

FORUM FOR
COMMUNITY
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**SCAN OF THE FIELD OF HEALING
CENTERED ORGANIZING:
LESSONS LEARNED**

November 2019

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Prepared for the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was made possible by the generous support and thoughtful partnership of the Andrus Family Fund. The authors want first and foremost to recognize and thank the adult and youth staff who every day dedicate themselves to supporting youth growth and healing while also demanding just policies and systems. They generously shared their insights, experiences and knowledge that make up the core of this report. Thanks also to the researchers and practitioners who laid the foundation of the field of Healing Centered Organizing, namely Nicole Lee, Mara Chavez-Diaz and others. They provided the framework, the history and guiding principles of Healing Centered Organizing, and this report is an extension of what these field leaders have already described and made happen. Finally, the authors want to thank Yelena Nemoj and Jamiel Alexander of the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum who conceived of and lead this project. Their guidance, wisdom and enthusiasm were essential to the project's success.

INTRODUCTION

Youth organizing is a key strategy to both change communities and support youth development. The Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing defines youth organizing as an effort that “engages young people in building power for social change and uses a distinct set of culturally and contextually resonant practices to develop youth leadership within a safe and supportive environment.” (“What Are the Impacts of Youth Organizing? – Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing” n.d.) It is well documented that youth organizing results in positive academic, health and social outcomes for youth (Shah, S., Buford, W., and Braxton, E. 2018). Essential features of youth organizing include,

- engages most marginalized
- promotes holistic development
- creates meaningful change
- develops a leadership pipeline.(“What Are the Impacts of Youth Organizing? – Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing” n.d.)

However, youth organizing has the potential to reach further into the lives of young people and support them in a process that is restorative and healing even from significant traumas inflicted by social ills borne from structural oppression. When organizing is interwoven with practices that promote care of the spirit, culture and well-being of individuals and communities it can be even more transformative both for youth organizers and the society they seek to change.

In 2014, Nicole Lee the founder of Urban Peace Movement in Oakland, CA described “Healing Centered Organizing” (HCO) as an effort that engages youth community members in a process that “builds individual and collective health, well-being and hopefulness by combining emotional and spiritual healing and a range of wellness practices” while also focusing “on organizing strategies aimed at changing public policies.”(Chavez-Diaz, M. and Lee, N, 2015.) She and her colleague Mara Chavez-Diaz engaged in formative work to explain and examine HCO and what it looks like in practice across California. They observed organizations in action, interviewed adult staff and identified key practices that inform HCO including,

- healing is in response to community needs
- healing is political
- healing and organizing intersect
- healing is found in culture and spirituality (Chavez-Diaz, M. and Lee, N, 2015).

Lee and Chavez-Diaz’ work to describe HCO is grounded in numerous theoretical and practical approaches that form a solid foundation. Dr. Shawn Ginwright suggests that for youth, collective action to change the social structures that cause harm is a healing intervention itself and that the increased power and sense of control that result is transformative. Furthermore, Ginwright posits that “healing justice” is a framework that unites healing and social justice work and supports practices that aim to both fight for structural change while addressing the suffering they cause (Ginwright

2016). Similarly, Paulo Friere's Liberation Education encourages "praxis" and collective consciousness raising and action as a transformative process that restores individuals, communities and society (Freire, Macedo, and Shor 2018). RYSE, a community-based organization in Richmond, CA builds on this approach and promotes the practice of "Radical Inquiry" with youth that fosters "radical meaning grasping and tending to the roots." (Dhaliwal 2018)

The power of uniting youth organizing, and healing practices is increasingly well documented. Foster Youth in Action, an organization that supports young people in foster care to organize to change the child welfare system, has reviewed the literature and describes how participation in youth organizing promotes healing in the following ways:

- increased hope
- positive sense of self
- agency and confidence
- emotional management
- relationships, connection and social capital (Rosen, M, Gennari, A., and Mandic, C. 2018)

The evidence demonstrates that both the practices that are used to connect, support and engage youth as well as the experience of organizing itself promotes this healing process.

As a leading field builder, funder and convener, the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum can lift up and promote approaches that engage young people in the fight for social change and the process of restoration of personal and community well-being. Lee and Chavez-Diaz examined what Healing Centered Organizing looked like in California almost 5 years ago. Since then, and across the Country, organizations have embraced approaches that both heal youth's wounds while pushing for social change. In this project we build on Lee and Chavez' work and look across the Country to see how Healing Centered Organizing practices are considered and implemented and the implications for the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Forum in the future.

METHODS

We conducted a scan of the field to examine how organizations across the country are engaging in Healing Centered Organizing. This project embraced principles of research justice and centering the experience and wisdom of youth. The research team consisted of two adults and a young person in their early 20’s who has relevant lived experience including engagement in youth organizing.

The scan consisted of interviews with organization staff, youth participants and national experts in youth organizing, trauma and healing practices and resulted in this document for the Opportunity Youth Forum. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were aimed to reveal the common principles that guide this work and the practices that put them into action. Learnings about what is needed to effectively support organizations to implement Healing Centered Organizing approaches were gleaned to inform future Opportunity Youth Forum activities to build the field.

