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Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: The Northwest Community Organization and Sustainable Structures for Neighborhood Organizing

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Abstract

This article examines the historical development and organizational structure of the Northwest Community Organization (NCO), a neighborhood-based community organization founded by Tom Gaudette in Chicago in 1961. From the late 1970s onward, congregation-based organizing, where congregational institutions are the formal members of organizations, became dominant within the Alinsky organizing tradition. Neighborhood organizing efforts, focused on recruiting individuals one by one, were often critiqued at the time as insufficiently stable and powerful, among other limitations. NCO, however, represents an example of a powerful, durable alternative to the congregational approach, in part because its multilayered structure facilitated organization, action, and stability on different levels. While the organization drew on churches and settlement houses, it was not institutionally anchored in them. Through a detailed analysis of NCO's structure, which included micro-local campaigns, semi-autonomous civics, and organization-wide committees, this article shows how the connections between these levels supported leadership development, issue escalation, and organizational resilience. NCO's model enabled residents to move from addressing immediate block-level problems to contesting challenges in their local multi-block area to engaging in large-scale neighborhood-wide struggles over issues like housing, urban renewal, and zoning. Partly as a result, NCO became one of the strongest community organizing groups in the nation and remained so for decades. In fact, NCO was the key founding organization of the current national organizing group People's Action. The article concludes that NCO's interlocking substructures produced unusual durability and power and that the NCO model offers valuable lessons for contemporary organizers seeking sustainable, people-centered organizing models adapted to present conditions.

Keywords: Neighborhood organizing, issue-based organizing, block clubs, door knocking, micro campaigns, bottom-up leadership development

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Introduction

An approach I term "neighborhood organizing," which seeks to organize people one by one through door knocking, house meetings and the like, has always been a part of community organizing in America. Around the late 1970s, however, many organizers in the tradition of Saul Alinsky, the most influential organizer in America[1], "invented" an approach to congregation-based organizing anchored in the institutions of churches. Alinsky had always worked with churches.[2] But his approaches were eclectic, usually seeking to organize whatever could be organized. Alinsky organizations like The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago (TWO) and FIGHT in Syracuse combined established institutions with a wide range of formal and informal small groups, while building new small organizations like block and building clubs from scratch.[3] In the 1970s, however, organizers found it increasingly challenging to hire the larger numbers of organizers necessary for a door-knocking approach to organizing for a range of reasons. At the same time, organizers in Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) were discouraged with their experience in individual organizing approaches that seemed too evanescent and fleeting to sustain. The organization examined here, the Northwest Community Organization (NCO), was created by Tom Gaudette, originally under Alinsky's guidance (although also drawing from Gaudette's own extensive experience). For a number of years after Gaudette left NCO, however, Gaudette and Alinsky were estranged, and after Alinsky's death there was little love lost between Gaudette and the staff of Alinsky's Industrial Area's Foundation (IAF).[4] This tension may have intensified the IAF's discouragement with neighborhood organizing approaches. Congregation-based organizing, grounded in stable, long-standing institutions that had a financial and membership base which could be successfully organized by a small number of organizers and which could often produce larger numbers of participants for actions, seemed like a perfect solution to the limitations many organizers perceived with neighborhood organizing.

Neighborhood organizing approaches did not disappear, but they were overshadowed among prominent Alinsky organizers and organizations. In fact, the PICO organizing network (now Faith in Action) was originally founded out of a model very close to that of NCO (by leaders trained by Gaudette), but shifted to congregation-based organizing (Schutz and Miller 2015). Gregory Galluzzo (mentored by Gaudette) also started with neighborhood organizing approaches, but when he returned to Chicago he also picked up the congregational organizing approach for his Gamaliel Foundation network.[5] For a time, congregational organizing seemed to rule in the Alinsky tradition.

Neighborhood organizing groups of different kinds still exist in long-established networks like People's Action (which was founded out of a coalition of organizations that started with NCO) and the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), or as part of groups like the Center for Popular Democracy,[6] or as fully independent efforts, although I do not know of any accounting of

[1] For the best history of Alinsky see Horwitt (1992).
[2] My summary of this history draws from interviews with a wide range of organizers working during these years, also see Schutz and Miller (2015).
[3] Horwitt (1992); Nicholas von Hoffman, in conversation with the author, 1/18/2012 and 5/7/2012.
[4] Although Gaudette reported that he called Alinsky before Alinsky died to complain about competition with the IAF, and reported that Alinsky asked Gaudette to co-direct the developing IAF organizing institute. Oral History Interview with Tom Gaudette May 10-15, 1990.
[5] Gregory Galluzzo in Conversation with David Walls, November 1, 1996.
[6] See https://peoplesaction.org/, https://worc.org/ and https://populardemocracy.org/.

