

Ira Barbell on the role organizing can play in helping a community-change initiative achieve results



Making Connections Des Moines has had two very successful experiences working with local community organizing groups on issues that affected many residents of its target neighborhoods. One involves working with Citizens for Community Improvement on predatory lending (see Stopping Predatory Lending). The second involved working with AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) on medical debt (see Easing the Burden of Medical Debt in Des Moines).

These experiences influenced the thinking of Ira Barbell, Making Connection Des Moines's long-time "Site Team Leader." Barbell is a Senior Associate with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Before coming to the Foundation, he directed South Carolina's child, family and adult services agency.

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One of the touchstones for *Making Connections* is the need for measurable results for the families living in the neighborhoods it is trying to help transform. It’s not enough to simply talk about and plan for change. Instead, an initiative like *Making Connections* must be able to show with data how the lives of those living in these neighborhoods have actually changed.

In Des Moines, some of the strongest data showing change in the lives of its neighborhoods’ residents has resulted from the work of two local community organizing groups. One helped dozens of families recover more than \$2.5 million from four businesses that were using predatory lending tactics. The second is helping potentially hundreds of families avoid millions of dollars of medical debt.

As a result of these experiences, the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Ira Barbell says that he is “*much more convinced that organizing has the potential to produce results.*” And he thinks organizing can do this in a way that doesn’t necessarily alienate local institutions or public agencies.

“AMOS was successful in engaging the hospitals. There was never a demonstration, picketing or anything. It showed the power of consumers, residents and the community to remedy something unfair that was hindering low-income families’ ability to succeed.”

“What this reinforces is that an organizing strategy has tremendous potential to achieve results that will change people’s lives. It is literally millions of dollars that are back in people’s pockets that previously wouldn’t have been there.”

Despite this clear success, organizing strategies still have not been widely embraced by *Making Connections* or most other community change initiatives, Barbell says.

“My frustration is that we have not been able to capture this experience. We haven’t been able to communicate that an investment in an organizing strategy can produce tangible, concrete results for families without threatening the community’s institutional infrastructure.”

Despite *Making Connections*’ strong commitment to engage residents of its target neighborhoods, Barbell thinks that one of this initiative’s biggest challenges nationally is the reluctance of its institutional partners to fund community organizing as a core strategy to engage these residents and achieve results.

“If we had created a health program that had the same impact on people’s lives as this organizing strategy has, we would have had all of these institutional partners funding it. But if we had gone to them and said, ‘Look, we want to raise \$100,000 to fund this organizing strategy to moderate the health care system’s policies to improve families’

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financial stability and help them access the health care system, I don’t think we would have gotten a dime out of any of them.

“I am convinced that there are other issues where we can apply this strategy. We want resident capacity, but resident capacity for what? What residents want are changes in their lives that impact what’s happening to them on a daily basis. We need to be able to say to residents, ‘Look, here are tangible examples of where the community has come together and brought about changes that improve the quality of life for children and families in Des Moines. You too have the capacity to bring about change in the things that impact your lives.’”

Barbell thinks that *Making Connections* should also be able to “have a conversation with our institutional partners as well” about how an organizing strategy can help them achieve results around whatever set of issues they care the most about.

Barbell acknowledges that many institutional partners worry about being a target of the organizing around a particular issue. *“I think there is some anxiety at the institutional level that we need to understand. We need to peel this away and give people like Paul [Turner, an AMOS organizer] a chance to lift this up.”*

The main point that needs to get communicating, Barbell believes, is that organizing can be *“a powerful tool that can produce substantive results if we are serious about engaging families and communities to bring about change.”*

The unease with organizing strategies extends to national foundations as well, Barbell adds. *“I don’t know why organizing hasn’t become as mainstream as some of the human service programs that we fund on a regular basis. We have a lot of programs we fund that are lurking around the margins and not dealing substantively with the major changes that families want.*

“Maybe that is the issue — organizing has become driven by families and individuals and not by the funders and institutional partners. So they feel less certain about where this is going to end up. This is a very different way of doing business with a community.”

Barbell keeps coming back to the idea that, *“We need to capture the success we have had in getting substantive changes for families.”* If people saw these concrete results on important issues, he thinks they would eventually insist that organizing strategies be part of the mix.

“But that question isn’t even on the table,” Barbell adds. *“People just talk about a job-training program or a pipeline to business. It’s all service-program strategies*

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that seem to be on the table first and solely. That’s what I’ve taken away from this.”

He says that Des Moines’ work on predatory lending and medical debt “has literally put tens of millions of dollars in the pockets of low-income families.

“It dwarfs the EITC [an effort to get more families to file for the Earned Income Tax Credit]. It dwarfs other stuff that is going on. It has huge potential and we haven’t been able to tap it.” Organizing could help Making Connections achieve scale — one of its key goals — by being part of a strategy to modify state policies, “but we haven’t been able to do that yet.”

Barbell thinks one way the Casey Foundation could help is to look at the

sites where organizing groups have helped *Making Connections* achieve specific successes and “*distill out of that a more mainstream strategy for using organizing to achieve results.*”

Such a strategy would not just be an “against-the-establishment strategy” but one that “brings the establishment in as partners.”

Barbell acknowledges that this is not how organizing has been seen in the past, or how many organizers see their role in the future. “*There are certain mythologies, beliefs and fears on both sides that keep organizing from becoming a more mainstream strategy for achieving change.*”

This is one of a series of reflections and reports about the work of Making Connections, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E Casey Foundation. These reflections are available at: www.DiaristProject.org. For more information, contact Tim@CharityChoices.org.

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