

People Power

Empowering Rural Communities in
Del Norte and Tribal Lands Through
Community Organizing

2022



Executive Summary

This exploratory case study is part of a research series investigating pathways to improving health and well-being in a remote, rural region of northern California. Funded by The California Endowment, Building Healthy Communities (BHC) in Del Norte and Tribal Lands focused on empowering historically excluded adult and youth residents to exert agency in public and private decision-making and to close the health equity gap. Community organizing became a critical piece of the Del Norte and Tribal Lands BHC Initiative. The experience of the True North Organizing Network (True North) offers insight into the 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.

Lessons from the initiative highlight issues encountered in launching into power-building work from a philanthropic effort, building organizing competencies in a rural workforce, creating solidarity between disparate groups, and how using relational models of organizing helped the network grow in this remote setting. The Humboldt Area/Wild Rivers Foundation and True North's unique emphasis in developing youth organizing work, and their success in engaging young people as a force for change in the community has been a particularly transformative element of their work in Del Norte and Tribal Lands.

Introduction

Del Norte County and Tribal Lands (DNATL) is California's northernmost coastal region. It is the ancestral home of the Yurok and Tolowa peoples, represented in the present day Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, Elk Valley Rancheria, Yurok Tribe, and Resighini Rancheria. With its rugged mountainous coastline, rivers, and dense Redwood forest groves, the natural abundance that both sustained its indigenous communities and later drew exploitation from prospectors and timber barons continues to draw visitors to the area. Redwood forests and salmon populations were not only important resources but also culturally significant to the Indigenous people of the region. In the nineteenth century white settlers began arriving with the California Gold Rush. Not long after, they turned their attention to the commercial exploitation of other natural resources, launching successful timber ventures. These changes were catastrophic for the region's indigenous communities who suffered displacement, genocide, forced acculturation, and other efforts to strip them of their culture, resources, spiritual well-being, land, and families¹ by European settlers. The legacy of those atrocities continue to be felt by the county's Native American residents, roughly 10% of the population (2019 census).

One hundred years later the Second World War brought a national housing boom which decimated 90% of the original Redwood forests. This turned Del Norte's local economy towards its fisheries, which have now been in decline for the past 30 years (Pomeroy et al., 2010). Several waves of extractive natural resource booms later, Del Norte now lags behind most California counties on community well-being indicators. Residents lament the state of the economy, health care, infrastructure, and access to technology—and the relative lack of resources to improve overall quality of life for residents. Assessments conducted as part of the Building Healthy Communities initiative often revealed

how hopelessness and negative perceptions of the area prevail among its communities. As one organizer noted, there was a prevalent attitude that things would never change for the better in DNATL, and that when they did, marginalized groups would be left behind. Decision making power was consolidated among a small number of influential leaders who did not always see the value in striving for a more equitable and inclusive community.

"The good ol' boys network is so powerful, with a certain number of families who run everything ... People never bothered to challenge what was set out for us."

-True North Organizer

Structural racism and other historically-rooted systems of oppression create environments where certain groups are advantaged over others through laws, policies, and cultural norms and practices. These legacies have certainly impacted generations of DNATL residents who disproportionately experience high rates of poverty (23% of residents live under the poverty line, compared to 11% nationally [Census, 2020]), homelessness, childhood neglect, childhood obesity, substance abuse, low rates of college readiness, and low literacy rates compared to the rest of the state. Historically, the region contains many Sundown towns (Pfaelzer, 2008)—all-white municipalities that practiced racial segregation through violence, intimidation, and discriminatory local laws. Despite this, immigrants and refugees have settled on the North Coast for many decades. Language and immigration status is often cited as a barrier these residents experience to feeling safe in their own community, accessing healthcare and social services, and participating in local elections (CCRP, 2008 & 2017).

¹ For a sobering account of how contact with settler groups impacted the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation see <https://delnortehistory.org/tolowa/>

In this context, community organizing begins with a radical act of imagining a future where all residents can thrive together. The California Endowment (TCE) and other health sector leaders recognized the need for mainstreaming social determinants of health into community practice.

“Health equity is about how we’re impacted every day in our neighborhoods. If we’re undocumented, for example, or how being a young person of color in criminalized communities ... health equity has become a broader framework that is about life and death.”

-Abraham Medina, Director California Alliance for Youth and Justice, (Farrow, Rogers & Henderson-Frakes, 2020).

A 1.75 billion dollar investment allocated to 14 local partnerships across the state, The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities (BHC) grant aimed to innovate conventional approaches to health equity. The Initiative culminated in over 1,250 local policy wins, system changes, and other tangible benefits for communities (TCE, 2020). However, BHC did not begin with an explicit focus on local power building. In their telling, funders from The California Endowment were held accountable

by local communities and called on to transform their thinking about what generates sustainable positive change in community health. Through this reckoning with the true root causes of health disparities across the state, the program articulated a new theory of change: to improve health status by building “people power”, transforming policy and public systems, and expanding opportunities in communities that have been historically marginalized (TCE, 2020). In their evaluation of the program’s overall statewide efficacy, the Endowment recognized that across all 14 BHC sites, Del Norte and Tribal Lands was one where “People Power” was the least recognized and least developed as a vehicle for positive change (TCE, 2020). Lessons from the different local BHCs, especially Del Norte’s experiences, influenced the goals of the program at large. In 2016, the Endowment formally shifted its focus to make building people power its primary strategy, in pursuit of health and racial equity.

Through the accounts of organizers, Foundation staff, and community members collected in 11 one-on-one interviews, this case study details how community organizing went from an under emphasized and poorly understood element of health work in Del Norte, to the creation of a robust and effective regional organizing group that has empowered residents to take the lead on transforming their communities for the better.

History of Organizing in Del Norte

Community organizing brings people together to pursue action on shared concerns (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Through it, communities can identify opportunities to improve quality of life, respond to needs, and seize strategic opportunities. It is generally thought of as a means to strengthen and egalitize social, economic, and human capital (Mackie, 2014).

“... one of the central problems with much of the work that has been written on community is its tendency to fall into dualistic thinking: organizing or development; consensus or conflict; community or labor; local or larger scale. This limits the potential scope and range of community-based efforts for social change.”

-DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2010)

There are two predominant models for thinking of how change can occur in community, though they are not mutually exclusive in their use and organizing groups frequently employ some combination of the two. One model is often referred to as the consensus building approach. This approach believes that power can be grown rather than necessarily redistributed, that conflicts can be overcome through identifying mutual gains and working to build relationships and trust over key issues in communities (Beck and Eichler, 2008). This is contrasted by the classical labor organizing approach, detailed by Saul Alinsky in his seminal book *Rules for Radicals* (1971), which is more combative and oppositional in demanding power for marginalized communities. In contrasting these approaches observers often refer to a dichotomy between “conflict and consensus” or “disruptive and accommodationist” approaches. The conflict model

and its cognates are also sometimes referred to as “direct action organizing” (Ohmer and Brooks, 2013).