Organizations that currently work with the Opportunity Youth Forum and other groups that are known to engage in Healing Centered Organizing (whether they call their work that or not) were the focus of this project. The team interviewed 23 adults and 7 youth staff/participants from 17 organizations from a wide array of states across the country (see Table 1). Attention was paid to the location and focus of the organizations. Place-based and population focused organizations were included in this project. For instance, organizations such as RYSE that center their work in a distinct place, in this case Richmond, CA and Foster Youth in Action that work with young people in foster care across the country were included.

Organization	Location
Youth on Board -- Listening Works - Youth Build	Massachusetts/National
Foster Youth in Action	Northern California/National
Creative Praxis	Pennsylvania/National
Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing	New York/National
RYSE	Northern California
Teens Under Construction	New York
Asian American Organizing Project	Minnesota
Rocky Mountain Children’s Law Center - Project Foster Power	Colorado
Rethink	Louisiana
Communities United	Illinois
Resilience OC	Southern California
Florida’s Children First - Florida Youth Shine	Florida
DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving)	New York
Cheyenne River Youth Project	South Dakota
Power U	Florida
True North Organizing Network	Northern California
Youth Leadership Institute	Northern California

Interviews were semi-structured and focused on healing and organizing principles and practices, lessons learned and needed supports. Interviews took approximately one hour and were conducted in person when possible or on the phone or video call. Interviews were confidential and were recorded and transcribed. Themes were drawn from the data and key learnings were identified. This final report pulls these learnings and implications together to inform the Opportunity Youth Forum’s work moving forward.

LEARNINGS FROM ADULTS AND YOUTH ENGAGED IN HEALING CENTERED ORGANIZING

Collectively, the organizations included in this scan have worked for decades to transform their communities through political action and support the well-being of youth engaged in this organizing process. They have thought deeply about their communities, the young people with whom they work, the political and systems issues that need to change and how to best both organize and support personal transformation. Despite the fact that these organizations are in places all over the country and work with youth who may be quite different from each other, they have many similarities in their perspective and approach to youth organizing and healing practices while there are also important differences. The learnings drawn from the interviews conducted help to illuminate a core framework for Healing Centered Organizing and what holds true about this approach regardless of its locale, population or target political issues.

In the following sections this framework is laid out and the lessons learned about its principles, common practices and outcomes are described. In many cases the learnings reflect ideas also described in the literature. However, in the following section all of the ideas reflect ideas, opinions and experiences described by adults and young people who were interviewed. Their work, courage and vision add additional ideas and experiences to the framework originally laid out by Nicole Lee and others. This report brings concepts together and discusses its implications for the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum. The team who conducted this scan and the Aspen Institute are not breaking new ground with this report but rather have an opportunity to bring recognition and support to the organizations and people who, every day, fight for change while supporting young people's emotional growth and well-being.

LEARNING AREA #1:

Unwavering support for both *healing* and *organizing* is the foundation of this work despite differences in approach and practices.

Interviewees emphasized that organizations have to be completely dedicated and committed to a Healing Centered Organizing approach at all levels of an organization. It requires leadership, funding and skills that must be infused across an organization. Interviewees recognized that some organizations are not inclined or prepared to do this work well. Many of the organizations interviewed believe deeply in the intersection of organizing, youth-led efforts and healing. There is passion and strong belief in this approach and what it requires. It was the thread that wove all of the interviewed organizations together, regardless of the issue, community and details of their approach.

Adults and youth interviewed have a clear sense of the purpose of youth organizing and see that, at its core, youth organizing is about challenging systems of oppression that create trauma. Organizing engages youth in efforts to change systems that have an impact on their lives and centers activities that aim to connect people, build a base of support and engage in political action. Adult and youth staff interviewed saw a clear distinction and important relationship between youth development approaches and youth

organizing. One interviewee commented, *“youth organizing is, in general, a unique approach to youth development in that it has a particular set of methods that reflect not just principles of youth development, but also sort of the knowledge and insights of a long line of folks who have done organizing...And so to me youth organizing sort of builds on a lot of the basic principles of youth development. But adds this idea of organizing.”* Furthermore, interviewees stressed the importance of organizing as an approach that engages youth in directly challenging the systems that enact harm in their communities. For all of the organizations interviewed that do youth organizing work, there is a deeply held commitment to the fight for social justice and belief in the power of communities, and in particular youth, to challenge systems to change.

It is important to note that some of the organizations interviewed did not begin as groups engaged in youth organizing. Many were originally focused on youth development or youth service provision. However, many adult staff who were interviewed shared that this initial approach was insufficient. One staff commented, *“...that by empowering young people to have power and to have a say in what was going on, that the long-term sustainability of that change would be so much greater.”* These organizations that transitioned from youth development work to youth organizing made it clear that the approach and philosophy for the entire organization changed as well and that the shift was a challenging and critical transformation for the organization. Some of these shifts included creating staff and leadership positions for youth in the organization; changing the decision-making processes to be led by youth organizers; implementation of training for youth and adult staff to change their working relationships and address adultism; and, changing the types of activities and services of the organization to focus on organizing. Rather than providing services to youth, these organizations focused on youth becoming leaders and organizers and built activities and structures to support healing organizing work. Youth make decisions and drive the work of the organization, which is a shift from organizations being run by just their adult staff and board. One adult staff discussed how everyone working in the organization did political education together so they all would have the same understanding of their community history and importance of organizing work. This created common ground for youth, adult staff, and their board to start from. This partnership is a shift from adults holding the historical knowledge and long-term view to youth having the same understanding to build the work with adults as partners.