their numbers or formations. In fact, the largest organizing "network" in America for a time was ACORN, a quintessential door-knocking model, before it dissolved (with some local organizations surviving) in 2010 after a conservative attack (Atlas 2010). In addition, some of the most significant organizing manuals or guides, like Lee Staples' *Roots to Power* (Staples 2016) and Michael Jacoby Brown's *Building Powerful Community Organizations* (Brown 2006), were grounded in an essentially neighborhood organizing vision, while the widely used Midwest Academy's *Organizing for Social Change*, by Kimberly A. Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max (Bobo et. al. 2010), takes a relatively ecumenical approach. More recently, congregational networks have branched out, expanding their base to a more diverse group of organizations (referring to their model as "broad-based"), and adding neighborhood organizing models like Fred Ross's House Meeting approach.[7] And congregational groups have long pursued local door knocking efforts focused around individual congregations. Nonetheless, key writings and research about community organizing still often focus on congregation-based/institution-based/broad-based community organizing, including work by Brad Fulton, Richard Wood, Brian Christens, Paul Speer, and a range of congregation-based organizers, many from the Industrial Areas Foundation (Fulton et al. 2012, Christens et al. 2021, Chambers 2012, Graf 2020; see also Warren 2001, Shirley 1997, Miller 2012).

One key issue that manuals and books and histories about neighborhood organizing tend not to address in depth are questions about how organizational structure might contribute to long-term sustainability. By structure, I mean more than the creation of founding councils or action committees or administrative processes for electing leaders and organizing decision-making. Of course, long-standing neighborhood organizing groups exist and have existed. But analysis is lacking about how to make this happen.

This historical article explores some of the nuances of the institutional structure of NCO, founded in 1961, a door knocking group that was grounded in a strong, multilayered, sophisticated structure that rooted the organization in the neighborhood. NCO represented a hybrid organization, drawing on the strengths of local institutions like churches and settlement houses but focusing the work of its organizers on door-knocking. NCO became an extraordinarily resilient institution that lasted for decades—it may have been the longest lasting organization to emerge directly out of Alinsky's own work. NCO's sophisticated organizational structure allowed the organization to operate on multiple levels at the same time, providing a wide range of ways to train and maintain leaders.[8] While the world has changed quite radically since the days of NCO, many organizers would argue that the basic motivations of human beings have not shifted significantly. There seem to be a relatively small range of effective strategies for organizing people over the long term. As a result, recovering effective approaches from the past can illuminate possibilities for new and creative approaches to organizing that might not be evident otherwise, even if they cannot be directly copied into the present.[9] Fundamentally, I believe that there are insights from the NCO model that could inform organizers today.

[7] Anonymous organizer, in conversation with the author ND. For Fred Ross and the house meeting approach, see Schutz and Miller (2015).
[8] Ironically, NCO eventually declined, I have been told (personal communication, Don Elmer ND), partly because it eventually tried unsuccessfully to shift to a congregational model
[9] This effort extends on work completed earlier with my colleague Mike Miller exploring the diverse creativity of organizing approaches that emerged between the 1950s and the 1980s, see Schutz and Miller (2015).

The Genesis of NCO[10]

At the start of the 1960s, Alinsky was approached by Msgr. Jack Egan, who asked Alinsky to create a new organization in the West Town area of Chicago. A key impetus for this effort was the threat that the city might knock down a significant part of the area as a part of their "urban renewal" plans. West Town wasn't one of Alinsky's priorities, but Egan had collected start-up funding from Catholic churches in the neighborhood, and Egan was too important to Alinsky for him say no. So, in 1961, Alinsky hired Tom Gaudette to organize what became NCO. Alinsky knew about Gaudette because Alinsky's key lieutenant, Nicholas von Hoffman, had been working with Gaudette, a key leader in Chicago's neighborhood-based Chatham Avalon-Park Community Council (CAPCC).[11] Under Gaudette and others the CAPCC had become one of the most powerful neighborhood organizations in Chicago, successfully winning battles with the city and against the Nation of Islam and voting the entire neighborhood "dry"—kicking out the taverns. One of the few examples of Black-White collaboration during the racial transition of a neighborhood in the 1950s, the CAPCC was able to maintain the middle-class status of the area, even as Whites fled, a unique achievement in the City (see Schutz 2020).

