



**Community Organizing and Family Issues:**

**Making Real Impact in Chicago  
Communities**

**PROSPECTUS  
2004**



## Community Organizing and Family Issues: Making Real Impact in Chicago Communities

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Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) strengthens the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life—from local institutions and communities, to city and state policy arenas. By assuring that parents have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives, COFI builds healthy, family-supportive communities in low-income neighborhoods. Through a highly intentional leadership development and organizing process, Family Focused Organizing, parents develop skills, confidence and organized power to win improvements in schools, communities and public policies.

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### Family Focused Organizing: Building Parent Leadership, Catalyzing Change

Family Focused Organizing (FFO) helps individuals and communities create positive change. COFI's FFO model uses the following strategies to help parents achieve their goals for themselves and their community:

- ***Focus on strengthening the individual first.*** Participants develop leadership skills, problem-solving tools and forge strong, mutually supportive teams that enable them to achieve their personal and family goals.
- ***Build capacity to create change within communities.*** After participants have built up their leadership skills, they are able to take on larger projects and lead campaigns in their schools and communities.
- ***Empower parents to challenge policies that affect their lives.*** As participants achieve goals in the community, they develop broad public policy campaigns by organizing with groups in other communities.

### COFI's Family Focused Organizing is comprised of:

- ***Self:*** A six-session introductory leadership development course—*Self, Family & Team*—that leads to the formation of Parent Action Teams in local schools and organizations.
- ***Team:*** Staff provide organizing support and *Team Building* training for Parent Action Teams to help them achieve action goals.
- ***Community: Community Outreach & Action*** training for new leaders, other parents and community residents to build relationships, identify issues facing families, and engage more parents in tackling issues to make the community a better place for families.
  - ***Linking teams in local communities:*** Providing organizing support to teams and their local partners in working toward more ambitious community organizing goals, and developing a structure to continue work on specific goals.
- ***Policy and systems:*** Recognizing that many local community problems are rooted in public policy, parent leaders become engaged in the policy making process and in broader citywide and statewide organizing. COFI provides advanced training in policy and systems change.

In 2003, the parents created a new citywide parent organization, *POWER-PAC, Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council*.



## Self: Leadership Begins From Within

Family Focused Organizing begins with the individual. Through the *Self, Family & Team* training, parents assess their needs, wants and values. They create supportive teams with one another, set goals and establish plans for achieving those goals. This process of personal change boosts the participants' self-esteem and helps them realize their leadership potential.

### COFI Accomplishments: Parents Become Community Leaders

- More than 1,300 parents have participated in COFI's leadership development process in six Chicago communities including Austin, Englewood, Logan Square, Rogers Park, Uptown and West Town.
- 112 parents have campaigned for Local School Council seats—99 were victorious.
- More than 50 parents have joined the boards of community-based organizations in their neighborhoods
- More than 30 have found employment at local community organizations and schools.

### COFI Parents: In Their Own Words

- “I feel better as a person and as a mother. I feel I have confidence in myself and have noticed the same growth in confidence in my children.” - *Carmen Gonzales, Parent Leader*
- “One of the workshop questions was, ‘Who is the leader in your house?’ I started to think about it, and it was me. It was a real awakening once I found out that I was the one in control of my life.” - *Tami Love, Parent Organizer*

### Highlighting COFI's Success: One Woman's Story

“When I came to the U.S. from Mexico,” said **Graciela Suarez, a parent leader and organizer in the West Town community**, “I missed my family, and I was quiet and depressed. The COFI training helped me see that other people who were in a similar situation were setting goals for themselves and accomplishing them.”

“The training opened my eyes and gave me a sense of direction. The other parents were supportive and helped me think of different ways to achieve my goals,” she explained, “Now, when I set goals, I never forget what I learned in the training—be realistic, specific and make sure the goal is achievable.”

With the support of her parent team, Graciela tackled her most daunting personal goals - learning English and earning her GED. Inspired by her success, she began working with other parents on broader community changes: creating a parent room and child care center at the school, winning funding for after-school programs, and tackling community safety issues. Graciela became a key leader at her school, and at the community and citywide levels. She joined the staff of West Town Leadership United, a COFI partner organization, in 1999 and currently works as a parent organizer.