Healing is not only necessary for the organizing work to happen, but it is also an outcome of youth organizing work. Adult and youth staff interviewed embrace that supporting healing and personal growth of youth participants is a fundamental aspect of their work. When asked what healing looks like for youth, adult and youth staff shared that healing for youth is -- being able to trust others and themselves, loving themselves, being able to lead, supporting the healing of others, being able to define what healing is to them and that it sets youth up for accomplishing whatever “comes next”. Many of the adult staff recognized that “healing” at its core is supporting young people to better cope with the trauma in their lives and offered that a higher goal is “liberation” -- when young people are free of the sources of trauma. Youth organizing holds the promise of liberation as a strategy that challenges the root causes of trauma in the life of young people. One adult staff shared that *“liberation comes from finding power, like personal power and kind of that collective power, and then being able to use it to do something to kind of be free of whatever that past was and change the really bad things that happened into momentum for action and for some sort of positive in the world.”* It was expressed in numerous ways that in order for youth to be effectively involved in youth organizing they must be supported, and their emotional hurts and needs must be addressed. At the same time, the organizations interviewed see that this work is transformative in its outcomes and nature, both for youth and the community. They discussed how when youth organizing is implemented well, changes happen on all levels of the ecological model: individual, community, and systems.

While organizations take fairly similar approaches to youth organizing, the ways in which they foster healing in the work varies (see Spectrum of Healing Centered Organizing below). Healing Centered Organizing approaches can be seen on a continuum. Some organizations and experts believe that the process of organizing is healing in its nature and not much other emphasis is needed to support personal transformation. They feel that healing and youth organizing are intertwined, and that healing is grounded

in analysis and taking action to try to change oppressive systems. Youth organizing *“is fundamentally, personally healing for [youth] in the ways that we think about healing from trauma. That it provides to a greater sense of control, it gives folks hopefulness and opportunity. And I think it allows young people to step up and really feel like their voices are heard. And I think that those are all sort of parts of what, when we think about how to heal from trauma, I think those are some of the things that are important.”* Some of the core practices of organizing like political education and community base building are seen as contributors to healing. *“For it to be healing it means we actually have to address the actual structures that are trying to denigrate us, kill us, force us into some kind of subjugation. If we’re not doing that then it makes it hard to be healing. It’s just another space where we’re just like worker bees.”* When organizing leads to systems change and the structures of oppression are changed, then healing can happen for everyone.

Other organizations believe that transformation requires more specific practices, approaches, and activities that specifically focus on healing and that these may be related to but separate from the organizing work. Some organizations *“add like that one little piece that’ll give some extra connection or allow someone to share and connect story-wise or maybe just allow some vulnerability, some celebration. So, lots of little things like that that I think are like focused on healing that are not maybe so overt.”* Staff believe that there needs to be intentionality around healing activities, and this is an additional element to their organizing work. While still other organizations believe that some of the healing work needs to happen separate from and outside of the organizing work and often with individual therapeutic approaches. These staff believe that some youth and community members need specialized support for the traumas they have experienced, and that staff doing the organizing are not necessarily equipped with those skills. One organization interviewed *“recognized there’s a limit, is we can’t take on - we’re not a healing organization. And we can’t take on the task of supporting people to heal from their mental health needs, their emotional health needs that come out of - like the full scope of them. So, you know, we can’t be substitutes for therapists, for psychiatrists, for spiritual healers, for emotional healers. It’s one thing for us to be able to support people through their healing. But we can’t be a substitute for people that need expert-level support.”*

SPECTRUM OF HEALING CENTERED ORGANIZING



LEARNING AREA #2:

There are core elements of Healing Centered Organizing that are common to organizations engaged in this work.

The following elements encapsulate the perspective, practices, challenges and outcomes as described by the organizations who were interviewed. These are not new domains, but rather describe the common approach taken by these organizations.

- Engage in Critical Analysis and Fight for Structural Change
- Promote Physical and Mental Health
- Engage in Community Building
- Ensure Youth Leadership and Ownership
- Foster Relevance and Meaning

Engage in Critical Analysis and Fight for Structural Change

For the youth and adults interviewed the core of a Healing Centered Organizing approach is engaging young people in efforts to change oppressive and harmful systems and policies. **Raising the awareness and fostering critical analysis about the root causes of their community conditions and experiences is a key first step in youth organizing.** Supporting young people to “move from me to we” lays a foundation for both the organizing and healing work. Interviewees explained how when young people understand that their traumatic experiences spring from social and political forces a key piece of the path of healing unfolds. Through critical analysis youth develop knowledge and understanding of context, root causes and structural determinants. They are able to link their trauma to a context and see how to use their lived experience to connect with others and make a change. Through organizing, youth are able to engage with their rage and hurt and channel it into activities aimed at systemic change. For the organizations engaged in this work, having guiding principles or values that prioritize structural analysis is essential as they do this work overtime. Furthermore, for some organizations tackling multiple issues through organizing allows for acknowledging connections and common social structures that underlie community conditions.

