

BRIEF REPORTS

Community-Led Solutions: How Local Organizing Committees Drive Change for Housing and Health Equity in California's Central Valley

Rebecca L. Martinez, MPH¹, David Frausto², Juan Zavala-Sandoval², Anabel Serna³, Claudia G. Corchado², Alexandra Alvarado⁴, Janine Nkosi, Ph.D⁴, Irene Yen, Ph.D, MPH⁵

¹ HOPE Lab, UC Merced, ² Cultiva Central Valley, ³ Cultiva la Salud, ⁴ Faith in the Valley, ⁵ UC Merced

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In this research brief, we describe how the HOPE Lab (UC Merced), Faith in the Valley (Fresno), and Cultiva Central Valley (Merced) are collaborating to address housing-related disparities within California's culturally diverse Central Valley. Focused on the transformative role of Local Organizing Committees (LOCs), our research employs an anti-racist research praxis to actively engage residents, enhance leadership capacity, and foster communication between residents and elected officials. Drawing on several theory-of-change statements and the practical insights gained from "field experts" carrying out ongoing initiatives, this report explores the positive impact of LOCs on meaningful community involvement, empowerment, engagement, accountability, and policy changes.

Introduction

In California's Central Valley, anti-racist research practices are crucial in confronting challenges posed by capitalism, infrastructure failures, racist housing policies, and lack of enforcement regarding landlord violations (Robinson, 2021).

A collaborative effort between UC Merced, Faith in the Valley (Fresno), and Cultiva Central Valley (Merced) is working to address these concerns and specifically promote housing and health equity. The approach involves one-on-one conversations with residents, interactions with field experts, the formation of resident-led local organizing committees (LOCs), and the identification of policy options to enhance access to stable housing.

The establishment of LOCs within these communities signifies a departure from traditional top-down approaches to problem solving, instead opting for inclusive models of community engagement. By fostering collaboration between academic institutions, grassroots organizations, and residents, the initiative not only empowers communities but also generates insights that are deeply rooted in local contexts.

Background

In recent years, the Central Valley has witnessed a rise in housing costs, rendering affordability a distant dream for many residents. Despite efforts by local officials to address the housing crisis, existing policy interventions

have yielded limited success. A significant portion of Fresno's population remains rent-burdened, with individuals allocating more than 30% of their income to housing expenses (Policy Link, 2017). Moreover, access to public housing remains elusive for many, as evidenced by the low approval rates and expiration of Housing Choice Vouchers before suitable housing can be secured (Montalvo, 2022; Tobias, 2019). The failure of these policies underscores the urgent need for innovative approaches that address the structural inequities underpinning the housing crisis.

In response, community organizers and advocates have championed a reparative and proactive approach grounded in the Homes Guarantee Framework. This framework seeks to redress historical injustices and promote sustainable housing solutions through restorative justice and community empowerment (Garibay & Calix, 2021; Hernandez, 2022). Central to this approach is the concept of deep learning, storytelling, and community organizing, drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). Initiatives such as Local Organizing Committees (LOCs) serve as catalysts for collective action, providing residents a platform to share their experiences, advocate for policy change, and hold elected officials accountable (Garibay & Calix, 2021).

Addressing racist housing policies requires research that identifies discriminatory practices while also actively working to dismantle them. We gain insights from *Advancing Racial Justice Research in Architecture, Urban Planning, and Allied Fields*, a study that highlights challenges and opportunities in conducting anti-racist research and emphasizes the need for critical engagement with racial justice frameworks and the importance of centering marginalized communities in research and decision-making processes (Williams et al., 2022).

Community-based participatory research amplifies community voices and leads to more informed and equitable policy recommendations (Boston et al., 2023). Similarly, confronting challenges centered on housing necessitates a research approach that prioritizes community engagement. The success of these grassroots efforts underscores the transformative potential of community-driven solutions in addressing the housing crisis. By elevating the voices of impacted communities and fostering collaborative partnerships between residents, organizers, and policymakers, there is an opportunity to create more equitable and sustainable housing outcomes in the Central Valley.

