

Transformative Philanthropy

Supporting Institution-Based Community Organizing

By Molly Schultz Hafid and Kathy Partridge

The cinder block church, in the shadows of the freeway and the city's new, towering sports arena, was an anchor in this poorest part of town. On a site visit as program officer of the Needmor Fund, Kathy listened to the earnest visions of the pastor and gathered residents – for fair city services, better school funding and safety. This was in the 1990s, and the organization was rather typical of the community organizing of the day – neighborhood-based and addressing city-level issues. But these leaders, and their organizer, also shared visions for expanding to win important reforms at the state level, and even beyond. They got the grant – general support, renewable for four years. Now, just over a decade later, this organization is not only powerful at a state level, but influences Congress and the White House on health care and immigration, and was a key player in voter turnout. Expanded more than tenfold, with increased racial, religious and geographic diversity, and an impressive track record on the issues, a new name reflects its statewide organizing. Kathy considers that initial grant to be among the most effective actions of her philanthropic career.

As long-time funders of community organizing and movement-building, Interfaith Funders knows that institution-based community organizations (IBCO) like this are transformative – person-by-person and community by community. Interfaith Funders is an affinity group of secular and faith-based funders, and over the last two years we have worked with academic researchers to conduct a comprehensive census of IBCOs. The census builds on the baseline data collected in 1999 and provides us with the rare opportunity to look back and measure the real changes in this field.

What we found through our State of the Field project demonstrates the value of funding multi-issue, multi-constituency community organizing, as well as the merits of general operating support and multi-year funding. Below are observations from our *Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Community Organizing* report about the structure and approach of institution-based community organizing, how it has expanded over

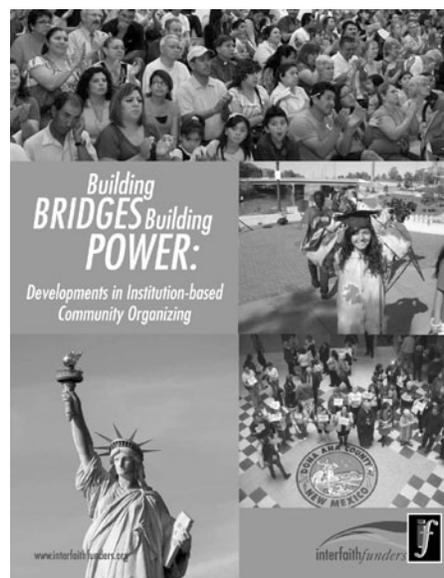
the past decade, the current funding of the field, and some recommendations for philanthropy.

ORGANIZING INSTITUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

Over the last decade, we have seen an increasingly polarized political discourse that often uses the most extreme elements from different religious

traditions to weigh in on crucial public policy questions of our time. These extreme voices have a distorting influence on the social concerns many of us care about. The groups we studied are the antidote. IBCOs are essential for tapping into a crossroad in American civic and political life. They tend to be diverse groups of institutions coming together, powered by volunteer energy and led by democratic principles to learn about community needs, identify policy solutions and advocate for meaningful change.

Institution-based community organizing is a form of organizing pioneered by Saul Alinsky and is one based in community institutions such as schools, houses of worship, unions and social service organizations. IBCOs are now found in 40 states, comprised of more than 4,500 institutions that collectively represent more than 5 million Americans. Most are locally-based nonprofit organizations, the majority affiliated with networks, the largest being the Industrial Areas Foundation,



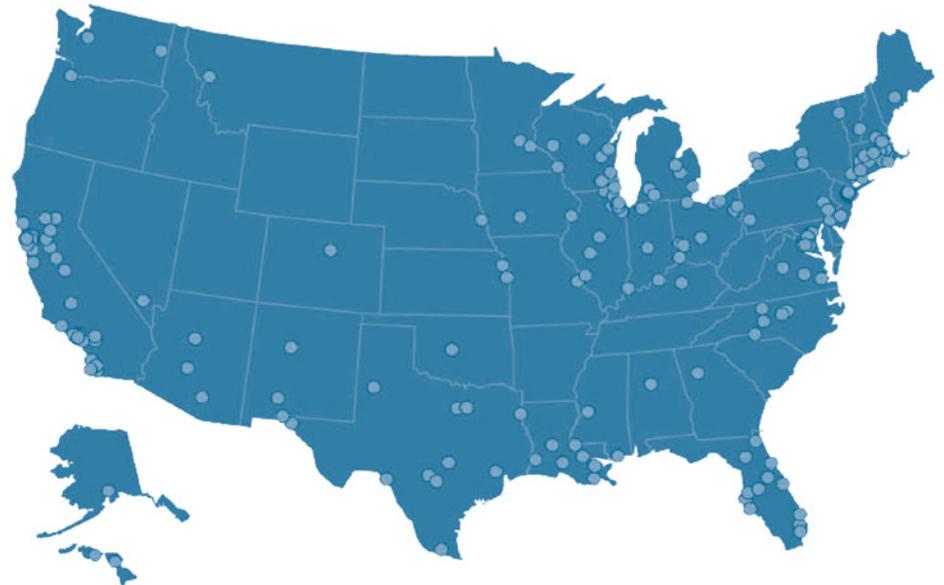
PICO National Network, Direct Action & Research Training Center and Gama-liel Foundation (Figure 1: U.S. Map).

The nearly 200 IBCOs seek to build democratic participation and improve social conditions in low-income and working-class communities. They bolster public life by identifying leaders and developing them into effective advocates for their communities. Employing a wide range of strategies, they influence public and private decision-makers to influence a multi-issue agenda such as poverty and economic inequality, education, health care, immigration, housing, criminal justice and employment.

