# WHY ORGANIZERS STAY: INSIDE CHP'S APPROACH TO POWER BUILDING

# “The benefits to our power and to our people have far outweighed the challenges that have come with it.

– **DANA KENNEDY**
*Co-Executive Director,*
*Center for Health Progress*



**"We were basically a policy and advocacy organization that started doing a little organizing and mobilizing like eight years ago," Dana Kennedy, co-executive director of the Center for Health Progress (CHP), says. "And then it was like, well we're not really building any power. This isn't actually building power."**

CHP fights for equity and justice in Colorado, envisioning health care systems and a society that value humanity and wellness over profit. And while their policy and advocacy work was changing health care policy, it wasn't changing lives.

Because the only way to fundamentally transform society is through grassroots organizing and power building—and CHP wasn't doing much of either. To really make changes that people could feel in their everyday lives, CHP needed to switch to a power building model where communities most harmed and impacted by these systems were driving the solutions.

The organization had tried organizing before. A prior organizing director (who later became deputy director) launched CHP's first organizing program. But because of internal resistance, the organization remained a mix of organizing, policy, and advocacy. Without fully committing to an organizing-first model, CHP's patchwork of strategies and a lack of a clear vision wasn't building the power they needed to implement the changes they were suggesting in policy and advocacy meetings.

CHP wanted to build power to make real, lasting change.

Its leaders knew they needed to try something different—and completely throw the organization's resources and direction behind it.



**So, CHP bet big on organizing. At a deep philosophical level, the organization believes that successfully building power requires skilled organizers with ample experience and ability to spend time in community.** And the way to get those highly skilled, highly impactful organizers to stay? Invest large amounts of time, resources, and care into them.

As CHP transformed itself, every aspect of the organization's policies and practices were reevaluated and redesigned to focus on building power through organizing and an organizer-first culture.

**Ultimately what CHP needed to create was a culture that radically cared for its staff—and used rigor and accountability to get there.**

CHP's experiment worked: by putting its organizers first through radical investment based on rigor, accountability, and trust, CHP put its power building first. And not only that, its staff were committed to the work and the organization because they believed CHP was capable of making the change they wanted to see. Now, CHP and its staff are starting to see real change in the communities they work in.

> **"We all really care about each other as humans and as organizers, and so there's a lot of care and investment. ...we try to hold tension in our conversations within that culture of care because it's all in service to actually growing.**
>
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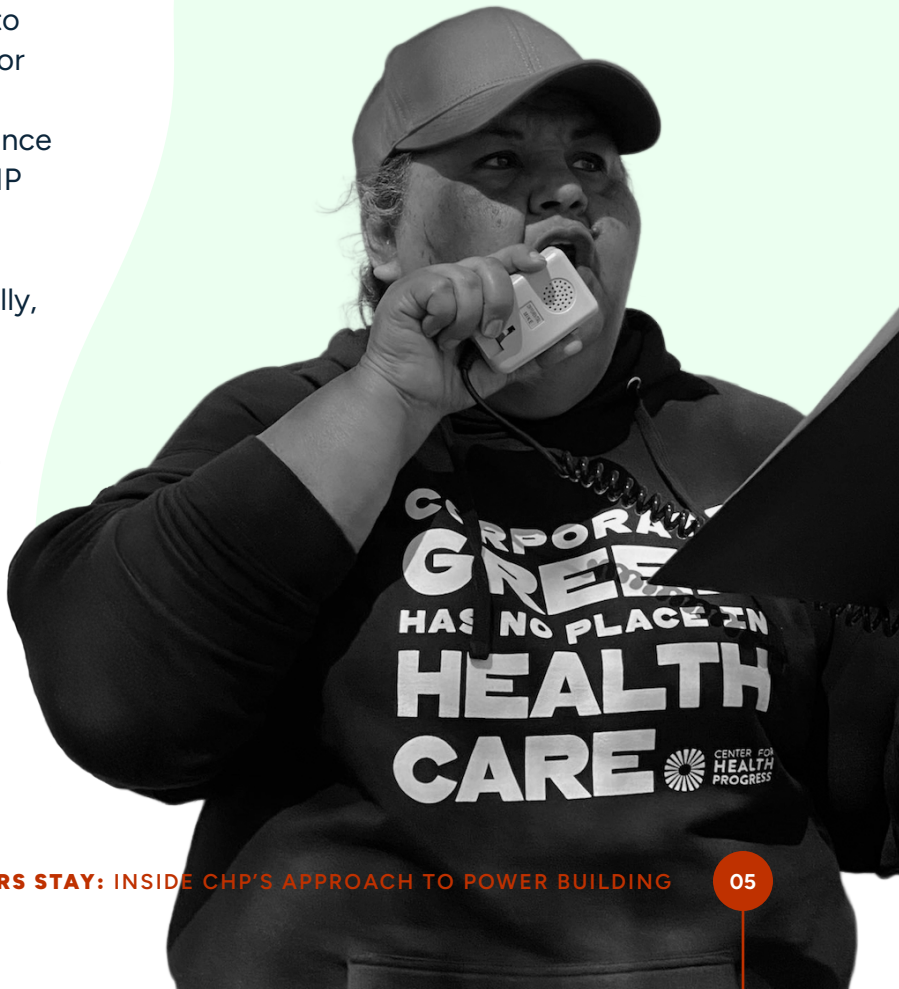
# HOW CHP INVESTS IN ITS ORGANIZERS