Practices

- Organizing training/skill development in youth organizing and advocacy
- Social justice and critical awareness training and experiences. Engaging in liberation education pedagogical techniques and community based participatory research and analysis approaches.
- Young people directly affected by an issue do political and community organizing
- Showing youth participants other political advocacy efforts in action -- going to demonstrations, protests together and reflecting on those experiences.

Promote Physical and Mental Health

It is essential that organizations and staff recognize that the underlying conditions in which young people live may present ongoing challenges and that youth participants have ongoing needs. In order for Healing Centered Organizing to be effective, prioritizing the physical and mental health needs of youth participants and staff both young and adult is critical. Staff and youth organizers witness young people

balancing their personal life, school and home responsibilities while they also organize around issues that affect their communities. These young people are often navigating institutions that create hardships in their own lives while actively trying to address issues that affect them and their communities. Adults and youth interviewed emphasized that healing is a journey and that as long as oppressive systems are still in place, youth experience new traumas all the time. One organization shared, *“When anytime...we ask how many people have someone locked up and every single person, including staff, will raise their hand. That has impact that is beyond a campaign, beyond an issue.”*

Many of the organizations interviewed believe that often amongst youth participants and at times in the wider community there is stigma around mental health. Their approach is to create a different narrative that fosters mental well-being. Many organizations foster conversations about mental health by engaging with youth through one-on-one check-ins, “wellness buddies”, or healing circles. Often these groups are organized by gender or ethnic/racial identity. **These approaches that bring youth together in discussion about their experiences are the most common across the organizations interviewed, as they allow youth to build relationships and create a safe space for everyone to feel comfortable sharing experiences and receive mutual support.**

Many organizations interviewed promote a holistic view of well-being and engage youth participants and staff in mindful practices that are culturally relevant. Some organizations incorporate body work, yoga, and acupuncture and include the use of herbs as a way to foster wellness with what the earth naturally provides. Young people use these practices to be grounded and connect to others, their community, and ancestors. Furthermore, many organizations provide youth with information about how to engage in self-care that is accessible to them, meaningful and not expensive. Self-care is often thought of as pampering the body, however, young people working with these organizations are able to redefine this concept as something more than physical, but emotional and spiritual and embrace the concept that self-care is an act of resistance. Finally, staff shared that laughter and play comes naturally after young people feel safe and welcomed in their spaces.

Some organizations have found that the common approaches of “circles” and group healing work has limitations and that the promise of “healing” through these methods is overstated or unclear. Some of the organizations interviewed have reframed these types of social support approaches as about building community, fostering “emotional intelligence” or use other concepts that make clear that they are not a mental health intervention. **Furthermore, it is well recognized by adult staff in particular, that for some youth participants individual mental health services are needed for meaningful personal growth and coping with trauma. They feel that as much as healing and organizing may be intertwined there is a need for pathways into individual mental health support.** Trauma is complex, serious and may require interventions of someone with training and capacity to work with youth individually.

The organizations interviewed handle this need for individual and at times intensive mental health support with different approaches. Very few of the organizations have robust systems with mental health practitioners on staff who are available to provide therapy for youth organizing participants. Other organizations provide referrals to partner organizations, while some did not have any formal systems in place to address this need. It is critical to note that without access to mental health professionals, organizing program staff often end up doing this work with little support, training, and resources. Many of the organizations interviewed fell into this category with program staff providing both the organizing support and training and the mental health services and other needed resources. This role for staff can be made even more difficult as many are not well paid and are coping with their own and vicarious traumas.

Finally, it can be difficult for organizations to support youth mental and physical health needs because they fall outside the scope of funding for program activities. Interviewees explained that often program funding is not allocated to support youth participant’s basic needs, including food and shelter. Organizations have to scrape together resources to provide material support to youth and staff may end up

paying for what is needed out of their own pocket. In addition, for youth participants a salary or stipend can be a crucial aspect of engagement in formal organizing work and is a concrete way that organizations support their well-being. Again, securing sufficient resources to provide youth with a living wage is an ongoing challenge.

Practices

- “Healing circles” and other social support structures
- Culturally relevant healing practices including ceremonies, body work, acupuncture, mindfulness, herbal remedies, yoga
- Providing mental and physical health support for staff
- Individual therapy and case management either as part of the organization or through referrals
- Basic needs support including food and shelter

Engage in Community Building

Community building and fostering supportive relationships are at the core of Healing Centered Organizing work. Staff interviewed made clear that organizing approaches that are disconnected from relationships do not promote healing and are less successful in their campaigns. Organizing that is healing focuses on the relationships and the human experience. Political organizing and systems change do not happen from individuals working in isolation, but from groups of people coming together to make change. Staff shared that Healing Centered Organizing is *“designed around harnessing collective power as opposed to any individual being a great advocate, and the nature of creating, I think, that kind of space, and like being so intentional about the collective nature of that, I think, allows the healing to happen and is kind of the baseline for our work.”* Youth organizing relies on strong relationships to make a difference and healing comes from building supportive and loving connections. Young people value having the time to build relationships and to be heard.