## **Team: Achieving Goals Through Teamwork**

As parents begin to develop their personal and family visions and begin working to achieve their individual goals, they discover that they share many of the same problems and needs. COFI staff help and support the Parent Action Teams that commit to work together on an ongoing basis to address shared concerns.

### **COFI Accomplishments: Parent Action Teams Advocate for Local Change**

- Since 1995, Parent Action Teams have been formed in 24 schools in 6 communities. These teams range in size from 4 to 77 members and typically organize parents to work on campaigns that address issues such as safety, better communications with school staff members, and specific school improvements such as uniforms, parent rooms and better facilities.
- The teams have worked to change local schools and institutions in important ways, making them more family-friendly and receptive to parent leadership. Through the influence of parent teams, schools have begun to involve parents in programming, policy setting, and increasingly welcome the voice and leadership of parents in school decision-making.

### **COFI Parents: In Their Own Words**

- “When we formed our parent group—Driving Englewood Above the Rim—we had so many ideas about changes we wanted to make in the community and the school. Through the SFT workshops, we realized that many of our goals were inter-connected and achievable. For example, we were interested in tutoring and after-school programs, as well as increased security in the community and more community involvement in the school. Those goals led us to the idea of opening a community center at the school, which now addresses many of these issues.”

- Pam Galloway, Parent Leader

### **Highlighting COFI’s Success: Parent Action Teams**

- Organized community events attended by hundreds of families such as family reading nights, cultural fairs, back-to-school events and anti-violence vigils.
- Won funding for the construction of a new school for Ellington Elementary School to replace a dilapidated building in the Austin community.
- Won funding to establish two new community play-lots.
- Established GED, ESL, computer skills and basic literacy classes for adults in more than dozen schools.
- Initiated parent safety patrols and other safety program in more than 10 schools.
- Instituted Parent-Teacher Mentor programs in 11 schools.
- Won new parent rooms in 15 schools and 5 new computer labs..
- Strengthened police protection in high crime areas and won new speed bumps, traffic circles, street barricades and stop signs in 11 neighborhoods.



## **Community: Changing Lives One Neighborhood at a Time**

The COFI *Community Outreach & Action* training gives parent leaders the tools they need to meet with neighbors, find common ground, develop new programs, organize community-wide campaigns and spread their message to other communities.

### **COFI Accomplishments: Communities are a Better Place for Families to Live**

- Since 1995, 16 teams have conducted more than 5,000 outreach interviews in their communities. The interview process helps parent leaders learn about the community's interests and needs and build relationships with other parents, as well as potential partners and supporters.
- COFI Parent Action Teams have brought more than \$3 million in new programs and resources for families into their communities, including 12 new parent-run community centers in their schools and five computer labs, adult education classes and countless other programs for children, parents and families.
- In other Chicago neighborhoods, Parent Action Teams are responsible for 2 new play lots, 11 schools have new speed bumps, traffic circles, street barricades or stop signs. In several high crime neighborhoods, police protection has been strengthened around schools.
- Parent leaders have led the creation of 2 new family focused organizations—the West Town Leadership United community organization, a multi-issue parent-led neighborhood group, and Sankofa Community Outreach and Restoration Center, a citywide organization for families navigating the criminal justice system.

### **COFI Parents: In Their Own Words**

- “We went out in the community to survey as a group—as a team. We bonded and stood as a team. We did 676 interviews—nothing stopped us. What we couldn’t do by ourselves we did together. After all of the surveys were finished, we held a community meeting with parents, community leaders and politicians. We put the surveys in the front of the room and read them out loud. Then we talked about what we needed to do for our community.”  
- *Nancy Santiago, Parent Leader*

### **Highlighting COFI’s Success: Community Learning Centers**

In more than 12 schools, the community outreach process has resulted parents organizing to open new community centers located within the school that operate after school hours to provide free programs for children and adults in the community.

- Programs offered at the centers include adult ESL, GED and literacy classes, scouts, computer classes, dance instruction, youth sports, steel drums, Alcoholics Anonymous programs, after-school tutoring, citizenship classes, and arts programs.
- The centers have been successful, attracting hundreds of residents and boasting among the highest graduation rates of any adult education programs in the city.