Objectives

In the pursuit of confronting the multifaceted challenges, our anti-racist approach is grounded in the establishment of Local Organizing Committees (LOCs). LOCs drive positive transformations within local communities and unravel persistent causal pathways and mechanisms of oppression. We began with articulating several theory-of-change statements by applying our collective LOC and related experiences to a project with Fresno County public housing residents.

We used the following theory of change statements:

1. **If** we actively engage residents in the formation and operation of LOCs, **then** we expect to see increased resident involvement and ownership in addressing housing issues and advocating for change.
2. **If** we provide support, resources, and training to enhance the leadership capacity of LOC members, **then** we predict an increase in the effectiveness of the LOCs in advocating for residents' needs and achieving their goals.
3. **If** the LOCs facilitate regular communication (in resident's native language) and collaboration between residents and housing authorities and/or elected officials, **then** we anticipate improved responsiveness and accountability from them, leading to positive changes in housing policies and maintenance.

Creating a Local Organizing Committee

Collectively, our team has multiple years of experience supporting the formation of LOCs. Here we provide an overview of how we create them, with the caveat that every situation has specific circumstances and histories. Where possible, we gesture to those variations.

Local Organizing Committees serve as dynamic and grassroots collectives, bringing together individuals who share a purpose to address and rectify local issues, advocate for transformative change, and foster community empowerment. Typically formed by 3–5 committed community members, LOCs harness the strengths of collaboration, personal experiences, and community engagement to catalyze positive impact. The timeframe for initiating an LOC varies based on the complexity of the issues being addressed and the community's readiness for collective action. It may take weeks or months to solidify the committee, establish goals, and begin the implementation of initiatives.

Members of an LOC take on various roles following a governance structure, where members may choose a traditional hierarchical setup (e.g., President, Vice President, etc.) or they may opt for a shared consensus approach where each member “steps up and steps back,” rotating roles for each meeting. These may include a coordinator to facilitate meetings, a communicator to engage with the broader community, and individuals focused on specific aspects of the project or advocacy efforts. Collaboratively, these roles contribute to the effective functioning of the LOC.

Establishing trust and fostering open communication channels are foundational elements of forming an LOC. By acknowledging the diverse perspectives and experiences within the community, LOCs create an inclusive space where every voice is valued, thereby strengthening community cohesion and solidarity.

In LOCs, residents work together to recognize and tackle housing-related issues in their neighborhoods. By engaging with the community, making plans, and advocating for change, LOCs impact policies, address systemic

problems, and bring about positive changes within their communities. Residents play key roles in the LOCs to ensure community voices are respected and heard.

Drawing inspiration from initiatives like those supported by Funders for Housing and Opportunity (FHO), LOCs may engage in similar strategies to empower their community and advocate for housing justice. The strategies include hosting “Know Your Rights” workshops, designed to empower residents with crucial information for navigating housing options and legal processes. Storytelling and art initiatives are also utilized to highlight housing challenges and advocate for racial justice (De la Torre, 2022).

Through collective action and community empowerment, LOCs strive to address housing inequities and advocate for systemic change. The impact of an LOC extends beyond its size, as it becomes a conduit for community voices and a driving force for change. By adopting these strategies, LOCs aim to contribute to significant policy advancements at the local level, mirroring the impact seen in initiatives such as St. Paul, Minnesota’s residential rent stabilization ordinance (De la Torre, 2022). In essence, an LOC embodies the principle that collective action, even in a small group, can lead to meaningful and sustainable change within a community. The commitment, dedication, and shared vision of its members propel the LOC toward achieving its goals, making it a strong force for positive transformation at the grassroots level.

Methodology

Our methodology prioritizes community involvement emphasizing participation, leadership development, and facilitating communication between residents and elected representatives. This strategy unfolds through the following actions:

1. Establishment of Local Organizing Committees (LOCs)

We support and facilitate the formation of LOCs in targeted communities, departing from the traditional top-down approaches to problem solving. These committees unite individuals with a shared goal of addressing issues advocating for changes and empowering the community. LOC members are residents focused on addressing housing challenges within their neighborhoods.

2. Statements on Theory of Change

With the residents, we develop theory of change statements to guide our efforts within the LOC spaces. These statements act as blueprints for reaching objectives and results. For instance, we lay out expectations for increasing engagement and ownership in addressing housing issues, as well as boost leadership skills among LOC members and enhance communication and collaboration between residents and housing authorities or elected officials.

