



## Organizing Essentials

### #4: Building Power for Policy Change

*"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public,"* Cornel West

As organizers, we help community members understand how to build power to address root causes and how to create systemic change. When most people think of bettering their community, their minds immediately go to direct service and charitable activities. In any given community, very few people are engaged in policy work, and even fewer are aware of the often behind-the-scenes policies and systems that have a huge impact on people's lives and on the future of their community. As organizers, we have to educate ourselves and the people we work with about building power, developing a systemic analysis, and about the policy landscape.

While both are valuable and needed, there are differences between works of charity and works of justice. Both are driven by love. Working for justice brings us into the public arena where policy decisions are made. As Cornel West notes, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

One way to understand what it means to organize to change policies and systems is to use the analogy of a blueprint. The homes that we live in, the schools our children attend, and the buildings in which we work are built upon blueprints, documents that lay out where the walls go, how high the roof will be and how the plumbing will work. In most neighborhoods, the houses tend to look the same because they were built from similar blueprints. Over the years, people may adapt the blueprint, by building a bedroom onto the back of the house, or by converting a garage to a room. We usually do not see the blueprint of our house until we seek to change something. Until then, we are largely unaware of its underlying design.

Communities too are built on blueprints. Our neighborhoods were built upon blueprints much like our homes were. Blueprints not only determine physical space, but they also determine how institutions function. Our schools, for example, have an underlying blueprint, a set of policies that determine how an elementary or middle school should function. It's no surprise that when we walk into a middle school in one part of the state, then visit another middle school hundreds of miles away, that we find how similar these schools are. They are built from the same blueprint.

There are blueprints, or sets of policies, that structure virtually every aspect of a community's life. Policies determine who pays taxes and how much, how wealth is distributed, and how the private sector functions. The blueprint determines how we invest public funding and to what purpose. Numerous, smaller actions taken over long period of time influence the makeup of the

larger policy blueprint. These actions cumulatively come together to shape our environment and our overall health and wellbeing.

Here are some basic aspects of the public policy blueprint:

### **The blueprint is often unseen**

Although policy blueprints are public documents, we are often unaware of them. Just as in our homes, we typically do not see the blueprints that lie underneath our community life. These blueprints often become visible when a community runs into a problem, and upon investigation, discovers the blueprint. For example, after the Camp Fire devastated the town of Paradise, we learned that Paradise, like many foothill communities in California, was not built upon a blueprint designed to protect lives from a fast-moving wildfire. In the days following the tragedy, we learned that the town had few roads that could serve as escape routes and had an inadequate warning system. As city officials began to rebuild after the fire, they had to reconsider and change the blueprint. Officials in similarly situated communities are scrambling to learn the lessons and to make changes before the next fire season hits.

### **The blueprint is public**

Because we live in a democracy, policy blueprints are public documents. They are written down and belong to the public domain. In the old days, they filled up thousands of shelves in government buildings; today they live online, in the cloud. We elect judges to interpret the blueprint and lawmakers to rewrite the blueprint. The words “politics,” “policy” and “politician” all come from the same root, the Greek word polis, or the people. Our system of democracy is meant to be accountable to the people.

### **The blueprint is the product of competing interests**

While the “people” have formal say over the blueprint in a democracy, very few people actually determine what is in the blueprint. The blueprint is not the product of a neutral, rational process. Rather it is the product of competing interests. A state capitol is a building visited regularly by lobbyists paid by particular interest groups to rewrite the blueprint to their advantage. Corporations spend millions each year to influence the blueprint. Interest groups hire specialists who dedicate their professional lives to understand the blueprint and to position the interest group to have the most influence possible over the blueprint. Year after year, groups compete: housing advocates vs. realtors and developers, trial lawyers vs. doctors, labor vs. business . . .

### **The blueprint is not neutral.**

The blueprint gives advantage to some and disadvantages to others. In this country, with its foundations in patriarchy and white supremacy, we have created blueprints that give advantage to white Christian cisgender men, and that disadvantage women, people of color, native communities and people who are LGBTQ. Many of these blueprints have served to keep certain communities in poverty. For example, following World War II, during an era in which America greatly expanded its middle class through housing policies, African American families were denied access to this wealth accumulation through redlining by banks and restrictive

housing deeds.

