



# WORKER CENTERS: ORGANIZING COMMUNITIES AT THE EDGE OF THE DREAM

FUNDERS' EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
BY JANICE FINE

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## About the Author

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In addition to her academic work, Fine has worked as a community, labor and electoral organizer for more than twenty years. From 1981-83 she was the President of United States Student Association. During the 80's, she worked for the AFL-CIO in Broward County, Florida, Massachusetts Fair Share in Boston, the Jackson '88 presidential campaign as well as numerous other electoral campaigns. During the 1990s, she founded the New England Money and Politics Project at Northeast Action and played a leading role in passing the nation's first "Clean Election" law in Maine. Until 2003, she was the organizing director at Northeast Action, the hub of a regional network of statewide progressive coalitions and citizen action groups.

## Working Group on Labor and Community

The Working Group on Labor and Community is a national network of funders committed to fostering greater collaboration among foundations, labor unions and community groups to address issues facing the working poor.

Our goals are to:

- ♦ Provide opportunities for foundations and unions to learn more about one another;
- ♦ Increase support for non-profit organizations that build partnerships between unions and community groups;
- ♦ Increase funding for leadership development among women and workers of color;
- ♦ Organize in-depth site visits to meet with workers as well as union, religious and community leaders involved in major organizing campaigns among low-wage workers, innovative economic development efforts or public policy initiatives;
- ♦ Identify areas of agreement and common concern in the public policy arena, to maximize the impact of our resources;
- ♦ Share what we learn with our members and other funders through our listserv, web site ([www.nfg.org](http://www.nfg.org)) special publications and conference workshops.

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# Acknowledgments

This report was produced by the Neighborhood Funders Group's Working Group on Labor and Community. It was motivated by our realization that our members had experienced a tremendous increase in grant applications from worker centers, especially immigrant worker centers, in recent years. Despite this, immigrant worker centers seemed to exist largely under the radar screen of the philanthropic world. We wanted a way to catalog and analyze the work and impact of these groups and the challenges they face, and we hoped that this study would be a vehicle both to inform our own grantmaking and allow us to share our findings with our colleagues in philanthropy. This report is drawn from a larger work, to be published by Cornell University Press and the Economic Policy Institute in the fall of 2005, which will be an invaluable resource for those who want to delve deeper into the subject of worker centers.

We'd especially like to acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Janice Fine, who worked diligently and carefully to conduct the research and draft the report. We are also grateful to the Economic Policy Institute, under whose auspices Dr. Fine worked during much of the study; and the Center for Community Change, whose support made it possible for her to finish the study. Thanks also go to Sue Chinn, former executive director of the Discount Foundation and now chief of staff at the Center for Community Change, who conceived the idea for the study and spearheaded the fundraising effort.

We also extend our thanks to the funders, practitioners and others who served on the advisory committee and helped guide the research. They include Jeff Chapman, Economic Policy Institute; Victor Quintana, Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock; Ellen Widess, Rosenberg Foundation; Ann Bastian, New World/Phoenix Fund; Jennifer Gordon, Fordham Law School; Peter Cervantes-Gautschi, ENLACE; Nadia Marin-Molina, Workplace Project; Steven Pitts, UC Berkeley Labor Center; Nikki Fortunato Bas, Sweatshop Watch; Eliseo Medina, Service Employees International Union; Marielena Hincapie, National Immigration Law Center; Sarah Fox, AFL-CIO; Kent Wong, UCLA, APALA; Pablo Alvarado, National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON); and Yanira Merino, Laborers International Union.

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Regina McGraw, Wieboldt Foundation  
Victor Quintana, Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock  
Co-chairs, Working Group on Labor and Community

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# Executive Summary

Millions of immigrant workers are mainstays of America's service, manufacturing and agricultural labor markets. Despite the obstacles of low-wages, discrimination, uncertain status and the decline of many local civic institutions, these workers are building vibrant communities and organizing to achieve economic and political influence. In the past, political parties, unions, fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies were important vehicles for immigrant political and economic integration and together comprised a civic infrastructure for workers striving to improve their prospects. But today, especially at the local level, these institutions are much weaker. An important new institution, the worker center, emerged in the final decades of the last century and is playing a central role in helping immigrant workers access services, advocate for their rights and organize to improve wages, working conditions, neighborhoods and public schools.

The goal of this study was to identify various worker center models, evaluate their effectiveness in improving the lives of workers and highlight their current strengths, weaknesses, challenges and potential. The Neighborhood Funders Group, which sponsored this research with the Economic Policy Institute, hopes this study will provide new information to funders, practitioners, labor unions, religious institutions and public policy-makers.

## Key Findings

1. Worker centers are one component of a cluster of organizations that together comprise the newly emerging gateway infrastructure for recent<sup>1</sup> immigrants. For community foundations interested in civic integration and access to education, housing, healthcare and general social service provision, centers provide access to populations that most other organizations are unable to reach.
2. Worker centers are providing essential information to low-wage immigrant families about how they can access existing social service resources in their communities. They are also directly providing essential services, like legal representation, that are not available to these families elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>
3. Worker centers are deeply involved in immigrant integration, helping immigrant families navigate the public education, housing and healthcare systems and advocating for their needs.
4. Worker centers are providing important avenues for civic participation and political incorporation for immigrant families who are learning how local and state governments work and how to advocate and organize for their economic and political interests. In industries that have become almost entirely non-union, these groups are calling attention to problems and providing opportunities for low-wage workers to come together and take action.
5. Worker centers, working closely with local, state and federal government agencies, are pushing for improved enforcement of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act and state wage and hour laws.
6. Worker centers present an emerging investment opportunity for foundations interested in reducing immigrant poverty and increasing immigrant civic integration.

Worker centers are community-based mediating institutions that provide workers and their families with a range of opportunities for individual and col-

*This study concluded that among the greatest strengths of worker centers today are: their ability to cultivate and develop immigrant leadership; their success in winning back wages for immigrant workers and compelling better government enforcement of minimum wage and health and safety laws; and achievements in pioneering campaigns for improving labor conditions in low-wage industries.*

lective empowerment. Centers pursue their mission through a combination of approaches:

- ♦ Service delivery, including legal representation to recover unpaid wages; English classes; worker rights education; access to health clinics; and access to bank accounts and loans;
- ♦ Advocacy, including researching and releasing exposés of conditions in low-wage industries; lobbying for new laws and changes in existing ones; working with government agencies to improve monitoring and enforcement; bringing suits against employers for labor violations and advocating for fuller civic integration;
- ♦ Organizing, building ongoing institutions and engaging in leadership development among workers to take action on their own behalf for economic and political change.

*Worker centers are unique community-based mediating institutions that advocate for the rights of low-wage immigrants and other people of color as workers and provide these workers with a range of opportunities for individual and collective empowerment.*

Worker centers vary in terms of their organizational models, how they think about their mission and how they carry out their work. Nonetheless, in the combination of services, advocacy and organizing they undertake, worker centers are playing a unique role in helping low-wage workers to navigate the world of work in the United States. They provide low-wage workers a range of opportunities for expressing their “collective voice” as well as for taking collective action.

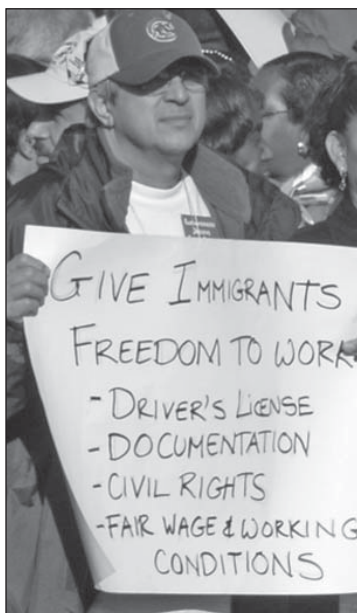
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The study concluded that the major weaknesses of worker centers are the limited numbers of formal members and volunteers who actively participate in their campaigns; small, uncertain funding streams; limited understanding of the local labor market in which they operate; and underdeveloped alliance building and networking.

Worker centers have very small budgets. Fifty-one percent of the centers involved in this study had annual incomes of \$250,000 or less. The bulk of this funding is received for centers’ organizing and advocacy work. A variety of foundations and national funding collaboratives now support immigrant worker centers, but demand greatly exceeds the amount of funding being provided. Foundations have a vital role to play in supporting immigrant worker centers, helping them overcome their weaknesses and improving their effectiveness.

Foundations could strengthen worker centers by:

- ♦ Providing support for service provision work and helping workers develop links to more established service providers and programs.
- ♦ Providing multi-year and general support funding.
- ♦ Helping them to diversify their funding and improve their organizational capacity through technical assistance, matching grants and capital campaigns.
- ♦ Encouraging and supporting collaboration among worker centers and other local organizations and institutions.
- ♦ Supporting local, statewide and national networks so that worker centers can work together for greater impact.



## Introduction

Millions of workers, mostly immigrants and people of color, are the mainstay of America's service, manufacturing and agricultural labor markets. They suffer under a triple burden—as immigrants, workers and people of color. Many of the organizations and institutions that served previous immigrant communities have disappeared or been significantly reduced in size and influence. Despite these difficulties, dynamic new groups and institutions have begun to develop and assert themselves in American life, including immigrant worker centers.

