH's member decision-making procedures. Some more seasoned members feel that other organizations try to use CVH's work and membership without reciprocating or respecting CVH's values. Likewise, representatives of other organizing groups acknowledge successes gained from working with CVH on shared goals, but they point to their own difficult experiences collaborating with CVH. They acknowledge that joint efforts with CVH frequently disrupt their own organizational processes, because of CVH's focus on internal organizational development that is often time consuming.

There are common elements to the kinds of tension which allies, CVH staff, and CVH members express and that are reflected in this research. First, CVH assumes that other organizing groups are not as dedicated or respectful to their membership as their staff and leaders. This has led to members and staff of CVH openly criticizing other organizations and even provoking their members to question their own internal procedures and staff by insinuating that they do not truly participate in decision-making. Second, there is a sense that community organizing groups are competing for a limited pool of funding, which can generate a context of suspicion and competition instead of cooperation.

Clearly, CVH staff and members must choose alliances carefully and strategically. Consequently, the alliance criteria may not always be communicated explicitly to allies but, rather, are expressed in the tone and content of their exchanges. Ultimately, both labor and community organizers recognize CVH's ability and effort to organize low-income constituents and want to engage them for this reason. Sometimes elected officials are allies but, as with all ally relationships, they are based on a productive tension. CVH believes that all allies are important and that strategic relationships are based on power - specifically the power each organization brings to the table. Thus, CVH works to build a strong base before entering coalitions. It professes a desire to respectfully collaborate, and understands that partnerships advance the goals of all involved. These relationships, however, require trust building and negotiation.

Direct action: an essential element

In the preceding pages, you've read about a number of CVH's actions. It's been said that a good action is good theatre, but CVH's history bears out that it's far more complicated than that: a good action is clever, relevant, and noticed, among many other things. What is perhaps most striking about these activities is their relevance to the political context, their savvy use of

the media, and their ability to get CVH's members in the room with, or across the desk from, the policy makers. As a result, CVH's agenda is in the papers, on the news and, more importantly, being addressed by decision-makers who have been so intelligently targeted. "When you deal with an invisible community," says Sindy Rivera, a CVH member, "and we are invisible, these things have to be done to get attention from people in power."

Fearless confrontation has been a key part of CVH's success. Some public officials acknowledge that these disruptions are a catalyst for change. Demonstrations and direct action targeting public officials can demand attention. CVH has used direct action to disrupt, "to draw attention", to gain access. For example, a protest on the steps of City Hall in 1997 that brought WEP workers and labor union members together caught the attention of the press. Consequently, concern about that "attention" helped to persuade public officials to listen, and eventually respond, to CVH's demands during the POP campaign. Stephen Bradley, CVH Board Member, describes it this way: "I think most people don't know how much pressure they can really exert on politicians. It's our business to let them know what we want them to do."

Direct action turns constituents into members, and members into leaders. Constituents are introduced to the idea that they can change their lives by confronting people at City Hall and get positive change. Making that connection between action and impact begets increased and deeper involvement. The deeper the involvement, the more likely a member is to become a leader. Henry Serrano, CVH organizer, concurs: "As an organizer, I've witnessed the development of people that have come to their first planning meetings suggesting that 'we call Oprah or get some petitions signed' and a year later they are firmly negotiating at an action. I think that the extensive use of direct action at CVH has not only contributed significantly to achieving concrete wins but has also had a large impact in broadening members' ideas about tactics for political change."

From its origins, CVH found an identity and powerful potential in the people it organizes. That member-led philosophy – driven by leadership building, constant and creative engagement, and action-focused base building – was essential for the successful execution of the three campaigns described in these pages.

Research team

Ann Rivera, principal investigator

Katherine Thompson, assistant principal investigator

Rasmia Kirmani, assistant principal investigator

Research participants

At the initial point of contact, members of the research team informed potential respondents of the interest in talking with them about community organizing for policy change, and of a particular interest in their experiences with Community Voices Heard. Interviewees were told that confidentiality of their identities and responses would be maintained and that their identities would not be revealed under any circumstances, unless they gave explicit consent.

Confidentiality was critical to eliciting respondents' honest views and the rich details about events and experiences. Only those individuals who agreed to be identified are listed by name below. To protect the identities of those individuals who wished not to be identified, organizations, institutions, and agencies who have contributed to this research are identified, rather than any actual representatives of these groups. We are deeply grateful to the following individuals and organizations, who gave generously of their time and experiences to contribute to this research.

Current and former members of CVH

Afhor Blake
Ama Shields
Ann Valdez
Emily Shubrick
Euline Williams
Geneva Wilson
Gilbert Goddard
Janine Douglas
Joanne Ward
Keith Gamble
La Don James
Loretta Hall-Orr
Marilyn Bezear
Raymond White
Robin McCoy
Sabrina Rogers
Sandra Killett
Shenia Rudolph
Sindy Rivera
Stephen Bradley
Vernell Robinson
Yvonne Shields
Zoila Almonte

Current and former staff members of CVH

Jarrett Alexander
Gail Aska
Ralph Castro
Paul Getsos
Anita Graham
Elaine Kim
Joan Minieri
Michelle Perez
Diomaris Reyes
Tyletha Samuels
Jeremy Saunders
Henry Serrano
Danielle Weekes
Sondra Youdelman

Allies, funders, political analysts, and public officials interviewed for this project

Seth Borgos, Director of Research and Program Development, Center for Community Change (CCC)

Maurice Emsellem, Project Director, National Employment Law Project (NELP)

Jennifer Flynn, New York City AIDS Housing Network (New York City AHN)

Bill Henning, Vice President, Local 1180, Communications Workers of America (CWA)

Brad Lander, Director, Pratt Center for Community Development and former Director of Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC)

Katherine McFate, former Associate Director for Working Communities, Rockefeller Foundation

Rob Newman, Legislative Director, New York City Council and former Advisor to the General Welfare Committee of New York City Council

Kevin Ryan, Program Officer, New York Foundation

Andrew White, Director for Center for New York City Affairs, Milano Graduate School of New York University

In addition to the aforementioned individuals, persons affiliated with the following organizations were also interviewed. The views expressed represent those of the individuals who shared their experiences and not of the affiliated entities.

Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN)

Central Labor Council (CLC)

District Council 37 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

Jobs with Justice (JWJ) of New York City

Mint Leaf Productions

New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA)

New York City Mayor's Office

New York City Department of Parks & Recreation

Staff of Senator Hillary Clinton, Washington, DC Office