From a distance, from the perspective of today's focus on congregational organizing, NCO might appear to look like a standard congregation-based group. It was initially funded by churches, and priests did play a key role in the leadership. However, Egan twisted a lot of arms to raise the money for the organization, and many of the priests had limited or no interest in participating. In an early report on the pastors, Gaudette listed 13 pastors as "plus" and 9 as "minus." The "minuses" included one for whom he simply wrote "no hope," a second he "summed up" as having the "attitude" of "Go away and leave me alone," and a third who "sleeps at pastors meetings." (John J. Egan Papers, Box 36, Folder 1). According to early organizer, Craig Heverly, "there was a lot of tension that Tom had to deal with constantly" between the pastors. While churches were key sites for organization meetings and congregations were key sources of participants, the organizing structure was not based institutionally in churches. As Heverly said, "the church provided the meeting hall," although some of the better pastors became important leaders in the organization.[12]

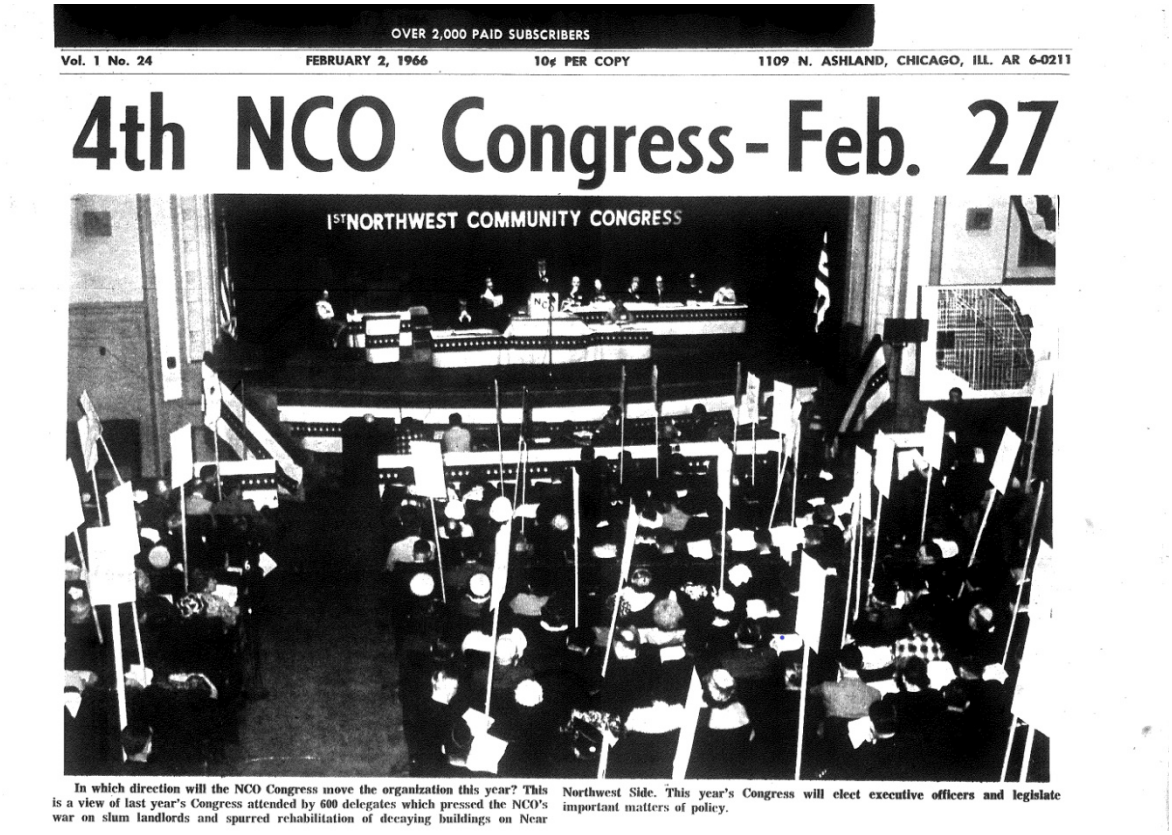
Formally, the organization was governed in two ways: under the yearly "Community Congress" once a year, and with a Senate that met monthly to take up issues in the interim, with officers that led the organization between Congresses. To be an organizational member a group was only required to have "10 active members" and could be a student club, Holy Name Society of a church,

[10] For the story of how Alinsky needled Gaudette in to quitting his job as an executive and organizing NCO see Schutz and Miller (2015). Key texts discussing NCO include Lancourt (1979) and Reitzes and Reitzes (1987), Finks (1984); Black (1965); Schutz and Miller (2015); Bachelor (1976). For Gaudette, see citations to Schutz and Miller (2015), and Black in this footnote as well as Schutz (2020). Also see Seligman (2005). Although Gaudette was one of the most influential organizers in America, very little has been written about his work. The most comprehensive volume on the emergence of the network of organizations, National People's Action (now People's Action: an umbrella group working with different local organizing groups across the US), out of NCO and associated organizations in Chicago is Westgate and Vick-Westgate (2011). Also see Trapp (2003). This article is grounded in these published works, archival materials, documents acquired from different organizers, and interviews with a number of NCO organizers. Aside from copies of the NCO Observer, however, it does not draw on the expansive but unprocessed archive of documents held by the Chicago Museum of History, which I have not had time to examine. The NCO archives, only made publicly available in the last few years after being locked away for a long time, present a potential gold mine for those interested in issues related to this organization and its key organizers and participants.