Worker centers are unique community-based mediating institutions that advocate for the rights of low-wage immigrants and other people of color as workers and provide these workers with a range of opportunities for individual and collective empowerment. Difficult to categorize, they have some features that are suggestive of earlier U.S. civic institutions, including settlement houses, fraternal organizations, local civil rights organizations and unions. They identify with social movement traditions and draw upon community organizing strategies. Other features, especially cooperatives and popular education classes, are suggestive of the civic traditions of the home countries from which many of these immigrants came. Some are based in one specific industry while others are non-industry based. Many are a mixture of both—they have specific industry projects as well as other geographic and issue-based activities.

The centers are central components of the immigrant community infrastructure and are playing a singular role in helping immigrants navigate the worlds of work and civil society in the United States. They are gateway organizations that are meeting immigrant workers where they are and providing them with a wealth of information, training and representation in the larger community. All over the country, worker centers are helping low-wage workers recover lost wages and take action to improve their lives.

*Worker centers present an emerging investment opportunity for foundations interested in reducing immigrant poverty and increasing immigrant civic integration.*

### Workplace Project

The Workplace Project began as a project of CARECEN, a social service agency for Central American immigrants in Long Island, as increasing numbers of them came to its offices seeking redress for unpaid wages and other employment-related problems. Workplace Project staff and volunteers were appalled by the Department of Labor's cavalier refusal to respond adequately to the numerous claims it was receiving from immigrant housekeepers, restaurant workers and day laborers. Beginning in 1993, the Project began to systematically monitor the DOL's behavior with regard to its acceptance and pursuit of these cases. Its findings documented a pattern of flagrant disregard for the problems faced by low-wage immigrant workers, which proved instrumental in cultivating members of the media at *The New York Times* and *Newsday*, and in building alliances with Democrats and Republicans in state government to pass the strongest unpaid wages law in the United States.

## About This Study

The Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG), in partnership with the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) commissioned a study of worker centers, most of which are working with a predominantly immigrant population, and were identified by key informants as among the most advanced and promising models emerging in this area. The goals of the research were to identify various worker center models, evaluate their effectiveness in improving the lives of workers, and highlight their strengths, weaknesses, challenges and potential. The study is largely qualitative, although a survey of 40 organizations was conducted and the quantitative data from this sample is analyzed and presented along with nine case studies. Working with an advisory board created for this project, the researchers defined “worker centers” as follows: community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers. The vast majority of centers have grown up to serve predominantly or exclusively immigrant populations. However, there are a few centers that serve an African-American-focused population or bring immigrants together with African-Americans.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this study is immigrant worker centers, but these organizations are a subset of a larger body of community-based and led worker organizing projects that have taken root in communities across the United States in recent years. There are also other centers, especially those working with the day laborer population that provide services and advocacy but are not engaging in organizing. Organizations that *are* engaging in grassroots organizing, and that are doing so among immigrant workers, were the specific focus of this study.

As a starting point, we felt it was useful to think about the larger set of organizations that were engaging in grassroots organizing and then focus in even further on immigrant worker centers in metropolitan areas. We identified and mapped a full range of community-based worker organizing projects, which we called worker centers. The majority of the organizations identified are immigrant worker centers, but a wide range of groups was included on the map—African-American-led organizations, groups that work with immigrants as well as non-immigrants, organizations that focus on workfare participants, groups that call themselves unions and even groups that do not call themselves worker centers. The map tried to capture the full breadth of new types of community-based worker organizing projects that serve low-wage workers.



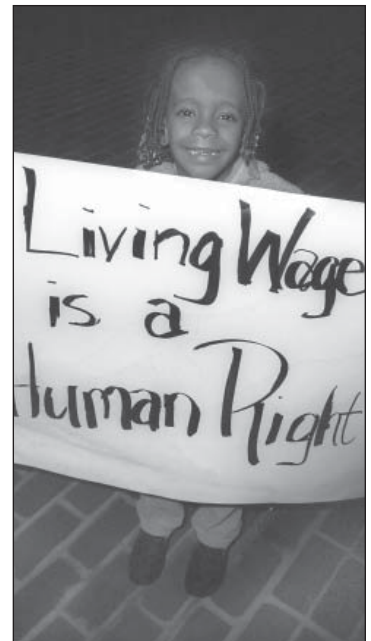
### Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee

The Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee in Virginia began in 1986 as a community organizing entity that focused on helping 2,000 low-income residents of the Arlandria neighborhood of Alexandria fight eviction from their subsidized housing and convert a 300-unit building into a limited equity co-op. Over the years the organization has grown into a local civil rights organization that is involved in a host of projects. It does community organizing in several other neighborhoods in Alexandria as well as Arlington and other Northern Virginia communities. Besides housing, it has taken up other local issues including public education and youth programming, healthcare, sustainable development and zoning, and living wages. In addition, TWSC organizes immigrant and African-American hospitality workers, childcare providers and taxi drivers. Each of these groups has an organization that is affiliated with TWSC. The organization has won a local living wage ordinance, better working conditions for childcare workers, important improvements in the public schools and, over the past several years, successfully negotiated with area hospitals to forgive more than \$1 million of debt owed by low-wage families.

It is probable that for every organization included on the map, there are twice as many others that are engaging in some similar activities, but have not yet surfaced. Ultimately we were able to identify 135 organizations, 120 of which are working with immigrants. We conducted 40 survey interviews, 34 of which were with groups working with immigrants, and carried out nine case studies (in addition to the 40 groups in the survey). All nine focus on groups working with immigrants, although two, the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee and CAFE, work extensively with African-Americans as well. CAFE and Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), another of the nine case studies, do not refer to themselves as worker centers but their work comports with our definition.

## Chicago Interfaith Worker Rights Center

The Chicago Interfaith Worker Rights Center emerged from the work being done between labor unions and area religious institutions by the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Workers Issues. After years of work mobilizing clergy to support union organizing campaigns, the Interfaith Committee and a number of its churches became known as places immigrant workers could bring their employment-related problems. In 1998, the Interfaith Committee published and distributed a workers' rights manual in English and Spanish that generated enormous response from area immigrant workers. Many who called had been unaware of their rights, and many were undocumented and afraid to seek help. The Department of Labor was largely inaccessible both because of language barriers and limited office hours—it was only open from 9-5. Workers turned to their clergy and congregations for support, but these organizations didn't necessarily know how to help. Lacking an infrastructure to handle the growing numbers of immigrants seeking help and organizing support, the Interfaith Committee opened two worker centers on Chicago's north and northwest sides. Both are located within the walls of religious institutions. The organization helps workers file unpaid wage claims and other complaints. It has helped dozens of worker groups to organize to achieve improvements at their workplaces, including matching several with local unions for organizing drives.



## Worker Centers' Unique Role

While employers manifest an enormous hunger for immigrant workers—literally hiring them by the millions—the nation's immigration policy has exacerbated their vulnerability to exploitation. The silent compact between employers and employees is simple: in exchange for corporate indifference to their exact legal status, workers will not make a fuss about conditions or compensation. America's immigration policy has become one of its central *de facto* labor market policies.

The difficult conditions under which low-wage immigrant workers across the United States currently toil are the result of a “perfect storm.” It is a storm resulting from labor laws that have ceased to protect workers, little effective labor market regulation of new economic structures and a national immigration policy that has created a permanent underclass of low-wage workers.

The mission of worker centers is to challenge these conditions. They do so through a combination of approaches. These include: (1) Service delivery, including legal representation to recover unpaid wages; English classes; worker rights education; access to health clinics; and access to bank accounts and loans. (2) Advocacy, including researching and releasing exposés of conditions in low-wage industries; lobbying for new laws and changes in existing ones; working with government agencies to improve monitoring and enforcement; bringing suits against employers for labor violations and advocating for fuller civic integration. (3) Organizing, building ongoing institutions and engaging in leadership development among workers to take action on their own behalf for economic and political change.

*Immigrant worker centers have emerged as central components of the immigrant community infrastructure and are playing an indispensable role in helping immigrants navigate the world of work in the United States.*

### CHIRLA and IDEPSCA

Eight day labor hiring halls are operated by two community organizations in Los Angeles—the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA). The groups work with day laborers to set the rules that govern the centers. CHIRLA is the largest community-based immigrant rights organization in Los Angeles. It began in 1986 in response to changes in federal immigration law. It functioned initially as an umbrella organization for a coterie of local groups, but as the day labor issues in Los Angeles grew increasingly serious in the late 1980s, it added a focus on workers' rights and eventually direct organizing of immigrant workers.

IDEPSCA is a non-profit community-based organization that grew out of local community organizing efforts by Chicano and Latino parents around issues of discrimination, educational inequities and the scarcity of affordable housing. The group is dedicated to improving the educational opportunities and economic self-sufficiency of low-income Latino families through education and organizing. In addition to hiring halls, it operates adult Spanish literacy and ESL programs, a computer literacy project, and youth and women's programs.

Staff members for the two organizations work on site helping to facilitate the day-to-day operation of the hiring halls. They offer a variety of services to day laborers including help with unpaid wage claims and immigration issues, ESL classes and tool lending. They advocate on a host of public policy issues that affect day laborers and work to mobilize day laborers at rallies and hearings in support of these issues. CHIRLA and IDEPSCA are the backbone of a vibrant day laborers' and immigrant workers' movement in Los Angeles.

