

THE POWER AND THE NEED FOR CITIZEN ORGANIZING by Bill Woods, StreetVibes' Contributor

Citizen organizing of every type received attention at an all day forum on Saturday February 23rd. Two hundred plus activists took part in "The Power of Organizing - Finding Your Community's Voice," an event sponsored by the Murray and Agnes Seasongood Good Government Foundation.

Speakers, panels, and breakout discussions focused on how citizens can have an impact on government policy and the decisions that affect their communities and neighborhoods.



The day began with a keynote address by Karen Hobert Flynn, the President of Common Cause U.S.A. Although Flynn now heads an organization that spends a lot of time and energy promoting political reforms at the

national level, she believes in citizen organizing at all levels. In fact, Flynn began her career organizing at the grassroots. Reflecting on how state legislators often try to avoid contact with constituents, she revealed that one of her strategies as a young activist was to corner representatives right before they entered the bathroom.

Flynn had some of her previous successes at the state level. She played a key role in organizing the adoption of public financing for campaigns for state elective offices in Connecticut. As a regional director for Common Cause, she assisted a number of state chapters, including Ohio, in their reform efforts. She stressed that some of Common Cause's best work continues to take place in the states, and she noted its success (in collaboration with other groups) in passing redistricting reform in Ohio last May.

Flynn emphasized the importance of having the Season Good event at this particular moment in U.S history. Citizen organizing to preserve our democratic institutions is critical. On a positive note, she proclaimed that citizen involvement in groups such as Common Cause has greatly increased in the last two years.

The morning panel that followed the keynote focused on the nuts and bolts of organizing. Featuring local people with diverse organizing experiences, the panelists emphasized how they went about recruiting and working with volunteers. For instance, if citizens are going to give their time and talents to an organizing effort, they need to be appreciated and to believe that their involvement makes a difference. If it's a major effort involving a coalition of groups, one panelist stressed that a corps of leaders must evolve that works well together and trusts one another. All the panelists noted organizers must prepare their groups for unexpected setbacks which can often be used as learning experiences. Moderated by Liz Blume of the Season Good board, the panel included Jennifer Summers of the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, Dorothy Smoot of the Partnering Center, Bill Woods of Applied Information Resources, and Nicole Edwards of the Sierra Club.

One of the most valuable parts of the day occurred before lunch. Attendees split into three groups, and these breakout sessions allowed everyone to say why they were there. These sessions also encouraged people to present their ideas about needed organizing projects in Cincinnati. As an example, many neighborhood representatives noted that

neighborhoods are isolated and need some kind of coalition in order to be heard and taken seriously by public officials.



Over lunch, two full time community organizers, DeMario Cooper of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, and Katy Heins of Community Change, shared their thoughts on the theme "Why Organize?" Heins began by saying that organizing is all about providing sufficient power to

citizens to insure that they have an impact on public decisions that affect their lives. On a variety of issues from fair wages to affordable housing, Community Change works with citizens in various cities and states to bring this about.



DeMario Cooper agreed with Heins' statement about "power." Often working in low-income African-American neighborhoods, he described the inequities that exist without effective organizing. He was especially blunt about the inequities confronting Black males. As an example, he pointed to the huge percentage of Black males who serve prison terms in this country and the deep hole this places them in once they are released. Issue 1, on last November's ballot, was a justice reform initiative that would have eliminated much of the unnecessary incarceration in Ohio. Although the organizing effort for Issue 1 by groups such as the Ohio Organizing Collaborative ended in defeat, Cooper already sees some positive next steps emerging from that campaign.

A final panel also featured diverse citizen organizers discussing their recent work and how they go about it. Catherine Turcer, Director of Common Cause/Ohio, described the organizing that went into the campaign to bring about redistricting reform in Ohio. She depicted how the successful state-wide signature gathering by volunteers for the grassroots Constitutional Amendment proposal persuaded members of the Ohio House and Senate to draft a real reform proposal of their own which the voters passed overwhelmingly passed last May.



Panelist Josh Spring, the Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, told attendees about his work in organizing tenants. Tenants, especially those living in publicly assisted apartments, often need to know their rights in order to stand up to landlords who fail to maintain their buildings or who are attempting to evict them in order to raise rents or to sell their properties to developers. Spring has been successful in his goal of working with tenants so that they successfully speak and take action for themselves.

As a conclusion to the day, David Altman, Executive Secretary of the Seasingood Foundation, and Michael Coffey, of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, talked with attendees about the availability of grants for citizen organizing. Altman noted that it was a good sign that two local foundations not only saw the need for citizen involvement in public decision making, but they also recognized the importance of organizing that involvement.

