

# Basic Issue Development for Organizers

April 20, 2003

This document is intended to help organizers be more comfortable with the ways ACORN thinks about the most common and most important issues you will hear on the doors. If you are clearer about what is within the realm of the possible and how it can be achieved, you will be more confident and effective in your organizing. Remember, most anything is possible, because it's all a function of power, but its necessary to have a good practical and political analysis that guides issue development at the local group level.

Issue development is the process of taking a problem and turning into an issue – a matter that can be acted upon that has a clear target and demand. Remember that in every rap on the doors, you are developing an issue and coming out of the interview section (Section II) with an action proposal, which is essentially a developed issue with a clear target and demand. You then build a vision around how the member can achieve the power to win the issue as framed, and sign em up! This document is intended to help you imagine the possibilities in your rap as you encounter issues. It is broken down by issue area with some concrete ideas of what ACORN can do to win on the particular issue.

## Smaller Community Issues:

### Speeding

The issue here is typically cars going too fast down residential streets. It can also be donuting in intersections. Here are some possible campaigns:

#### **Demand: Speed bumps**

#### **Target: The City**

If we're organizing to address speeding on one block, or basically want to treat this as a quick hit, then we can demand speed bumps for a block. Typically, we will have already beaten the crap out of the City on speeding for a while, so they will have set up a mechanism by which blocks can get speed bumps, based upon an annual allocation of funds per Council district. Typically, we'll need to circulate a petition, and then the City will do a feasibility check (make sure the street isn't a major thoroughfare or isn't too short). We can also do follow up quick hit actions, or do an informational action where we get the speed bump guru to come explain the process to a group of members. Speed bumps typically cost \$3000 per, and in many cities, the problem is a huge backlog, so once a block gets approved, it can take 1-3 years to get them.

In some ways more interesting than campaigns at one block level would be systemic campaigns to break the speed bump bottleneck.

#### **Demand: More funding for speed bumps**

#### **Target: The City (budget campaign)**

If speeding is the main issue in a community, and its taking too long to win speed bumps for individual blocks, we can also demand more money overall. There are also other structural solutions. If staffing undercapacity is the holdup, we can also demand more staff to install speedbumps for the city. We can also demand a program where private groups of citizens can pay for them on a fasttrack.

#### **Demand: Money for Traffic Calming**

#### **Target: Local businesses, car dealerships**

If you're tired of beating up on the City for speedbumps, and the City allows people to pay directly for speedbumps, you can do an ACORN safe streets pledge campaign targeting local businesses, and get each of them to sponsor a speedbump. Targetting autodealers would make a lot of sense here. This gives you a private-sector target. You could also do a campaign to set up a special taxing district to tax local businesses (or downtown businesses, maybe, this may be legally harder) to pay for traffic calming.

#### **Demand: Comprehensive Traffic Calming Program**

#### **Target: The City**

If you don't want to do it piecemeal, or don't want to have to figure out the demands, you can demand that the city set up a pilot traffic calming program with a set of criteria: a budget, staffing, and a community process. Other cities, e.g. Sacramento, have these, and it could be piloted based on what works elsewhere. There are also traffic calming experts, e.g. Dan Burden in FL, that we can demand the City hire to make a plan with ACORN members for their community.

**Demand: Police speed traps**

**Target: The Police**

Rarely do we see police enforcement of speed limits in our neighborhoods. We can demand targeted speed traps at speeding hot spots, where our members live, in front of schools, etc.

**Demand: Electronic speed limit sign**

**Target: The City**

If the City doesn't have one, we should demand this first. It's basically a cart that has two speed indicators. The first tells drivers what the speed limit is, and the second posts your speed as you go past the cart. The cart has a radar gun embedded inside. This is a great quick hit tool, because the City can plop the thing down for a week in front of a members house and it will feel like immediate action is being taken.

**Demand: Stop Signs, Speed Limit Signs**

**Target: The City**

Duh. These are good quick hits. Cost \$300 and can be put in fairly quickly.

## Street Lighting

The issue is typically that there aren't enough lights in an area. It can also be that lights are burning out and not replaced, or are often shot out, or that the bulbs are too dim.

**Demand: More street lights**

**Target: The City**

Straightforward. You can also demand higher wattage bulbs, that the city put protective casings over the lights so they aren't shot out, or that they be more responsive in getting dead lights fixed. More lights can be expensive, and sometimes the City (as in Tampa) will try to make the consumer pay directly.

