



# ISSUE BRIEF

## BUILDING PUBLIC WILL: One Faith Leader at a Time

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### » INTRODUCTION

When advocates seek to engage others and build a movement to cause meaningful change, one of the most challenging steps is to develop a network of engaged volunteers. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the divide between the “us” of advocacy groups and community organizers and the “them” of community—a divide that can make it difficult for advocacy movement staff to understand and speak to the community’s values enough to activate people.

Faith leaders exemplify one way to bridge this gap. Not only do many faith leaders have a passion for making a difference in their community, they also tend to have a specific, broad-based constituency whom they regularly engage. As such, faith leaders and faith-based movements can be strategic partners for advocacy efforts where broad participation and motivating people to take action is important.

Project Health Colorado (PHC), a 2011-13 community-focused effort designed to engage individuals and organizations in a statewide discussion about health care and how it can be improved, supported people throughout the state who were working to build public will for access to health for all Coloradans. Funded by The Colorado Trust, a statewide grantmaking

foundation focused on improving health equity in Colorado, many organizations participated in PHC and, accordingly, recruited different types of volunteers, including nurses, physicians, parents, community members and faith leaders.

This brief explores the experience of one PHC grantee partner, Together Colorado, and their efforts to engage and support faith leaders in advocating for access to health in Colorado. Throughout the duration of PHC, Together Colorado worked with an array of faith leaders to mobilize faith communities, including hundreds of congregants, around the issue of access to health. These faith leaders received training on a common message framework, helped convene community forums, conducted one-on-one conversations with congregants and directly engaged state policymakers.

This brief presents the specific approach used by Together Colorado to engage faith leaders and congregations in advocating for access to health. It also includes tips about what works best when working with congregations in order to build will and mobilize new advocates around a particular issue. This brief is primarily intended for community organizers and secondarily for funders interested in supporting organizing efforts.

## » PROJECT HEALTH COLORADO

Project Health Colorado (PHC) was created and funded by The Colorado Trust, a statewide grantmaking foundation, to organize a group of organizations and individuals interested in discussing health care issues, learning more and standing together to make health care work better for Coloradans. By asking questions, getting straight answers and encouraging people across the state to be part of the solutions, PHC helped influence how decisions are made about health care. PHC built on the work of 13 organizational partners to help foster the necessary awareness, understanding and, ultimately, support for the kind of changes that will help achieve access to health for all Coloradans. Additional funding for those partners was provided by the Colorado Health Foundation. The communication and messaging experiences outlined in this brief build on the training PHC participants received from Spitfire Strategies, one of the PHC communications consultants.



## » TOGETHER COLORADO

Together Colorado is an affiliate of the PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) National Network, which serves as an umbrella hub for faith-based community organizations across the United States, ensuring that the voice of local and statewide faith advocacy efforts can contribute meaningfully to national policy reform. Together Colorado's model of multifaith and multiracial community organizing and its statewide clergy network that works in partnership with other engaged community leaders have helped bring the issues of health, education, immigration reform, gun violence prevention and economic justice to the forefront of Colorado's policy agenda.



## » WHY FAITH LEADERS?

Faith-based mobilization represents one of the largest and most dynamic efforts to promote democracy and social justice, and strengthen public life in the United States today.<sup>1</sup> The profound impact of faith-based organizing in American history is demonstrated not only by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's interracial, interfaith movement to achieve civil rights in America, but also by watershed social change movements such as the abolition of slavery, the establishment of children's labor laws and the promotion of women's suffrage.<sup>2</sup>

The power of faith-based mobilizing as an effective social reform mechanism is driven by a number of key elements:

- Faith-based movements tend to emphasize service to others and cultivate commitment toward a just society.
- Faith-based programs often demonstrate greater success mobilizing on behalf of large-scale social reform than secular programs.
- Places of worship have the ability to bring new constituencies, such as recent immigrants, into participation in the public sphere. They also can foster cooperation and collaboration across economic and racial lines.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing that harnessing the natural civic engagement strengths of faith-based leaders could be an increasingly powerful force in achieving social reform, faith-based community organizations began to emerge in the 1980s and early 1990s. Faith-based community organizations have since established a mobilizing infrastructure that can more fully leverage the social capital of faith communities in broad public action. The intrinsic orientation of faith communities toward the public good, supported by the mobilizing infrastructures of these organizations, has turned faith-based community organizing into an approach that engages millions of people across American congregations and communities.<sup>1</sup>

