



Congregation-Based Community organizations are powering Grassroots Campaigns for Affordable Housing in Florida

By: Blaise Denton

Across Florida, Congregation-Based Community Organizations (CBCOs) bring together large, diverse groups to lobby for justice. CBCOs are advocacy groups using the power of faith and numbers to lobby local officials on social justice issues. In Florida, these groups are often affiliated with either Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART) or Faith in Action (formerly PICO). These umbrella organizations offer training, resources, and support to local groups to stand up local initiatives led by local advocates.

How it works

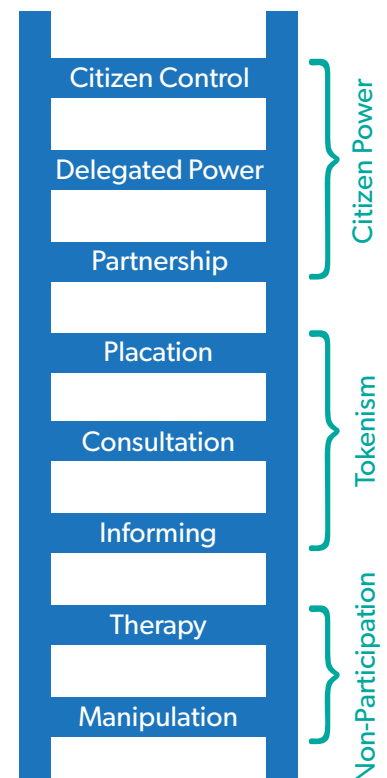
Every year, faith and community leaders affiliated with these CBCOs meet with their congregation to discuss the community's most pressing social justice issues. Once each congregation chooses its slate of issues, a representative (often clergy) will meet with other leaders to select a few priority issues that the CBCO will focus on over the next year.

After several months of community talks and workshops and research by the community, a "Nehemiah Action" is organized to address a priority issue. This event, which usually brings together thousands of congregants and community members, involves hearing from individuals negatively impacted by the selected social justice issue. This human-focused approach helps highlight the real-world consequences of leaving the chosen issue unaddressed. The organizers also typically pressure local elected officials to come to these events, hear testimony, and pledge to address the issue through whatever means necessary.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

The CBCO approach to activating dialogue around a pressing issue in the community is an effective way to engage communities in policy making. Even well-meaning affordable

Eight Rungs on the Ladder of Citizen Engagement



(Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAI, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224)

housing non-profits and local government agencies may be staffed by professionals divorced from the concerns of the people they serve. Similarly, members of the community who care deeply about affordable housing in their community, do not have the background or connections to seriously engage with affordable housing policy. This is particularly true for less financially secure people who often lack the time, resources, or knowledge to navigate complex public engagement processes.

This divorce between policy and people can lead to citizen participation failures. Sherry Arnstein, in her influential paper “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” details the eight types of citizen participation. These eight steps, from manipulation to citizen control, provide a useful guide for assessing the efficacy of governments and nonprofits in engaging with communities they serve.

Congregation Based Community Organizations create a forum for community engagement that falls under the “citizen power” grouping on Arnstein’s ladder. By listening and researching, then “delegating power” to community representatives, as well as engaging in large scale community engagement events like Nehemiah Actions, a broad spectrum of community members can influence policy. These groups also allow nonprofits and local governments to hear from poor and wise marginalized members of communities that rarely attend public engagement sessions. This can create better policy, a more engaged community, and a more responsive government.

What They Have Done in Florida around Affordable Housing

In Florida, CBCOs have made significant changes to affordable housing policy and funding. Below are some recent examples where their efforts were instrumental; this is not an exhaustive list and does not include initiatives currently underway.

Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality (HOPE)

HOPE has advocated for the Hillsborough Affordable Housing Trust Fund for several years. Because of their efforts, \$5,125,000 was set aside from general revenue for the construction and

rehabilitation of affordable housing in the 2019 Hillsborough County Budget and County commissioners have pledged to dedicate a total of \$10 million. They are continuing to advocate for affordable housing by pushing for the spending/allocation of these funds to be open, transparent, and timely, and by demanding ongoing funding for the Trust Fund.

People Acting for Community Together (PACT)

PACT has worked to address affordable housing issues in Miami Dade County since 2014. So far they have successfully encouraged the County to: reactivate the County Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which was inactive for 8 years, appoint a board to oversee the Fund, change the Fund’s policies so that 50% of the funds go to those making less than 50% of the AMI, allocate 25% of all County land sales to the Fund, and allocate half of any carryover from general revenue to the Fund. They have also worked to create a County 5-year affordable housing plan. Through a 2017 Nehemiah Action, the organization pressured the mayor to bring the six cities in the County together to draft the plan. Public meetings and housing practicum are currently underway. Finally, PACT has held a series of affordable housing workshops to educate and engage the faith community.

Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment (PEACE)

PEACE has been working since 2017 to bring more affordable housing to Polk County. This April, at a PEACE Nehemiah Action, 4 out of 7 City of Lakeland commissioners promised to add 500 affordable housing units for families with homeless children by 2023. Nearly 5% (1 out of every 22) Polk County students are homeless: most of them living in motels or moving between family and friends. They also pressured the mayor to call a commission workshop meeting before June 30th to focus on affordable housing issues for homeless school children.

At the Florida Housing Coalition’s 2019 Statewide Affordable Housing Conference, we will showcase the work of Congregation Based Community Organizations and discuss ways for the broader community, policymakers, and developers of affordable housing to engage with this powerful voice for affordable housing. [HNN](#)



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