[11] A more detailed version of this story can be found in Schutz and Miller (2015).

[12] Craig Heverly, in discussion with author, January, 2015.

settlement house, veteran's association, ethnic organization, credit union, and the like (See, e.g., A list of the organizations that came to the "1rst Annual Community Congress," February 17, 1963 at John J. Egan Papers, Box 37, Folder 8 and see the "Constitution of the Northwest Community Organization," at John J. Egan Papers, Box 36, Folder 1). The first Annual Community Congress membership listed nearly 250 different organizations, each with a number of delegates (2-11) based on their individual membership. It was at the annual Community Congress, which Gaudette celebrated for its raucous engagement, where officers were elected and resolutions passed (Oral History Interview with Tom Gaudette by unknown interviewer, May, 1990 at Thomas A. Gaudette Papers, Box 1, Folders 1-4).



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4th NCO Congress - Feb. 27

1ST NORTHWEST COMMUNITY CONGRESS

In which direction will the NCO Congress move the organization this year? This is a view of last year's Congress attended by 600 delegates which pressed the NCO's war on slum landlords and spurred rehabilitation of decaying buildings on Near Northwest Side. This year's Congress will elect executive officers and legislate important matters of policy.

Figure 1: The Northwest Community Observer, Feb 2, 1966, p. 1.

Sub-areas called Civics formed early in the history of the organization (some had existed in some form before NCO) and had their own leadership structure, meetings, and officers. (The Civic approach essentially copied the structure of the APCC in Chatham where Gaudette had served as President and was later repeated in the organization Gaudette created after NCO, the Organization for a Better Austin [OBA]). "Civics" generally represented 5+ block areas anchored by a key institution or institutions, usually a church and/or a settlement house. Each Civic operated essentially like a quasi-independent organization, running their own issues and campaigns.[13]

[13] Multiple conversations with NCO organizers, including Eunice Letzing, October, 2014; Bud Kanitz, January, 2013; Bob Johnsen, September, 2013; Don Elmer, December, 2012 and 2024-2025.

In part because the pastors themselves were not always reliable supporters, from the beginning NCO was grounded in a version of what IAF organizers would sometimes later dismissively call "issue-based" organizing.[14] Gaudette and his organizers told leaders in personal and mass meetings that "we organize through problems," and that "when you come to these meetings, it will be to talk of problems." In fact, in a book of memos that captures the work of the first year of the organization, one priest complained that "all you guys do is ask for problems and when the people give them to you and ask what they could do about them, all that you say is, 'what are you going to do about them?'" At one meeting, Gaudette meeting "asked the residents to speak of their problems and what they want done. 'If not,' he said, 'you will get what you deserve.'"[15]

Organizing Staff and Training

NCO had essentially three levels of organizing staff. First, there was a lead organizer (at different times, over the years I have been examining, these included Gaudette, Bob Johnsen, Shel Trapp, Don Elmer, and Eunice Letzing). Then there was a group of organizers paid either by NCO or by local settlement houses, with the understanding that they worked for NCO. Finally, as Shel Trapp noted, "the largest category of staff was interns or students who were 'into social change.' They came through internship programs, as religious volunteers, or just walked in through the door." (Trapp 2003). Interns would be provided a minimal stipend and some kind of housing. These three levels were increasingly supplemented by local leaders who began to take on more organizer-like roles in the organization, although these leaders do not seem to have been integrated into the established group of organizers.[16]

On the surface, training seemed quite minimal. New organizers were told to get out on the streets and knock on doors, get to know existing key leaders in their Civic while developing new ones, and uncover problems that could be turned into campaigns. A new organizer might be taken out for a day to see what organizers did, or an organizer might just be sent out "cold" to start working. However, at least weekly, the Executive Directors would hold Socratic-like meetings late into the early morning where organizers would report about what they were doing, answer questions from the Director, and, to a lesser extent, engage in dialogue with other organizers. These meetings were where the culture and practice of organizing was continually hashed out and absorbed. Organizers were constantly challenged to act, learning from what their colleagues were doing and from the praise and critiques of their ED.[17]

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[14] As Ed Chambers emphasized, in the congregation-based organizing era the focus was on building relationships that then would support issues. "In the modern IAF, it's 'connect and relate to others.' Issues follow relationships. You don't pick targets and mobilize first; you connect people in and around their interests." (Chambers 2004: 37). In other words, you don't start with "problems" as Gaudette did in NCO or as the pre-congregational organizing IAF of the late 1960s and early 1970s often did in the Campaign Against Pollution (CAP) and other efforts.

