

HOW WELFARE RECIPIENTS ARE BUILDING THEIR POWER AND CHANGING THE WELFARE SYSTEM

Community Voices Heard (CVH)
New York, NY

“There is nothing that beats the look of revelation on people’s faces when they realize they can do things to create their own power.”

Gail Aska, Co-Founder
Community Voices Heard

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SUMMARY: CVH is an organization of low-income people, predominately women on welfare, working to build power in New York City to improve their lives and those of their families and communities. CVH uses a multi-pronged strategy that includes public education, grass roots organizing, and leadership development; training low-income people about their rights, political education and direct-action issue campaigns. This story was completed in 2002 and is a historic perspective of the organization. The work of CVH today focuses on a broad range of issues that fall under what CVH calls "welfare activism" which includes education, training, jobs, housing, economic development and other community issues.

At the time this story was written, CVH was characterized as an organization that brings low-income people to the forefront of the debate over local and national welfare policy. Since that time, CVH has moved into a range of other issues.

Established during welfare reform in the early 1990’s, the organization used constituency-driven **direct action organizing, legal strategies, mass mobilization** and other means, in combination with **constant leadership development**. Their approach included the following practices:

- **Train Constituents to Run and Represent the Organization:** CVH has established explicit checks and balances among its members, staff and leaders to ensure that members influence the organization’s direction. They train members to be spokespersons and to meet directly with policy makers, sharing not just their personal stories but their policy recommendations as well.
- **Prove that Action Adds up to Result:** The organization regularly gets people out on the street, putting a face on their issues and confronting and challenging power directly. They fight to reshape policies, not just tinker with them, and they have won significant victories.
- **Partner with Other Organizations:** CVH works strategically with other groups in order to further their goals. One of CVH’s most successful strategic partnership has been with AFSCME DC37, NYC Largest municipal union, who CVH partnered with to replace NYC’s WEP program with a paid transitional jobs program.
- **Build Members’ Personal Empowerment:** Through educating low-income people about their rights, and focusing on winning real improvements for their lives, CVH fuels long-range, sustained action.

In the following case study, CVH staff, members and allies describe how the organization changes lives and impacts on public policy:

“I GOT THE TOOLS TO FIGHT FOR MYSELF”

Community Voices Heard

Writer: Jonathan Walters

Co-researchers: Gail Aska, Paul Getsos, LaDon James, Joan Minieri, Dianne Reese, and Tyletha Samuels (Award Recipients) and Jennifer Dodge (NYU/LCW)

Tyletha Samuels has a vivid memory as a child: of the frustration she experienced with her mother's welfare caseworker. "This woman had us coming and going," says Samuels. Years later, Samuels herself would be a single mother on welfare, still frustrated by a system that seemed more interested in enforcing rules than actually helping people. The outrage came again when Samuels, as a participant in New York City's new welfare to work program—called the Work Experience Program (WEP)—watched her supervisor threaten a fellow WEP worker with dismissal, and potential loss of benefits, for not meeting the office dress code. "The supervisor was very belittling," says Samuels. "They weren't working with this woman to help her change a little from where she was, they wanted her to comply."

But rather than stay frustrated, Samuels decided to take action. She'd seen a flyer in the homeless shelter, where she and her daughter were staying at the time, advertising a workshop on WEP workers' rights. It was being presented by Community Voices Heard (CVH). At the time, CVH was a fledgling organization created by and for welfare recipients, dedicated to educating those on public assistance to their rights, on the one hand; but also to helping welfare recipients find a voice in the larger legal, program and policy debates (which later became critical in the wake of the 1996 welfare reform). The meeting would transform Samuels from a powerless client to determined actor for social change. "I didn't know that speaking up for your rights could make changes in such a way that CVH was making them." In other words, speaking up could make real change. Samuels immediately became active in CVH. In doing so, she was testing an interesting proposition: Did an organization that billed itself as deriving its power from the voices of its members—and not on the technical expertise of a handful of key staff—really mean what it said? Could an organization made up of individuals who for so long had felt powerless over the policies impacting them actually become a political force to be reckoned with?

