

Session 6B:

Expanding the Base: Building and Connecting to Grassroots Support

Moderator: Lori Gay, Executive Director, Los Angeles Neighborhood Housing Association

Panelists:

- Anthony Wright, Executive Director, Health Access
 - Bill Kennedy, Managing Attorney, Northern California Legal Services
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In the session entitled, “Expanding the Base: Building and Connecting to Grassroots Support” Panelists Bill Kennedy and Anthony Wright discussed challenges and strategies for creating grassroots support. Some of the ideas the group developed are included in the list below.

Organizing Challenges:

1. Policy groups tend to analyze existing data on a social problem and develop solutions without first reaching out to constituents for buy-in. When these groups reach out to communities to speak about assets, for example, they often face blank faces from those who simply are not interested in what seems like such an abstract topic. Letting a policy agenda get too far ahead of the grassroots weakens a groups political clout.
2. Intimacy barriers: Personal finances are private matters for most people. In order to organize people to begin public discourse on financial matters, it is important to build trust.
3. In order to make policies palatable to the widest audiences, many policy groups often avoid difficult issues such as race. But it is exactly those issues like race that touch underserved populations most deeply. In order to organize a committed group, it is essential to address issues like race.

Organizing Solutions:

1. Accessing local groups: It is important to understand how people organize themselves in a community. Political organizers should work to access the existing groups that community members already identify with – faith-based groups, groups based on geography (one neighborhood), or groups already delivering services to the community you are trying to reach.
2. Build Coalitions: Other advocacy groups have powerful resources in the form of constituents to share. APIC, for example, is a way for groups like the Health Access to broaden the reach of its own issue and access new constituencies and legislators. The asset building movement helps to connect healthcare issues to the issue of economic security.
3. Making policy understandable: Policy focused groups have to work to avoid jargon and keep their messages simple, reducing them to a two page handout, for example, or using GIS mapping.
4. Engage grassroots participants and local groups in the creation of solutions that work best for them.



5. Grassroots support offers advocacy groups a way to translate abstract policies into real life stories for legislators of their constituents' needs.