[15] IAF [NCO] Memos Nov 1961-Dec 1962, copy given to author by John Gaudette. Note that these memos provide a rich, almost day-to-day record of what happened over the first year of NCO.

[16] Thank you to Ken Galdston, Don Elmer, and anonymous reviewer for this focus on the increasing importance of volunteer leaders taking on organizer roles, and the long-standing effort to train leaders in organizing practices which had, previous to the 1970s, largely been limited to paid organizers. For example, in my own experience many action/issue committees within organizing groups many in fact be largely run and organized by volunteer leaders (perhaps especially in congregational groups where there are few professional organizers). The extent to which these volunteer organizers can replace paid organizers over the long term, and which roles they are best placed to serve, especially in neighborhood organizing efforts focused on door knocking or house meetings and the like, is not something I am aware there is available literature about.

[17] Multiple conversations with Don Elmer in 2024 and 2025, in addition to conversations with other former NCO organizers.

From Local Fights to Campaigns: Developing Leaders

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NCO Pickets 2 Slum-lords

NCO, COPA March On Colewell

By David Sindt

The sun was bright and the breeze off Lake Michigan warm and pleasant. But the COPA and the other NCO members who gathered in front of 707 West Hutchinson, within the very shadow of luxurious high-rise Lake Shore Apartments, were not out for a pleasant Sunday stroll.

These housewives and ministers, teachers and laborers, businessmen and social workers, school children and senior citizens gave up the first spring-like Sunday of 1966 to picket the modern and elegant home of William H. Colewell, owner of, buildings at 1243-45 Chicago and 757 N. Elizabeth, in the midst of the Erie-Eckhart Project.

These buildings, in marked contrast to Colewell's Lake Shore home, are car-indented slums that endanger both the community and the lives of the tenants who try to raise their families in them.

Three of these tenants joined in the picket March 13, as they had on the first picket a week earlier.

Neighbors and Sunday strollers watched as the 53 pickets carried signs with such captions as, "You can't fix a broken toilet with paint," "Colewell fix you slums," and many others.

One picket showed photographs of the slum buildings to passers-by so they could see the deplorable conditions for which their neighbor was responsible.

One of the several policemen on the scene remarked, "After seeing these pictures of the buildings, it's a wonder they

Over 50 members of COPA and NCO picketing luxurious north-side home of slumlord, W. H. Colewell, who has repeatedly refused to correct hazardous violations in his buildings at 1243-54 Chicago and 751 N. Elizabeth.

Thirty members of the St. Fidelis Community Organization, NWCA and PROS picketed the office of Frank Aischuler, after city and owner would not agree to fixing the sidewalk on Washtenaw

just north of Division St. Aischuler and family derived near $2,000.00 per month income from this property, it is reported.

Won't Fix Dangerous Sidewalk

By Dan Smith

"Why are you bothering me? I don't even own the building." Shrieking these words at a committee from St. Fidelis was prominent architect, Frank Aischuler.

The committee was concerned about a dangerous sidewalk adjacent to the property at 2658 W. Division St.

The sidewalk, now almost disintegrated, has been in a state of disrepair for serveral years. It is in the path of small children going to school, elderly ladies going to church, and anyone wishing to shop at the supermarket adjacent to the walk. Recently a youngster fell on the sidewalk, striking her head on the pilasters; six stitches were required to close the wound. A young mother of six fell and was confined to crutches for six weeks, her ankle, which was broken, is still wrapped in bandages. A little girl of 10 fell and permanently injured her knee.

She will walk with a limp for the rest of her life.

Aroused by these events a committee comprised of four car loads of people met at St. Fidelis on Saturday, March 12. From there they proceeded to 200 W. Diversey Parkway, the residence of Rose Aischuler, the owner of the building.

Upon arriving the committee was told by the building man-

Figure 2: The Northwest Community Observer, March 23, 1966, p. 1.