Humble beginnings

"We were a little corner office in the sky," says Gail Aska, a founding member of CVH, who was on public assistance at the time. Aska was one of a handful of welfare recipients who in the early nineties came together with a small group of social service advocates and community organizers to ask a simple enough question: who was actually and truly representing the interests of those most directly impacted by welfare reform?

Joan Minieri, one of the original co-founders, along with Aska, says the decision to go ahead and build Community Voices Heard was made based on a rather surprising discovery: that no such organization yet existed. "We ran around the city asking if anyone was doing this," says Minieri, "getting low income people involved. It became clear that nobody was." "We realized it was

time for an organization that really represented the minds and the thoughts of low-income people," says Aska, "of people on welfare." Aska and Minieri joined with Paul Getsos, who brought with him a background in mobilizing people to take direct action, along with extensive experience in electoral and legislative organizing. He recognized the importance of connecting with women on welfare to frame the issues and create the changes that needed to happen in welfare reform.

The different experiences and expertise of this trio has brought three critical strains of organizing philosophies into a powerful combination: constituency-driven organizing, leadership and organizational development, and mass mobilization. They used this expertise to build an organization that would truly rely on members for its direction and action, and that would groom members who had lived the issues to be the face and voice of action for the cause of welfare reform. These three strains are still evident in the work that they do today.

When CVH came into being in 1997, after a couple of years of hard work and organizing, it was clear to the principals involved that they had hit upon an idea worth growing, that a project aimed at helping inject the voices of women on welfare in the debate over welfare policy was a project destined to soar. Indeed, CVH quickly outgrew its cramped quarters and began building staff and a huge network of active members and partners. Starting out in shared quarters with the Hunger Action Network of New York State, CVH gradually picked up members, foundation support and a more ambitious outlook, and moved into quarters of its own, all the while hewing to the operating philosophy of bringing its members into the front ranks of leadership.

Leadership development

Developing leadership among its members is an ongoing job. "After years and years of suppression a lot of our members didn't feel they had any power or that they could generate any," says Aska. "And so one of the things we try to do is lift them up and show them what it is they can do that creates power." To do that, CVH actively grooms what it calls "leaders." These are members who have been involved with the organization for several years and who have a good deal of influence over the organization's direction. CVH has a core of about 50 such leaders out of about 5,000 members. These leaders balance the power of CVH's staff and board – which also include members – whose job it is to oversee its mission, administration, finance, personnel and final program approval. In other words, its structure is designed in such a way as to create very explicit checks and balances between the different structural positions. Staff are not the "star leaders;" members are the ones developed to be decision-makers, strategists, spokespeople, run press conferences, and meet with policy makers.

These practices – that have been polished at CVH – positioned the organization to respond forcefully in the flurry of advocacy action in the wake of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). CVH prepares its members to take on leadership development opportunities in such responses. Behind all of these experiences are extensive training workshops – often given by other members with some experience already under their belts. These trainings usually cover such topics as: political education, public speaking, base-building, building power, campaign strategy development, talking to legislators, and direct action. CVH also uses what they lightheartedly call "quick and dirty" training that typically involves a run down of the issue being addressed in a press conference and a briefing

on which members will be meeting and how they connect to power. These trainings keep new members informed and reinforce what participating members have already learned.

It's a profound shift, say CVH staff and members, from the typical approach. "We don't throw some 'expert' out there to frame the problem and suggest a solution and then have the token person on welfare come in and tell her horror story," says Aska. "We've broken that mold. When one of our members gives testimony, it's not just 'this is my horror story;' it's 'this is my horror story, this is the problem, and this is what we're going to have to do about it.'" The power in such testimony is that there is a clear connection between the member's story and the policy being discussed and debated. Part of the truth comes from the experiences of the people affected by the policy; this truth is reflected in their stories.

Direct action

Not only are CVH members the ones who represent the organization to the press, policy makers and community, they are also the vehicle for more direct action. One of CVH's key issues has been the city's "Work Experience Program," designed specifically to place welfare recipients in municipal jobs as a way to meet the work requirements under PRWORA. WEP jobs are widely considered to be of dubious value in helping people advance to better wage work, according to critics. Indeed, the coercive—almost punitive—nature of the WEP program had people wondering whether the city wasn't simply using it as a way to provide itself with cheap labor. But rather than join the clamor to tinker insignificantly with WEP, CVH fought to eliminate the program entirely, and replace it with real jobs with real training opportunities and possibilities for advancement.