Applied in real world context, most organizing outfits will use elements of both approaches, strategically. Some argue that the consensus approach can be a more conducive model in rural areas compared to the more disruptive strategies. In this more collaborative strategy, the organizer capacitates the community in pursuing their wants and needs, which are determined through their own consensus building work. The consensus model may better promote considering broad strengths across community resources, avoiding alienation, and honoring the close relationships that must be maintained over time amongst disparate groups of people who depend on one another in close-knit rural places. Across the nation rural places host a large number of Veterans, due to reserve and national guard deployments, and are becoming more ethnically diverse with Latinx communities and existing indigenous lands. These populations have special needs as do the youth and aging populations which remain underserved in these settings and demand a rural-specific approach (Mackie, 2014).

Power dynamics within the timber industry shaped understanding of organizing and resistance in Del Norte and adjacent counties. While the first timber union in the region was organized in neighboring Humboldt County in 1884, these movements reached Del Norte later in the 1930s, where labor (often provided by recent immigrants from Scandinavia, Portugal, Poland, and elsewhere) agitated for a 50-hour workweek, provision of better health care for loggers, and other labor rights. In some parts of the Pacific Northwest, strikes turned deadly, for example the Holmes Eureka mill strike which resulted in three workers being murdered by police and vigilante groups.² Environmental groups seeking to conserve redwood forests

² Redwood District Council Archive, Cal Poly Humboldt. Accessed May 2022 at <https://library.humboldt.edu/humco/holdings/sawmill.htm>

and other special landscapes and species trace their origins back to the early 20th century, when groups like the Save the Redwoods League—whose organizing power came mainly from women’s civic engagement—successfully preserved several old growth groves along the north coast. As the timber industry began to decline, so did labor organizing efforts. However, this period also ushered in the rise of resistance to environmental degradation being carried out by different industries. The “timber wars” of the 90’s drew national attention to the plight of northern California’s redwoods, as activists occupied stands of old growth to save them from harvest.

True North Organizing Network’s early leadership recognized the region’s rich history of organizing actions, specifically around environmental issues. Tribal communities in California’s northern counties in particular, have a successful legacy of organizing in defense of the ecosystems which not only materially provide for them but also form the basis of indigenous culture and spirituality. In the 1950’s, Native American communities started organizing against the dams that were disrupting their traditional livelihoods and diets by affecting salmon populations. Referring to local tribal nations, an early proponent of Del Norte organizing efforts

stated: “They have been a throughline, and showed us what can be done.” The fish kill event of 2002 is a powerful example—warmer water temperatures and low river flows due to dams created conditions for pathogens to flourish resulting in the extermination of over 34,000 mainly Chinook salmon arriving to the river to spawn. Through their organizing efforts aimed at hydroelectric corporations and their backers at home and abroad, Yurok and Karuk activists and their allies were able to secure an agreement to remove the six dams along the Klamath and begin restoring salmon habitat.³

Throughout its history, organizing in Del Norte has used opposition tactics, organizing agitation to protect rights or coerce those in power to concede benefits to the people. The creation of a more relational model of organizing to pursue long term, structural change in local communities constitutes a first, and its advocates had to strategically think through and experiment with different approaches to make it take hold. Those efforts are detailed throughout this case study. The adaptations are particularly apparent in accounts of the early days of community organizing, arising with support of the BHC Initiative during its early years.

³ From the Global Nonviolent Action Database, Swarthmore College. Accessed 5/31/22 .

Creating True North

Establishing the Network

The BHC Del Norte Initiative started as partners Humboldt Area Foundation (HAF) and Wild Rivers Community Foundations (WRCF) created a joint department of Communities and Outreach. This provided a natural home for staff to explore explicitly addressing organizing in their work with community partners. Several staff at the Foundations had experienced, in their professional trajectories, the need to address power and to do so using knowledge from the community organizing field. One HAF director had worked as an organizer earlier in his career, and a staff member at the Endowment had worked for the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) which provided the foundation for the model True North adapted (see page nine). There were staff at both the Endowment and WRCF who had experience with political organizing networks.

Foundation leadership recognized an opportunity to unlock greater positive transformation by empowering Del Norte's residents. One director noted that when the timber industry left, there was no educational base and practically no jobs for working class people in Del Norte. There was a lot of trauma among Tribal and Immigrant communities, and white families living in generational poverty. The purpose of organizing, as this director noted, was to remove some of the barriers—such as time and capacity—that keep marginalized communities from being able to advocate for themselves in the manner that affluent ones do.

To begin this important work, the Foundations hired a consultant from the PICO network to learn how to train local people. HAF then started providing small grants for organizing purposes, noting that “[creating] equity requires infrastructure”. This new approach to community development was not met with universal approval—some organizations in the community saw it as competing with or replicating things being done in the nonprofit sector. The

vision was not understood by more traditional organizations in the civic sector. These critiques have since quieted, as the work of the organizers started to speak for itself.

At first the choice to launch organizing in these communities from their local secondary schools was purely logistical. In remote communities, anchoring institutions, those that create gathering opportunities for people from all walks of life, are few and far between. Public space of any kind is limited, and people have to travel to do their weekly shopping or access most services. Local schools were effectively the only viable option when looking for a physical location to embed the work in the community. Ultimately, this would have profound implications for youth, the organizers, and their allies. In virtually every interview conducted for this research with community leaders, respondents referenced how transformational—both personally and professionally—organizing with young people was to become.

Upon initiating the program, three organizers were hired, with expertise aligned to organizing youth and Latinx communities especially. Foundation staff relied on their social capital to be able to place organizers within the schools and get them access to students and parents- which launched the work.

Standing on their own

2015 brought a watershed moment for the BHC Initiative at large. The coalition felt the energy was dwindling. Staffing changes had occurred in a few organizations, which resulted in the Initiative losing champions and institutional knowledge. There was a general sense of disinvestment in the collaboration, at the expense of its goals. While this was occurring in other topic areas (and ultimately resolved through a creative overhaul lovingly referred to as “the Pitstop”), the value of organizing and transformative power it held was actually becoming more and more apparent. With it, came frictions as organizers and

their communities stepped into their power and sought new tactics for enacting change. Not all of these new strategies were compatible with the mission and positionality of the private foundations who were incubating the work. For example, while the organizing work was fundamentally about building good relationships, there were times when actions were necessary that carried the potential to compromise existing relationships the Foundation had cultivated. Organizers needed to retain the right to use agitation or advocacy techniques in select instances where they would be effective. While ultimately good relationships were maintained by all parties, managing some of the threat that established community leadership felt about this new organizing work sometimes fell on HAF/WRCF staff.⁴ Aspects of organizing made the Foundation uncertain, particularly getting involved in campaigns that reached beyond the region.

