

# Handbook for Communities Facing Environmental Hazards

## Chapter One: Community Organizing



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# Chapter One: Community Organizing

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# Chapter One: Introduction

The first step in finding a solution to an environmental problem is often community organizing. Environmental hazards rarely affect single individuals. If you or your family is being affected by an environmental hazard, it is likely that others in your community are as well. Finding and working with others is much more effective than working alone for many reasons. For example, the more people that are involved in the fight, the more likely you are to draw attention to your organization from government and corporate officials.



Community organizing also offers people the opportunity to develop their voice and speak out about their rights and needs. This type of empowerment will carry over into other aspects of your life and enable you to assert your rights in other areas.



# Chapter One: What is Community Organizing?

Community Organizing is people working together to bring about change.

Community Organizing unites a group of people around a common goal. Each member's participation matters to the entire group. Members each lead one another and listen to one another.

**In community organizations, people learn by doing.**

Community organizing helps to educate people and enables them to participate. Community organizing ensures that everyone participates in the decisions that are made about their lives. As ordinary people become active participants in public life, engaging in demonstrations, public hearings, and media campaigns, public officials become more accountable.





# Chapter One: How Do I Begin Community Organizing?

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## ① Clearly define your goal.

Your goal is a statement of what you want to accomplish. It will give you direction and focus as you work. To clearly state your goal, you might want to ask yourself, "What problem do I want to solve?" or "What am I trying to achieve?" It is important to be clear so that others can easily understand you.

## ② Find out whether any groups exist that share your goals. If they do, find out if you can join them.

If other groups that share your goals are already established, they can be a great place to use your skills and talents towards accomplishing your goal. Rather than reinventing the wheel, you will add momentum to an organization already fighting the battles you want to fight. Such groups will have experienced leaders who may be able to teach you leadership skills as well.

One way to find out whether such a group is already in existence is to check with environmental organizations in your state. Take a look at Appendix A for a list of organizations.

If a group does not exist or you can't join, you need to start a **NEW GROUP**. Check out the next section, titled **How do I Form a New Group?** for tips.



# Chapter One: How Do I Form a New Group?

## ① Bring People Together

The first step for group organizing is to bring people together. You do not need to hold a meeting - you may have more success inviting people to a social event! If the problem that you want to solve is a problem that affects your neighbors as well, begin by having a neighborhood get-together. Provide people who share a common problem with an opportunity to talk and share ideas.

Other ways to bring people together include attending meetings for other groups that may have similar (but not identical!) concerns, going "door to door" in your neighborhood and talking with your neighbors about the issue, talking with other parents during children's sports practice, or creating an opportunity to share ideas with members of your church.

## ② Find a "Core" Group of People

Using the contacts you have made, pick out a group of people equally committed to your goals and willing to work with you to achieve your goals. These people need to be very dedicated to your goal, because they will provide the energy of your organization. Together, you all will create a plan for action and recruit more interested people!



# Chapter One: How Do We Tackle Our Goals?

## 1 Pick a Name for Your Group!

Picking a name will give your group a sense of identity. Your name is also the way for others to remember who you are as a group and what your group is trying to accomplish. Your name needs to reflect your goal. Because your name will apply to all members of your group, it is important that you work together to come up with something you are all comfortable using.

## 2 Get Help!

You are not alone in your fight. There are a variety of resources to help you. Many organizations in North Carolina are also fighting for environmental justice. These groups can teach you what they know about your issue - and they can share their own successful and unsuccessful experiences. Getting the help you need, whether you are learning more about an issue, or finding out about your state legislature, is simply a matter of contacting the right people.



Check out the groups listed in Appendix A for some help!



# Chapter One: How Do We Tackle Our Goals?

## 3 Figure out what your goals are

As a group, take another look at your goal. Make sure that you are working for something that will be a real improvement in other people's lives. State your goal as clearly as possible so that others can understand!

**A community facing expansion of a hazardous waste incinerator decided their goal was to prevent the expansion.**

## 4 Decide on your group objectives

An objective is the **HOW**: How you will reach your goals. Objectives might include:

- Educating your community about a local health hazard
- Cleaning up a site
- Stopping a permit from being issued
- Understanding/modifying a permit
- Creating a partnership with a corporation to address pollution problems



# Chapter One: How Do We Tackle Our Goals?

## 5 Recruit Members!

Ask yourself "who should we include?"