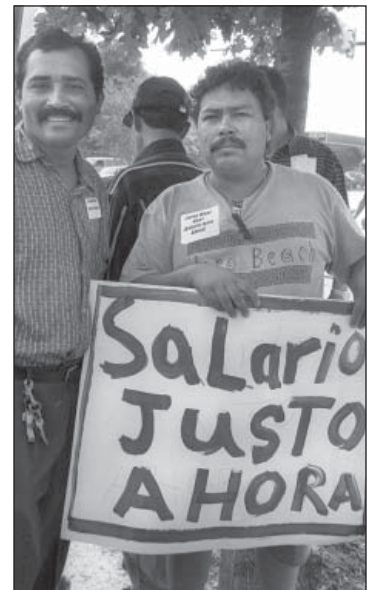
In fighting for immigration reform, labor market policy change and immigrant organizing, these centers are playing a unique role in communities across the country:

- ♦ **Immigrant worker centers have emerged as central components of the immigrant community infrastructure and are playing an indispensable role in helping immigrants navigate the world of work in the United States.** They are gateway organizations that are providing information and training in workers rights, employment, labor and immigration law, legal services, ESL and many other programs. They represent a new generation of mediating institutions that are integrating low-wage immigrants into American civic life and facilitating collective deliberation, education and action. They are accomplishing a great deal on very modest budgets.
- ♦ **Immigrant worker centers have attracted workers who are often the hardest to organize and for whom current unions by and large do not offer a viable option.** The vast majority of immigrant workers center members and beneficiaries are recent immigrants (including large numbers of undocumented workers) who labor in the worst jobs. Workers centers have had unprecedented success in developing leadership among these workers. They now provide a central vehicle through which low-wage immigrant workers are receiving services and education around workplace issues, participating in civil society, telling their stories to the larger community and organizing to seek economic and political change.
- ♦ **Immigrant worker centers are acting as “organizing laboratories,” creating and testing innovative strategies.** Centers are pioneering a range of approaches for improving wages and conditions of work across low-wage labor markets and industries. These include: working to expand “joint and several” liability coverage beyond the agricultural sector; pressuring individual employers to change practices through coordinated local and national actions and boycotts; organizing to raise wages across an industry; and targeting industries to raise wages or provide health benefits through public policy changes.

*Immigrant worker centers now provide a central vehicle through which low-wage immigrant workers are receiving services and education around workplace issues, participating in civil society, telling their stories to the larger community and organizing to seek economic and political change.*

## Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment

The Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE) Southerners for Economic Justice started the Worker’s Rights Project (WRP) in Greenville, S.C., in 1980. Its mission was to help workers who were not represented—and were likely to remain unrepresented—by unions, to take action. By 1985, workers in more than 50 cities and towns across South Carolina had contacted WRP. It developed “job rights workshops,” which taught about employment laws and organizing. The workshops were held in 10 cities around the state. In 1986, the organization won passage of a new state law that made it harder to fire injured workers. Since then, the organization has taken the lead on contingent worker issues, fighting for public policy changes and taking on Manpower and other large temporary agencies. CAFE has broadened its agenda beyond employment issues to public education, criminal justice and domestic violence. In recent years, the organization has begun to organize chapters among and provide assistance to the growing numbers of newly arrived Latino immigrant workers.



## Strengths

The following characteristics represent the greatest strengths of immigrant worker centers.

**Leadership Development:** For most of the centers studied, leadership development, including creating a leadership body to which staff is accountable, is a central focus. As a result of this commitment, worker center participants demonstrate remarkable leadership qualities. There is a vibrant leadership core at the heart of these organizations and the proportion of members who take an active part in them is quite impressive.

**Winning back wages/Calling attention to exploitative industry practices/Monitoring and enforcement of minimum wage, overtime, health and safety and other employment laws:** Centers provide an effective means for individual workers to file claims and recover back wages. Beyond providing legal expertise, they encourage workers to act collectively and support them when they do so. They also use cases of abuse to publicize the problems low-wage workers are facing in specific industries and push government to do a better job monitoring and working to deter future labor violations.

**Providing vehicles for a collective voice/Altering the terms of the public debate:** Although their numbers continue to increase in more and more communities, immigrant workers are still mostly invisible to the larger society. Immigrant worker centers are one vehicle through which the interests of low-wage immigrant workers are represented and their point of view expressed.

**Pioneering campaigns for improving conditions in low-wage industries:** Most of the workers who contact immigrant worker centers are employed in low-wage industries. Immigrant worker centers have developed campaigns and devised some very creative and effective strategies to win lasting improvements for low-wage workers. The greatest accomplishment of these campaigns to date has been compelling individual employers to pay back wages to workers and in the realm of public policy. To date, worker centers have been strengthening minimum wage, overtime and occupational safety and health enforcement; passing minimum wage and living wage ordinances; and pushing local and state government for other improvements in specific industries.

**Willingness to Experiment:** The prevailing wisdom of contemporary business experts is that the most effective firms are those that operate as “learning organizations,” constantly evaluating their work, learning from their mistakes and shifting gears and approaches. Worker centers’ leaders and staff acknowledge what they don’t know and what isn’t working, and are open to trying new approaches. In a context where it is still not clear which strategies will prove most effective, this openness to rethinking is critical.

*Immigrant worker centers are acting as “organizing laboratories,” creating and testing innovative strategies.*

### Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates

Founded in 1992, the Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (KIWA) organizes and provides ongoing support on employment-related issues to restaurant and grocery store workers in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles. After years of filing claims and lawsuits on behalf of individual restaurant workers, it launched the Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign in 1997. A major focus of the campaign was to increase the industry’s compliance with minimum wage laws. By 2000, as a result of the campaign, KIWA estimated that the compliance rate of Koreatown restaurants had increased from about 2 percent to over 50 percent. KIWA operates a free medical clinic and helps members file claims for overtime, unpaid wages and workers compensation. It has an ESL component that teaches workers English they can use in the restaurant industry, as well as a vocabulary for organizing.

## Weaknesses

If immigrant worker centers have significant strengths, they also demonstrate a number of weaknesses.

**Low Numbers/Scale:** The composite view of worker centers is that they are providing help to significant numbers of workers with unpaid wage claims. While their advocacy and organizing work is clearly having an impact on the wider low-wage immigrant worker community, total numbers of workers directly participating are modest. Moreover, most centers do not ask workers to pay dues or to engage in collective action.

**Financial Fragility:** For most worker centers, a disproportionate part of their income derives from foundation funding and, to a lesser extent, government monies. Government funds go primarily to day labor worker centers, which means that for the non-day labor centers, the proportion of total income coming from foundations is even higher.

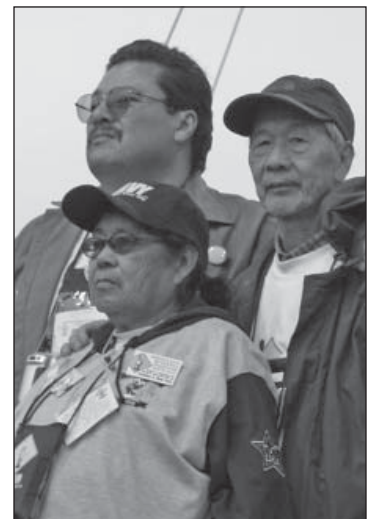
**Lack of Economic Analysis:** Many centers lack the capability to compile the data that would lead to a deep understanding of the industries, employers and jobs in which their members work. Without this, it is difficult for them to make strategic decisions about campaigns to take on and employers to target.

**Isolation of Many Worker Centers:** In general, immigrant worker centers are terribly over-burdened with their day-to-day work and most have a difficult time engaging in strategic alliance building and coalition organizing. At present, immigrant worker centers are under-networked at every level. The lack of ongoing networking prevents them from aggregating their power at the local and state levels to bring pressure on employers, industries and government bodies. At the national level there are three promising but under-financed networks that bring together worker centers: the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), National Interfaith Justice and Enlace.

*Immigrant worker centers are works in progress. They are constantly evolving, but they also struggle with limited resources and enormous challenges.*

### The New York Taxi Workers Alliance

The New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) had its origins in 1992 in the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAHV), a pan-Asian organization that was started by young activists in New York City in the 1980s. Since 1997, it has established itself both with the media and relevant governmental bodies as the leading voice of the 40,000 Yellow Cab drivers in New York City. In 2002 and 2003, the organization developed a successful multi-pronged strategy to campaign for a fare increase. It partnered with the Brennan Center of NYU Law School to produce research reports on wages and conditions in the industry, which provided the organization with data to back up its claims to the media and government officials. By fall 2003, NYTWA had the attention of the major media and public officials. Over the next several months, it was the major voice of taxi drivers in the media and the major player on the drivers' side as they negotiated and won the first fare increase in eight years.



## Recommendations for Improving the Effectiveness of Worker Centers

Immigrant worker centers are works in progress. They are constantly evolving, but they also struggle with limited resources and enormous challenges. The fact that they are helping to establish a collective voice for immigrants in their communities and providing some avenues for redress, along with needed services, are tremendous accomplishments worthy of support. However, these achievements must be tempered with the knowledge that, in the main, they have not yet been able to realize significant labor market improvements via direct campaigns against employers. What follows are recommendations for strengthening immigrant worker centers.

**Research and strategy development:** Worker centers could benefit greatly from devoting more attention and resources to detailed economic and political research and strategy development. Worker centers have very little access to research about firm behavior within and among individual industries. They could certainly benefit from a central or regional resource for labor market and industry research.

**Effective dues collection systems:** To support their drive toward greater financial stability and self-sufficiency, resources ought to be devoted to helping worker centers develop and refine effective models and methods for dues collection.

**Other revenue-producing strategies:** Most worker centers are providing legal aid and many are providing check-cashing, small loans, and help with filling out tax and immigration applications but do not charge for any of these services. Additional research and investigation is needed to determine the feasibility of worker centers drawing an income from offering financial services such as check-wiring.

