

## EXPANSION AND REPLICATION

**F**or 21 years, COFI has worked to build the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life. Through COFI's intensive and systematic leadership development and organizing process, leaders address issues at both a personal level and through public action.

While based in Chicago, COFI expanded its partnerships to low-income parents of color in four Illinois sites outside of Chicago in 2014—Aurora, East St. Louis, Elgin and Evanston—and deepened its work in three Chicago neighborhoods by working with parents of very young children. Here are two stories of COFI's work in new Illinois communities. COFI received funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Family Engagement Initiative to implement, document, and disseminate the three-year leadership training and organizing process in these expansion and replication communities.

### EAST ST. LOUIS, ILLINOIS

In 2013, COFI came to East St. Louis, a poverty-stricken and under-resourced community of about 30,000 in southern Illinois, to do trainings for parents, through the All Our Kids Early Childhood Network. The goal was to build parent leaders who will eventually address public policies that affect families. Later, COFI organized parents from early childhood centers and preschools. Transportation was among the prominent issues parents identified.

Yolanda Wooten, a single mother who has two grown sons and three grandchildren, has lived in East St. Louis for almost all of her life. “My main concern has been to keep kids on the right education track. In COFI trainings, I learned about myself, how to manage things and give to the community. And I learned that I'm not alone; I found a circle of friends who support each other. We've knocked on doors in the community, learned about what concerns people have.”

“Before COFI, I didn't know what steps and procedures to take on issues that affect our community,” she says. Wooten helped organize a group called Parents United for Change, which has met with the mayor, the police chief and others.

Dr. Kareem Mateen, administrator with East St. Louis School District 189, calls COFI “a true support system in the community.” “I have seen COFI transform parents into leaders—parents who didn't even know that quality. The major thing is, they want their voices to be heard.”



**“We have power in numbers, and if we pull together, we can make changes in this city. Now, I don't just have love for my children, I have compassion for my city.”**

*Yolanda Wooten, a single mother who has two grown sons and three grandchildren, has lived in East St. Louis for almost all of her life.*

**RIGHT, FROM TOP:**  
Parents United for Change in East St. Louis meet to review their outreach findings; COFI parents organize a community day for their neighborhood to help people get to know each other





**“This is my passion now. With COFI, I’ve found a family that accepts me where I am. I am part of this movement.”**

*Liliana Olayo is the mother of three children who are 9, 14 and 22 years old. She lives in Aurora, a new community where COFI is training parents to be leaders. She is shown here displaying her COFI advanced leader badges.*

**AURORA, ILLINOIS**

“I wish I had met COFI before I did,” says Liliana Olayo, a mother of three who lives in Aurora, where COFI has trained parents to be leaders over the past two years. “I am grateful. COFI teaches me that I need to be strong for my kids—but that can’t be possible if I don’t take care of myself.”

COFI has trained several groups of parents in Aurora, a mixed income city about 50 miles west of Chicago, including one group from the school district’s early learning center and one from the Visiting Nurses Association Home-Visiting program. Local partners include SPARK (Strong Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten) Early Childhood Network, East Aurora School District 131, and Family Focus-Aurora.

Trainings started in 2014. In Phase 1, participants looked at themselves, their goals and how they could become leaders. In Phase 2, parents learned the skills of community outreach, interviewed 104 neighbors and hosted a Community Forum attended by over 100. Parents also organized a Parent Summit that addressed the need for children’s savings accounts.

“I’ve learned about many tools and resources by being involved with COFI,” says Olayo who moved in 1991 from Mexico to the U.S. where she has lived ever since.

“I tell COFI I have three goals,” Olayo says. “I want to make a difference on my street, where it’s not always safe; in the school district, where we don’t have school buses; and in all of Aurora. We need more parks and more activities, especially for the teenagers. They need to know that someone is thinking of them.”

In the meantime, Olayo says that she and COFI are trying to bring more people into the program. “This is my passion now,” she says. “With COFI, I’ve found a family that accepts me where I am. I am part of this movement.”

**LEFT, FROM TOP: Liliana Olayo and other parents graduate from COFI Parent Peer Training; Padres Lideres Activos of Aurora present on their work at a Statewide Parent Gathering.**