Powerful corporate interests have and continue to play a huge role in shaping the blueprint. Decades ago, as a result of lobbying from the auto industry and highway builders, elected officials changed the blueprint to encourage the use of the automobile and to disincentive mass transit. This change ultimately made billions for the auto industry and companies that build highways. It also led to low-density communities and the paving over of farmland and wilderness.

### **The blueprint is dynamic**

The blueprint is in constant flux. Year to year small changes happen and at times big changes take place. Prior to the election of Barack Obama, we had a blueprint that caused millions of people to go without health insurance. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, Congress and President Obama made a fundamental change to the blueprint. While the ACA is imperfect, it represented a sea change in American public policy, similar to the passage of Social Security and Medicare. It not only extended health coverage to millions, it marked a fundamental shift toward the notion that health care is a human right.

We elect the people who write the blueprint. As we elect people who hold different interests and values, those leaders make changes to the blueprint. At times, legislators will seek to write the blueprint to their own political advantage, as when legislators put in laws that suppress voting or that carve out districts that help them get reelected. Legislators will also pursue changes to the blueprint that enrich them personally, as when we see millionaire members of Congress vote for deregulating industries in which they hold assets or when they go work for those industries after leaving office.

### **The blueprint is a code of values.**

Ultimately the blueprint is a code of values. A city budget, for example, reflects what the elected officials of that city value and what they do not value. Often when we expose where government spends money and where we underinvest, we discover numbers that can be shocking, such as the cost incurred by incarcerating a young person verses investing in prevention and diversion programs.

The blueprint also plays a role in determining human worth, valuing some groups and devaluing others. In our history scarred by systemic racism, we have had policies in place that treated Native Americans and African Americans as subhuman. We denied marriage equality to couples who are LGBT. Policy documents describe people who are undocumented as “aliens.”

### **The blueprint structures relationships**

Finally, the blueprint determines the nature of many relationships in our society. It determines your rights as an individual and what power other people can hold over you. It defines what a doctor, a teacher, or a police officer can and can't do. If you are a parent, it determines under what conditions may government remove your child and place your child in the foster care system, or if you are incarcerated, if your child can visit you.

Public policy shapes how police interact with communities. In 2018, following the police killing of Stephon Clark, an unarmed Black man, we discovered that police are largely shielded from accountability by a state law known as the “Police Officer Bill of Rights.” The police union asserted that the Stephon Clark shooting was legal under this state law. Groups, including PICO California, have been organizing to change this policy and redefine when it is appropriate for police to use deadly force.

## **Organizing to Change the Blueprint**

Organizing is about changing the blueprint so that it reflects values grounded in justice, equity and fairness. To make significant changes to the blueprint, we need to build organizations that have the capacity to compete in the power arena year after year. We build people power and we organize our financial and human resources to win policy changes and to influence elections. With every win, there is the inevitable backlash. To seize opportunities, to work on policy implementation and to fight the backlash, we need organizations that are in it for the long haul.

We conduct research to make the blueprint visible and to understand options to change the blueprint. We look for allies inside institutions and in the policy area who often know what needs to happen but need others pushing from outside to move the change. We take action to exercise our power, to create constructive tension and to move our solutions forward. Action can take many forms but must be built upon a solid understanding of current policy and the changes we need.

## **Implications for organizers**

### *Get the blueprint*

As organizers, we need to get our hands on the blueprint. We need allies who bring special expertise in understanding and interpreting the current blueprint and how it needs to be changed.

### *Analyze the blueprint*

We need to develop an analysis of who gains advantage from the blueprint and who is disadvantaged. We need to look at the blueprint from the perspective of values: who is valued, and who is devalued. What does the blueprint say about our priorities?

### *Be proactive*

We often find ourselves spending huge amounts of resources and time dealing with the conditions created by the current blueprint. While this is important and necessary, we also need to take a proactive stance and propose changes to the blueprint that represent a shift in values and priorities.

### *Persist*

Significant changes to the blueprint usually take years to win. When PICO California first started organizing on health coverage in the late 1990's, the state of California had policies in place to make Medi-Cal difficult to access and maintain for families with low-income children. As a result, large numbers of children were uninsured. Over a 20-year period, PICO California and its allies won expansions in coverage so that today, almost all children have health coverage, including children who are undocumented.

*Build power and organization*

Building powerful organizations requires the day-to-day work of building relationships, conducting research and laying the groundwork for action. Power is built gradually. Only through building influential organizations are we able to compete in the power arena and contribute to making long-term change.