**Building an online clearinghouse/information sharing/gatherings:** Centers would greatly benefit from being able to easily access information about legal strategies and cases, as well as how other centers organize their legal services and provide other services and referrals. They could also benefit from being able to access written materials that other centers have developed about worker rights education, specific issues, campaigns, legislation, volunteer training and fundraising. There is also a wide range of activities that could be carried out jointly that might dramatically strengthen the overall movement of worker centers.

**Closer cooperation with unions and churches:** Churches and unions are the most important local social justice institutions that have real membership and organizational strength in metropolitan communities across the country. Worker centers can benefit from the relationships that exist inside and between religious institutions and other community-based organizations to strengthen their service provision, advocacy and organizing activities. Worker centers can benefit from the labor market, industry knowledge and power that unions possess. Unions in turn can learn from worker centers about how to work in and relate to the growing immigrant labor sector. Worker centers are playing an important role in holding unions accountable for representing their immigrant members. Arranging national, regional and local dialogs between worker centers and unions should be a priority.



# Key Programs Foundations Could Support

## Service Provision

There is an enormous unmet need among low-wage immigrant workers, especially undocumented workers, for legal assistance regarding employment issues, healthcare and English classes—immigrant worker centers are filling this void. The range of service provided by centers is extensive. They include direct services such as help with filing wage claims, ESL classes, issuance of ID cards and other immigration-related assistance. They also include matching up workers with services provided by other agencies, such as referrals for healthcare. While legal assistance and ESL classes are the most common services provided, individual centers tailor their offerings to specific needs of their local areas.

In low-wage America today, violations of wage and hour laws are commonplace. As a result, among the services currently offered at workers centers, legal help—particularly assistance with filing and pursuing claims for unpaid wages—stands out. It is the one in greatest demand, and also often the most developed aspect of the centers' service work. On average, worker centers collect between \$100,000-\$200,000 a year in back wages for workers, but in certain cases they have collected well over \$1 million.

After legal aid, the most common service offered by worker centers is ESL courses. Most combine teaching the English language itself with presenting information and fostering discussions that encourage participants to think critically and analytically about society and their own place within it. Classes often cover workers' rights as well as organizing approaches and techniques. Some centers—especially those that work with day laborers and housekeepers—tailor their ESL classes to developing particular industry vocabularies.

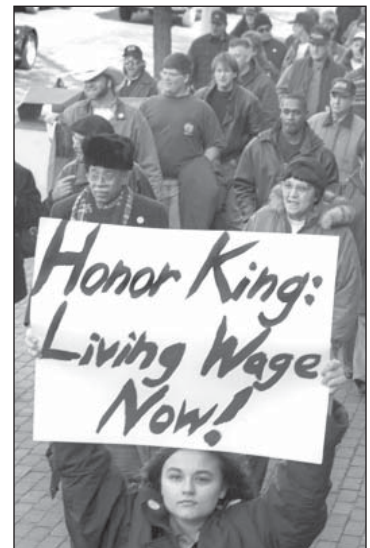
Immigrant worker centers offer three kinds of services related to health. These include a range of ongoing programs and training on health education, including occupational safety. Many clinics provide referral services for immigrants to health clinics and other health-related services. Finally, some centers include health clinics on site.

Most worker centers do not charge any fees for their services, although some ask for small donations. Despite their increasing role as gateway institutions for newly arriving low-wage immigrants struggling to navigate the world of work, immigrant worker centers are not, by and large, packaging their service programs to foundations or raising money specifically for the services they provide.

*On average, worker centers collect between \$100,000 & \$200,000 a year in back wages for workers, but in certain cases, they have collected well over \$1 million.*

## Omaha Together One Community

Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) is a faith-based organizing group affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation. In 1998, the organization began looking at the difficult conditions under which the largely Mexican workforce was laboring in the Nebraska meatpacking industry. In 1999, OTOC organized a rally with 1,200 people that focused on conditions in the meatpacking plants. In the fall and winter of that year, its efforts gained the strong support of the governor and lieutenant governor, who held investigations and promulgated a "meatpacker's bill of rights" in the first months of 2000. Also that year, OTOC's workers' committee began sponsoring clinics with meatpacking workers on how to prevent and seek treatment for repetitive stress injuries. In June 2000, OTOC and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) announced their plan to organize 4,000 area packinghouse workers and launched the organizing in earnest. In less than two years, the partnership organized close to a thousand new workers into the Omaha UFCW local.



## Advocacy and Organizing

The advocacy and organizing that immigrant worker centers do above and beyond the services they provide are what sets them apart from other agencies and organizations. Centers understand the critical role of basic organizing and the need for creative direct action targeted at individuals and institutions at key points of leverage. This organizing and advocacy work is in three general areas: (1) Raising wages and improving working conditions in low-wage industries; (2) Defending immigrants' rights in their communities and fighting for immigration reform; (3) Dealing with issues of immigrant integration including education, housing and healthcare.

On the advocacy front, worker centers have done an excellent job of using the data they gather through their legal services programs to document and publicize the exploitation that is occurring in low-wage labor markets. For example, the Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (KIWA) has carefully collected and analyzed data from workers who have used its legal clinic over the past 10 years and has used the data as the basis for studies that have garnered significant media coverage of the problem. Similarly, the Workplace Project collected stories from scores of immigrant workers who had been turned away by the State Department of Labor and used the information as the basis for the ultimately successful case it made for new administrative measures as well as legislation.

Worker center strategies that target a single employer have focused mainly on filing wage claims and coupling this legal action with a variety of forms of direct economic action at work sites to recover unpaid wages. These activities, calling employers and asking them to pay, filing wage claims and picketing when they don't, are the daily "bread and butter" work of the centers. But strategies to win other changes in the workplace or to alter conditions of employment have also been actively pursued, including consumer boycotts.

One example of targeting a corporation is the successful three-year campaign coupled with a lawsuit that the Garment Worker Center (GWC) waged on clothing retailer Forever 21, which resulted in paid back wages for scores of employees and an agreement by the company to work with GWC to improve working conditions at its sewing subcontractors. This campaign also underlines the value of partnerships with public interest law organizations to complement other strategies of worker centers.

Another example of targeting a corporation is a successful effort to improve the hiring conditions for day laborers organized by the Coalition for Humane

*Successful worker center efforts to win new legislation benefiting immigrant workers include the passage by the New York state legislature of a law increasing the penalties on employers for failing to pay their workers.*

### The Garment Worker Center

The Garment Worker Center (GWC) in Los Angeles was organized after UNITE was defeated in its efforts to organize the garment industry. There were 90,000 immigrant women, primarily Latina and Chinese, working for more than 5,000 contractors, often under sweatshop conditions. Despite the difficulties of organizing a union, a coalition of legal aid and community organizations decided to open the Center to provide legal, organizing and advocacy support. Based in the heart of the garment district, the organization has staff and volunteers who help workers learn about their rights, file claims for back wages and act collectively to push contractors, manufacturers, retailers, industry leaders and government officials to improve conditions. The organization has established itself as the voice of immigrant workers in the fashion industry in Los Angeles, garnering extensive media coverage of workplace abuses, winning hundreds of thousands of dollars in back wages, developing an active leadership body of garment workers and connecting to the global anti-sweatshop movement.

Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). The organization was able to bring pressure to bear on Home Depot regarding situating a day labor hiring hall in the parking lot of Home Depot's Cypress Park store; another Home Depot in North Hollywood pays for a billboard that advertises a day laborer center four blocks away. The National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) has proposed that Home Depot promulgate a code of conduct for its stores to follow, so that day laborers are treated fairly and not "criminalized" for seeking work. The network wants Home Depot to allow local day laborer centers to leaflet customers outside the stores about their services and to consider opening more day laborer workers centers on site, such as the one at Cypress Park. NDLON now has a national Home Depot subcommittee that meets regularly via conference calls.

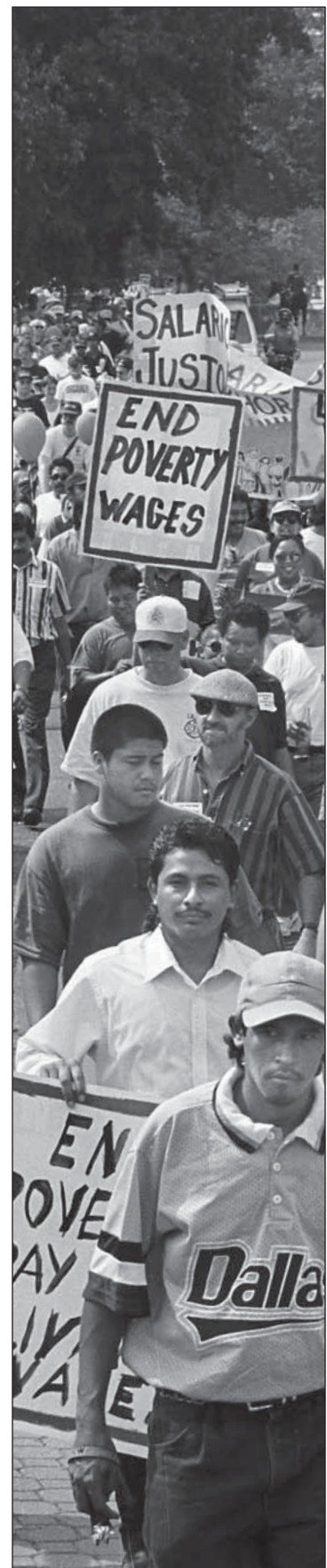
One final example is the successful conclusion, in March 2005, of the four-year national boycott of Taco Bell, which was organized by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida to improve the wages and working conditions of tomato pickers. In a precedent-setting victory, Yum Brands (the largest restaurant company in the world and owner of Taco Bell) agreed to pay a penny-per-pound "pass through" to its suppliers of tomatoes and to undertake joint efforts with CIW to improve working conditions in the Florida tomato fields. Of special significance about both the GWC and CIW victories is that the organizations succeeded in getting corporations to take responsibility for the wages and working conditions of their subcontractors.

