

2022 Event Series

Actualizing Equity in Community Organizing

The COVID 19 pandemic has caused shifts in the way we organize and advocate for systems and policy change. To protect our collective health while meeting the urgency of the moment, we had to adjust our strategies and tactics to mobilize our communities and bring both new and long-standing demands to institutions of power. As we continue to navigate the ongoing pandemic, what challenges have we faced and what opportunities have we embraced? At our April 2022 Actualizing Equity event we discussed this question with Monica Bravo and Myisha Holley from West Side Community Organization; Alex Burns and José Antonio Zayas Cabán from Our Streets Minneapolis; and Kara Lallman from HOME Line.

How has the pandemic impacted you, your community & your organizing?

Exposed stark racial and economic divisions, and exploitative practices

Shifted efforts to direct service, in addition to systems change work

Increased reliance on technology and attention to accessibility

Refocused stakeholders on the urgency of high-impact outcomes in our work

Caused a slow down to address self and community care

Clarified personal and movement priorities and goals nationally and locally

Expanded capacity for disruption and willingness to take risks

Broadened imaginations to embrace solutions that truly meet community needs

Strategies & Tactics



Contextualizing current challenges:

The pandemic enhanced but did not create longstanding injustices. Organizers addressed the crisis by working to both meet immediate community needs around food, housing and health and also put those challenges in the wider context of structural racism and the need for policy change. For instance, WSCO made sure those accessing rental assistance were also aware of the rent stabilization campaign and Our Streets Minneapolis made sure the Bring Back 6th campaign was rooted in an understanding of the past existence and intentional destruction of a thriving Black business corridor.



Leading bold and timely campaigns:

The pandemic made even more clear the urgency for transformative rather than incremental systems change. And movements seized the moment. For instance, organizers in St. Paul made a bold leap to mobilize community and win the nation's strongest rent stabilization policy, and, in Minneapolis, transportation advocates launched a campaign that doesn't attempt to mitigate harm but fully remove the I-94 interstate through St. Paul and Minneapolis.



Connecting online in impactful ways:

The pandemic shook or further undermined community faith in the social systems that are supposed to take care of us. Organizers worked to create clear ways for community to advocate directly to relevant power brokers for feasible and timely change. For instance, Our Streets Minneapolis created online accountability forums for the Bring Back 6th campaign to connect residents to state transportation staff with specific and actionable demands.



Expanding limited staff capacity:

The pandemic increased the volume of asks from and needs of community across a range of issues. For instance, the number of renters reaching out to HOME Line skyrocketed without a commensurate rise in staff capacity. To address this, the organization focused on creating online tools — from public webinars to app-based, one-to-one and group communications — and training up individual leaders who could take a central role organizing in their buildings.



Operationalizing self care:

The pandemic exposed the toll it can take on organizers to constantly triage the symptoms of injustice rather than address the source of the harm. To make self-care part of the organization's culture, HOME Line instituted wellness hours, where organizers can collectively process and support each other, while, at WSCO, staff create a self-care plan that is tracked like any other part of their workplan.



Integrating disability justice:

The pandemic has created new and likely lasting limitations for many residents, making accessibility and simply slowing down critical to organizing. From physical health barriers created by COVID to deeper recognition of the gaps in mental health care, organizers have begun to more fully integrate disability justice in their outreach approaches and campaign goals. This means, for instance, not only advocating for street designs that are accessible and inviting for all abilities, but replacing transit police with ambassadors to support rather than punish riders experiencing mental health crises.