**Demand: That the City factor safety, not just traffic, into light placement**      **Target: The City**

In Tampa, we found that the City traditionally placed street lights only with regards to street visibility for cars, with no regard to community safety. We could do campaign to fight for a policy saying that in high crime areas, the City place lights with regards to community safety as well. This could be an objective standard based upon the top 30% of crime areas, and then a visibility standard or something within those areas.

**Demand: That the City create a comprehensive lighting program for X community**

This would apply in cases where the City is throwing up cost or other bureaucratic barriers. Rather than demand specific lights or other things, we demand that the city figure it out and figure out how to pay for it, of course with some input and sign off from the community.

## Vacant Lots

**Demand: That the owner of X lot agree to: a. clean up the lot, maybe including hiring local teenagers to keep it clean; b. fence the lot in; c. sign a waiver allowing the community to build a community garden or playlot until the lot is developed; d. sell the lot to some community entity**

**Target: The Lot Owner**

**Demand: That the City Clean Up X Vacant Lots**

**Target: The City**

We can demand that the City clean up lots directly. We can also demand that the City fence lots in if they are being dumped on, and charge the owner. (They would need to jump through some legal hoops to do this.)

**Demand: Fund ACORN cleanup days****Target: The City**

This fits in with our national cleanup day campaign, June 14, 2003! We can also hit private sector targets that have connection to garbage generation to fund our cleanup days, e.g. large industrial plants in the area.

**Demand: That the City block together hundreds of vacant lots for ACORN to develop with a developer**  
**Targets: The City, Developer**

This would be a massive neighborhood level campaign, but feasible where we'd built something. The strategy would be to force the City to make a plan to turn the vacant land it owns, or where taxes are delinquent, into an opportunity for decent housing affordable to our members. We demand the City pool the land, and go after a developer to agree to develop it at an affordable level. To add a smart growth twist to this, we could go after a big sprawl developer with deep pockets and demand some development in our neighborhoods as payback. The developers will argue they need subsidies to make it all work out affordably, which may be true. Call AHC...

## Crime

People concerned with crime fall in two categories: 1. those who emphasize preventative solutions like jobs and youth programs; and 2. those who emphasize law enforcement solutions.

## Education

Of the three most important issue areas of our work (jobs, education, housing), education is the one most often viewed as a neighborhood issue. In many ACORN cities, there has been a natural trajectory of our education work. First, we start with facilities, safety, and other physical and programmatic (non-academic) improvement campaigns in and around the school. Fix the playground, place a crossing guard, hire a bilingual secretary, etc. Then, if education gets traction, we start looking at angles that more directly impact academic achievement. This used to include school board campaigns, starting new schools (as institutional anchors of our work), and parent organizing at the local school level. We have reached a few conclusions organizationally based on this work. The school board campaigns were more useful in the context of a larger educational strategy, and perhaps more importantly, when we could get to scale. The new schools strategy has been very powerful in some ways and a drain on resources in others. Only the strongest offices should even consider it seems to be the current thinking. And parent organizing at the local school level required significant resources to be applied at a level that didn't lead to much change; instead we've emphasized organizing parents at-large at the district level. Most recently, we have tended towards district level policy campaigns with direct educational impact: teacher quality, curriculum reform, textbooks, etc.

**Local School Campaigns:****Demand: Incentives for more certified teachers****Target: The District**

Check on the internet for the number/percentage of qualified teachers at the local school. If the teachers aren't 100% certified, you can demand that the District immediately bring in certified teachers for all positions. All the research and the political momentum is on your side.

**Demand: Infrastructure****Target: The District**

Get with the parents, and use this as a chance to get to the Principal. Find out what they've been asking for for years and not getting. Demand it: fix the roof, rehab the playground, make the bathrooms work, air conditioning/heat, whatever...

**Demand: Non-Academic Programming**

**Target: The District**

Again, use this not only as a chance to move on what the parents want, but also to strike an alliance with the school leadership. Examples include: translate all documents for the parents, bilingual office staff, crossing guards (targets Police Dept. sometimes), more playground supervisors/hall monitors, etc.

**Demand: Research proven curriculum programs**

**Target: The District**

In schools where the curriculum program is weak, there are specific research-proven curriculum programs that can help lift academic achievement. These tend to be reading and math programs, and they tend to be more useful at the elementary school level. The rap on them is that they work best in very weak schools in terms of lifting them from bad to passable, but not in terms of excelling. Good teachers often hate these programs because they are too rote. The main one ACORN has dealt with is Success for All, although there are others.