An excellent example of industry organizing is KIWA's successful campaign to substantially increase payment of the minimum wage in the Koreatown restaurant industry in Los Angeles. It did so by deploying a variety of forms of direct economic action including picketing 10 restaurants and targeting three for sustained boycotts. For nine days, it organized a hunger strike on behalf of one worker. When the campaign began, about 98 percent of the restaurants weren't paying minimum wage. Several years later, KIWA estimates that the compliance rate of Koreatown restaurants with the minimum wage has increased to over 50 percent.

Organizing day laborers is another form of direct economic action through which worker centers in Long Island, Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles and smaller cities have achieved some successes. They have successfully defended the constitutional right of day laborers to seek employment, and negotiated arrangements with communities about where day laborers can gather daily to seek work. They also have been able to establish minimum wages at shape-up sites<sup>7</sup> and hiring halls. Finally, by formalizing hiring halls so that a larger number of businesses feel comfortable utilizing them, organizers feel that they have generated additional jobs for day laborers.

In general, workers' centers and other contemporary low-wage worker organizing projects have had their greatest impact on improving working conditions and raising wages through government action and local public policy initiatives. The Coalition of Immigrant Worker Advocates (CIWA) provides a good example of what advocacy has been able to accomplish in the area of employment conditions. It was created in 2000 by four worker centers in Los Angeles to advance labor law enforcement in low-wage industries including garment, restaurant, ethnic market, day labor, domestic and janitorial work. It has been successful in working with the California Secretary of Labor to establish a low-wage worker advisory board of CIWA member organizations and later an Office of Low-wage Industries to ensure compliance with state labor regulations in that growing sector of the state's economy.

<sup>7</sup> Shape-up sites are locations that allow for informal matching up of employers and workers for short-term jobs.



Successful worker center efforts to win new legislation benefiting immigrant workers include the passage by the New York state legislature of a law proposed by the Workplace Project increasing the penalties on employers for failing to pay their workers. Another important victory was New York City's adoption of a "Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights." OTOC and the United Food and Commercial Workers' efforts to organize Nebraska meatpackers were greatly facilitated by its successful campaign to convince that state's governor to issue a groundbreaking "Workers Bill of Rights." It included "the right to organize, the right to a safe workplace, the right to adequate facilities, the right to compensation for work performed and the right to seek state help." Finally, there have been a number of successful local minimum and living wage campaigns led by worker centers. These include campaigns by Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), which passed the first living wage law in the country, the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee in Alexandria, Va., and Young Workers United and the Chinese Progressive Association in San Francisco.

Most of the organizations interviewed for this study are active participants in national and state immigration reform coalitions. They have worked with the National Council of La Raza, the National Immigration Forum, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the National Immigration Law Center, the National Farmworker Justice Fund, the American Friends Service Committee and many other groups. NDLO has made immigration reform an important component of its advocacy and organizing work, conducting a national discussion among day laborers and within the larger immigrant rights community about the type of reforms that would be the most helpful.

In 2003, many immigrant worker centers participated in the historic Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride sponsored in large part by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE), which helped to organize hundreds of local events across the country and culminated in a very large national rally in New York City. Many of these groups are now involved in the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FAIR) a new national coalition for immigration reform that is being coordinated by the Center for Community Change. FAIR is also working as part of the New American Opportunity Campaign, the immigration reform effort that grew out of the Freedom Ride.

Notwithstanding these efforts at the national level, most of the campaigns of worker centers on immigration are focused on changing policies at the state level. Laws and administrative rules limiting the rights of immigrants to obtain drivers licenses and of the children of undocumented immigrants to access financial aid for higher education are two of the most frequent issues.



## Funding and Foundation Support for Worker Centers

**W**orker centers have very small budgets: 51 percent have annual incomes of \$250,000 or less and only 9 percent of those surveyed exceeded \$500,000 annually. As with most non-profits, the vast majority of their funds go to paying modest staff salaries and covering overhead. While a few own trailers, most of the centers do not own their own buildings. Some use office space donated by religious organizations, but most centers are not subsidized.

Centers raise the majority of their funds (61%) from foundations. The balance comes from government (21%, primarily going to day laborer centers), earned income and grassroots fundraising (16%), and dues (2%). Most raise their funds from a handful of foundations and struggle to meet their modest budgets. According to a recent survey of foundations conducted by the Neighborhood Funders Group's Working Group on Labor and Community, 61% of respondents said they were funding organizing, 56% advocacy, 50% civic participation and 44% public policy efforts. At present, the centers' organizing and advocacy work generates most of the funds. Although service provision is a central activity of worker centers, only 6% of respondents said they were providing funding to support services. Most funders give general support money. Those foundations answering the NFG survey that were not funding worker centers were funding a variety of programs and services that included ESL, literacy and legal services, suggesting the possibility that centers could be raising more foundation money for service-related activity.

(See Appendix One: Foundations That Support Immigrant Worker Centers.)

Initial support for worker centers generally comes from a circle of small to midsize national funders that strongly support grassroots organizing. These include the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Public Welfare Foundation, New World/Phoenix Fund for Workers, the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, the French American Charitable Trust and the Solidago Foundation. Another set of national funders that support grassroots organizing around economic justice includes the Ms. Women and Labor Fund, the Discount Foundation, Jewish Fund for Justice, certain programs at Tides, and the Funding Exchange and its local affiliates.

To expand support beyond these funders, worker centers move in two directions—to local private and community foundations such as the New York Foundation, Liberty Hill or the Rosenberg Foundation; and to other regional and national foundations such as the California Wellness Foundation and The California Endowment, which are both health conversion foundations that fund statewide. A few large national foundations, such as Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, Open Society Institute and Rockefeller Brothers, have supported a small number of worker centers, but for the most part these funders focus on supporting national organizations. They tend to fund local organizing work through specific initiatives, many of which involve a regranting component, or through funding collaboratives such as Hispanics in Philanthropy's Funders' Collaborative, the Racial Justice Collaborative or the Four Freedoms Fund.

"Large foundations are not structured to make many small grants to local organizations in many different sites," said Katherine McFate, deputy director of the Rockefeller Foundation's "Working Communities" program. Rockefeller made a few early exploratory grants to worker centers in cities where the Foundation works, and continues to support efforts by the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and Interfaith Worker Justice to expand their technical assistance to worker centers. But McFate believes these local organizations will ultimately need to find local revenue streams. National foundations or pooled funds might be

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able to play a partnering role, but “local foundations are close to the ground; they are working to ensure that their local communities have effective safety net programs. Thus, they are well-positioned to support these kinds of emerging institutions—worker centers can assist with the integration of new immigrants, negotiate the inter-ethnic tensions that arise in some communities, and provide basic services to the poorest of the poor. They seem a natural fit for local funders.”

The current study identified only seven community foundations that are funding worker centers. These include: Chicago Community Trust, Arlington Community Foundation (Virginia), Community Foundation for the National Capital District, Denver Foundation, Long Island Community Foundation, St. Louis Community Foundation, New York Community Trust and the Boston Foundation. “Given the fact that workers centers and day laborer activities are local phenomena and impact local communities, it is interesting to see that very few community foundations are supporting these activities,” said Spence Limbocker, executive director of the Neighborhood Funders Group. “Given their mission, there is a real opportunity for community foundations to begin to play a larger role in working with day laborer and worker centers, and it is important that they do so.”

Interestingly, a few local worker centers have also attracted corporate funding. These funders include American Express, First Data/Western Union Foundation, Washington Mutual Foundation, JP Morgan Chase, Merck, Citizens Bank of Boston and the Independence Community Foundation.<sup>4</sup> “We don’t normally think of corporate foundations supporting this kind of work,” Limbocker said. “The fact that there were so many of them is very encouraging. Hopefully their presence will attract other corporate foundations to the field.” A small number of centers also receive support from United Way.



## Why Foundations Fund Worker Centers

Workers centers are being funded through a variety of program areas. The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region (CFNCR) funds worker centers out of the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants, a funding collaborative that it helped to establish, and which it houses and staffs. “As a community foundation, we wanted a way to get this sector of work onto our agenda and we have been able to do it by setting up this fund,” said Tom Kam, senior program officer. In 2000, the collaborative helped establish a legal office in northern Virginia after it learned how many immigrants were having problems with unpaid wages, and it began funding Casa de Maryland and the D.C. Employment Justice Center and doing advocacy work with them. The foundation advised its peers in the Washington area that this was an emerging issue and that they had effective community partners doing the work. As a result, it was able to convince other grantmakers to contribute to the funding collaborative. The collaborative raises all of the money it disburses and has received some major grants, including one from the Kresge Foundation to support advocacy efforts on behalf of immigrants post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. Another collaborative in which CFNCR participates, the Common Ground Fund, works to address interethnic tensions between immigrants and the African-American community.<sup>5</sup>

The Rosenberg Foundation, a private foundation based in San Francisco, focuses exclusively on California and funds worker centers through its “changing population” program area. The goal of this program area is to promote policy change to advance the economic, social and civic integration of immigrants and minorities into a pluralistic society. It focuses on immigrant rights and economic security in various low-wage industries. “Worker centers are perfect examples of the low-wage labor market and immigration themes that have been central to our work at the Rosenberg Foundation,” said Ellen Widess, senior program officer. “The Foundation began funding in this area in the mid-1990s when, as immigration soared, it saw that low-wage immigrant workers were facing serious problems in the workplace and were especially vulnerable to exploitation because of their immigration status.” Rosenberg has provided technical capacity support to several emerging worker centers and convened California worker centers to provide a chance for them to collaborate and share ideas about building greater power and sustainability for centers.

