



Organization of the NorthEast (ONE)

The Organization of the NorthEast (ONE) has operated in northeast Chicago for three decades, but hit its stride as a true community collaboration in 1989 after a year of reorganizing itself. That year – which included extensive community listening sessions to identify common problems – yielded a new structure and a new mission: to build and sustain a successful, mixed income, multi-ethnic (African-American, white, Asian, and Latino) community through community organizing, advocacy, and leadership development.

Building a Community Partnership

ONE functions as overlapping layers that bring community issues to the surface so they can be addressed. At the same time, these layers build in mutual accountability for ONE and its members. The formal organization consists of a small staff of 6, a Board, and 83 dues-paying organizations from the community.

Community residents – those directly experiencing problems of homelessness, a lack of affordable housing, racism, and disempowerment in general – are actively involved in the multi-ethnic partnership in many different ways. First, “house meetings” take place throughout the year not only in homes but also in churches, shelters, clinics, schools, low-income housing, and any other settings where people gather. In these settings, ONE-trained facilitators gather information from people about the issues that are most important to them. In the spring, just before the ONE Annual Convention, as many as 50 house meetings are held to gauge what is on the minds of community residents.

As issues are raised in house meetings, they are passed on to one of two Issue Committees (focusing on Education and Homelessness) or three Strategy Teams (focusing on Immigrant Rights, Jobs, and Land Use/Housing), which themselves have strong participation from community members who are most affected by these problems. For example, the Jobs Strategy Team includes 50% low-income people, 34% with criminal records (who brought to ONE's attention the problems that ex-felons face in finding jobs), and 18% homeless. The people participating in the partnership are also ethnically diverse, reflecting the neighborhood populations of white, African-American, Asian, Latino, and recent immigrant residents.

ONE's committees and teams research problems identified by community members and explore ways to deal with them. If an issue appears to be common to many different constituents, it may be forwarded directly to the larger Action Council. The Action Council meets four to eight times each year and includes one to three representatives from each of the 83 member organizations (depending on the organization's size). Action Council meetings are open to the public, but only members may vote. Any five member organizations may place an item on the Action Council's agenda.

Two other committees – on Membership Development and Leadership – provide encouragement and skill-building for members to promote different levels of participation for those who are interested. Free training in courses such as “Organizing 101” is offered to anyone associated with a member organization. Organizing 101 (and its follow-up course, Organizing 201, for those who have participated in Issue Committees or Strategy Teams) teaches the basic skills of public life – power, relationship building, how to run effective meetings, and how to turn problems into issues. Most importantly, the training helps people participate in all partnership activities on an equal footing. A new mentoring project will take this idea even further. As a member of the Housing Strategy Team put it, “Participating in ONE helped me to think of things differently . . . to

look at politics differently. More knowledge equals power. You feel like you have power and you don't feel invisible.”

Through its emphasis on organizing, advocacy, and leadership development, ONE emphasizes building enduring relationships to accomplish community goals. “We train people on the principle that relationships can be built with anyone in the community,” ONE staff explain. They provide training and coaching on how to meet with power brokers as equals and find common interests. The layered structure – of house meetings, Issue Committees, Strategy Teams, and Action Council and Convention meetings – provides many opportunities for people to engage at different levels. A typical progression might be attending a house meeting and speaking up, becoming a facilitator, becoming more involved in researching a particular issue at the Issue Committee or Strategy Team level, and designing, organizing, and participating in actions.

Every year, 1,000 members and community residents attend ONE's Annual Convention, where the participants establish the organizations' goals and priorities, ONE's board is elected, and dues-paying member organizations vote on key decisions affecting the entire partnership. People attending meetings on behalf of member organizations are expected to carry information back and forth between ONE and their organization's other members; likewise, they are expected to vote with the interests of their organizations at heart. This extends ONE's reach to many more people and also holds the organization accountable to its members. If members do not feel ONE is furthering the mission of a successful, multi-ethnic, mixed-income community, they will not renew their membership or pay annual dues. The membership structure also lets smaller community groups “play big,” appearing larger than they really are because of the joined forces of many acting together. This not only helps facilitate interaction with other stakeholders, but also gives each member organization a home base from which it can negotiate from a position of strength and unity. “We bring together all the mediating institutions in the community to focus their

power,” ONE’s leaders explain. “This creates more power and capacity than each organization working on its own.”

Looking at Issues Through the Community’s Lens

ONE has changed the way issues are raised, understood, and tackled in the community. For example, a traditional response to crime would be to demand more police patrols and arrests. Community members, though, pointed out that this approach would create new problems for residents by sending young people to prison. Instead, ONE focuses on more funding for youth programs, vans to carry youth safely across gang lines, and sensitivity training for the police. For residents who already have prison records, ONE was successful in changing state policies that keep ex-offenders out of the workforce. In addition to enlisting the help of pro bono attorneys to rewrite legislation, ONE members who are ex-offenders traveled to the state capitol to tell their stories to state legislators.