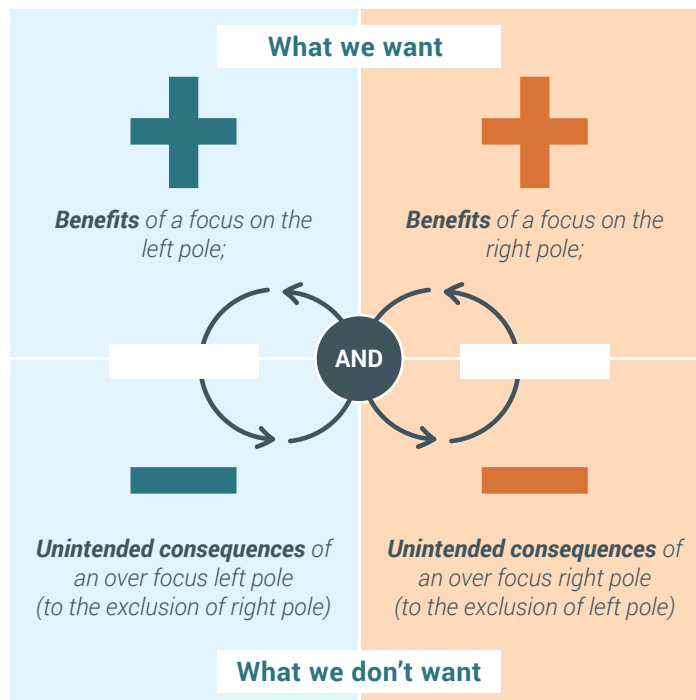
There were other issues. The Foundation wasn't staffed to take on the work, they had managed with a lean roster until that point. Program officers found themselves needing twice as many hours in a week than they had; always feeling stretched, ineffective, and unable to provide the support the work needed to flourish.

"Doing community organizing while growing an organization in a small rural community, within a foundation, building across racial groups and different communities ... that was grueling."
-True North Organizer

Neither party, organizing or regular foundation staff, found there was the right balance between inclusion in decision making and autonomy, resulting in friction as one interviewee noted. There was a sense that there were things that needed to be said and done to maintain the integrity of an organizing program which could be harmful to the relationships and work the Foundations were doing. A restructuring needed to occur, but there were many possible directions that needed to be weighed to set the work up for success.

"None of the transitions have been particularly gentle," divulged one staff member, "on a personal level they have always been challenging and difficult." To initiate this re-visioning of the work, the team relied on a powerful exercise called Polarity Mapping (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Polarity Mapping



⁴ This section reports on content from interviews conducted with five past staff members.

This visual framework allows teams to frame issues in terms of trade-offs and pros and cons, legitimizing experiences, and recognizing the value of different approaches.⁵ Through it, the collaborators were able to see that the organizational structure they were working under was delivering the negative aspects of the polarities without the positives—work needed to be done to make sure support and strength were provided without losing the autonomy and nimbleness needed for effective organizing work. If they didn't give the organizers space to thrive, the Foundations risked losing the opportunity to let community leaders drive change. The lack of autonomy also risked delicate relationships the Foundation was cultivating and maintaining. They realized the best way forward was to start devolving some of the administrative functions, with a view towards creating a more autonomous entity that would house the organizing work. A fully separate organization was not envisioned originally, but as some functions started to spin off from the Foundations, they recognized the need for an autonomous 501c3.

Hiring and human resources were the first roles devolved to the fledgling organization. HAF/WRCF remained the fiduciary and financial intermediary to the Endowment well into the separation process. During the transition, the two organizations worked flexibly to make sure supports were in place, with the Foundations helping on a fee-for-service basis, funded by the Endowment. As this was occurring, the organizing workstream was logging more traction with key communities and accruing more "wins", moving steadily towards becoming their own organization.

Growing Good Organizers

In the estimation of the more senior organizers currently serving in the Network, it takes five years to "grow a good organizer". DNATL's unique context contributes to some of the challenges True North has experienced in training and deploying skilled staff. As several staff conveyed that the stakes are also high—organizers sent to do the work when they are too green could accidentally sever delicate relationships that the organization took a long time

to grow.

In particular, it is difficult to find staff who are prepared to use the PICO model and its Del Norte adaptations. There is limited interest and availability of candidates in the local area, which forces consideration of applicants with experience from urban settings. Those candidates more often come from advocacy or activism organizations, perhaps lacking the deep belief in this model that is needed to forge relationships which are durable and can take the work forward over generations. True North started recruiting interns out of the local university, Cal Poly Humboldt. They were first placed in a three-to six-month-long trial period before taking on an assignment. This method requires staff to invest a lot in employees who may not ultimately make the cut, but the organization can't take the risk in scaling back training.

During the early stages of the work, Foundation staff had to think outside the box to find their initial recruits, prioritizing connections to the community. They came from labor organizing, social work, teaching, and nonprofit professions. Once the Network dug deeper, they realized that tribal communities, for whom self-advocacy was a matter of survival, possessed many innately talented organizers. They often didn't know it yet. A few expressed how they weren't sure how to get started, and didn't trust the principles of the PICO model which the organization was working with, to carry them through. Another remarked how surprised they were at the way people came forward to share their experiences during those early one-on-ones (see page 11). The first cohort of organizers had to build confidence in themselves and in the organizing process to innovate organizing in a way that suited Del Norte's unique context.

"I had never heard that until that day, 'what are your pain points' ... and the diversity in that room I had never seen that before, it doesn't happen in Del Norte. And people really revealed their souls in that room!"

-True North Organizer

⁵ See https://universityinnovation.org/wiki/Resource:Polarity_Mapping

Working with PICO

True North organizers noted that PICO operating principles were used with a high degree of fidelity in the early stages of the Network’s development. Using the PICO model at the outset equipped True North organizers with strong core values from

which to build. It is clear that these values are well integrated into the work; in discussion with organizers and leaders, they are often quick to connect an anecdote or lesson from their work to one of the PICO principles (see Figure 2). The PICO consultant was able to provide close guidance, having strong knowledge of the community.

Figure 2: The People Improving Community Through Organizing Principles

Leadership Development, Relationship Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Never do for others what they can do for themselves. ▶ People cannot be held responsible for what they do not understand. ▶ When in doubt, do a one-to-one. ▶ Take people from where they are, not from where you want them to be. ▶ The first resolution is internal. ▶ There is no nice way to make change. ▶ Empowerment is developmental. ▶ If people can't say "no", what good is a "yes"? ▶ Leaders have followers. ▶ Organizers teach leaders, leaders organize.
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Power is the ability to act. ▶ Real power is often hidden. ▶ Power is taken, not given. ▶ Power is a product of relationship. ▶ Power respects power. ▶ Power defines the rules. ▶ Power: use it or lose it. ▶ Ask "Who do you love?"
Strategy Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Small is beautiful. ▶ Go in dumb, come out smart. ▶ Define the situation, control the outcome. ▶ Push a negative far enough and you get a positive. ▶ Stay with the experience of your people. ▶ Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, no more, no less.
Issue Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Organizing is about people; people are about issues. ▶ People act out of their self-interest. ▶ Self-interest is never static. ▶ The greater the distance you are from a problem, the more you can philosophize about it. ▶ Push a problem and you get the issue. Push the issue and you get values.