Adult staff in this work recognize the importance of making young people know they are loved, particularly those youth who have or may continue to experience trauma. Staff and youth both spoke of the strength of the relationships they have built with each other and the connections within their communities as being key to their success as organizers and part of their own healing. One organization focuses on *“the way we engage, the non-violent communication, one of the things we say as adults is you’ll never hear us come at you the wrong way, sideways, yell at you, that kind of stuff. There are ways in which we communicate that is never going to be disrespectful. That always holds the dignity you have as a human being.”* Being able to trust others and have less conflict was one way in which healing was described and love was held up as the glue that holds youth organizers and their adult supporters together.

Community building within youth organizing is purposeful and geared towards action. The organizations interviewed work towards building relationships that are supportive of youth as leaders, organizers, and change agents. This work is different from other types of youth development or youth service work in that this type of relationship building is aware of and does not promote adultism and connects youth to their own communities by learning their own histories. It also means building relationships for an *“awareness of not being alone and not just finding the connection but finding a connection and feeling like there is a way to use your voice to do something about it has been really powerful.”*

At the same time, healing always has to be at the forefront and not jeopardized by taking on opportunities. Adult staff spoke about putting what youth want as the highest priority, even if that meant turning down opportunities to speak at events or with political figures. If there was not enough time given for preparation or the speaking event did not align with the organizing agenda set forth by their organization,

then those were deemed not appropriate events to attend. In these organizations, youth and adult staff trust each other to make those decisions and do what is best for themselves and for their organizing work. One staff member shared their approach to those who ask for youth to attend events is to *“not to make the assumption that we're just going to produce a young person out of our back pocket who can meet. But just like, you're asking me. I have to now go ask the young people. Like hey, do you have time? All of those things so that they feel prepared and they have agency...We have an agreement that I just don't like tell them to do stuff. I ask and then they make decisions together.”* Adult staff made this clear to those they partner or work with, that their relationships and trust with youth organizers came first.

While youth organizers are able to build connections within their organization and local community, these organizations doing this work don't necessarily know each other. One staff member shared that *“we believe, to our knowledge, we're sort of the only organization doing this particular work in the entire state. So, in terms of an ecosystem, that sort of brings up some capacity questions.”* Multiple organizations spoke about not knowing what other groups are out there doing youth organizing in this way and having a desire to connect with organizations doing similar work, regardless if the topic is the same. Healing Centered Organizing is an area of development and learning for newer organizations and those staff do not have a network to connect with for support. For youth organizers themselves, there is value in connecting with other youth doing the same work and *“seeing that they're part of this wide, national, and international community of other youth doing the damn thing. I know it can feel like we're in a silo, or this work is super-hard and some weeks are more stressful than others, but you are part of a rich community and a rich history.”*

Practices

- Social support and community building spaces to share past experiences with others who have similar stories
- “Circles” and other restorative justice approaches -- gender specific groups
- Creative and visual activities that illustrate connections
- Connecting to other groups and issues -- form bonds between communities and youth and learning the history of organizing
- Restorative justice principles
- Programs exist in community - programs are advocating for the community and the community supports the young organizing
- De-emphasize transactional nature of relationships and interactions
- Culture of appreciation -- incorporating celebration and positive acknowledgement on a regular basis
- Conflict resolution practices and training
- Building relationships between youth and elders as a way to address intergenerational trauma

Ensure Youth Leadership and Ownership

It is critical to emphasize and build the leadership and organizing skills of youth who are traditionally marginalized. Youth ownership of the organizing work and the ability to exercise leadership is the base of youth organizing and sets this work apart from youth development programming. Youth and adult staff emphasized the importance of youth having a role in all aspects of organizing work because leadership and control supports their healing. A Youth Organizer explained that liberation comes after young people start to heal from their traumas and subsequently gain power in their own lives, have a

say and are involved in decision-making in their city and schools. Young people continuing their organizing and leadership is viewed as a major outcome of this work in addition to the political/systems/community change work.

It is important to have youth leadership pipelines that exist both within the organization and externally with the community. Some organizations have general memberships for their program with very few requirements to join in order to encourage a range of youth to participate and support *“that inclusive mentality. Like you don't have to be the superstar standout foster youth that everyone knows about in order to be part of this work. We want you just because you have a voice to be heard.”* Many organizations have multiple leadership levels for youth and provided steps and criteria for moving between levels or tiers. These included, time involved with the organization, training hours and other ways of developing seniority. In addition, most of the young staff interviewed started as youth organizers and later became staff members. One young staff person was an active participant for two years and was later offered a Program Assistant position which led to a full-time position as a Program Coordinator. She developed a critical analysis through the program, was supported by exceptional mentors, and explained her experience as transformative because it inspired her to continue to work towards making a change and mentor young people of color. Another young person was a participant before being offered the Youth Organizer position. She came into the program with an extensive history of being an activist in her community. Adult staff also expressed a desire to build stronger connections with the community to support youth as they grow older. At some point, many of their youth organizers need to leave the organization and it would be helpful to have a professional network for them to move into. One staff shared *“as our leaders kind of move through our program - to make connections to community groups outside of us, that they like launch into the world and have those connections. But we need more and more of those that are willing to meet our young people where they're at and really kind of keep that leadership pipeline going with us.”*