## » A MODEL OF FAITH LEADER ENGAGEMENT

Together Colorado engaged faith leaders in building public will for access to health using the PICO model. They engaged congregations throughout Colorado and across many different faiths. Each congregation had an opportunity to become an active partner with Together Colorado, exploring the issues most relevant to their congregation and identifying how they wanted to be involved. The PICO model used by Together Colorado calls for a specific set of steps that lead to a congregation taking action:

1. Background work to assess the reach, size and values of the congregation, in order to better understand its capacity for community mobilization
2. Agreement from the congregation's leadership to begin a partnership
3. Outreach to congregants, identified by the faith leadership, inviting them to a meeting
4. Introduction of Together Colorado's issue areas, followed by discussion with congregants to identify the issues that resonate (i.e., the issues that have impacted their friends, family and community)
5. Further conversations around the identified issue(s) to clarify the congregants' main concerns, such as lack of access to quality mental health care
6. Engagement of interested congregants in an organizing committee
7. Targeted assistance, training and other support as needed for congregants to not only take action, but to lead mobilization efforts.

At each step, Together Colorado respected the values of the congregation and supported them as they found their own voice, learned to connect to the common messages and discovered how they want to take action—all within the unique cultural context of the congregation.

### The Value of Volunteers

The evaluation of PHC found that faith leaders took many different actions and ultimately reached more people than other PHC volunteers reached through similar efforts. On average, faith leaders reported reaching over 70 people in person and over 170 for mixed in-person and electronic reach. Several leaders had even more extensive reach, with a few leaders who engaged over 300 people through in-person events, and one leader who had access to a congregation of 8,500 people. Faith leaders were also more likely to believe they were making a difference. This suggests that faith leaders were a key component of the project, extending the reach of PHC beyond what paid staff could have done alone. It also suggests that faith-based movements provide a ready mechanism for large-scale engagement in advocacy efforts.

## » WHAT MAKES IT WORK? TIPS FOR ENGAGING FAITH LEADERS

### **Tip #1: *Do Your Research and Listen***

Together Colorado's lead organizer for PHC, as well as faith leaders, emphasized that preparation is critical to engaging faith communities meaningfully in health reform advocacy. Researching the traditions of a faith community and taking the time to listen to their primary concerns will lead to more successful engagement of congregants. In other words, make sure that the issue you tackle is consistent with values of the particular faith community you're engaging, and do this collaboratively with the faith community.

*“The biggest piece of advice is to come at it from a place of listening and understanding the variances and traditions of faith communities, and to provide intense coaching, meeting people where they are at, but not letting them stay there. ...Understanding their visions and hopes and what they care about and helping them to find the path to get there as a community.”*

~Together Colorado Staff Member

One of Together Colorado's faith leaders talked about how his decision to get involved specifically in their health work was because lack of health access was the number one “hurt” in his neighborhood. His neighborhood consisted of many new immigrant families and, according to census tract data, had the highest rate of uninsured residents in the state. Upon learning this, Together Colorado was able to provide that congregation with the tools and resources it needed to take on the issue.

**“Hurt” fuels action**, especially when it is in sync with a faith tradition's focus on the importance of creating a just society. Motivation can be personal, too. A personal “hurt” can also translate into a powerful passion for justice—the ability of faith to orient people to the public good, making a small leap from “this is my hurt” to “no one should suffer this hurt.”

