

Case Study Brief

People Power: Empowering Rural Communities in Del Norte through Community Organizing

Community organizing is a critical piece of the Building Healthy Communities Initiative (BHC) in Del Norte County and Tribal Lands (DNATL). The experience of the True North Organizing Network (TNON) offers insight into adaptations needed to translate popular organizing models to operate in rural areas, and the importance of grassroots organizing as a foundation for building healthy communities.

DNATL is California's northernmost coastal region and the ancestral home of the Yurok and Tolowa peoples. White settlers arrived on the North Coast during the Gold Rush, and began the commercial exploitation of natural resources. Timber companies ultimately destroyed 90% of the region's Redwood forests, and local fisheries have been in decline for the past 30 years¹ (Pomeroy et al 2010). Del Norte now lags behind most California counties on community well-being indicators. Residents disproportionately experience high rates of poverty (23% of residents live under the poverty line), homelessness, childhood neglect, childhood obesity, substance abuse, low rates of college readiness, and low literacy rates compared to the rest of the state. Assessments conducted as part of the BHC Initiative often revealed how hopelessness and negative perceptions of the area prevail among its communities. The True North Organizing Network grew from the recognition that empowering residents - aka "People Power" - could be a key ingredient to creating better well being for DNATL communities.

Creating a Rural Organizing Model

"Power building is growing in areas of the state where community power was too rarely recognized - for example...in Del Norte County and Tribal Lands"

-BHC Report, 2020

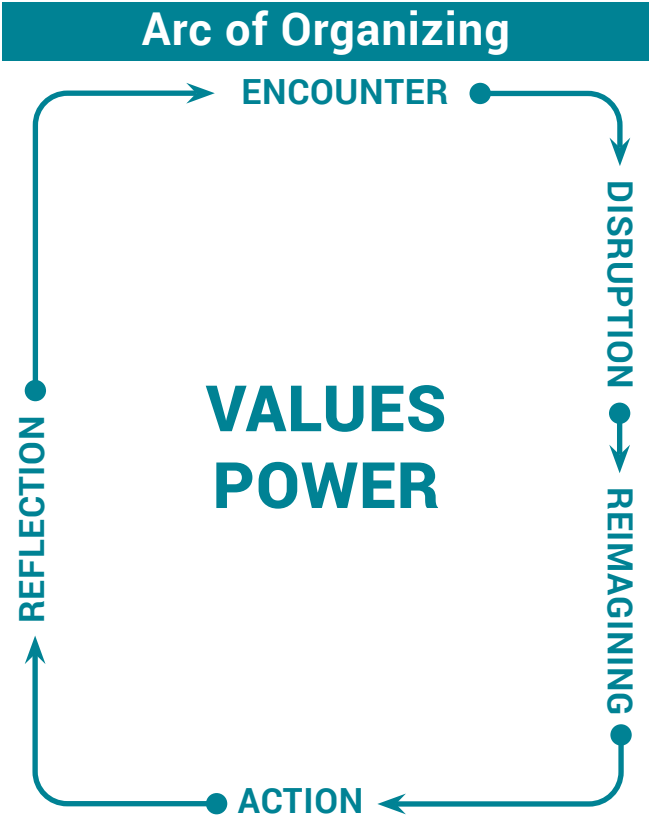
Rural peoples' organizing needs are distinct from their urban counterparts, and have been evolving over time. Rural places host a large number of veterans for example, due to reserve and national guard deployments, and are becoming more ethnically diverse with Latinx communities and existing indigenous lands. These groups remain underserved, as do the youth and aging populations in these settings, which demand a rural-specific approach². DNATL's fledgling community organizing work had to create adaptations to a popular urban model championed by the organization People Improving Communities Together (PICO) and learn some crucial lessons on its way to becoming a successful cultural institution in Del Norte. These adaptations, highlighted here across a few key experiences during the Network's nascent development, have helped Del Norte's residents see themselves as powerful agents of change rather than accept their status quo.

Establishing the Network: In its early stages as part of the Humboldt Area Foundation/Wild Rivers Community Foundation in 2014, True North leaders and staff participated in a "season of listening", facilitating over 1,000 conversations with residents and organizations in North Coast communities. These conversations set the course for the organization, identifying five campaign issues for research and action: Water and the Environment, Immigrant Rights, Police Accountability, Mental Health and Homelessness, and Public Education. Unlike most grassroots organizing efforts True North was blessed with ample financial support in its early years, thanks to the BHC Initiative. However, its position within a community foundation was often not well aligned with its early power building work, as they launched these campaigns. Rebalancing roles and creating a gradual plan for departing into its own organization ultimately overcame this. True North began in Humboldt County in 2015 as an affiliate of the Humboldt Area Foundation and became an independent nonprofit organization in 2018. In order to best leverage its power on crucial issues, they now work across the region.

¹ Pomeroy, C. (2011) California's North Coast Fishing Communities Historical Perspective and Recent Trends. Final Report to the California State Coastal Conservancy. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255992111_California's_North_Coast_Fishing_Communities_Historical_Perspective_and_Recent_Trends

² Mackie P. (2014) "Community Organizing in Rural Areas: Yes, It's Different" Presentation to the National Association for Rural Mental Health. Accessed at <https://works.bepress.com/paul-force-emery-mackie/7/>

Growing Good Organizers: Finding trained organizers who could adapt their ways of working to a unique rural community proved difficult. Instead, TNON identified potential in organizers with deep community connections who came from different professional backgrounds — social workers, teachers, non-profit professionals, and others. From there, organizers learned how to employ the PICO-derived “Arc of Organizing” (see figure), and particularly the use of one-on-one conversations with community members and leaders to understand what they love and hold sacred, their lived experiences in the community, and sources of pain and frustration. These conversations and the relationships built from them are the backbone of TNON’s work.