Though youth are the focus of this work, adults have an important impact on the experience of young organizers. Youth organizing does not mean that adults are absent but are there to support the work of youth. Adults interviewed are present in this work as organizational leaders (executive directors, program coordinators, trainers, board members). Many staff shared the importance of bringing in the historical perspective of organizing work and connections youth have with past organizing efforts. They emphasized the importance of building supportive relationships with elders and what they can learn from them. **Though youth are the focus of this work, organizations do not promote bifurcation of youth and adults, but believe in the power of the them working together.** *“Our youth know that as long as they have a support system that is sustainable, and that doesn't replicate violence, that we're going to reach liberation because our healing is going to be supported by a framework that supports our development and wants to see their growth in the community.”*

A few programs utilized an intergenerational approach to their organizing work. This included incorporating ancestral knowledge in workshops to help young people learn about their identity, where they come from, and why that's important. Elders are part of the organization to share their experiences and knowledge with young people. **Creating meaningful relationships between elders and young people can be transformative for both groups.** These organizations shared that their community naturally has an intergenerational approach as it is grounded in their culture. Adults and youth are intertwined, and therefore the organizing work cannot be done separately. In some cases, there is no hierarchy between elders and young people, they are all valued and respected the same. One adult staff shared that *“traditionally in black and brown communities there has always been a space for elders and intergenerational work...And we kind of talk about it as like, no, I'm responsible for you, you're responsible for everybody younger than you. This is an intergenerational thing...And our job is to support that and not to take it over. But I'm not supposed to be invisible either, you know what I'm saying?”* At the same time, there are challenges to intergenerational approaches. Inviting parents to participate in the program can be problematic or triggering for young people because some topics can be difficult to digest, or they may not feel safe participating in discussions about mental health or LGBTQ issues around their parents.

Youth organizing is complex and adults who have not adequately interrogated their beliefs and behaviors about young people can unintentionally engage in practices that are retraumatizing. Organizations that did not begin as youth organizing groups acknowledged the structural transition needed to fully practice youth ownership and leadership. *“There's got to be full buy-in at the executive level or director level around the latitude that young people have to make decisions. And I think some of it's structural. I think that the work gets taken over and adults often have to find their way into it.”* Adultism is an ongoing challenge in this work, both within organizations and with external partners and funders. It is not enough to do a workshop in the beginning, continuous training and reflection is needed by adults. Some organizations have developed specific practices like adult accountability check-ins, adult staff critically examining their beliefs about youth, and saying no to events that promote youth tokenism. Organizations have developed their own philosophies around youth and adult partnerships based on respect and open communication. Many adult staff come from the same communities as youth and have had similar experiences as them. Staff need to heal from their own traumas in spaces away from youth and then with them in order to be able to support youth doing organizing. For many adults, working with young organizers has been transformative for them personally; there is power in opening up to young people and that vulnerability builds bonds between them.

Practices

- Prioritize both youth leadership/ownership and adult/youth partnership in the following ways:
 - Hire youth as paid staff
 - Youth serve in organizational leadership roles such as on the Board of Directors
 - Youth driven decision making about the organizations and the organizing agenda
 - Youth represent the organization and issues with the media, elected officials or government agencies.
- Ongoing opportunities for youth participants to give feedback and input and it needs to be used -- young people having increased control, even over funding is a possible step towards more healing and true youth leadership of this work
- Peer to peer approaches -- this helps build leadership in youth and promotes mentorship between youth
- Ongoing training of adults to address adultism practices in youth programming
- Adults need to examine how they view young people and how this impacts their work with youth -- this will change their overall approach including language, practices, organizational structures, etc.
- Youth owned spaces and separate adult spaces and spaces where they come together
- Saying no to tokenism -- this means prioritizing the healing and meaningful participation of youth over a political, media or other opportunity

Foster Relevance and Meaning

In order for organizing to be meaningful, engaging and sustainable it must be directly relevant to the lives of youth. Across the country, organizations are tapping into the power of youth organizing by taking aim at policy and structural issues such as immigration, education and criminal justice. Young people are motivated and have urgency as they work to change policies and systems that have an impact on their lives and that of their communities. This enthusiasm and dedication of youth organizers is matched by the commitment of the organizations and adult staff who support them and proves to be critical to the success of this work. Furthermore, fostering and sustaining healing practices requires vision, stability and commitment over time.

It is essential to ground Healing Centered Organizing in principles of inclusion, identity, culture and history. Organizations interviewed emphasized the importance of recognizing diversity and creating spaces and approaches that welcome youth and support their gender, ethnicity and other forms of identity. Using language that is gender neutral in particular was thought to be important. Adult staff and youth highlighted that it is critical to put the work in a context and connect young people to ancestral and community traditions of resistance and fighting for liberation. When youth see their efforts as connected to a larger community of people fighting for social justice it provides another layer of meaning and fosters intergenerational healing.

Finally, many interviewees discussed the importance of creating healing spaces where young people can develop skills and reflect on their experiences. Building environments where youth have the support to share their stories and feelings is essential to promoting their well-being. The organizing work can retraumatize young people when they are asked to tell their hard stories and they are not given a way to debrief, process and make meaning of their experiences. Staff need to be intentional and committed to creating a space that reflects the history and experiences of young people. They need to dedicate enough time, energy and resources to create this space and ask young people what they need to heal and what makes spaces healing.