People working together can bring about serious change - but it takes a lot of people. You need people to accomplish the steps in your plan of action. You also need lots of people to show those in power that your organization means business. To recruit members, think of all those people who are affected by your problem. They could be neighbors, co-workers, or parents with children at the same school. Who else will gain if this problem is solved?

**Tips to help you reach out to people:**

The best way to get new members is to **talk to people**. Talk with people face-to-face or over the phone about your issue. Listen to their concerns. Explain your concerns. How do you find the people to talk to? Consider going to business groups, religious organizations, senior citizen groups, or any group that has people who may have an interest in your goal. Again, try visiting your neighbors.



## 6 Meet with your supporters & plan your strategy

Strategy is the course of action you plan to take in order to meet your goal. For ideas on different ways to take action, turn the page.



# Chapter One: How Do We Tackle Our Goals?

## 7 Take Action:

To achieve your short-term objectives, and long term goal, you need to take action! There are many possible action steps your group can take. The order in which you take those steps is up to your group. All are valuable ways to work towards meeting your goal.

The following are some different types of action steps:

### Organize a demonstration.

For this, choosing the right location is critical. Also, use your demonstration to target individuals rather than a large group. Your message is clearer when you target "Senator Smith" rather than "the U.S. Senate."



### Obtain Information



Often you will want to get more information about your issue to inform yourself and others. If you are up against a company or a governmental organization, you will need to learn the power structure of that organization. Check out Chapter Two for different ways to obtain information.



# Chapter One: How Do We Tackle Our Goals?

## Different Action Steps Continued:

### Getting Your Message Out

Using the media, holding public meetings and participating in government decision-making processes are all important strategies to reach your goal. Check out Chapter Three for more information on how to get your message out!



### Using the Law



State and national laws protect the quality of the air you breathe and the water you drink. Corporations, landlords, and government agencies are required to follow these laws. If anyone violates your rights to clean air, clean water, lead-free housing, etc, you may be able to sue them in court. For more information about legal options, check out Chapter Four.

### Putting Pressure on Corporations and Governments

Your organization can influence elected officials and corporate decision-makers. Attending public meetings and lobbying are two ways to influence decision-makers. Check out Chapter Five for more information.





# Chapter One: How Do We Raise Funds?

Fundraising can be done in many different ways. You might begin by asking **individual donors** for financial contributions, writing letters, going door-to-door, setting up a table, or taking collections at meetings. You should also consider taking **in-kind** contributions as well. These are gifts other than money, including volunteer time, the use of a car or office space, gifts of food, and so on.

Another way to raise funds is by holding a raffle, a phone-a-thon, a benefit concert or dinner, or a yard sale to raise money. When planning any fundraiser, keep these points in mind:

- Raise more money than you spend
- Don't spend money on risky ventures
- Keep your ethical standards high
- Educate those who donate
- Have fun!!



**Grants** are another way to raise money for your organization. Grants usually require a well-planned and well-written proposal. There are a variety of organizations that offer grant funds to groups, including private foundations, corporation grants, public charities, community foundations, and some government agencies, like the EPA.

To learn the basics of how to write a grant application or find funding, check out The Foundation Center's website: [www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org).



# Chapter One: Additional Resources

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There are a number of organizations that will help you with community organizing. Give them a call or check out their websites (take a look at Chapter Two for help on using websites):

- **Community Toolbox:** An online guide to building communities—provides information on community organizing. Website: <http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/>
- **Southern Organizing Committee:** assists communities in the south with organizing. They have a special Health and Environmental Justice Project. Contact information:  
P.O. Box 10518, Atlanta, Georgia 30310  
Phone: 404-755-2855  
Fax: 404-755-0575  
Email: [socejp@igc.apc.org](mailto:socejp@igc.apc.org)  
Website: <http://www.igc.org/socejp/>
- **Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League:** assists communities facing environmental hazards in North Carolina and several surrounding states with organizing. They also provide technical assistance on scientific issues. Contact information:  
P.O. Box 88, Glendale Springs, NC 28629  
Phone: (336) 982-2691  
Fax: (336) 982-2954  
Website: <http://www.bredl.org>