Micro-Local Action: The Example of the Race Street Slum Building

> *Each organizer was assigned to go out in the neighborhood and just talk to people. What are the problems? And that's where we would find out about the dirty lots, or the slum houses or small things like that that we could use to mobilize. It was definitely an outreach kind of thing which an organizer would do… We can go out in the hood and talk to the people and find out what's bugging them and that would be the way of getting them involved in the neighborhood group and also developing new leadership.*
>
> *-- Organizer Bud Kanitz*[18]

Heverly, an early organizer in NCO, was looking for "problems" when a pastor told him that there was a deteriorating building on the 2100 block of Race Street near his church. Heverly went over to the building and began knocking on doors of residents who lived around it. "I went up and down that street and said, 'What's going on here?' They would say 'There's a problem there'" with a slum landlord. Heverly quickly invited people to a meeting in a resident's living room "and the place is jammed." For small campaigns like this, the organizers generally moved residents into action as soon as possible to maintain momentum. They first asked for a meeting of the owner "and he told us to go to Hell." At one point a small group of Race Street residents conducted a sit in in the office of the building inspector until he agreed to come view the building, where he was confronted by a crowd of residents and reporters and photographers from the Daily News. At another point the Race Street group sat in at a local bank and forced the bank president to turn over the name of the

[18] Heverly in discussion with author, January, 2013.

mortgage holder. The residents also took busses into the absentee landlord's neighborhood and started picketing his house. Eventually this pressure forced the landlord to fix up his house.[19]

Micro-local actions like these brought residents together around issues that they cared deeply about, issues that affected them on a daily basis. In the Race Street example this resulted in a coherent block club organization, but in most cases organizers just moved on to other local issues and problems.[20] As result, in NCO, there were constant micro conflicts going on all the time in many different areas, and organizers were constantly going around the neighborhood looking for problems that could be turned into immediate local issues for action. This could be as small as someone's child being bitten by a rat, local arson, dumping in a local vacant lot, a lack of garbage pickup, a stop sign, and more. The image from the NCO observer, above, indicates this diversity, with a story about large pickets of slumlords sharing space with a story about crumbling sidewalks.

A key goal of these many mini campaigns was to initiate residents into practices of organizing and to provide them with an experience of succeeding in a conflict with powerful people. (I am exploring the logic behind this process in more detail elsewhere.)

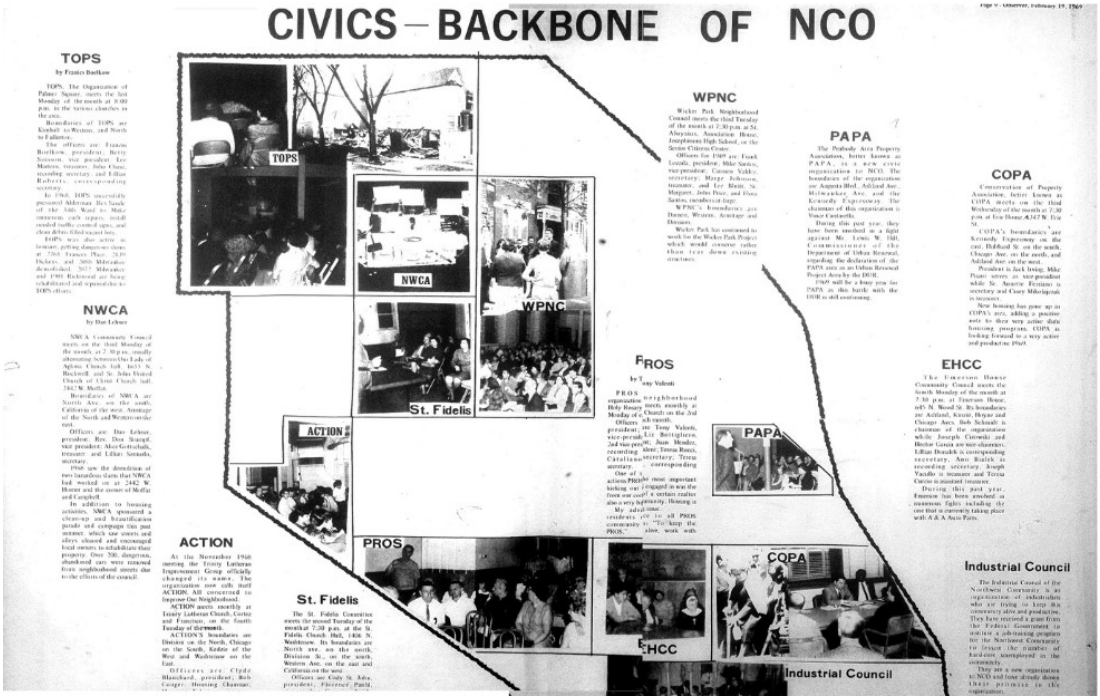

Figure 3: The Northwest Community Observer, Feb. 19, 1969, pp. 8-9.