3. Community Empowerment

We actively connect with residents through conversations, community gatherings, and initiatives led by residents themselves. These engagements offer residents opportunities to share their stories, express their concerns, and play a role in decision-making processes. Moreover, we offer support, resources, and trainings to strengthen the leadership abilities of LOC members, empowering them to advocate for their needs.

4. **Reflection**

We record insights, challenges, and strategies discussed during our team meetings using audio and video recordings. These recordings are transcribed using Otter AI to ensure no important details are overlooked. Reflecting on these interactions helps us pinpoint strengths, areas needing improvement, and strategies for overcoming obstacles in our endeavors.

Through this community-focused approach, our goal is to empower residents and promote collaboration between institutions, grassroots organizations, and residents while generating insights deeply rooted in local contexts.

LOCs in Action

We present three case studies of our work featuring LOCs in the Central Valley addressing housing justice. They demonstrate different LOC dynamics and processes but reflect the same theories of change and commitment to community engagement.

Case Study 1

When public housing becomes privatized, it often results in increased rental prices, reduced affordability, and the displacement of low-income residents (Yavo-Ayalon, 2022). This was the

situation for a resident who reached out for assistance after experiencing a change in property management.

To start engaging with the community and strengthen relationships, the concerned resident, Faith in the Valley, and the HOPE Lab arranged an event called “Coffee, Conchas and Conversations.” Armed with coffee and pan dulce (sweet bread) they set up a small get-together under the community gazebo, which eventually became the LOC meeting space. It was important to emphasize that this gathering was created and hosted by residents and not affiliated with property management.

At the gathering, residents expressed concerns regarding withheld leases, indicating that management failed to provide tenants with copies, deteriorating conditions, expensive charges for minor repairs, broken appliances, neglected amenities, and compromised security measures.

These discussions gave residents a platform to voice their concerns and offered us valuable insights into community challenges. The stories were captured via Google Forms along with the resident's information.

After the event, the data shared by residents was compiled to create a community poster highlighting shared concerns. This visual aid represented the community's voice and was used in subsequent meetings as a reference point for discussions and advocacy work.

Engaging with the community played a large role in spreading awareness about the gatherings. A team of resident canvassers was equipped with flyers and canvassed the property, encouraging neighbors to join us at our meeting spot. This grassroots outreach initiative provided a platform for locals to voice their experiences and join in the shared discussion. Due to growing participation, bi-weekly meeting spaces initially organized by the LOC eventually transitioned to weekly gatherings. (The frequency and meeting times for LOC spaces are unique to each community's schedules and depend on the urgency of the situation.)

In preparation for the weekly gatherings, residents convened via Zoom to coordinate efforts and provide updates on property management and lease statuses. The "prep meetings" were led by the "core group" of residents and served as a platform to strategize on addressing ongoing issues, review documents such as leases and property management correspondence, and collectively plan their approach in the upcoming LOC space. Each member embodied various roles within the group; some served as coordinators, facilitating discussions, others as communicators engaging with the broader community, and some focusing on specific aspects of advocacy or project management. Collaboratively, these roles contributed to the effective functioning of the LOC, ensuring that residents' voices were heard and their concerns were addressed. This collaborative effort underscores the effectiveness of the LOC in fostering community engagement and ensuring that residents' voices are not only heard but that actions are taken as a result.

As the LOC continued, the significance of nurturing community and unity was highlighted. Potluck-style gatherings became a feature of the meetings, enabling neighbors to bond over dishes and stories. This LOC space expressed the significance of nurturing a sense of community and unity through food and conversation.

The meetings also included "Housing 101" workshops, requested by the residents, to learn more about the Fresno housing market's history — a crucial step in acknowledging historical factors influencing their communities. These educational sessions within the LOC

align with our commitment to enhancing residents' leadership capacity and knowledge base, as outlined in our theory of change. Together, the residents navigated the challenges of accessing their leases, confronted mistreatment from property management, and advocated for their tenant

rights. This grassroots engagement within the LOC echoes our theory of change, which emphasizes the active involvement of community members in addressing housing issues and advocating for change.