**To get organizers to invest in CHP, CHP had to first invest in its organizers. But the transition wasn't all sunshine and rainbows.**

Dana, the co-executive director, shares: "I would say almost everyone, if not everyone, questioned, is this the place that I want to be? There was a lot of tension about who we are and who we want to be as an organization."

The transition didn't happen overnight, either. Dana says she herself resisted the change to an organizing-first, power-building model for a long time. Chipping away at her own resistance and other staff members' resistance took years. Part of the reason for that is CHP attempted a piecemeal approach at first, changing some elements of their work to prioritize power building more. But eventually, staff realized this wasn't working. Instead, they needed a pivot.

"A hard pivot," Dana calls it. CHP needed to "totally, fundamentally transform" itself if it was ever going to actually attempt the power building model. So that's what they did, including restructuring the organization and splitting the role of executive director between Dana Kennedy, Joe Sammen, and Theresa Trujillo.



All told, it took CHP seven years to go from hiring an organizing director to begin making small changes to feeling like they were fully embracing and practicing a power building model.

Here's how they did it, how they brought their staff along, and how they're continuing to make changes—because there's always something to improve on—to become a force for grassroots organizing in Colorado:

### PRACTICE 1:
Staff-wide one-to-ones and training at the outset of CHP's transformation to level-set and collectively commit to power building.

### PRACTICE 2:
Development of clear expectations, benchmarks, and formalized reporting to facilitate rigor and transparency in organizing.

### PRACTICE 3:
Regular agitation tables and reports to deepen accountability and trust across leadership and staff of CHP.

### PRACTICE 4:
Compensation and personnel policies that provide economic security and work-life balance and reflect CHP's commitment to a culture of care.



# PRACTICE 1:

## Staff-wide one-to-ones and training at the outset of CHP's transformation to level-set and collectively commit to power building.

After deciding to commit to power building, CHP introduced the new model to its staff with the help of consultants. One of the co-executive directors, Joe Sammen, started by meeting individually with staff, asking: "What does this look like for CHP? What do you think? What do you want?"

**Through 18 months of one-to-ones and trainings along with a week-long training in New Mexico, staff focused on developing a new language and culture of accountability and rigor.** This set-up allowed the team to learn the ins and outs of power building and organizing, agitation tables, and holding each other accountable.

But power building is about more than just memorizing ladders of engagement and other tactics. It requires a culture of accountability, support, and commitment—and CHP needed to build that culture, too. The 18 months of training gave staff members time to figure out if the direction CHP was embarking on was one they wanted to take, too.

"The way that Pamela, Paul, and Sarah conducted these series of training was extremely agitational for every single participant who went through it," Joe says. "Every single staff member on the team basically had a decision in front of them laid out through this training module: 'Are you going to take this business of building power with CHP seriously or not?'"

Staff members took that question to heart. A few left. But those who stayed were committed—to the new model, to the organization, and to one another. And that joint commitment—staff made public commitments to one another about why they were dedicated to the power building model—formed the glue that really allowed power building to stick.

But it's also important to keep the adhesive that bonds everyone at the organization together strong. CHP's transformation into a power building organization evolves every day.

"It's not just some one-time thing," Dana says, of how the organization and its staff constantly re-evaluate its commitment to a power building model.

# PRACTICE 2:

## Development of clear expectations, benchmarks, and formalized reporting to facilitate rigor and transparency in organizing.