Action Development

- ▶ No permanent allies, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests.
- ▶ The action is in the reaction.
- ▶ Rewards go to those who do the work.
- ▶ Relationships are reciprocal.

Source: PICO

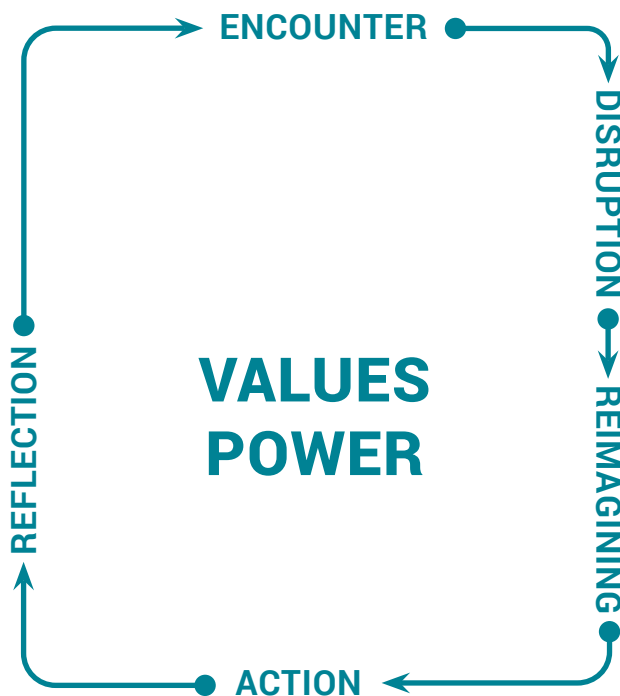
The Pacific Institute for Community Organizing was founded in the 1970s; founder John Baumann was influenced by the ideas of activist and organizing theorist Saul Alinsky to create an organization committed to empowering communities. There are currently 13 affiliates in the state, embedded in a larger network of faith-based community organizing groups. Since 2004, the group has changed its acronym to stand for “People Improving Communities through Organizing”, and operates as part of the “Faith in Action” network today, which True North is an affiliate of. PICO organizing is characterized by its use of a “pressure group” approach and an institutional base, generally a faith-based organization. The PICO secretariat provides technical support and capacity building around use of its principles and model, which affiliate organizations can use as tools to pursue locally-determined priorities and goals.

The Arc of Organizing is one of the most fundamental principles, the “lifeblood” of the organization according to one leader. Particularly the first step, engaging in one-on-one conversations, was key to launching this work in DNATL. Organizers would sometimes refer to these conversations as “heart to hearts”, and connect that stage of the organizing process with the most important question that almost all Del Norte organizers referred to as the crux of their process—“Who do you love?” These important conversations are about understanding what community members cherish, what is sacred to them in their lives, and what are sources of pain and frustration. True North organizers refer to the latter as “pain points”. Engaging in these one-on-ones was empowering for community members and organizers alike.

Creating a new organizing model for DNATL

Several issues arose in the early days of the organizing network which motivated innovations to the model. On one hand, there was not enough consistent access to PICO expertise and leadership for green organizers to draw on when responding to the day to day challenges that arose in the work. “We used our own experiences and analysis of the model to create a hybrid that would work for the youth piece,” responded one organizer, but they noted that there was a leadership vacuum and they were encountering a lot of situations that fell outside of what they perceived as the PICO model’s strengths. Ultimately, an executive director was hired who was a skilled coalition builder and conflict resolver, with strong connections to the community, who helped shepherd the organization through these early challenges.

Figure 3: Arc of Organizing graphic (courtesy of True North, 2022)



The issues with the model were particularly stark for the Youth Organizing program. The organizers didn't have experience with youth development, the scaffolding model, or other ways of supporting youth with a history of trauma that created safety and operated in a restorative way. The need to incorporate social work elements became increasingly apparent, and remains a tension in the work: organizers are cognizant that developing youth leadership requires an orientation towards the struggles of youth and families, particularly those who have experienced systemic oppression and other traumas. However, organizers also expressed their awareness that their role in a young person's life is not to be their social

worker or therapist, but a mentor who can connect youth with those people and organizations that can provide services for their continued development. To do this True North focuses on making sure that any organizers who work with youth understand their social and physiological developmental needs so they can engage them with age-appropriate challenges and opportunities to grow as leaders. The jumping off point for the work did come directly from organizing models—the revolutionary notion that young people are the foremost experts on their own experiences. Centering their knowledge and pursuing the issues that matter to them created a sea change in the community, detailed in the youth organizing section below.

Box 1: Creating a Youth Organizing Model in Del Norte

“To organize the students, first I had to organize the Principal”

The launch of True North's Youth Organizing work was a false start. The administrators in the first high school the network tried to embed in didn't understand the value of the work. Reaching the students became impossible and the program was ultimately abandoned. From this initial failure, the organizer learned to start with the administrators. They took the time to build rapport in the second high school, and through this process found in the principal an open-minded professional who was passionate about supporting her students in any way that might be effective. This principal became a champion for youth organizing—even approving academic credit for participation in organizing activities that met certain enrichment criteria. “The students had a lot of changes they wanted to see happen and it was important that [the principal] understand this wasn't a critique of her work.”

Building civic literacy was a major component of that early work, and one that positively impacted the students. A powerful exercise one of the organizers facilitated was an examination of the voting margins in recent local elections. The students dug into the numbers and discovered that some races had been decided by a handful of votes. It stood to reason that if any one of them had brought in a few people to vote, they could have decided the race. This energized the young people to engage in local politics on issues they cared about, particularly around how law enforcement was interacting with local youth. This method of working—identifying a problem that people care about, researching it extensively, then reaching out to leadership and stakeholders to engage—was an accessible process Youth were able to apply to many different issues in their lives. It also inspired some of the participants to pursue local politics themselves.

When asked how to initiate youth work, the PICO mentor said “the Model is the Model”. The Arc of Organizing was employed just as it would in any other setting. Reaching out with one-to-ones cracked open a little space for young people to come forward with their stories and be heard by adult members of the community in ways they hadn't experienced before. The validation was a positive all on its own. The organizer conducted 35 one-on-ones with students, learning about their experiences at school, hopes and dreams for the future, and their pain points. This helped them develop their youth leadership training in directions that were meaningful to these young people—addressing their school environment, substance use issues, policing, and sustainability and health campaigns that led to tangible wins for youth and their loved ones in the community.