Furthermore, the intentional focus on bringing restorative peace and healing to the community was a significant LOC component. Facilitating healing circle sessions provided the community with a dedicated space for reflection, restoration, and trust. In this space, residents were able to share their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in an atmosphere of mutual support. This emphasis on healing and community building within the LOC echoes our vision of creating spaces that nurture supportive relationships and foster community well-being, as articulated in our theory of change.

The holistic approach adopted by the LOC, encompassing community outreach, educational sessions, and healing circles, underscores the transformative potential of community-led initiatives in fostering resilience and solidarity. As we continue to champion the principles of community empowerment and social justice, this case study serves as a testament to the enduring impact of collective action in creating more equitable and sustainable housing outcomes for all residents.

Case Study 2

An apartment complex in Merced became a focal point of community resilience and advocacy as residents faced unprecedented challenges following an electrical fire. Multiple families were threatened with eviction due to receiving a “Notice to Quit” — anyone who refused would be met with law enforcement. Feeling backed against the wall, residents reached out to Faith in the Valley (Merced) for support and guidance. Residents sought a meeting space for the complex that was away from the building, where they could discuss how they’d protect themselves from eviction and keep their homes.

The formation of the LOC provided residents with a safe and supportive space to meet, share experiences, and strategize for collective advocacy. This collaborative endeavor aimed to address both immediate challenges and advocate for long-term systemic changes, aligning with the theory of change emphasizing community involvement in addressing housing issues and advocating for change.

Gathering family-style with food and conversations, residents fostered connections and built solidarity within the community. Some members took on active roles in engaging with decision makers, speaking with the district attorney, city council, board of supervisors, and

assembly members. They even traveled to the state capitol to lobby for fair housing laws, such as SB567, amplifying their voices on wider platforms and advancing their collective interests.

Within the LOC, residents took on different roles, each tasked with specific responsibilities to ensure the committee’s smooth operation. Some served as timekeepers for meetings, ensuring discussions remained focused

and productive. Others took on responsibilities such as creating agendas and conducting research to inform advocacy efforts. This division of labor allowed for

efficient coordination and ensured that all aspects of the advocacy campaign were adequately addressed.

Inspired by the collaborative environment fostered by the LOC, residents engaged in storytelling workshops. Through these sessions, they honed their narratives into powerful three-minute stories, enabling them to amplify their voices and collectively assert their demands for accountability. These narratives served as powerful tools for mobilizing support and engaging with policymakers and stakeholders. By sharing their stories with senators, local elected officials, and community organizations, residents amplified their voices and garnered broader support for their cause.

Through concerted efforts, residents secured temporary relief for the entire complex, including housing accommodations, financial assistance, and legal aid. This multifaceted approach underscored the efficacy of community-driven advocacy in fostering tangible support and systemic change. The success of the advocacy efforts reinforced the theory of change underlying the LOC approach, demonstrating the transformative potential of grassroots organizing in addressing housing injustices and advancing community interests.

Case Study 3

On January 10, 2023, Planada — an unincorporated city nine miles east of Merced — faced an unexpected challenge when a levee breach resulted in record-breaking flooding (Lin, 2023). Residents were ordered to evacuate and carry whatever they could salvage on their backs (Lin, 2023). After the storm, hundreds of residents returned to uninhabitable homes.

Cultiva Central Valley (CCV), formerly known as Cultiva La Salud of Merced was one of the first organizations in Planada to begin assisting with disaster recovery efforts. Once roadways were safe, the CCV team drove to Planada and began to offer direct assistance to residents and support to other organizations in the relief efforts.

The CCV team is comprised of staff and more than 30 Promotoras throughout Merced County, all who are volunteers deeply rooted in their local communities. (Promotoras, who embody the principles of an LOC, played a crucial role in responding to the crisis, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of grassroots initiatives in times of adversity. Promotoras previously attended intensive trainings focused on civic engagement and understanding government policy and processes. Since their participation in the course, they are closely connected to CCV, each other, and their local communities. Promotoras also regularly connect neighbors and friends to each other, advocate, and organize — in other words, they are essentially an LOC.)