Another example of community-oriented thinking is how ONE views the plight of the neighborhood’s many homeless residents. Before homeless people were actively involved in ONE, it would have been natural to see funding for a new homeless shelter or drop-in center as a victory. But homeless people themselves have raised more complex questions about homelessness and the services they receive. They question whether services are provided in an atmosphere of respect and dignity, whether services are driven by the needs of homeless people or agencies, and whether the underlying causes of homelessness – racism, unemployment, and lack of affordable housing – are being addressed by the Committee on Homeless Issues. These shifts in perspective were initially difficult for ONE members who viewed homeless people as clients, rather than as partners or community leaders.

Working for an Affordable Neighborhood

ONE's efforts to halt the harmful effects of gentrification and increase the supply of affordable housing are another example of how community residents changed the lens through which a problem is viewed and solved. Although housing had been on ONE's agenda for many years, the scope of the problem had changed from one decade to the next. For example, during the 1970s, affordable housing was plentiful, but substandard. Subsequent battles included preserving HUD-funded Section 8 buildings, and making sure Single Room Occupancy hotels were in the hands of reputable nonprofits. By 1998, it was clear that working families in the neighborhood were losing their housing, and nonprofit agencies and religious institutions in the neighborhood were struggling to keep up with property taxes and the costs of renting space.

ONE's Land Use and Housing Strategy Team – made of people who needed affordable housing, homeowners facing escalating property taxes, local nonprofits, and representatives of agencies involved in various aspects of affordable housing – decided to raise the profile of the housing problem and delve into it more deeply. A building-by-building community survey and a series of house meetings echoed each other: families were being displaced from rental buildings as they converted to luxury condominiums, often with little or no notice.

The Strategy Team considered various options, including pressuring developers and local politicians to align themselves with ONE's mission of a successful, multi-ethnic, mixed economic community. The problem was defined as an out-of-control real estate market that allowed the community's housing stock to change hands (and character) without any community influence or planning. "We decided that what we could do was hold our local politicians and developers accountable to our vision of the community and ask them to collaborate with us to design local solutions," ONE members recalled.

That's exactly what happened. At the 2000 ONE Annual Convention, four local aldermen committed publicly to supporting balanced development. This was followed by an affordable housing summit that brought together three of the aldermen, the City Department of Housing, and local developers. A creative solution sparked by the summit was for developers to set aside a portion of a new or renovated building's units to be sold for \$155,000 or less – within the reach of moderate income people. (Although the developer could use less expensive finishes in these units, they had to have the same layout as other units in the building.) Meanwhile, first-time homebuyers would take a training course in home ownership and qualify for a mortgage and federal assistance, depending on their income. This group would then compete for the set-aside units in a lottery.

The program, called the Chicago Partnership for Affordable Neighborhoods, has yielded more than 100 set-aside units since 2001 – all as part of normal, for-profit development. Of course, some developers have been more willing to participate than others; those who drag their feet draw ONE's attention in community meetings, marches, and persuasive protests. ONE is proud of this success because it made the private market work, at least in part, for the benefit of the community. Moreover, the program has had an effect outside the community as three other Chicago neighborhoods have adopted it.

Nonetheless, this triumph is only a partial one, since it does not address the housing needs of low-income people. Because the solutions were researched and selected by people at all ends of the housing spectrum, the focus on this feasible – if partial – solution was endorsed by ONE's members, with the knowledge that the organization would continue to search for and advocate broader solutions. Indeed, this partial victory raised the profile of the issue in the community and built the partnership's power, capacity, and optimism to tackle other aspects of the affordable housing problem. As a result, the role of city

policies – in favor of speculation and unplanned development, rather than in favor of keeping people in the communities they call home – is now a clear target for action.

“A fundamental root cause of the problem is lack of respect for low-income people by power brokers in the community and the fact that low-income people do not have a voice in the decisions being made about development in their communities,” ONE leaders point out. The campaign on set-asides was designed to create space for those low-income voices to be heard on this issue – and they were. These voices will continue to be raised, even more loudly and powerfully, as ONE plans a city-wide Balanced Development Campaign to fight for a full range of housing options.

Pathways to Collaboration

Through several mid-course corrections, ONE has worked hard to create a partnership that is a real resource to people experiencing problems in the community. Despite their successes in this area, ONE recognizes that more could be done to create an equal footing between people with different backgrounds and skill levels – and that some of these gains could be lost if the partnership is not careful.

ONE brings to the Pathways workgroup an example of a diverse partnership that creates a common language across common interests. ONE’s diversity is not only racial and ethnic, but also by income, profession, and power – and eventually will have to incorporate the higher-income people moving into the neighborhood, which the group sees as a future challenge.

ONE’s structured yet open collaborative process for raising and tackling community problems, as well as its public forums and accountability sessions that allow community residents to talk to power brokers as equals, will be

intriguing to other partnerships. ONE members also look forward to learning more about the processes that other partnerships use to engage and sustain people in work that changes lives, one neighborhood at a time.