Urban vs. Rural Organizing

To pursue BHC's higher level goals the context of DNATL meant confronting some of the biases and conventions that have developed in popular organizing traditions. Much of the need for adaptation and innovation stems from the rural and remote nature of the communities True North works with. This has practical implications for organizing strategy. One, low population made issue-based organizing unlikely to be successful. Motivating and mobilizing enough supporters for any one issue across a vast and remote landscape seemed implausible. Second, 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. Everyone knows everyone else, and people often serve multiple roles in the community. An organizer cannot afford to discount or antagonize anyone in this context.

"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."

-True North Organizer

Thinking about the community along racial or ideological divides would not do service to True North's 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 True North organizers frequently quote—no permanent allies, no permanent enemies. Avoiding burnt bridges is a key concern for organizers, and cultivating open lines of communication makes their work possible. There were times where this tenet of the work was

particularly challenging for community members, where inaction and poor outcomes were perceived to be due to specific leaders that they wanted the organization to call out—"We are not undermining the institutions that are opening their door to us," asserted one community organizer about how they had to hold the line for relational organizing to the discontent of some.

"In larger, more urban areas it's okay to blow up bridges occasionally, but in a rural, remote area there may be only one bridge."

-True North Organizer

This is not to say that opposition in the community isn't sometimes a challenge to the power building work the organizing network takes on. In interviews with BHC collaborators and organizers multiple mentions were made to the "good ol' boys" network, that in Del Norte leadership and influence is consolidated amongst a small number of (white, elder, male) leaders who are often resistant to change. There is a sense that this network can feel challenged by grassroots efforts to address issues in the community. In a salient example, the community briefly hosted a more progressive Catholic priest at the local church, and residents believe he was forced to leave by the "good ol' boys" network as result of his ideological orientation. He was replaced by more traditional, conservative clergy.

This surfaces another issue in the PICO model that had to be adapted to better fit DNATL's context by organization's leadership. Part of the Faith in Action network of organizations, faith-based organizations have historically been the incubating spaces of PICO affiliates and their campaigns. In urban contexts this worked well for a number of reasons. Relying on the social capital faith-based

institutions have in their communities, it was often strategic to have faith leaders as allies. Once it was determined that the grassroots effort was committed, the faith leader might carve out space in their service, introduce the speaker and have the community member present on the issue to raise awareness, recruit others to the cause, and carry organizing work forward. One organizer paraphrased how this is often framed: “We need to understand the system level dynamics of these issues in our church community so we can love each other as God intends.” From there, the faith-based institution could help anchor the work in the community while things are getting off the ground.

While this has been a successful working model in the communities where PICO works, it was clear to True North’s early leadership when they took a research trip to Colorado to see it in action, that this strategy would not be deployed with success in Del Norte, for several reasons. The first being that the religious institutions in the community were oriented towards preserving the status quo in most if not all scenarios, as noted above. The second being the painful colonial history of the region, in which western religious institutions were used as an instrument of cultural genocide against the local Indigenous peoples. Throughout the history of the United States, and Del Norte County is no exception, settler regimes have enacted large scale forced removal of American Indian children to religious schools where they were “re-educated” with the explicit purpose of eradicating language and traditional beliefs. Building trust across such a painful past and largely unreconciled injustice, particularly given the ideological slant of the local leadership, was not going to be an appropriate or supportive strategy for launching the power-building work the organizing network was endeavoring to do with their tribal partners and leaders. Indigenous organizers noted the difference in organizing with “deep reservation” or “upriver” communities in the tribal lands, that working with faith-based organizations would feel like a return to the paternalism that historically characterized those relationships as imposed by white settlers.

“We have to be careful how we use the word faith because of the legacy with Native American persecution. [We have to] emphasize values to draw in secular and other traditions.”

-True North Organizer

The undesirability of anchoring in faith-based institutions in Del Norte was one of the factors that pushed the organizing work into schools. Because of this, the youth organizing work was launched, which became one of the more transformational programs not just for the organizing component but for the BHC DNATL Initiative at large.

Social dynamics and the county’s demographics also meant the network approached social justice and racial equity work differently from their urban counterparts. Undeniably, Del Norte’s white families 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, criminal justice reform. True North 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. Focusing on the racial dimensions can ironically lead to missed opportunities for solidarity and shared wins. One organizer stated, “We need to get better at talking about how policy changes will benefit everyone, poor and white people included, not just brown people.” Of course it is important to focus on disparities, as their campaigns have done, but the need to center intersectional approaches is heightened by Del Norte’s demographic profile and history.

Figure 4: Adapting a popular urban organizing model to a rural region



Del Norte's organizers are quick to point out that ideological divides are poorly understood and often overstated, especially when it comes to poorer, rural communities. Many residents carry multiple roles and leadership positions in the community, it's difficult to hold protracted disagreements when there are so many points of contact and high need for collaboration. Another positive of working in a remote rural area, as one organizer put it, is that, "if you have a good idea, people will listen to you and let you take it forward."

Issues vs. Relationships

In a more typical organizing scenario, a group of community residents might identify an issue that is impacting their lives and band together to figure out what they can do about it. They might then raise awareness and seek others similarly motivated to take action on the issue. From there, the group might pursue sources of support to help them carry actions forward—in a PICO scenario this would likely come initially from community faith-based organizations and grow from there. This organizing process generally describes a grassroots effort launched from concern for a specific issue or topic. At times, the work done to formalize the action or effort creates capacity to sustain on-going work and a formal organization may be born from a single campaign.

The True North story diverges from this typical incubation process in several key regards. As detailed above, their funding model was wildly

different; it is not often that grassroots groups find themselves in possession of substantial funding while still seeking to define an outcome for their work. In some ways, having “more money than mission” created quandaries for the organization, in one organizer’s account of this time period. But in other ways, it increased the stakes to really listen and shape the organization towards community needs.

True North’s campaigns have been a result of that deep listening, and they address important community issues that impact the daily lives of residents. But they are an outcome of the Network’s efforts, not the work itself. True North defines what they do as building relationships, and developing leaders. These were the core activities and investments they have made in these first seven years of operation, and the evidence of their efficacy is everywhere but especially reflected in the achievements of their youth leaders.

Organizing People, Organizing Money, AND Organizing Narratives

Box 2: Campaign on housing/homelessness

Communities throughout the state of California had the opportunity to apply for funding from Project HomeKey in 2020. Project Homekey is an innovative program inspired by a collaboration between Los Angeles County and the State of California to purchase and rehabilitate hotels and motels and convert them into permanent, long-term housing for people experiencing

homelessness. True North staff worked with the Yurok Tribe and the Arcata Housing Partnership to apply for the Project Homekey grant funding. The collaboration was awarded a 2.2 million dollar grant in October of 2020 to purchase an 18-unit motel in Eureka. This funding provided \$1.8 million in development and renovation and \$400,000 for operational support.

“Power building here has been constrained [to some degree] by imagination,” assessed one organizer of the challenges to organizing for community change. The PICO model emphasizes organizing people and organizing money. True North added a third prong to their approach—organizing narratives or stories. “Just keep pushing on that narrative ... that’s powerful up here,” elaborated one organizer.