Throughout the flood recovery process, CCV staff and Promotoras took on a pivotal role in providing direct support and gathering essential data required for the allocation of funding to flood victims — some of the Promotora volunteers were victims of the flooding themselves. These efforts were manifested through hosting community events, providing recovery supplies and food in collaboration with World Central Kitchen, assisting with donations, and utilizing social media and direct engagement to obtain the data necessary to identify folks in need. (This data collection effort aligns with the theory of change underlying LOCs, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and data-driven advocacy in addressing immediate needs and advocating for long-term solutions).

Their efforts were instrumental not only in securing assistance for those directly affected by the disaster but also in advocating for recovery funds specifically for farmworkers, many of whom were unable to work due to the flooding and whose homes were deeply impacted. They continued their advocacy by pushing for more daily support and donations for Planada's struggling residents, providing weekly recommendations to Merced County Supervisor Rodrigo Espinosa, and actively participating in City Council and Merced Multi-jurisdictional Housing Element meetings. In order to amplify community voices, CCV and Promotoras began gathering housing stories of struggle from their neighbors across Merced County. These stories, collected by Promotoras served as powerful tools for raising awareness, mobilizing support, and driving policy change.

The Promotoras are aware of their collaborative power and use it to advocate for the betterment of their communities. This collaborative endeavor, driven by CCV and Promotoras, underscores the ongoing commitment to collective action and community empowerment, embodying the principles of an LOC even in the face of adversity.

In times of crisis, such as the flooding in Planada, the emergence of LOCs highlights their role as vital sources of community support and advocacy. The ability of these grassroots initiatives to mobilize resources, coordinate efforts, and amplify community voices demonstrates their resilience and effectiveness in addressing immediate challenges and advocating for systemic change. While LOCs typically form to address ongoing social, economic, or environmental challenges, they also play a critical role during crises by organizing relief efforts, coordinating resources, and amplifying community voices.

Conclusion

Our research underscores the importance of community-led initiatives, like Local Organizing Committees (LOCs), in tackling housing inequalities and advancing health equity in the Central Valley. Through working and employing an anti-racist research approach, we have witnessed firsthand the impact of grassroots involvement, in instigating beneficial transformations. As

we progress, it is vital that we persist in nurturing community participation, strengthening leadership capabilities, and advocating for policy changes that prioritize the requirements of marginalized communities.

In the midst of challenges posed by capitalism, infrastructure issues, and discriminatory housing policies, the creation of LOCs promotes community engagement models that empower residents to actively participate in resolving housing challenges and advocating for change.

Taking inspiration from racist studies and participatory community approaches, LOCs embody the values of community empowerment, leadership development, and grassroots advocacy. By emphasizing community participation, encouraging communication, and fostering a sense of togetherness, these committees have proven their ability to drive political change.

These examples provide evidence of how LOCs have made a difference in addressing housing disparities and promoting community interests. From coordinating relief efforts to pushing for housing regulations and assisting residents facing eviction, LOCs have shown their adaptability and strength during tough times.

When we look back at the journeys and accomplishments of the local organizing committees in the Central Valley, it's clear that coming together and taking action in smaller gatherings can bring about significant and lasting transformation.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The history of exploitation that impacts Black, Indigenous, people of color, and low-income residents manifest in many ways. This quotidian reality poses distinct challenges to residents, community organizers, and researchers. For example, the lack of infrastructure (i.e., access to health services, transportation, road maintenance); uncertain access to food and housing; and limited communication capacity (i.e., cell phone data plan, reliable access to the internet) can present conflicting priorities for residents, community organizers, and researchers. Of course, the potential challenges of this project cannot be compared to the historical exploitation of residents.

Oftentimes, these conflicting priorities have sown distrust in research institutions and community-based organizations. These place-based challenges may become visible in how and when residents join a LOC space. Because of this long history, the HOPE Lab, FIV, and CCV are committed to shifting the traditional research model and establishing long-term reciprocal partnerships with community members.

Embracing localized knowledge, customs, and traditions not only enriches the research process but also fosters a sense of mutual respect and inclusivity. Our manuscript underscores the transformative potential of this approach, highlighting its capacity to democratize research and amplify the voices of marginalized communities. We invite fellow scholars to join us in this endeavor, recognizing that collective action is essential for effecting meaningful change in the research landscape.

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