

OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANIZING DRIVE

PURPOSE OF THE ORGANIZING DRIVE

The main purpose of an organizing drive is to build a functioning, strong, and democratic ACORN chapter in a neighborhood. What that means in concrete terms is that :

- The group represents a significant portion of the neighborhood (at least 5% of the households are full members of ACORN, with 10% closer to ideal).
- The group has the capacity to turn out large numbers of residents for events and meetings. Usually the founding meeting should have at least 100 people attending, with the first kickoff action on a campaign turning out 50 people.
- The group has an understanding of how politics in their neighborhood works, with an idea of how many registered voters there are, and how many votes it takes to win local elections.
- The group has chosen an issue that affects the entire neighborhood and has kicked off a campaign on the issue.
- The group has elected a board through a democratic process, and has an additional 20-30 block captains responsible for informing their area of ACORN events, as well as mobilizing around elections.
- The group is involved in and knows about other local, state, and national ACORN events and campaigns.

This means a few things. To get to 5% of a neighborhood of 2,000 households, 100 member families must join. Breaking it down, that means that over the 8-9 weeks of the organizing drive, the organizer and the organizing committee made of members from the community must sign up around 11-12 members per week. In order to turn out 100 people to a big meeting, 1,000 names and phone numbers must be collected. If strong leaders are going to be elected to the ACORN board, then a process of leadership identification and development must occur through the process of Organizing Committee Meetings.

PREPARATION FOR THE NEIGHBORHOOD DRIVE

- Identify possible neighborhood boundaries, usually by looking at major streets, and while trying to include around 2,000 households.
- Get the voter list for that area (if possible) from the political department, including an analysis of frequent voters (often good potential ACORN members and leaders).
- Begin identifying potential contacts/allies to contact for support in the organizing drive.

TIMELINE AND PROCESS

An organizing drive takes 2 months minimum to take from start to finish. Generally, the first month is spent building a core organizing committee and narrowing down the initial campaign focus. The second month centers around building for the founding meeting (Big Meeting) and campaign kickoff action.

First and second week:

- Sign up 20 full members.
- Identify potential big meeting locations

- Second visit and solidify relationships with the initial organizing committee
- Organize a quick hit
- Make a list of community institutions, including banks, churches, schools, social service agencies, day care centers, legal services offices, doctors, etc and begin setting up meetings with people within those institutions

Third week:

- First Organizing Committee (OC)—members only
- Confirm Big Meeting location and date
- Print and mail/distribute Organizing Committee letter to the community
- Doorknocking and petitioning with OC members to sign up new members
- Sign up at least 10 new members

Fourth week:

- Second OC Meeting
- Doorknocking and petitioning with OC to sign up new members
- Sign up 10 new members

Fifth week:

- Third OC Meeting
- Invite target to first action for the campaign, make initial action plan
- Begin turnout for founding meeting and action, making initial phone calls and getting commitments to turn others out.

Sixth week:

- 4th OC Meeting
- Final turnout for founding meeting and action, including daily phone banking, flyering at gathering places, church announcements, putting up posters and yard signs, etc.

Seventh week:

- Rehearsal meeting before the big meeting
- Confirmation phone calls starting at least two days before the meeting
- Founding Meeting!
- Big Campaign Action!

Eighth and ninth week:

- Sign up all non-members who came to Founding Meeting and Campaign Action
- Identify and finalize block/precinct captains, flyer captains, and phone captains
- Further planning with OC on neighborhood campaign (see Campaign Planning Worksheet)
- Work with Chair, Co-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, and APAC Representative on identifying their responsibilities for the neighborhood and city-wide.

ROLE OF THE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE (See OC Agendas and Notes for actual agendas)

The Organizing Committee forms the leadership for the drive. For our neighborhood groups to develop leaders, membership, power, and self-sufficiency, the OC must take responsibility.

Over the course of the drive, the OC does the following things:

- establishes legitimacy by voting to organize their community through ACORN
- develops leaders and ownership of the group
- prioritizes issues
- makes decisions about the first campaign
- makes a plan to involve the whole neighborhood
- builds a team that will maintain the chapter and build power in the community, whether a full-time ACORN staffer is assigned to the area or not.

OC Meetings are very different from the founding meeting. Everyone in the neighborhood is invited to the Founding Meeting, but only members who are potential leaders and hard workers are invited to the OCs. OCs are held informally, in people's homes, not in a public meeting space. The atmosphere is less formal, the agenda is more flexible, and discussion are more open-ended than at the Big Meeting.

ACTIVITIES TO BUILD THE DRIVE

Doorknocking

Primary Purpose: Sign up new members

Secondary Purposes: Develop leaders by having them come out with you; developing good contact information for the big meeting; and updating voter files for election purposes.

Notes: Use the voter registration file for doorknocking wherever possible. It should be in a format that allows the organizer to use it as a doorknocking sheet. When doorknocking, the organizer can ask for the name listed on the sheet, and make corrections as needed (this information becomes very useful as the group becomes involved in election campaigns). Many houses will not be listed if no one is registered voter, in which case they can be flagged for future voter registration efforts. Whenever possible, a member should doorknock with the organizer, introducing the organizer to people they know, and helping make the case for people to join.

Petitioning

Primary Purpose: Gather names and contact information for Big Meeting turnout.

Secondary Purposes: Develop a petition that can be used for leverage on the campaign.

Notes: This is an easy project for members to do with a little training. After spending an hour with a member at first, members can go on to do it on a regular basis. It also builds a relationship with grocery stores and other businesses that will allow us to set up future petitions.

Quick Hits

Primary purpose: Sets the tone and builds momentum early in the drive by quickly moving membership into action.

Secondary purposes: Develops leaders, get a small win early on, builds excitement about ACORN being in the area, and strengthens legitimacy

Notes: Quick hits are very good early on in the drive. Be careful, though, because after a

certain point in the drive, they can sap energy away from the OC and Founding Meeting process.

Meetings with other institutions in the community (churches, service agencies, etc)

Primary Purpose: Building relationships that will be useful later on for the local group

Secondary Purposes: Organizing against conflict by defusing concern about ACORN's presence in the community, answering questions, and getting referrals and other community contacts to build the group, using these connections later on to help get the word out about the Founding Meeting

Notes: Other community groups and established leaders often don't relate well with ACORN if they aren't approached carefully. They often have a significant stake in the status quo, and ACORN will probably upset that status quo. We do not want to cause avoidable conflict within the community, so it is usually good to meet with these groups and leaders early on, to help them understand that we're here to work with them, not against them. During those initial meetings, approach them as an organizer by asking questions about the things they think need changing in the area, and working to bring them around to a vision of power in numbers. Get contacts of community residents from them that they think would be interested in joining ACORN, and open the door to future relationships in neighborhood campaigns. Explain ACORN's organizing process as well, so that they understand that community residents will be making the decisions about issues.

Mailing the OC Letter

Primary Purpose: Builds the buzz about the first meeting.

Secondary Purposes: Builds legitimacy for the Organizing Committee, and paves the way for future doorknocking.

Notes: The OC letter should go out to every household in the neighborhood if possible. It should explain briefly some of the issues identified in the OC Meeting, have a brief description of ACORN, and tell the Founding Meeting date, time, and location. Have members write it using a sample for reference, and they can help stuff envelopes and mail it out.

Yard Signs Announcing the Founding Meeting

Primary Purpose: Turnout for the founding meeting

Secondary Purpose: Owning our turf.

Notes: Along with giving every member a sticker to put in their window or on their car, this helps us own ACORN turf in a very visible way.

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