On organizing through funding and breaking down assumptions that held relationships back, the story of Project Homekey was instructive. Homelessness is a pervasive problem in the northern counties of California, and is often cited a chief concern of residents in these communities. There had been frustration on the part of advocates in DNATL and neighboring Humboldt County—they perceived inaction as being the result of ambivalence or ineptitude on the part of social service agencies tasked with addressing housing issues. Organizers reported that their attempts to engage this leadership to initiate housing programs and support, particularly their outreach to the county’s department of Health and Human Services, had been more combative than productive. At an impasse, the organizers asked themselves, “Is there a different kind of meeting that can be had?” They thought about a re-set in which they considered the humanity of the leaders involved, and inquired about

their visions and motivations. What aspirations did they have for transforming these housing programs and manifesting positive change? What were the actual constraints that were holding their work back? By changing the quality of engagement and humanizing those involved, the network was able to see that the obstacle was capacity constraints—staff were so laden with daily administrative responsibilities they did not have the bandwidth to take on visioning work or launch innovative projects and programs. “People are overworked and short on ideas,” said one organizer.

From this realization, the network was able to move forward on ideas that ultimately became Project Homekey and their broader work on housing (see Box 2). They now were organizing people and working more closely with key leaders who had been seen as impediments before. Next came organizing narratives—humanizing those experiencing homelessness and community residents deserving of dignity, respect, and support. Changing the perception of the issue and centering the human rights component was an important piece of the overall change that needed to happen to become successful. Finally, in an innovative stroke, organizing money—in this case identifying and pursuing resources which others had been unaware of or didn’t have the capacity to draw in.

True North shifted its strategy to one that complemented existing efforts by bringing in a vision, capacity, and new resource streams to support it. One of their organizers wrote a grant, ultimately successful, which demonstrated that it was actually more cost effective to convert underutilized properties into single occupancy housing for people

experiencing homelessness, than to continue using the existing voucher system the county was relying on. They assisted the county to understand how to access and draw down funds readily available through the state to help resource homelessness initiatives.

Building Youth Leadership

"Focusing on the power and agency of young people was not a specific part of the initial Building Healthy Communities initiative ... that shift came from the ground up."

-(TCE, 2020)

The California Endowment, looking across its experience creating the BHC network at large, has commented that a greater understanding of how "trauma and healing were intertwined with organizing work" (TCE, 2020) is one of the greatest lessons they have drawn. The work the Network has helped move forward with young people in DNATL is evidence of both the importance of this and how centering internal development is often a necessary foundation for successful organizing.

Many of the youth who came to be involved with organizing in Del Norte were arriving with past traumas and struggles at home that impacted their interactions with the community at large.⁶ Organizers and Foundation staff involved with that early work, through engagement with the schools and newly formed Youth Training Academy (a summer program for DNATL youth), noted how youth from LGBTQIA+ and tribal communities particularly struggled at school and in the community. As detailed in the Empowering Youth Leadership case study (CCRP, 2022), young people lacked confidence when it came to interacting with adult leadership, and had low expectations for building positive relationships with adults. In this setting, to grow young people's leadership potential, organizers worked first to help them see their stories as valid and important to the community.

Several organizers interviewed for this case study commented on how profound the transformation was. They shared stories of high school students who could barely speak in meetings with their peers,

later commanding the podium at a public forum and speaking with confidence about tough issues that had impacted them personally. Organizers observed students who overcame severe anxiety issues through the organizing process and others who were experiencing alienation due to their gender or sexual identity whose sense of self-worth grew as they saw the positive impact of their work. There were others who discovered career possibilities as a result of their work with the school organizers. There were students who after learning more about local government, actually got involved. One former organizing student, Alex Fallman, ran for the Crescent City council and won, becoming its youngest member.

"Youth went from never talking about their painful experiences to learning how to do so in front of a room of community leaders, and speak with confidence and with demands for change, speak from their truth. This is a transformation in the way that young person will interface with the world. Once a person learns how to do this, they are different in perpetuity."

-True North Organizer

True North organizers often noted in interviews the importance of teaching and organizing for civic engagement, and how this step often gets minimized to leadership development in traditional organizing. During the first summer that organizing was included as part of the Youth Training Academy, the Network decided to focus their efforts on understanding civic engagement, particularly since they would not have time to cover a full organizing cycle during those summer weeks when the students would be involved (See Box 1 above).

⁶ For more on their stories, see BHC DNATL Youth Campaigns, another case study in this series.

Many of the youth involved were about to become of voting age. Organizers decided to focus on voting and the difference that political participation could make over a spectrum of issues for youth. They designed a curriculum to help them understand how to research these races and the candidates. True North coordinated youth-hosted candidate forums where the public is given the opportunity to ask the candidates policy questions, and has become a mainstay in Del Norte County elections.

Community Transformation through “People Power”

Throughout the course of the interviews which inform this case study, organizers emphasized how engaging with residents in the course of their work not only transformed those budding leaders, but fundamentally changed the organizers themselves. These transformations, occurring at the individual, group, and community level, are at the heart of the network’s impact story. Perhaps nowhere was this more visible than in the youth organizing work. As one leader commented, “[youth] went from believing nobody cares about them and they have no control, to realizing if they connect with adults and peers, do research, understand the power dynamics of change ... anything can be possible”. This new empowerment had positive spillover effects across the community.

“They stepped into their power and did this thing they didn’t know was possible ... it changed the way I saw youth and their challenges.”

-Community Partner

In addition to their new found sense of support and empowerment, youth’s deep empathy for their peers and the painful experiences they witnessed in their community was a source of creative power for their campaigns. Organizers helped youth see this as a source of strength and connection, with activities like the “vulnerabilities exercise”. In this activity, a statement about a challenge or experience is read aloud, if it applies the participant stands, if not they

stay seated. Organizers then prompt participants: “see who is standing and not, thank everyone for standing in their truth.” Young people realize through these types of exercises that they are not alone, but part of a community who are affected by the same issues. Empathy and connection becomes the basis for taking action on sources of pain and taking on the systemic issues that were obstacles to youth thriving in Del Norte.

Particularly inspiring was the youth-led alcohol campaign. Several organizers commented on the power of the compassion and commitment the young people who helmed that effort demonstrated for their peers, and how this led to such tangible success for the community. First, the youth understood from their lived experiences that adults who were trying to combat substance abuse among teens didn’t understand how kids were accessing alcohol. Second, they felt strongly that engaging law enforcement and using criminalization tactics would ultimately be detrimental to impacted youth, and did not uphold the restorative vision they had for addressing the issue. Third, they rose to the occasion and learned to speak their truth with confidence to community leaders, including the Sheriff and local retail managers. Together they presented collaborative solutions that decreased alcohol theft substantially and made teens safer. Organizers were bowled over. “The degree to which they expressed concern for one another” was responsible for changing that organizer’s perception of youth power, noting that their commitment was rooted in love for their peers who were experiencing near-lethal instances of alcohol poisoning and alcohol-related hospitalizations. “Those young people changed me as much as I helped them,” said another.