IBCOs engage a diverse cross-section of community members. Some of the most notable axes of engagement are:

- **Race and Ethnicity:** The membership, staff and leadership of IBCOs are representative of the communities they serve. People of color are engaged at levels that meet or exceed (in the case of African American involvement, by double) their percentage in the population. The majority of leaders (staff and volunteer) are people of color. And increasingly, explicit discussion of racial justice occurs within these cross-racial ties.
- **Socioeconomic:** Because IBCOs are composed of schools, houses of worship, unions and local service institutions, their membership and leadership reflect the broadest range of economic backgrounds within a community.
- **Immigration:** More than half of the IBCOs surveyed are working on comprehensive immigration reform, two-thirds of these at the national level. This is noteworthy because immigrant institutions (largely churches) make up only one-seventh of the overall IBCO membership. However, the large proportion

FIGURE 1: Institution-Based Community Organizing in 2011



Map credit: *Interfaith Funders*

of faith communities involved in IBCO helps to bring in a diverse set of stakeholders based on their faith teachings.

- **Religion:** IBCOs bring together people across religious barriers including Muslim, evangelical Christian, Jewish and other faith communities, as well as secular institutions. Catholic, Protestant and historic African American denominations undergird the diversity of the organizations. This allows diverse faith institutions to work on community issues of shared concern across religious differences.

DYNAMIC EXPANSION IN SCALE AND IMPACT

IBCOs today are generating valuable social capital by bridging these divides. Over the 10 years studied in our census, we found three noteworthy forms of expansion:

- IBCOs are in more than 40 states (up from 33 in 1999).
- In 1999, they worked mostly at the local level. They have since leveraged their membership in national

networks to work at state, regional and national levels.

- More than three-fifths of IBCOs are working with other local, state and national partners on significant campaigns to influence state and national policymaking, nearly all of these beyond their formal network affiliation. This is a major shift from the previous survey in which fewer than one-fifth indicated collaboration beyond the local arena.

Taken together, these three forms of expansion are evidence of a new capacity for this field that links vigorous local organizing to a strong presence in higher-level political arenas, which translates into meaningful community change. For example:

- **Immigration:** Grassroots lobbying and media campaigns for comprehensive immigration reform complement the strong advocacy of national organizations, whose efforts are bolstered by the in-district public actions by local IBCOs. At the same time, rights for undocumented immigrants have been

advanced locally (such as stopping police impoundment of vehicles) and through work in coalitions at state levels (helping pass “DREAM” acts in California, Illinois and Colorado).

- **Wages:** IBCOs pioneered the living wage ordinance model, and now work regularly at state levels against governors’ budget cuts in education, safety and social services. Nationally, IBCOs work in coalition to strengthen financial reform legislation.
- **Health Care:** Proud IBCO leaders, including children, witnessed President Obama’s signing of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) authorization (after two earlier presidential vetoes) and went on to play a key role in the coalition for the Affordable Care Act. This national work built on local commitment to health care access, such as winning passage for health clinics in targeted poor communities where there was overuse of emergency rooms.

ORGANIZING MONEY

IBCOs have an impact that is far greater than their budgets and staff would suggest. Since 1999, the median annual budget for IBCOs has increased from \$150,000 to \$175,000, but adjusted for inflation, this represents a net decline of 12.5 percent in effective revenue for the average IBCO.

There has been a diversification of funding from largely denominational support to recognition by secular foundations that this work is an important part of their overall portfolios. Over the past 10 years, the percentage of support for IBCOs from secular funders has increased from 30 percent to 39 percent.

The increasing recognition by secular funders enables the current impact and future potential of this

field. The aggregate funding of the local IBCO organizations surveyed was \$5 million in 2011, up from \$3 million in 1999.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

It is rare in our field to have baseline data for the issue areas or fields we are looking to support. One of the most valuable findings from our census is that multi-year, general support of community-based groups has a measurable impact. We encourage you to check out your local IBCO and see if it is working on an issue of interest to your institution.

Here are a few other lessons learned from our long-term support of this field:

1. **Like any other field, this is one with its own jargon, methodology and institutional histories.** Interfaith Funders and the State of the Field project are a great place to start for an overview. Our census is a flexible tool that can be accessed around many questions you might have about demographics and issues.
2. **The potential of this field is huge and it is certain to overlap with your funding interests.** New IBCOs are being built every month and have the potential to work in any town in the country.
3. **Faith-based networks vary in their approaches to organizing.** If you are planning to fund the work at a local or state level, be sure to assess each individual affiliate as a stand-alone organization. Ask them which network they are affiliated with and reach out to the national staff of that network to learn more about long-term plans for work on your issue or specific geographic area.
4. **If you have significant investments in several states, or you discover you have a cluster of faith-based**

grantees, consider supporting for one or more of the national networks. They provide important recruitment, training, national strategy and other helpful services to their affiliates.

5. **IBCOs are fundamentally democratic organizations made up of volunteers with limited staff support.** The amount of work they accomplish can be remarkable and because they are human, there can also be down periods. If you have met a group and weren’t that impressed, don’t be afraid to take another look. If you have funded a group that was amazing and is lagging a bit, talk to its leaders about their plans to rebuild and try to be patient with them as they do.
6. **If you aren’t sure where to start, feel free to be in touch with Interfaith Funders and our members.** We might be able to help you get specific ideas of groups to fund – and we can definitely help you with the lay of the land and put you in touch with people in the field. ■

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Notes

1. Richard L. Wood, Brad Fulton and Kathryn Partridge, *Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Community Organizing* (Longmont, CO: Interfaith Funders, 2013), www.interfaithfunders.org.
2. Rarely in American history have voluntary associations incorporated such a high proportion of citizens: those that have done so have profoundly shaped American society in challenging times.