*“My daughter has had issues with mental health and ended up in a 72-hour mental health hold because of a manic episode. She spent 24 hours in an ER room in a hospital gown with no care and minimal food. Then they tried to release her before she was fully stabilized. This is a systemic problem and not just for my family. Dealing with a nasty situation like that, you tend to turn inward and internally trying to handle it, but you need to tackle it with others to make changes... There is a sense of freedom knowing you can address something. I would not have taken on this issue if Together Colorado had not encouraged it. I would have focused internally.”*

~Together Colorado Faith Leader

### **Tip #2: *Frame Your Issue Through Values and Beliefs that Resonate with Faith Values***

To effectively engage faith leaders, it is important to know the values of their faith tradition and only engage them if your efforts are aligned with their value system. If you've done your research and listened to the primary concerns of the faith community, you'll know whether your efforts can align with those of the faith community. The next step is to frame your issue so that it is clear to the faith leaders *how* they align with the community's values.

When several faith leaders who partnered with Together Colorado were asked what compelled them to participate, they shared that addressing the issue of access to health resonated with their religious values. One of these faith leaders described how Together Colorado's focus on the right to quality health care, as well as their social justice framework, fit into his church's mission to be brothers and sisters to the larger community.

*“The social justice piece resonated with me as a Christian. It is important that we be good examples of the greater commandment of Christ to love God and love your neighbor. We have to go out and show it.”*  
Leader ~Together Colorado Faith

**Tip #3: Be Strategic When Engaging Congregation Leaders**

Organizations hoping to engage faith leaders should not overlook the reality that congregational leaders often receive requests to engage in broader community efforts and may feel over-burdened or unwilling to take on another commitment. A Together Colorado faith leader stressed the importance of being strategic in how one approaches a congregation’s leader.

*“Lay out the case with the pastor [or other congregation leader], but totally underscore that you are not asking the pastor to do the work. Ask if you can reach out to a few congregants and let that energy come up from the congregation. Pastors are inundated with requests from outside organizations. When a congregant comes to a pastor, they are more difficult to dismiss than an outside organization. Most pastors, if they see that parish members are stepping up to take action aligned with their faith principles, they will support it.”*

~Together Colorado Faith Leader

**Tip #4: Offer a Range of Issues and Help the Congregation Connect to Them**

In recruiting faith-based communities to a health reform advocacy platform, Together Colorado used the traditional community-organizing approach of meeting communities where they were. Instead of having congregants mobilize around an agenda they did not shape themselves, Together Colorado provided a menu of core issue areas (e.g., access to health, immigration and education reform, etc.) that congregations could discuss and ultimately identify as priorities that resonated and merited action. Together Colorado in turn then activated their organizing infrastructure to ensure congregants could take action on the issues they chose. For example, when congregants identified health inequities as the issue they wanted to address, Together Colorado helped them engage with PHC, providing them with an organizing infrastructure that included a common message and the momentum of a movement that was already underway.

**Tip #5: Support Faith Leaders with an Organizing Platform**

The faith leaders interviewed for this brief emphasized that a key reason they wanted to partner with Together Colorado was for access to an organizing platform to move them from concept to action. Experiencing or learning of an injustice is a powerful motivator to getting engaged, but actually being able to address the injustice is what will sustain that engagement. Showing faith leaders that they can make a difference by taking realistic, achievable actions is a critical step in moving a congregation to action.

One faith leader described how, despite the tangible concern in his community around lack of access to health, and with congregants looking to the church for help, the church could not figure out how to assist its congregants in navigating the health care maze.

*“We were looking for something to do to express the love of Christ. Dealing with people who are in need... And then here comes Together Colorado. They helped us come up with an action model that is effective. When we get down and out, they have been there so we don’t feel like Don Quixote. They have demonstrated dogged determination using their organizing model.”*  
~Together Colorado Faith Leader

**Tip #6: Find and Develop Leadership, Rather than Taking the Lead Yourself**

Leadership is vital to any effective community mobilization effort. Together Colorado views their role in faith-based community organizing as identifying and developing leadership instead of taking on leadership themselves. Use the leadership at the top as a vehicle to reach congregants, who can actually take on the mobilizing efforts.