Practices

- Gender neutral language
- Reflective writing and other reflection practices to process conditions, experiences and emotions
- Practicing cultural and indigenous traditions. Holding ceremony and making visible ancestral approaches to reflection, healing and transformation.
- “Circles” are a common approach to holding space for young people where youth come together to share and offer support to each other. Many groups offer circles broken out by gender or by topics and that meet regularly.
- Some organizations require youth participants to regularly attend circles and other reflective opportunities as part of their organizing work because they view it as essential.

LEARNING AREA #3:

Demonstration of the Impact of Healing Centered Organizing is critical for field development and ongoing support

Describing the work of Healing Centered Organizing and measuring impact is challenging for many organizations. Organizations interviewed feel like they have to justify to funders what they do and why they do it. Staff expressed some funders see organizing as *“super political and scary, and we've had funders say they're not sure that this is for them. And I don't think there's anything scary about arguing that siblings should be together. Like that's not a political thing. And so trying to educate people has been hard in the funding space.”* When healing is added to this work, there is another level of nuance and challenge in describing what could be considered intangible outcomes to funders and external partners. Organizations want to *“measure some of those kind of well-being factors or soft skills, things like greater sense of self, greater sense of connectedness, greater ability to advocate or use your own voice. I think like those are factors that then lead to other good things in the universe, and I think it's just a matter of measuring some of those in-betweens.”* The challenge is that some organizations do not have the resources or support to explore how to measure and document these kinds of outcomes.

Funders may also be disconnected or not as engaged in the daily work of healing-centered youth organizing, making it difficult for them to understand and support this work. Staff want funders to know that *“youth organizing is an experiment. Movement work is an experiment. And I think that, sometimes, we really feel the heel on our neck when sort of reports and sort of things have to be crafted for funders, and for the sake of exchange of resources.”* Particularly for newer organizations or groups who are exploring healing components to organizing, there is a lot of testing and development happening. The pressure of delivering outputs and results that are dictated by funders can stifle this experimentation or cause undue stress on organizations. Another challenge some staff identified is foundations not reflecting the communities being served. One staff said foundation *“leadership does not reflect the people who are actually doing this work and are most impacted by this work. It feels significantly different when we have our people as Program Directors or as a liaison between the funder wants and needs and us. You know, to have former organizers, to have former EDs in those positions always feels radically different, because these people have been in our position, they've done our work, they understand the nuances.”* Foundations may also have inaccurate assumptions of what it really takes to do this work and what the outcomes are. The relationship with funders is *“well I'm going to give you X amount of money - it's really transactional, right? So, I think how do we also humanize it and there is the money component, but like your money doesn't mean I'm going to put a hundred forums and that's it. Like it means like we're actually building power and solidarity across communities.”*

Staff pointed out some ways in which funders have worked well with these organizations are providing flexibility with site visit requirements and giving time for youth to prepare for them, being open to different ways of describing outcomes of the work, investing long-term and investing deeply in the work, building a relationship that is not just transactional, and providing resources that are flexible and can be used towards a variety of organizational needs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ASPEN INSTITUTE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FORUM

Youth development, youth participation and youth engagement all play a critical role in strengthening systems to meet the needs of youth. However, Healing Centered Organizing pushes beyond these approaches and embraces critical analysis and a process of challenging existing systems and fighting for policy change. Similarly, there are numerous approaches to supporting youth and promoting their growth and healing. However, Healing Centered Organizing puts this emotional work in a larger context of socio-political determinants of well-being and intertwines collective action and personal healing. First and foremost, for the Opportunity Youth Forum to invest in Healing Centered Organizing a commitment to the premise that challenging structural oppression while supporting youth wellbeing is essential.

The organizations interviewed made several recommendations for how the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum and other funders can meaningfully support the continued development and implementation of Healing Centered Organizing around the country. Not surprisingly, most interviewees stressed the importance of the Opportunity Youth Forum and other funders giving money to support Healing Centered Organizing and the organizations doing this work. Specifically, interviewees asked for funders to support this work with the understanding that it is an “experiment” and evolves as it unfolds. Patience and flexibility are key. Organizations need time for the work to be meaningful. They asked for a deep and lasting investment citing that funding needs to support ramp up, transition and policy timeframes. It is critical to allow organizations time to build, try, fail and try again. Funders need a long view as this work takes a long time.

In addition, traditional mechanisms for measuring impact are limiting and interviewees stressed the need for funders to see beyond “units of service” or counting numbers of youth involved and prioritize the personal and social change that results from the process of organizing work. There is significant opportunity for the Opportunity Youth Forum to support the continued development of meaningful evaluation approaches that truly demonstrate the impact of Healing Centered Organizing. Finally, several interviewees suggested that in order for funders to meaningfully engage and understand this work it is critical that program officers and funder staff have experience doing community organizing and healing approaches.