Key differences between Urban and Rural Organizing models

	URBAN	RURAL
Defining Service Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The community organizers and the people involved may live close to each other. ▶ Community organizing and the PICO model is focused on marginalized neighborhoods in urban and suburban areas. ▶ Community organizing often combats issues related to large-scale gentrification, segregation and the displacement of low-income households. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Communities involved are isolated and far from one another. ▶ Neighborhoods can be sparsely populated with a lot of distance between each household. It makes more sense to work regionally than to classify communities by neighborhoods. ▶ Community organizing in rural regions like Del Norte and Humboldt Counties incorporates the largest Tribal Lands and Native American population in the state of California.
Institutional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Community organizers help faith-based congregations identify local problems and provide innovative solutions. ▶ Community organizers can be incubated by established neighborhood institutions. ▶ Community organizers often combat the inequitable distribution of funding with access to established organizations and resources. ▶ Resources, organizers, funding, and organizations exist in silos. It is important to not duplicate existing efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The solutions start with neighborhoods but expand regionally through many rural communities. ▶ Community organizers are starting from scratch. ▶ There is not enough funding to distribute. Community organizers often have to fill in the funding gap by applying for grants with school districts and Tribes, and building capacity to make the solutions effective.

	URBAN	RURAL
Building Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Community organizers bring people together through shared faith, identity, and values. ▶ In urban areas, the approach and strategy can be more aggressive and combative towards elected officials. ▶ Organizers mobilize community members to keep the pressure on and hold public officials accountable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ In a small town with a limited number of residents, community organizers can't afford to burn bridges with public officials. Public officials and community members work as partners. ▶ Community organizers build credibility and trust among multiple groups and community members who are experiencing marginalization.

Issues vs Relationships: Del Norte's population density makes issue-based organizing unlikely to be successful. Additionally, it worked against both the strengths of the PICO model and the culture of so many rural communities which are based in long standing relationships. In tight knit communities people often serve multiple roles in the community. An organizer cannot afford to discount or antagonize anyone in this context. Maintaining these relationships, even with people who do not agree, is a key adaptation of rural organizing.

"People don't understand [Rural America]...they think the politics are harsh and the ideologies rigid. Yes people are more conservative up here...but they are in relationship."

-TNON Organizer

Thinking about the community along racial or ideological divides would also not do service to TNONs work. Often, organizers remarked about how they found unexpected champions and allies once they reached out to them for those powerful one-on-one discussions. At the onset everyone should be seen as a potential ally; if collaboration doesn't work for one campaign or workstream, it doesn't mean that it won't work in the future. As the PICO principles state and TNON organizers frequently quote –

"no permanent allies, no permanent enemies."

Bridging Divides: Undeniably, Del Norte's white families (62% of the population) living under the poverty line would benefit from many of the reforms racial justice campaigns have advocated for in other settings –affordable housing and childcare, access to better healthcare, and criminal justice reform. TNON focuses on the intersectionality of the work, and how collaborating on these issues can create a rising tide that lifts all ships. Organizers note that misunderstanding of what racial equity campaigns are trying to accomplish is always an issue nationally, and locally they have found that it's counterproductive to have conversations on racial issues with groups who are not ready to engage in them. Del Norte and Humboldt Counties had several parks, streets and other places, some of them sacred to local Tribes, which had been named after settlers. In some cases, the settlers involved were documented in local history to have carried out atrocities against Tribal communities. Correcting this historical injustice became a flashpoint around which other communities could show up in solidarity with their Tribal neighbors to enact change. One organizer commented on the power of that, showing up to an action and seeing all of those in the community who were concerned and invested enough to show up changed her thinking about the visibility of Native issues and concern amongst the community about those issues. Members also felt their power grow when they showed up to key public meetings as a member of True North. There was a sense that while before their concerns could be minimized by community leaders, now when they got up to speak before these organizations "it was like there were 200 people standing behind me". This sense of solidarity has been a big shift in the community, according to interviewees.

Timeline: True North Organizing Network

• 2011

BHC hires local organizers to begin school-based organizing in three DNTL communities

• 2012

PICO model is adopted for organizing work, Del Norte organizers trained in its use. Local Organizing Committee creates Cultural Fire Management Council in Weitchpac

• 2013

True North Organizing Network becomes official PICO affiliate. The Network holds hundreds of one-on-ones with Tribal elders, clergy, youth, and community leaders. Helps organize school board election forum and student campaigns at Sunset High.

• 2015

Convenes 250 residents to identify focus areas- the environment, immigrant rights, housing and mental health, police accountability and education equity. Leaders host Immigration Forum for 100 attendees, provide free legal consultations.

• 2016

65 local Tribal members travel to Standing Rock to halt construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. True North helps organizer multi-Tribal gathering in support of water and indigenous rights.

• 2017

Organizes county leaders against CA SB 54 and its anti-immigrant language. More than 120 from Orleans, Weitchpec, Klamath, and Hoopa organize against the Pacific Connector Pipeline, which would cross the Klamath River. Builds rapid response infrastructure against ICE raids.

• 2018

Continues Voter education, registration, and candidate forums across Del Norte

• 2019

Hosts town hall meetings building support for making homelessness and mental health services a community priority

• 2020

The Pembina Pipeline Corp. halts construction of the Jordan Cove pipeline. TNON and Indigenous leaders had worked to oppose the pipeline since 2017.