**What are the signs that someone has the potential for leadership?**

*“We are looking at commitment to grow and a healthy attitude to taking on new challenges and being brave. Someone who understands sacred text and institutions and the work of justice... People who are already advocates and are very driven by institutional injustice... Not only passion, but also the ability to really look at issues that are important to them and assess what it means to address these issues for the people that they care about, to make sure they can have a life of dignity.”*

~Together Colorado Staff Member

**Tip #7: Support the Use of Consistent Messaging with Training**

Together Colorado provided their faith partners with the key component of message training. Framing the consumer voice in the context of faith, and the ability to put that voice in front of policymakers, is very powerful. The effectiveness of the messaging framework used by Together Colorado’s faith leaders can be attributed to the following elements:

- Framework provided consistency
- Key message points were compelling
- Message framework was easy to adapt and personalize
- Message points were aspirational in tone
- Framework posed access to health as a moral issue, not a political issue.

**Frame your message to talk about values, not just about policy change.**

*“The way the message is structured—that you have the right to health care—is an aspirational way of talking about it, rather than saying it is a broken system.”*

~Together Colorado Staff Member

**Tip #8: Demonstrate Results to Sustain Engagement**

For faith leaders to sustain engagement, advocates have to be able to demonstrate they can provide a way to take their social capital—that is, the value of their social connections to friends, family, neighbors and particularly their connection to their congregations—and turn it into a coherent, powerful voice and tangible change. Results speak for themselves, as one faith leader emphasized when talking about her partnership with Together Colorado.

*“I see an organization that gets incredible results and is addressing the needs of a variety of people who cross the full spectrum in shapes, colors and incomes. It is where I belong.”*

~Together Colorado Faith Leader

## » CONCLUSION

Faith-based organizing reflects a partnership between a mobilizing infrastructure and congregant communities whose faith values are naturally aligned with social justice. Faith leaders, who have access to and the trust of their congregations, are uniquely positioned to bring support to social movements, such as health care reform. As such, faith leaders are an important group to engage in efforts to achieve social change. Taking the time to complete the research needed to work with faith communities, as well as establishing an effective organizing infrastructure that allows congregants to conduct their own campaigns, can have significant benefits in engaging new partners and taking action. Faith-based movements also provide lessons that can be applied to other advocacy efforts that call for large-scale engagement.

**“The public is connected to the idea of being people of faith in a way that creates a different story—really looking at who we are as Americans, as Coloradans, and what we stand for and what we are trying to build. Faith leaders have relationships with a broad group of people. High Holy Days and Easter bring out large numbers of people. Those moments of incredible reach are opportunities to speak both about the values and instructions to uphold those values and the state of society as it is.”**  
~Together Colorado Faith Leader

Colorado faith communities supported by Together Colorado’s organizing infrastructure have initiated statewide conversations on how to improve Colorado’s health care system, increased community awareness and advocacy, and informed policy and legislation. Together Colorado’s faith leaders recognize that the organizing infrastructure provided by Together Colorado was instrumental in their ability to successfully take action. They suggest that others interested in organizing faith-based advocacy should not reinvent the wheel.

*“Lessons of faith-based community organizing have been learned and there are best practices that can be shared. Recognize that there is a group that can work with you to tackle issues that are critical to the needs of your community.”*  
~Together Colorado Faith Leader

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For more information about **Together Colorado**, visit [www.togethercolorado.org](http://www.togethercolorado.org), or email Community Organizer Eliana Mastrangelo at [eliana@togetherco.org](mailto:eliana@togetherco.org).

**Spark Policy Institute** partners with communities, policymakers and the public to find solutions to complex issues that bridge sectors, policy issues, levels of government and diverse beliefs and values. Spark served as the evaluators and real-time strategic learning coaches for Project Health Colorado. To learn more about Spark, visit [www.sparkpolicy.com](http://www.sparkpolicy.com), email [info@sparkpolicy.com](mailto:info@sparkpolicy.com) or call 303-455-1740.

## » ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Warren MR, Wood RE. Faith-based community organizing: The state of the field. A report of the findings of a national survey conducted by Interfaith Funders. Jericho, NY: 2001. <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2001/faith/faith.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America. Better Together: Religion and Social Capital. <http://www.bettertogether.org/pdfs/Religion.pdf>. Accessed February 12, 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid



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