“If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.”

-True North Organizer

Early experiences by network organizers helped residents from marginalized communities to understand that they did have agency in how things were done, and could agitate for change regardless

of their status. Using the “small is beautiful” principle, organizers facilitated community residents to identify things in their neighborhoods that impacted them daily, and find ways to take action. In these beginning phases, it was not about big structural changes. For example, in a listening session held near Smith River, residents voiced that the condition of the street lights, which were often out, made them feel unsafe and their neighborhood feel like a hostile place. In this instance organizers empowered residents to address the issue with local authorities, which they did successfully.

Turning the lights back on, on a small street in a very rural place, is not a huge victory, but it created an important shift in mentality in which residents saw their community as a place they had the agency to shape to their needs. “Little wins like that- that’s what counted the most”, said one of the organizers, “the little ones we were able to get done and people were like oh, they really are doing something for us”. Not only were communities taking tentative steps towards claiming power, they were recognizing the value True North was bringing. Once the faulty street lights were addressed, parents in that community turned their sights on creating safe recreational opportunities for their kids, transforming a public park space and lobbying for a new playground. This was particularly meaningful for many of the new American mothers who had hesitated to get involved with local actions due often to their immigration status. Engaging with organizers helped them to step into community leadership from a place of safety.

The region has not historically had a large Latinx presence, but many families had relocated to work in the mills there throughout the preceding decades. For this community, these initiatives were often their first exposure to local governance in the United States. One Latinx organizer and resident described the first meeting they attended in Orick—seeing clergy, public officials, the public—lots of diversity together in one room, “I had never seen that in Del Norte before.”

Centering community voices and priorities brought some surprises and set the stage for bigger successes. One such instance happened in the Network’s early work with tribal communities in Del Norte. Organizers from the Yurok Nation knew there were a lot of changes people wanted to see there. Public schools serving Native American students were particularly

problematic, with instances ranging from unconscious bias and policies that marginalized those students to outright discrimination students reported experiencing from teachers at school. Residents and organizers alike noticed that True North’s power grew with name recognition. As the actions began to be recognized in the community, accountability among the local leadership grew noticeably. “[Leaders] could not ignore groups of people anymore because they knew that True North had their back. They could not come to meetings unprepared anymore because they knew they would be asked tough questions,” said one organizer.

Growing Solidarity

As Local Organizing Committees grew opportunities for community voices to be heard in local decision making, Network members from marginalized communities were finding opportunities to take on more systems level issues affecting their well-being, often connecting struggles to national level issues—immigration, Indigenous sovereignty, and a burgeoning housing crisis to name a few. These campaigns, which topically more closely resemble what many may associate with community organizing—activism and advocacy—were still carried out using the relationship based model that was beginning to work in Del Norte. They also delivered some powerful moments for Network members, which in their telling helped them re-envision their community and the groups within it.

Tribal communities started with those smaller wins. Del Norte and Humboldt Counties, like so many places in the United States, 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 genocide and other atrocities against tribal communities. Correcting this historic injustice became a flashpoint around which other communities could show up in solidarity with their tribal neighbors to enact change. One Yurok organizer commented on how powerful it was to have community members concerned and invested enough to show up to have a monument changed. This action changed her thinking about the visibility of Native issues and their concerns amongst the community.

Box 3: Bringing Back Cultural Burns

For many decades, Indigenous communities like the Karuk and Yurok Tribes have been advocating for the expansion of prescriptive fire as part of their efforts to revitalize their culture and sovereignty, and keep forests healthy (Mark-Block & Tripp, 2021). In 2012, True North's Weitchpec to Wotek Local Organizing Committee (LOC) worked with the Cultural Fire Management Council, Yurok Tribe, and the California Conservation Corps to gain approval for coordinated cultural burns in Yurok Territory. This work led to the establishment of the Cultural Fire Management Council and

resulted in the first coordinated, cultural, and controlled burns that prioritized restoration of traditional food sources, weaving materials, and safety on the Yurok Tribe's reservation lands.

Tribal keepers of this traditional knowledge are helping train other community members in these methods, for everyone's benefit. Indigenous burning techniques are now used by local fire departments and independent land owners to reduce fuel load and safeguard against wildfires which are arriving earlier and burning more acreage than in previous eras.

Another Native American organizer commented on how they 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. Klamath parents would get emotional talking about what it was like to have Latina community come to support them, to have others volunteer to watch their kids while they prepared for their action at the school. One organizer recalled the action in which mostly Native parents who showed up to give testimony about why the Board of Supervisors shouldn't take a specific policy action that would have been detrimental to undocumented immigrants—and won.

DNATL is home to a vibrant Hmong community estimated at 50-60 families⁷ in Crescent City; refugees and relatives of those who aided US forces in the Vietnam War era. As in the rest of the country, their special history and culture is frequently misunderstood. Insufficient work had been done in Del Norte to build bridges with this culture; True North and the Foundation were aware that outreach needed to be done. Once first connections were made, the network invited Hmong leaders from outside the area to conduct a training with Crescent City staff and other local leaders. These sessions helped raise cultural awareness among those leaders of Hmong clans, their

council of elders and other aspects that govern family and civic life in their community. Themed "What do you wish people here knew about you", Hmong leaders educated the community at large about the reasons for their migration and how they came to reside in Del Norte. True North and the Foundation supported the creation of the Hmong Cultural Center in Crescent City, now its own 501c3 organization. Additionally, greater visibility in the community has brought other opportunities. The Hmong community is recognized as a key voting bloc now, and is often courted by local politicians for campaign endorsements, one organizer noted.

Youth Step into their Power

Through engaging the Network and Arc of Organizing process, youth identified bullying and harassment, often targeting racial groups, sexual orientations, and those with disabilities, as a problem in the school system. According to the California Healthy Kids Survey for Del Norte County, less than half of the students agreed that their teacher would do something to help a student that is being bullied. Students also reported that it is common for disciplinary policies to not be applied uniformly—if youth are caught doing the same thing, the punishments are not necessarily the same, and students of color tend to receive harsher disciplinary measures.

⁷ Estimates from the Hmong cultural center in Del Norte, see <https://wildrivers.lostcoastoutpost.com/2019/dec/6/del-nortes-hmong-community-rings-their-new-year/>

As part of the Youth Training Academy (YTA), True North organizers spent the summer of 2019 training youth on how to organize for change. The students advocated to focus on changing the process of reporting bullying and harassment in their schools. The students had many goals for their campaign. They wanted to implement better systems of accountability for those who were not adequately addressing the bullying and harassment that was happening. The students also wanted to prevent and reduce harassment and bullying whenever possible. Additionally, students wanted to create more safe spaces for students to talk about their experiences of either being bullied or harassed or being the person who has harassed or bullied. Finally, the students also wanted to create or modify existing trainings related to bullying and harassment.