And so joining with other groups interested in ending WEP, such as the National Employment Law Project (NELP) which uses the courts to advocate for workers—a number of CVH members stepped forward as plaintiffs to challenge how the WEP program was being run. This effort included filing suit around the health and safety of park sanitation workers. "In each instance," says an official of NELP, "CVH members themselves help us shape the case. They play a leading role."

CVH's involvement with NELP has helped to get people involved in changing the system – the essence of what it means to engage people in direct action and creating a constituency for larger change. But court cases take a while to play out, notes this official, and they are only one path to change. "It's very satisfying as a lawyer to work with a group that really understands that legal action is just one way of addressing a problem and that to really get the city to do what it's supposed to do takes activity outside the courtroom." "At CVH there's a real understanding of the need for pressure, for mass action, legal action, public relations, the whole nine yards," says a leader of Jobs With Justice, a coalition of groups that advocates for living wage jobs and that routinely joins forces with CVH on key issues. "They understand the need to get out on the street and put a face on the issue. There are a number of organizations that do that, but the one thing that usually goes begging is actual member involvement."

CVH has also partnered with NELP on other projects. Board members agreed to invite NELP to provide a legal clinic for members to raise individual awareness of personal rights, but also to create the space for members to recognize their shared interest in creating system wide change – beyond resolving individual problems. Developing this collective interest adds power to such broader initiatives as the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support, an effort in which CHV is a partner, that fights broadly for living-wage jobs instead of workfare, and that monitors legislative action related to welfare reform. It's due to such individual and collective consciousness-raising that CVH was able to mobilize a large, vocal and articulate response to legislative proposals in the case of reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. "We're not just about a vocal membership voicing their views in large public groups," says Minieri. "There is a deeper process that leads up to these actions, a process that is at the heart of what CVH does."

Personal power

Ultimately, though, it is CVH's insistence on giving members the tools to act themselves that gives the group its remarkable power base.

Diane Reese, a seven-year CVH member, first got active herself when in the wake of welfare reform she was told she had to quit school and go to work. Just short of the credits she needed to get her nursing degree, Reese didn't think the policy made any sense. After a session at a CVH legal clinic, Reese says she went back to her caseworker and told her she knew her rights and that school could be considered "work experience" under New York State welfare policies. Reese was allowed to stay in school and finish up her degree while maintaining her benefits. "That felt good. I had the tools from CVH that I needed to fight for myself."

Inspiring individuals to that sort of action—in their own interest and in the interest of the larger cause—says Gail Aska, is what CVH is all about. "There is nothing that beats that look of revelation on people's faces when they realize they can do things to create their own power. And then you see them doing something like talking to a legislator as an equal. I don't think there's anything more beautiful than that."

In fact, if frustration with larger policies is the spark that motivates leaders to join with CVH, it is results—winning—that provide the real fuel for long-range, sustained action. Whether on discrete issues like questioning specific rules and policies, or larger issues, like social policy nationally, CVH continues to prove to its members that action frequently adds up to results. In fact one of the key CVH initiatives to date has been to push the city to replace the useless WEP program with paid jobs. That effort resulted in the creation of the New York City Transitional Jobs Program, which was designed to create 7,500 transitional jobs. Advocates have had to continue battling to get it funded.

The personal and collective power that people develop with the gains that they make at CVH will certainly be put to the test, however. As CVH continues to work at the city and state level to ensure those on welfare are treated fairly, it will clearly be turning its attention to other national issues—even global issues. "Our members—our leaders—want to be part of a national movement and even an international movement," says Getsos. "They're saying, 'We've got to be there. These are people making the decisions on the issues that impact us and if we're not at the table pushing, who else is going to be?'"

As CVH looks to the future, it will continue to pursue a policy of level-headed strategic planning through shared leadership. But whatever direction it takes, CVH is sure that it will continue to be most relevant to those it serves because the organization takes much of its direction from its leaders. And in pursuing a new kind of organization that turns grassroots experience into sophisticated, effective action, CVH has proved consistently that there is no shortage of people who, given the opportunity and a little lift, are willing to step up and be heard, individually and collectively.

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