[19] Heverly in discussion with author January, 2013; other information from IAF [NCO] Memos. This very rapid approach to action, by the way, is typical of neighborhood-based efforts like these. Organizations of organizations, like congregation-based groups, can afford to take their time planning issues and campaigns. Neighborhood groups, existing to some extent only when they are engaged in action, cannot afford long fallow periods without engagement, lest their members fade away and find other things to do with their time. This can lead to strategic conflicts between congregational and neighborhood groups (see Atlas, 2010).

[20] Interestingly, organizers generally reported that block clubs in NCO (and in other similar organizations, like the Organization for a Better Austin [OBA] or the APCC in Chatham) did not usually form durable organizing organizations, but the Race Street block club appears to have represented a long-term exception

The Civics

Much (but not all) of NCO was cut into "Civics" that encompassed defined multi-block areas. The Civics operated somewhat like independent organizing groups. They pursued their own campaigns and had their own leadership groups. Micro campaigns provided the context for training and identifying new leaders and this fed leaders and issues up into the civics, where the civics were able to take on larger issues—housing, for example. The door-knocking and the micro campaigns, Executive Director Eunice Letzing noted, were "how you found and developed new leaders." The Civics were anchored by key institutions in each area, usually a major church and or a settlement house. But while the leaders of these anchoring institutions might be important, and while key pastors, for example, could bring people together for major meetings or get people out for actions, the Civics were largely independent and usually not based in the anchoring institutions. As Letzing remembered, "we would go out and start knocking on doors…, literally just knock on every door on the block but also in combination with neighborhood institutions." While one church in her area was important, "a number of the leaders were not active in the churches at all."[21] The interaction between the neighborhood institutions and the Civics was reciprocal—each supported the other. The micro campaigns taking place continuously across the civics constantly brought new leadership and also new issues to inform the development of Civic-wide issue committees. Within the Civics, issues emerged that were larger than a group of local residents could solve—slum landlords operating across multiple blocks, challenges in the local public library or the local elementary school, and the like. Issues might start on the streets and move up to the Civic level, or filter down from the Civic leadership into the work of door-knocking organizers.

For example, while smaller groups in the Civic could pressure landlords about a particular building, Civic-wide committees had more power and capacity to pursue a range of properties owned by a particular slum landlord or to go after multiple landlords. Since a landlord might own buildings crossing multiple Civics, Civics were also often collaborating with each other pretty early on.

NCO as a Whole

Above the Civics was the full NCO organization. Like the Civics, NCO had organization-wide issue committees and were also running campaigns. Often the pattern would be that a micro campaign would surface an issue that would then move to the level of a Civics issue committee. The Civics committees would work on the aspects they could address within their own areas, and these actions would be constantly reported up to the officers of the wider organization. When it became clear—through dialogue with those from other civics on the NCO-wide issue committees and among organizers—that the problem transcended the capacity or area of a particular civic, the fight would escalate up into the NCO-wide committees. Organizers were generally assigned to a Civic (or to a Civic-sized area) while also having responsibility for an NCO-wide committee, often something arising out of campaigns that started in that organizer's Civic. For example, an issue with limited police patrols started in a micro-local campaign in a Civic, then was raised up to the level of the entire Civic, and then police presence became an issue for NCO as a whole.[22] The panic peddling issue, where landlords were trying to scare residents into selling their houses by spreading fear that African Americans were moving into the neighborhood began with a single micro campaign against

[21] Eunice Letzing in conversation with author October, 2014.
[22] Eunice Letzing in conversation with author, October, 2014.

a landlord in a particular area, then was taken on by the entire civic, and then panic peddling became an NCO-wide issue.[23] Residents often started as leaders only interested in concerns in their own backyards, but many leaders were then progressively drawn into concerns about the entire neighborhood.

While a Civic might sometimes end up going to a top official in the City, it was NCO as a whole which generally took on organization-wide issues. These included more comprehensive responses to panic peddling and real estate brokers who were threatening the neighborhood, conflicts around mortgages, fights about zoning for the entire area, efforts to co-design a new high school, and an early successful effort to plan and build an entire housing complex.

In terms of housing, for example, the central organization eventually "confronted the municipal attorney in charge of ordinance enforcement and compelled him to issue a summons to a landlord." They then brought the Building Commissioner to a meeting of the 15 NCO Civic housing committees where he agreed to collaborate more. In the early years, NCO dealt with code violations in hundreds of buildings and created a centralized training program so that numerous members could engage in their own building inspection and complaint filing. Gaudette reported that these trained members "are now witnesses for the…municipal attorney." Gaudette reported that "we've cut through six months work and the Building Department is happy. We've even served summons." Eventually, NCO "organized its [Civic] neighborhood housing groups into a Compliance Board" that most landlords attended. One NCO Executive Director, John Daley, reported that "most of the landlords 'abide by the Board's decisions, since they don't want to fight NCO's power.'" Landlords who didn't attend or agree to follow the Board's decisions found their homes picketed by NCO members (Levine 1967).