On December 12, 2019, two Del Norte students from the YTA program along with a True North organizer

presented the revised bullying policy to the Del Norte Unified School District School Board. The two students gave testimony as to why this work was important to them. Soon after, the School Board passed the new bullying policy with a unanimous vote. The student-led campaign resulted in clearer language around administrator responsibilities, mandatory training for all adults, and a yearly report required from every school site on the state of bullying.

Campaign Progress and Wins

Public Education

In the last ten years, the DNATL BHC Initiative also worked with the Del Norte County Unified School District (DNUSD) to create a better educational environment for youth. The timeline (see Figure 5) presents a non-exhaustive list of projects True North took on in Del Norte Unified Schools to improve learning and student safety.

Figure 5: Timeline of True North Efforts in Public Education



Water and Environment

True North's organizer's work on water issues and restorative environmental justice began in 2012 on the Yurok reservation with the Weitchpec to Wotek LOC and expanded regionally to incorporate communities living along the Klamath River and Trinity Rivers. Since 2017 True North has worked to oppose the Jordan Cove LNG Pipeline Project. This project would tunnel a pipeline underneath the Klamath and Trinity Rivers and 400 other natural streams and waterways for the transport of liquefied natural gas. Many communities living along the Klamath and Trinity Rivers raised serious concerns about the detrimental effects of pipeline construction in some of the most vulnerable areas in the region.

Leaders from Eureka, Hoopa, Smith River, and beyond traveled to Southern Oregon in March of 2017 to give testimony at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) Open House, and to join with others protesting the construction of the pipeline. True North leaders held two pipeline intervention meetings, one in Orleans and one in Klamath, in DNATL, in October of 2017. The sessions were attended by over 100 residents, who deepened their knowledge of the issues and were trained as interveners. Residents learned how to file public comments online through FERC's new process to give their input on the project. As a result of the outcry, the Pembina Pipeline Corporation decided to pause the development of Jordan Cove LNG in 2020 to reassess the impact of

their project. Leaders in eastern Humboldt County are currently holding convenings to determine the next steps in resisting this pipeline project, which has the potential to further damage the Klamath River.

Immigrant Rights

True North staff have been organizing since 2015 to address immigrant rights in Humboldt and Del Norte counties. True North staff focused their efforts on addressing rights violations and anti-immigration policies by educating communities on immigration rights, and pressuring public officials to commit to protecting all residents.

Community organizers consulted with immigrant community leaders in 2015 to understand residents' experiences. They shared their pain at being targeted and harassed by police, neighbors throwing insults and objects at them from moving cars, and being too afraid of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids to send their children to school or to go to the grocery store. The goal of True North's campaign on immigrant rights is to pressure public officials to support a safe and comfortable community for all residents. Tied closely with these goals, True North has worked with the Humboldt County Sheriff's office to increase transparency on immigration enforcement. Concurrently, leaders built a Humboldt Rapid Response Network to assist families being impacted by unjust immigration policies.

Timeline of True North's Efforts in Addressing Immigration Rights Violations

2015

True North staff hosted forums on immigration rights and provided community members with free access to legal consultation and workshops throughout.

2016

True North staff organized a rally in solidarity with workers following an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid on Sun Valley Farms in Arcata, California.

2017

True North staff halted the Del Norte Board of Supervisors and Crescent City Council's anti-immigration letters.

True North staff negotiated the removal of the term "Alien" in reference to immigrants in the Humboldt County Correctional Facility; held an action to solicit commitments from law enforcement to undergo implicit bias training.

True North leaders came out in strong support of California Senate Bill 54 (SB 54), also known as The California Values Act. This bill enables any jurisdiction in the state of California to declare itself as a sanctuary city.⁸

True North leaders requested and received support from Cal Poly Humboldt as well as the Del Norte Board of Supervisors for the creation of a bilingual, English/Spanish radio station.

2018

True North launched a Rapid Response Network in January of 2018 for receiving calls when someone witnesses ICE raids.

⁸ While there is no legal definition of a sanctuary city, this may refer to municipal jurisdictions that refuse requests from federal immigration authorities to detain undocumented immigrants identified through other infractions.

Housing and Health

True North's Homelessness Organizing Committee worked with the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors and Crescent City Council in 2018 to pass resolutions making ending homelessness in the community a priority. These resolutions call for a solutions oriented community-wide effort that respects the human dignity of community members who are unhoused. A number of proposed transitional housing projects in Eureka, California, stalled in 2019 due to neighborhood concerns. True North hosted a series of town hall meetings shortly after that with community members from Humboldt County hoping to bridge the empathy gap on transitional housing. See also information on Project Homekey above.

Participatory Budgeting and Civic Education

In addition, the Network continues its work to boost participation in local democracy (to protect the integrity of this important role they serve, the Network never endorses a particular candidate) by hosting candidate forums in advance of local elections, voter registration drives, and other initiatives to promote civic participation.

COVID-19- Resilience and Response

In the wake of lockdown and subsequent COVID-19 restrictions, True North had to think strategically how to maintain work that relied on personal engagement and respond in their capacity to shifting needs. First came relearning the importance of demand-driven work that centers community needs. Identifying a quick action that seemed to respond to a common need in lockdown, True North assembled a network of helpers that could deliver groceries and other necessities to residents—only to find that most households were self organized around these needs or self-sufficient already. After this phase of early lockdown, they adjusted their focus to support parents—many families who were already under-resourced and stretched thin—as schooling went remote.

There were surprise benefits and trade-offs to the remote work model forced by the pandemic. As one youth organizer summarized, "It's easier to stay informed and harder to stay engaged." The move to Zoom made involvement in some meetings more accessible for busy parents. School board meetings take place in the evening and may run nearly four hours long; being able to attend via Zoom while multitasking made engagement possible for a lot of working families. At the same time, it was hard to deepen existing relationships or improve the quality of engagement over Zoom which is inherently less personal than in-person meetings, organizers divulged.

Looking to the Future

"People have more power than they realize."

-True North Organizer⁹

As the work of the Local Organizing Committees has grown in scope, ambition, and scale, regional initiatives have not only recognized the influence and power that has been built by the network, but also sought them out as a way to bring community voice in and shape initiatives that might not otherwise include public participation. Most recently, the network is helping families engage with the Klamath River Promise initiative, a 30 million dollar federal grant which will especially target youth and families to help reduce disparities

in educational attainment, health, and other metrics of well-being. The work done by the BHC Initiative, including the power building work done by True North, helped capacitate the Yurok Nation to pursue this funding in 2021. Other large, state funded economic development projects have also looked to True North as a way to ensure empowered input, especially from marginalized communities. The Network's work has cracked open new spaces for community members to influence and shape programs and institutions to fit their needs, in ways big and small. Their successes have become a powerful example even beyond DNATL, of what is possible when communities invest in "People Power".

⁹ <http://www.truenorthorganizing.org/official-statements>

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