As the Opportunity Youth Forum looks at how to support their network in engaging in Healing Centered Organizing it is essential that the limitations and opportunities of the Collective Impact approach be acknowledged. Collective Impact (CI) is widely supported as a strategy to tackle critical community issues and create systems improvements. However, CI has also been criticized for what some see as its inherent incompatibility with community organizing. In 2017, in the *Non-Profit Quarterly*, well recognized community engagement experts Meredith Minkler, Tom Wolff and colleagues laid out the challenge and explained that coalitions, collaborations and partnerships often engage community members in processes to give advice and input with limited authority. In addition, these efforts are often unable to focus on the structural causes of harm and may even shy away from addressing issues of race and inequity. As a result, engaging in organizing as a strategy within a CI effort can be challenging and must be approached with intention and eyes wide open (Wolff, 2017).

Many of the Opportunity Youth Forum funded collaboratives are made up of organizations that are part of the “system.” These very groups may be the target of youth organizing efforts or be viewed as part of structural causes of harm. Integrating youth organizing and a critical analysis of structural determinants may not be comfortable, desired or may just be difficult to navigate. It may be challenging for Opportunity Youth Forum funded groups that currently do youth development and youth services work but are not engaged in organizing efforts to move into this type of work. It requires a commitment to advocacy and challenging power structures and may push organizations out of their comfort zone, funding requirements and organizational mission.

Furthermore, youth organizing pushes the system to go way beyond “youth voice” and the more common ways of involving young people in system change efforts. Holding spaces for youth on planning and policy bodies, asking young people to share their stories and gathering data from youth are not the same as youth organizing. At its core, youth organizing prioritizes the collective and a “base” of young people who are pushing for change on an issue of common concern. For youth organizing to be incorporated into a collective impact or collaborative model of systems change may be inherently difficult as it is an approach that is centered outside of the system itself.

Another critical issue raised by many interviewees is the importance of funding organizations who already do this work. This suggestion stems from two important recognitions: 1) There are outstanding organizations pioneering Healing Centered Organizing around the country and they continually struggle to have enough funding to survive and 2) supporting organizations who do not already do this type of work to move into Healing Centered Organizing efforts requires extensive commitment, resources and knowledge. Very few, if any, of the organizations nationally and locally recognized for their Healing Centered Organizing work are part of the existing Opportunity Youth Forum network. As a result, the Opportunity Youth Forum may have to examine new investments or foster new partnerships in order to support a Healing Centered Organizing approach. Expanding funding opportunities to the organizations interviewed and others is one approach that may be welcomed.

The Opportunity Forum could support existing networks to reach out to and partner with some of the organizations interviewed and others that engage in Healing Centered Organizing. Minkler and Wolff offer that this type of collaboration might be fruitful but also requires great care. *“If collaboratives are truly invested in a community organizing approach, then they must seek to provide enough autonomy and funding to the initiative so that it can take bold, independent action, including potentially challenging the coalition or some of the institutions that its members represent”* (Wolf, 2017). Furthermore, there may be youth organizing groups in Opportunity Youth Forum communities that would greatly benefit from a partnership with youth service organizations that can provide mental health support. However, these partnerships would be structured, clear expectations are necessary, and the collaborative and all partners need to be fully bought into the role of Healing Centered Organizing in the work.

The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum may want to support existing organizations to adopt a Healing Centered Organizing approach. This transformation into Healing Centered Organizing work is not to be taken lightly. It requires both a knowledge and commitment to community organizing and dedication to youth well-being. This intertwined approach to working towards structural change and engaging in healing approaches needs to be expressed at all levels of an organization and is most fully realized if it is relegated to just a program within an organization. Building in reflective practices and spaces requires time and capacity. Staff need skills in how to effectively facilitate these approaches and intensive mental health support can be required. Training and support of adults to honestly examine their beliefs and practices is necessary to move this work ahead in a way that does not harm young people. At the same time, historical knowledge and elder wisdom is needed to ensure relevance and meaning. Finally, organizing is meant to uplift all and a wide array of youth should be included. Organizations should be supported to move beyond “creaming” and should be supported to create mechanisms to have wider participation.

The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum can promote a funding and evaluation approach where programs and youth have the freedom and support to accurately reflect their story. They need a chance to define the outcomes that they are aiming to achieve. Evaluation of this work needs to be creative and participatory and not rely upon quantitative measures of “units served”, “# of policies passed”, # of youth participants. Funders can adopt a framework of praxis in their measurement and evaluation work to support the experimental approach of this work. These organizations and this general field need support to develop meaningful measures about the long term impact of their work: the impact of policy changes, the impact of personal transformation of youth, the impact on the networks and communities that participate in this work, and defining what “healing” and “liberation” mean and what that looks like. Organizations need to be able to define these outcomes for themselves, not the funder. Funders though can support the development of these measures. This is all an area of work that Aspen could contribute to organizations and the general field of Healing Centered Organizing.

The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum can play a critical role in building individual organizations and supporting the field by bringing organizations together to share and mentor each other. Almost all the organizations interviewed expressed an interest in talking with others who do this work. While youth organizing is a longstanding approach, this particular focus on Healing Centered Organizing is not as well known or understood. Some organizations are new or are still developing their approaches to healing in this work. There is much for them to learn from each other and support each other in this work. Some organizations are isolated geographically, or they serve unique populations, and these groups want to be connected to others like them. Funding for organizations to meet with each other and mentor one another would be of great value since most of the organizations do not have the available funds for this type of network building.

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