Public Welfare is a national foundation that funds immigrant worker centers through several of its program areas, including “human rights and global security,” “immigrant communities” and “countering hate and discrimination.” “Over the years, we have seen that a vital element for most immigrants revolves around their ability to work and the conditions of work in the workplace. So we have started to support a lot of workplace organizing efforts, including day laborer organizing projects,” said Joe Wilson, senior program officer. The Foundation initially moved into funding immigrant community organizations in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an outgrowth of its international work. “We established the human rights program as a way to highlight the fact that struggles for economic and social justice are human rights struggles,” said Wilson.

The “immigrant communities” program focuses on supporting immigrant-led organizations that provide services and advocacy for immigrant communities. The program funds a variety of efforts that have emerged in the immigrant community to address issues of access to healthcare, education and housing. In addition to funding individual centers,<sup>6</sup> another priority of Public Welfare is funding collaborative organizing efforts such as the Multi-Ethnic Immigrant Worker Or-

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*-Ellen Widess  
Rosenberg Foundation*



ganizing Network (MIWON) in Los Angeles, as well as NDLO and the National Network of Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

Under its “workplace organizing” program area, the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, a national religious grantmaker, has been funding immigrant worker centers since the mid-1990s. “Of all American workers today, these workers are the most disenfranchised in terms of benefits, wages and labor law protection,” said Senior Program Officer Victor Quintana. “Most are employed in agriculture, service industries or by small manufacturing firms that historically have been difficult for unions to organize, especially given employer opposition, anti-union labor regulation and rampant subcontracting.”

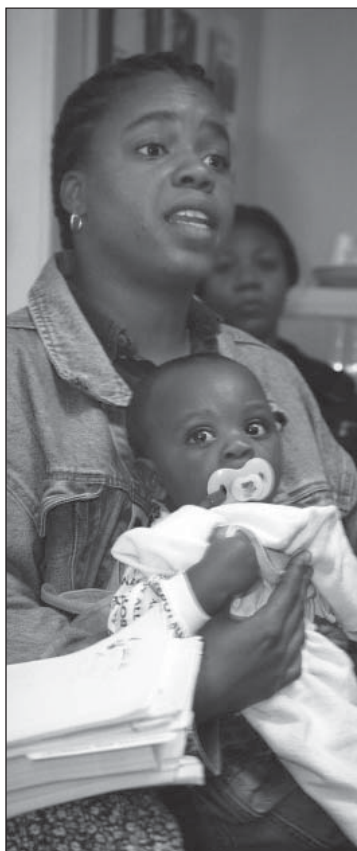
Quintana, Executive Director Marjorie Fine and other Veatch staff have taken board members to visit many of the immigrant worker centers, not only to witness firsthand the consequences of globalization and domestic economic restructuring, but also to observe the public policy impact the groups are having. Like Public Welfare, Veatch tries to support groups that have relationships with each other, so there is a greater likelihood that they will be able to “connect the human and material resources to effect larger change,” said Quintana.

The Ford Foundation participates in three important funding collaboratives that support worker centers: the LA Immigrant Funders’ Collaborative, the Racial Justice Collaborative and the Four Freedoms Fund. “What’s interesting,” said Taryn Higashi, senior program officer at the Ford Foundation, “is that worker centers are being funded through the lenses of racial justice, immigrant rights and immigrant civic participation and thus aren’t framed for the collaboratives’ donors as worker centers per se...” Higashi’s view is that centers can benefit when they frame their work in terms that mainstream foundations associate with well-established program areas. For example, “the Four Freedoms Fund is ... supporting worker centers because of the important role they play in increasing civic participation and leadership within immigrant communities, and for their role as bridge builders to other communities and to a range of issues.”

John Colborn, deputy director of Economic and Workforce Development at Ford, had not viewed worker centers as potential instruments of the Foundation’s workforce development strategies, but he was very interested to learn of the public policy impact centers have been having. “If folks are willing to go for those kinds of policy wins and broad labor market changes, that gets me interested,” Colborn said.

In addition to an interest in organizing that leads to policy change, Colborn also believes the centers have a cultural competency that could greatly complement the labor market institutions that Ford does support. “When I visit these groups, I think why isn’t the statutory one-stop system contracting some of its service provision to the day laborer centers? There is a whole variety of one-stop services, universal services that don’t require documentation. Why not contract out your community service to these groups, because the day laborers are never going to come into a government-looking office; or why couldn’t a community college contract with a day laborer center to start thinking about playing a feeder role, for folks thinking about education and training?”

Colborn believes that it would not be difficult to get worker centers more deeply embedded in the larger labor market system, that workforce investment boards can be persuaded to try out different approaches, and that local funders could be helpful in brokering these collaborations. McFate from Rockefeller noted that public workforce development systems serve such a small percentage of those eligible for their services that any organizations that may help steer low-income workers (especially those with language challenges) to available services should be welcomed into the service delivery landscape.



# National Collaboratives That Support Immigrant Worker Centers

**T**he Phoenix Fund for Workers and Communities, a donor collaborative of the New World Foundation established in 1996, is the only national intermediary that specifically identifies funding immigrant worker centers as one of its three priority areas. As Ann Bastian, senior program officer, recounted, “In the mid-1990s we were seeing a growing new field of work that has now been named ‘economic justice.’ Increasingly, fights were around core economic issues and poverty. There was a need for a national intermediary that would help interested foundations and donors navigate the world of grassroots organizing, and identify promising projects.”

The Fund supports immigrant worker centers in eight states and three national networks, along with programs to develop dialogue between these centers, potential allies and funders. Bastian said donors to the fund chose immigrant worker centers because “they felt that they were one of the few places giving voice to this new population of largely undocumented non-citizens and that they were a way that these workers could represent themselves at the larger table.”

The Phoenix Fund is a public charity that is supported by small family foundations and donors who want an “on-the-ground” intermediary to advise them about where to invest their money.

Other intermediaries that support low-wage worker organizing include Tides, the Ms. Foundation Women and Labor Fund, and the Jewish Fund for Justice. There are a few intermediaries that support immigrant worker centers as part of their portfolios around racial justice and immigrant rights.

**The Racial Justice Collaborative** (RJC) is a partnership of private and corporate foundations, family foundations and individual donors that provides grants to partnerships “involving lawyers and community organizations utilizing legal and non-legal tools to achieve equity and fairer policies for communities marginalized by race and immigrant or citizenship status.” The RJC has a documentation and learning initiative that sponsors training and technical assistance to grantees, convenes meetings, and works to disseminate the lessons that organizations learn while carrying out their work. The RJC has supported the Asian Law Caucus and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, which is working closely with the Garment Worker Center, the Chinese Progressive Association and Sweatshop Watch to hold California’s garment industry accountable.

**The Four Freedoms Fund** supports state and local organizations engaged in immigrant civic integration activities and defending immigrant civil liberties. Four Freedoms makes grants to enhance capacity building, movement building and networking. The Fund is also interested in directly supporting the national organizations that are leading immigration reform efforts. It has not made low-wage worker organizing a specific program area, but has provided support to a few immigrant worker centers for their immigrant civic integration work. “We put money into the Four Freedoms Fund because it is a way to get support to state and local groups. We try to make it general support or capacity building because the issues change all the time—the groups work on issues that they identify as critical at a particular moment; they may be playing offense or defense—but they are committed to immigrant and civil rights over the long haul,” said Taryn Higashi, at Ford.

**Hispanics in Philanthropy** (HIP) works to strengthen Latino communities across the Americas by encouraging partnerships between Latino communities and organized philanthropy. HIP sponsors briefings, research and publications as well as regional, national and international conferences. HIP has also established a funding collaborative to strengthen the Latino civil sector by marshalling re-

*National foundations looking to support economic and public policy initiatives to improve low-wage work could support worker centers through funding collaboratives and regranting to public charities and community foundations.*



*Community foundations could provide direct funding for delivery of these services along with technical assistance to help the organizations gain access to public funds for services or linkages to private social service agencies.*



sources to support building the capacity of Latino non-profits. The collaborative is structured as a regranting program that helps participating funders to learn about and make grants in 15 targeted geographic areas.

While not a funder itself, the **Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG)** has a mission to “strengthen the capacity of organized philanthropy to understand and support community-based efforts to organize and improve the economic and social fabric of low-income urban neighborhoods and rural communities.” A number of foundations have become involved in NFG’s Working Group on Labor and Community, which was founded in the mid-1990s. The Working Group is a national network of funders “committed to fostering greater collaboration among foundations, labor unions and community groups to address issues facing the working poor.”

The Working Group provides opportunities for funders to learn more about successful collaborations between community-based organizations and unions on a variety of topics. The organization puts on workshops at NFG and Council on Foundation conferences, organizes site visits, operates a listserv, and occasionally commissions and publishes reports and studies on topics of interest to funders in this area.