## **Policy and Systems: Parents Create an Agenda to Address Concerns**

In the policy phase, parent leaders from around the city come together to take their ideas and concerns to public officials and community decision-makers. In 2003, these parent leaders formed POWER-PAC, Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council, a new citywide parent organization. Focusing on common concerns raised by parents, POWER-PAC’s mission is to work to change programs and challenge policies that aren't meeting the needs of families, and build partnerships between community residents and professionals to develop programs and policies that work.

## **COFI Accomplishments: Parents Organize to be Heard by Public Officials**

- More than 50 parent leaders from 15 schools have helped to build POWER-PAC, a cross-community, cross-cultural group that aims to reform public policy in Chicago and Illinois to meet families’ needs, and to organize COFI’s campaign for public funding and support of community schools.
- Parent leaders have sponsored 3 annual Family Lobby Days in Springfield bringing more than 100 parents and children each year to meet with legislators on issues of relevance to their families.
- For the past five years, parent leaders have sponsored an annual summer Celebration of Hope to reflect on and share their accomplishments and thank their partners in the community and at the policy level.
- The citywide parent leaders’ newsletter committee publishes a bilingual newsletter for parent leaders—*Parent Unity Across Communities*—that is distributed to more than 2000 parents and community residents around the city.
- The Sankofa Community Outreach and Restoration Center succeeded in winning support from Chief Judge Tim Evans for new services for families in the criminal court system.

## **COFI Parents: In Their Own Words**

- “The Parent Policy Associates program taught me to keep working for change. When we do things such as travel to Springfield for Lobby Day, we meet with legislators and can see the impact of our work. It’s important for all of us to get out there and show people that parents can make changes happen, too.”
  - Delphine Weatherly, Parent Leader

### **Highlighting COFI’s Success: Community Schools Campaign**

Through COFI’s Community Schools Campaign, parent leaders met with policymakers from the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), IL Department of Human Services, Illinois State Legislature and other advocacy groups. Their efforts have won the following victories:

- A commitment by CPS, in collaboration with private funders, to fund and support the development of 20 new community schools in 2003 and 100 over the next five years.
- New funds for after-school programs.
- A new requirement to include parents in planning for the \$19 million CPS After School Counts program.
- A declaration of support from CPS for parent participation in planning, training, oversight and employment at new school-based community centers.
- More than \$1.25 million in federal CANAL funds to support five school-based community centers citywide.
- Parent leaders helped create a group advocating for community schools—the Chicago Coalition for Community Schools.

## **COFI's Future: A Look at COFI's Plans for Growth in the Coming Years**

### **Expand Family Focused Organizing to New Communities and Groups**

We plan to continue to expand our work to one to two new communities every two years. Conversations have begun with potential partners in Little Village—a vibrant, working class Latino neighborhood. In order to build the capacity to expand the local organizing work, we offer a Parents as Peer Trainers program and recently launched an apprenticeship program for organizers of color. Through the peer trainer and apprentice programs, advanced parent leaders in each community have the opportunity to gain the skills to build new parent teams and sustain their own teams into the future.

### **Build POWER-PAC, the new Citywide Parent Organization**

The next few years will be a pivotal time for COFI's development. Thus far, COFI has focused on building local teams and groups in Latino and African American communities throughout Chicago and loosely linking them together for work on city and statewide public policy issues. The leaders of these groups have recently come together to formalize these linkages and to create POWER-PAC, Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council, a new citywide parent organization. This takes their cross-community public policy work to a new level. POWER-PAC is made up of representatives of Parent Action Teams from throughout the city and is developing its' multi-issue agenda. It is parent-run, parent-controlled and supported by COFI staff.

### **Establish COFI as a Resource for Parents and Organizations**

COFI has published the first manual in the set of four Family Focused Organizing manuals to enable interested organizations to incorporate our model into their work. We are developing an organizer training program for interested groups beyond our immediate network and we are considering hosting a second, larger national gathering of Family Focused Organizing groups to share ideas and learn from one another. We continue to publish the COFI's newsletter—*COFInotes*—and plan to develop a Web site to disseminate information to parent leaders and to interested organizations in Chicago and nationally.

**For more information on COFI trainings, organizing programs, publications or research, please call (312) 226-5141 or write to [cofi@cofionline.org](mailto:cofi@cofionline.org).**

**If you are interested in making a donation please call the number above or send a check payable to Community Organizing and Family Issues to the following address:**

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