Urban renewal at the time was a code phrase for declaring sections of the city unrepairable (frequently an excuse to evict "undesirable" groups like African Americans), allowing entire neighborhoods to be torn down, opening space for more high-income development. NCO had been targeted for urban renewal prior to the founding of the organization (a key impetus for its original creation) and the organization as a whole fought urban renewal. NCO began holding their own separate urban renewal meetings where they "developed our own guidelines" which became "our own ten-page plan." The group then "hit [City] committee meetings that dealt with urban renewal to present our alternative to the city's plan." Using a wide range of tactics, Executive Director Shel Trapp noted that "we got the city to agree to leave much of the rest of the neighborhood untouched." (Trapp 2003: 37-39) Eventually Major Daley appointed a "Conservation Commission for the northwest section of the city." (Black 1965: 62). Out of 15 members, 11 were appointed from NCO, and, as a result, no zoning changes could be made without NCO approval.

Conclusion

NCO created a sophisticated organizational structure that engaged residents in the issues closest to and most important to them to activate and train them. It then provided multiple avenues for

[23] Bud Kanitz, in conversation with author, January, 2013. See Westgate and Vick-Westgate (2011). Housing issues of different kinds eventually moved through the development of collaborations between NCO and other Chicago Organizing groups (the Westside Coalition), to a Chicago-wide collection of organizations (the Metropolitan Area Housing Alliance [MAHA]), to alliances beyond the city, eventually leading to the creation of the National People's Action network that brought together (and helped create) organizations in cities across multiple states.

moving people up. NCO started with everyday residents without much involvement in their community, and some became "partial" leaders who might be recognized on their block. These leaders would sometimes develop into more "complete" leaders with the capacity to bring people together across a Civic or the entire organization (see Alinsky 1989 [1946]: 96). The organization combined a range of different approaches used by other organizational models. On the surface, it embodied components of the congregational approach, except that congregations were not the central members of the organization and often served more as locations for drawing people together and sources of pastors who could encourage people to show up. Another aspect was the way the organization built new sub-organizations from scratch. The Civics in the organization essentially operated as independent organizing groups, themselves, with their own leadership and issues and campaigns, anchored by key institutions. Within the Civics, even smaller organizations might emerge, like block clubs or other groups that could then participate in the yearly NCO congress or meet with the NCO Senate and pursue their own goals.

The entire NCO organization was constantly fed by the work happening at the lower levels. Larger committees could afford to take more time and engage in long-term challenges, confident that constant action was going on at multiple levels below them, actions that kept members engaged and that provided a constant stream of newly trained leaders. The micro-campaigns constantly informed the larger organization about what people were struggling with and cared about while training leaders to deal with a wide range of different (sometimes new) issues.

The organization was dependent on a large number of low-paid or even subsistence-stipended organizers who did an enormous amount of work knocking on doors and running multiple campaigns and different levels. Experienced volunteer leaders who had internalized the NCO organizing model increasingly acted in many ways as organizers themselves as the organization became increasingly mature and stable.

Different organizers have argued over the years that the time-intensive neighborhood organizing model is no longer feasible; that it was only possible in the unique context of the 1960s. However, it is an open question whether such a group could still operate, especially if it was as effective and powerful and engaging as NCO. Given the limited training necessary, could an organization attract sufficient rotating groups of interns? And, of course, ACORN continued to operate as a door knocking group for decades after congregational organizing groups, especially, had decided that such approaches were not very workable. Are there young (or retired) people hungry for change who would participate? Further, fundraising has become more sophisticated in recent years, with examples like DART, Iowa CCI, and ACORN collecting large amounts of money from dues and other strategies. While the vision of organizers as well-paid professionals embraced by congregational groups is likely not achievable for a large number of organizers in a neighborhood organizing group (nor was it ever attempted in ACORN or NCO), something in-between (a few well-paid experienced organizers and a larger group of largely subsistence volunteers committing for a year or so) might be possible.

NCO represented a somewhat unique structure (OBA, the CAPCC, and others have operated in similar ways [see Schutz 2020 and Seligman 2005]) that balanced the strengths and limitations of different sub-organizational structures, linking them together so that each component supported the others, generating the capacity for long-term sustainability (decades of existence), and building

power and educating members in different ways on multiple levels. This creation of interlocking substructures seems to have created a whole that was stronger than any of its individual parts. Organizers today could learn much from this example. They should consider how this model might inform their own work in communities today, potentially adapting these ideas to new realities.

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