Another important organization in this field is **Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR)**, which seeks to move the philanthropic field to address the issues of immigrant and refugee populations, largely in the United States. GCIR works to:

- ♦ Enhance philanthropy’s awareness of issues affecting immigrants and refugees and their new communities.
- ♦ Deepen the field’s understanding of how these issues are integral to community building in today’s dynamic social, economic and political environment.
- ♦ Increase philanthropic support for both broad and immigrant/refugee-focused strategies that benefit newcomer populations and strengthen the larger society.

National foundations looking to support economic and public policy initiatives to improve low-wage work could support worker centers through funding collaboratives and regranting to public charities and community foundations. Taryn Higashi of the Ford Foundation looks to local funders because “they have the expertise and have been on the ground and committed for a long time....” They could also consider regranting programs through consortiums of the groups themselves. The National Day Laborer Organizing Network, Enlace and Interfaith Worker Justice are three national networks of local organizations that foundations could support. In addition, under the auspices of Enlace, a consortium of worker centers has come together to seek funding.

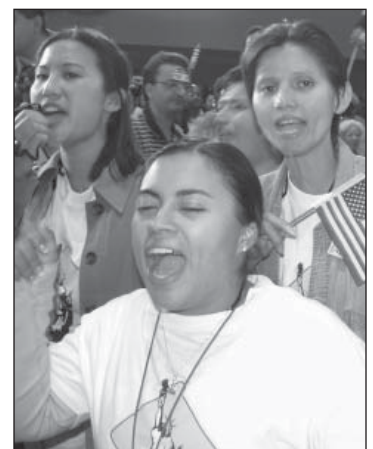
# Other Ways Foundations Can Support Worker Centers—Technical Assistance and Organizational Development

## Support

“Veatch has a strong technical assistance program which allows organizations to apply for mini-grants in five areas: organizational development, fundraising, specific campaigns, communications and travel. We think building the fundraising capacity is especially important because worker centers need to diversify their funding streams beyond foundations,” said Victor Quintana, senior program officer of the Veatch Program and co-chair of the Working Group on Labor and Community. For Veatch, one of the challenges in grantmaking to immigrant worker centers is the lack of diversity of funding sources. The foundation is usually one of the key sources of income for the groups. It has to balance a strong commitment to multi-year funding with helping newer organizations also be able to access resources.

Recognizing the importance of technical assistance to immigrant worker centers, other foundations have made it a priority as well. The New York Foundation (NYF) has many immigrant worker centers in its portfolio, and has a highly developed infrastructure to help provide capacity-building technical assistance to the groups it funds. “The signature NYF grantees are small organizations operating with a tiny staff, few resources and enormous expectations,” said Maria Mottola, executive director. “Their goals are huge in comparison to the resources they have available to achieve those goals. A grant from NYF is often the first large grant an organization receives... Our reports are likely to be the first time a group has put down on paper what their accomplishments are, or what their projected budget will be.”

For ongoing technical assistance, organizations are able to specify their needs and choose the person they want to work with from a pre-screened and approved roster of consultants. The Foundation believes that young organizations that receive start-up grants and are funded for five years reap the most from the technical assistance program, because they are starting from the beginning. “They are in the earliest stages of developing a board, beginning to fundraise, putting together a staff, etc.,” said Mottola. “So the best success stories involve those grantees that started out in their first year as one person’s good idea and grew over time into a staffed, funded organization.”



# The Way Foundations Provide Support is Important

As noted previously, 61 percent of worker center income derives from foundation funding. Over-reliance on foundation funding is problematic; however, foundation funding will remain critical for worker centers for the foreseeable future. Here are some suggestions about how foundations can help worker centers build themselves into stronger institutions for the long haul.

**Funding service provision:** Centers view service provision as a key part of what they provide to low-wage workers. They provide services to a population that most other organizations are unable to reach, due to issues of documentation, language and fear of government agencies. Community foundations could provide direct funding for delivery of these services along with technical assistance to help the organizations gain access to public funds for services or linkages to private social service agencies.

**Multi-year general support funding:** Compared to public monies, foundation funding is more flexible. Multi-year, general support funding is critically important for organizations to be able to establish basic infrastructure and develop programs and strategies over time. General support grants give organizations the ability to put staff in place and train them, and multi-year support gives them the opportunity to incubate specific programs and campaigns, which usually take several years to develop to maturity. Emergency grants and low- or no-interest loans to see organizations through difficult periods also should be more widely available.

**Start-up and matching grants to help organizations diversify their funding bases:** Foundations could provide incentives to centers to diversify their funding bases by providing start-up funds for income-generating projects and pledging matching funds for grassroots fundraising, fee-for-service projects and implementation of membership dues systems. Many worker centers are important as physical spaces where workers gather. Yet they often suffer from too little or inappropriate space, and rent can eat up a sizeable percentage of their annual budgets. In this context, those foundations that can, might think about supporting capital campaigns for permanent space.

**Enhancing organizational capacity:** Worker centers know that they need help and training on topics ranging from technology, fundraising, financial and personnel management to labor market and economic analyses of industries. Funds for technical assistance as well as pools of consultants from which organizations can choose are important ways that foundations can help. This support could include funding for bookkeeping, computers and translation equipment, as well as for business plans.

**Peer support and collaboration:** Foundations could provide support for centers to collaborate with each other and with other local civic actors to improve their capacity for economic analysis, link up with service providers and develop alternative income streams. They could also provide crucial support to centers that are seeking to establish a civic presence in their communities. Community foundations can convene other organizations they fund so that newcomers like worker centers have a chance to meet organizations with which they could collaborate, and which could provide pro-bono technical, legal, research, financial and administrative support. These organizations include academic and financial institutions, and legal support organizations.

**Networking:** Foundations can provide support to help centers establish and strengthen local, regional, statewide and national networks as platforms for joint work.

*Multi-year, general support funding is critically important for organizations to be able to establish basic infrastructure and develop programs and strategies over time. General support grants give organizations the ability to put staff in place and train them, and multi-year support gives them the opportunity to incubate specific programs and campaigns, which usually take several years to develop to maturity.*

## Conclusions

Worker centers play a multi-dimensional role in our communities. They provide critical frontline services in a direct and accountable fashion to constituencies who frequently will not intersect with government agencies. They are also playing a much larger advocacy role than their size would imply. At the state and local level they are important forces in labor and employment issues, immigration policy and basic safety net issues like healthcare. They help put a face on issues that are too often debated in the abstract.

Because they can help accomplish key goals such as poverty alleviation and immigrant integration, immigrant worker centers would be good investments for community foundations. In worker centers, foundations may find unique partners that provide low-wage workers and their families with opportunities to participate and make their concerns known. In addition, national foundations looking to support economic and public policy initiatives to improve low-wage work should consider immigrant worker centers.

The world of worker centers is hopeful, compassionate, inventive and dynamic. Confronting the “wild west” of America’s largely unregulated low-wage labor markets, and the legal limbo in which many of their members live and work, they have pioneered a host of innovative strategies that attempt to wrest order out of chaos. Centers provide essential legal representation and evince great skill at creative methods of recruitment, leadership development and democratic participation. They have effectively documented and exposed the exploitation of low-wage workers. They are altering the terms of debate—changing the way people understand the world around them, the problems they face and the possibilities for social change. In all too many cases, these centers are the only “port in the storm” for low-wage immigrant workers seeking to understand U.S. labor and immigration laws, file claims for back wages and organize against recalcitrant employers.

Through their service provision, advocacy and organizing work, immigrant worker centers are helping to set the political agenda and mobilize a growing constituency to make its voice heard on fundamental labor and immigration reform.

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# Appendix 1: Foundations That Support Immigrant Worker Centers

## National Grantmakers

Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Ben and Jerry's Foundation  
Center for New Communities  
Academy for Educational Development  
CS Mott Foundation  
Discount Foundation  
Edward Hazen Foundation  
Firedoll Foundation  
Ford Foundation  
Ford Foundation Advocacy Institute  
French American Charitable Trust  
Fund for New Citizens  
IOLA Fund  
JM Kaplan Fund  
Marguerite Casey Foundation  
Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation  
Mertz Gilmore Foundation  
Ms Foundation for Women  
Nathan Cummings Foundation  
Needmor Fund  
New World Foundation  
Norman Foundation  
Open Society Institute  
Overbrook Foundation  
Public Welfare Foundation  
Resist  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Robin Hood Foundation  
Rockefeller Brothers Foundation  
Rockefeller Foundation Working Communities  
Solidago Foundation  
Stone Soup for the New World  
Surdna Foundation  
Third Wave Foundation  
Tides Foundation/Hill Snowdon Fund  
Twenty-First Century Foundation

## National Religious Grantmakers

Catholic Campaign for Human Development  
Church World Service  
Episcopal Relief and Development  
Bishop John Richards Membership Appeal  
Jewish Fund for Justice  
Marianas Fund  
Mazon  
Presbyterian National Self Development of People Fund  
Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock

## Regional Grantmakers

Abelard Foundation (east and west)  
Community Foundation for the National Capital District (DC, Maryland and Virginia)\*\*  
Haymarket Peoples Fund: New England  
A Territory Resource: Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies  
Paul G. Allen Foundation (northwest)  
Rauch Foundation (Long Island and Maryland)  
Southern Partners Fund: southern states  
Weissberg Foundation (DC/Northern Virginia)

## State and Local Grantmakers

Allied Jewish Federation of Colorado  
Arlington Community Foundation\*\* (VA)  
Arlington County Bar Foundation (VA)  
Allegheny Franciscan Foundation, Dade County  
Asian Pacific Community Fund (LA)  
Buck Foundation (CA)  
Butler Family Foundation (MN)  
California Consumer Protection Fund  
California Endowment  
California Wellness Fund  
Chicago Community Trust\*\*  
Chinook Fund (Denver)  
Citizens for New York  
Clipper Ship Foundation (Boston)  
Common Ground Fund (DC Area)\*\* (a fund of Community Foundation for the National Capital District)  
Conrad Hilton Fund for Sisters (LA)  
Contorer Foundation (Seattle)  
Crossroads Fund (Chicago)  
Daphne Foundation (New York)  
Denver Foundation\*\*  
Diane Middleton Foundation (southern CA)  
Friedberg Foundation (Seattle)  
Fund for the City of New York  
Hoyer Center (Maryland)  
Hyams Foundation (Boston)  
Irvine Foundation (California)  
Just Media Fund (Denver)  
Kalish Fund (St. Louis Community Foundation)\*\*  
Liberty Hill Foundation/Fund for a New LA and Rhino Entertainment Fund  
Lily Auchincloss Foundation (NYC)  
Long Island Community Foundation\*\*  
Los Angeles Womens Foundation  
Mazursky Donations (film-related)  
McKenzie River Gathering (Oregon)  
Meyer Foundation (DC area)  
Miller Foundation (LI/NY)  
Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation (DC area)

New York Community Trust\*\*  
New York Foundation  
New York Women's Foundation  
North Star Fund (NYC)  
NYC Environmental Fund  
Peggy Browning Foundation (National-legal intern-  
ships)  
Pritchard Family Foundation (NYC)  
Ralph L Smith Foundation (Oregon)  
Ratshesky Foundation (Boston)  
Roman Catholic Archbishop (LA)  
Rosenberg Foundation (CA)  
San Gabriel Presybterian (LA)  
The Boston Foundation\*\*  
United Way (Maryland)  
Wagner Foundation (NYC)  
Weingarten Foundation (CA)  
Whitecap (LA)  
Wieboldt Foundation (Chicago)  
Wolcott Family Foundation (Denver)  
Women's Foundation /Race, Gender and Human Rights  
Fund (LA)  
Woods Fund of Chicago

Service Employees International Union  
Public Allies

### **Funding Collaboratives**

Four Freedoms Fund  
Funders Collaborative for Strong Latino Communities/  
Hispanics in Philanthropy  
Funding Exchange  
Ms Foundation Women and Labor Fund  
Phoenix Fund for Workers and Communities (NWF)  
Racial Justice Collaborative

### **Corporate Grantmakers**

Citizens Bank (Boston)  
First Data/Western Union Foundation  
Independence Community Foundation: NYC, Nassau  
County, Northern NJ  
American Express  
JP Morgan Chase  
Merck Foundation  
Reebok Foundation  
Washington Mutual Foundation

### **Infrastructure Regrants**

Center for Community Change  
CLINIC: Catholic Legal Immigration Network  
Hispanic Federation (Long Island)  
America's Second Harvest, NYC  
Ironworkers  
LA Conservation Corps  
Laborers Union  
Loyola Law School (LA)  
Maryland Legal Services Corporation  
National Asian Women's Health Organization  
National Association for Public Interest Law  
National Institutes for Occupational Safety and Health  
New Visions for Public Schools (NYC)  
Non-Profit Assistance Center (Seattle)  
Oxfam  
Progressive Technology Project

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\*\* community foundation

## Appendix 2: Capacity-Building Survey of Immigrant Worker Centers for Program Officers

This survey is intended as a guide to help funders think about ways to assess and strengthen the organizational capacity and sustainability of worker centers and their ability to pursue their mission through a combination of services, advocacy and organizing work. **There is no expectation that any worker center can achieve all these goals.**

### Organizational capacity:

1. Does the organization have clear organizational goals and strategies?
2. What is the organization's strategic capacity for internal management and planning, budget and fundraising?
3. How long have key staff members been in place? Does the group have the ability to retain staff in general, and staff members of color in particular, in leadership and organizing positions?
4. What role do volunteer leaders play in the activities, agenda setting and governance of the organization?
5. Does the organization have the ability to document programs, successes and numbers?
6. Does the organization have a clear membership model it is working toward? How does it expect to achieve sufficient scale to effect the kind of change it seeks?
7. Is the organization open to different models and ideas?

### Fundraising Strategies:

1. Does the group have fundraising savvy or interest in developing it?
2. Is the group thinking about ways to diversify its funding sources and reduce its dependence on foundations? Has the organization thought about long-term sustainability? Is there interest in membership dues, grassroots fundraising, charging fees for the services it provides and other revenue-generating strategies?

### Service Delivery:

1. Is there a sense of strategic provision of services with clear goals? Are these services not available elsewhere? Do any of them get to scale?
2. Is the service a recruitment draw that builds membership? If so, how is this documented?
3. Does the service activity lead to organizing? Is it a potential revenue stream for the worker center?

### Networking and Collaboration:

1. Does the group have strong, organic ties to the community through leadership, staff, board, members and location?
2. Is the group embedded in a network of other organizations to learn from and act with?
3. Is the organization coalitional in nature and strategic in terms of "out of the box" thinking about seeking allies?

## Strategic Campaign Work:

1. What is the organization's capacity for campaign strategy development? Is there internal organizational capacity to sustain external campaigns?
2. Are the organization's strategies informed by extensive and detailed economic and political research? What kind of industry/labor market analysis informs the choice of campaigns and targets?
3. Is there is a strategy for affecting the overall labor market? Are there efforts to create partnerships with unions, academic institutions, faith communities and other community-based institutions? Could the group's workforce development activities be tied to the larger public and private workforce development entities in the community?
4. What is the group's level of political sophistication—its legislative and electoral research capacity, analytical expertise, and relationship with elected officials, their staffs, and government administrators?
5. Is there an ability to mobilize a significant base of workers to take action or is the organization working toward it? What is the largest turnout the organization has ever had at a single event? What is the average turnout to membership meetings?

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In terms of sheer numbers, more immigrants arrived in the United States between 1990 and 2000 than during any previous period in American history. The immigrant population in the United States increased from 19.8 million in 1990 to 31.1 million in 2000. The two most striking differences between the Golden Era and today's immigrants are ethnicity and legal status. While 90 percent of immigrants to the United States during the Golden Era were white and European, only 15 percent of today's immigrants are from Europe, while half are from Latin America, with Mexicans comprising a full third of the total. See Diane Schmidley, Profile of the Foreign-born Population in the United States: 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Special Studies No. P23-206, December 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, the Legal Services Corporation, created in 1974 to provide legal aid to the poor, once played an important role for low-wage immigrant workers. But by 1996, "all legal service agencies operating under funds provided by the Legal Services Corporation are prohibited from representing undocumented immigrants, as well as from filing class actions, challenges to welfare reform, rulemaking, lobbying, litigation on behalf of prisoners, and representation in drug-related public housing evictions...." From the official website of the Legal Services Corporation, <http://www.lsc.gov/>
- <sup>3</sup> In his 2004 study of jobs and activism in the African-American community, scholar Steven Pitts set out to understand why the immigrant worker center strategy has not by and large had a counterpart in the black community. First, he argues that the crisis around work in black communities is too often defined exclusively as a problem of high unemployment, and not also as a problem of bad jobs: "jobs that pay poorly; jobs with few benefits; jobs that offer no protection from employer harassment; jobs whose only future is a dead-end." Pitts found that responses to the crisis of bad jobs in the black community and to the racially polarized nature of job markets often focused on individual skills development as opposed to putting forward a more systemic critique of the problem along with strategies for transforming bad jobs on a larger scale. Those organizations that do take up the issues of jobs "do not attempt to improve the jobs held by black workers. Instead the emphasis is on the individualized provision of job readiness counseling, soft skills and hard skills." Pitts posits several other reasons for what he calls the "lack of transformative responses to the job crisis." These include a tendency for the African-American freedom movement to focus on issues of ownership and control over assets rather than employer/employee relationships and the integration of African-Americans into existing government agencies. <sup>4</sup> Steven C. Pitts "Organize...to Improve the Quality of Jobs in the Black Community: A Report on Jobs and Activism in the African-American Community" UC Berkeley Labor Center, May 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> American Express is currently contributing to Comité de Apoyo A Los Trabajadores Agrícolas (CATA) in New Jersey. El Centro Humanitario in Denver receives support from the First Data/Western Union Foundation. Casa Latina in Washington state is supported by Washington Mutual Foundation. Make the Road by Walking in Brooklyn, New York, receives corporate support from JP Morgan Chase, Merck and the Independence Community Foundation. Citizens Bank in Boston supports the Brazilian Immigrant Center.
- <sup>6</sup> At present the Collaborative funds Casa de Maryland, the D.C. Employment Justice Project, the Virginia Justice Project, the Tenants and Workers Support Committee, Reston Interfaith and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) to provide technical assistance to the groups.
- <sup>7</sup> Public Welfare supports a large number of immigrant worker centers, including Casa Latina in Seattle, the Workplace Project on Long Island, the Brazilian Immigrant Center in Boston, the Latin American Workers Project in New York City, Voz in Portland, Oregon, Union Latino in Chicago, the Virginia Justice Center, Centro Humanitario in Denver, the Garment Worker Center and IDEPSCA in Los Angeles and Casa de Maryland.

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## Neighborhood Funders Group Mission

Neighborhood Funders Group is a membership association of grantmaking institutions. Our mission is to strengthen the capacity of organized philanthropy to understand and support community-based efforts to organize and improve the economic and social fabric of low-income urban neighborhoods and rural communities. We provide information, learning opportunities, and other professional development activities to our national membership, and encourage the support of policies and practices that advance economic and social justice.

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