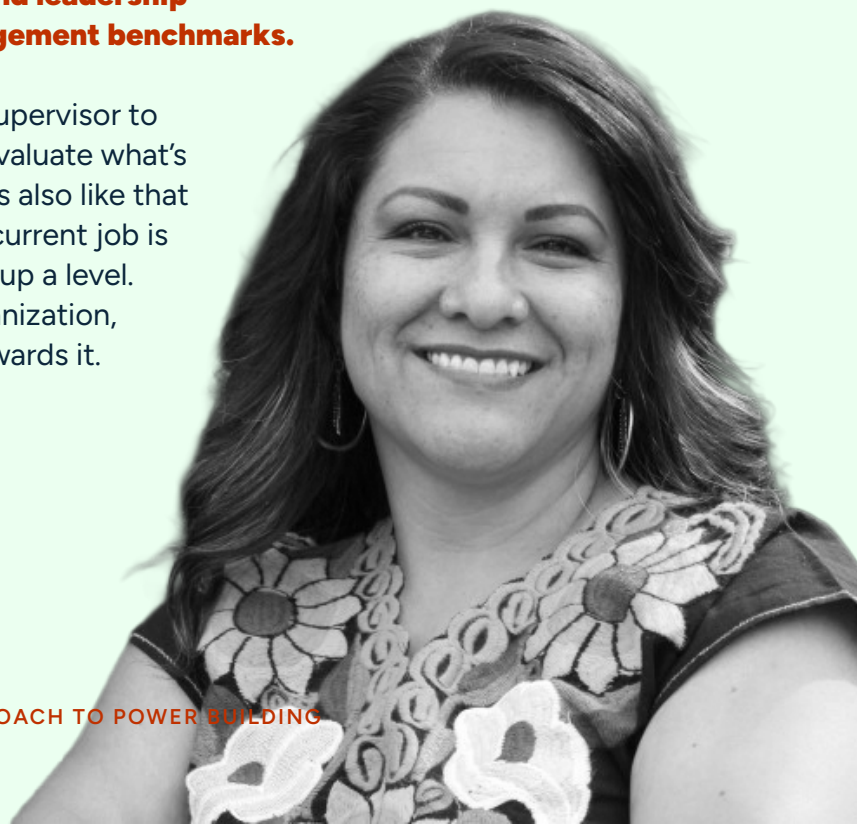
Yesenia values structure.

But as a long-time organizer who started at CHP before it transitioned to the power-building model, it wasn't something she was accustomed to having at her workplaces. Once CHP began crafting incredibly granular, explicit benchmarks and expectations for its staff, though, it helped Yesenia get the work done.

Whether it's a requirement to engage in the legislative session by joining at least one bill committee session per month or ensuring all their leaders are trained on how a bill becomes a law, the metrics made Yesenia's goals—and work—clear.

**Through regular in-depth reports with her supervisor, she's required to provide updates on her progress towards those goals, which are divided into leader relationship benchmarks, public relationships benchmarks, training and leadership development benchmarks, and leader engagement benchmarks.**

These reports often prompt Yesenia and her supervisor to reflect on her power-building, forcing her to evaluate what's working and what needs to change. Organizers also like that the expectations don't just lay out what your current job is—it also details what you need to do to move up a level. By creating a clear path for growth at the organization, organizers are more likely to stay and work towards it.



That's not to say the transition was easy.

"It was hard at the beginning because it meant responsibility [and] accountability," Yesenia says. "...And then the fact that you're making a commitment to the rigor."

**But one thing that made the transition easier is that supervisors and the organization are flexible if an expectation isn't met.** As Yesenia puts it: "Just because those benchmarks exist, it doesn't mean that it's, like, a stamp in a rock and it's, like, never moving again."

At a recent meeting, Dana, the co-executive director, noticed that no one at the organization was meeting one particular benchmark. Instead of assuming all the organizers were doing something wrong, they met to discuss what was happening and adjust the benchmark to make it achievable.



And when the organizer can be doing something differently, the rigorous benchmarks and reports allow for a learning opportunity: "...even if you don't meet your benchmarks, you can meet with your supervisor or you can meet at agitation tables and say...'you know what, I screwed up. I didn't meet my benchmark and this is what I learned,'" Yesenia explains.

Whether discussing a missed benchmark with a supervisor or at an agitation table, Yesenia says the accountability allows the organizers to get help from peers and supervisors on how to do better, which only strengthens their skills. By creating constant opportunities for feedback to sharpen their organizing, clear expectations, reports, and agitation tables incentivize organizers to stay.

# PRACTICE 3:

## Regular agitation tables and reports to deepen accountability and trust across leadership and staff of CHP.

**What are you struggling with in your power building?**

**What breakthroughs are you having?**

**Who have you formally agitated this month?**

**These are the kinds of questions all staff who organize at CHP must answer regularly through agitation tables (every six weeks), reports (monthly), and an ongoing culture of accountability and growing through tension.** Like extremely detailed benchmarks, these agitation sessions foster the rigor, mutual accountability, and trust that ultimately drives organizers to choose to remain at CHP.

In their monthly agitation reports, organizers list from the last month: all one-to-ones completed, all their scheduled one-to-ones, and every meeting they've had and what came from those meetings. They're also expected to reflect through open-ended prompts like "what's your most challenging one-to-one visit?" or "name one reflection on how you're growing?" Each staff member is required to agitate another organizer once per year.

Dana, the co-executive director, recently agitated someone she supervises about why she wasn't hitting her benchmarks. The agitation revealed the answer: it wasn't that the organizer lacked the skills or capacity to meet the benchmark—it was that her own self-interest wasn't in alignment with the work.

**The agitations aren't just limited to agitation tables now, either. Alongside monthly reports, they have transformed the culture of CHP broadly to embrace accountability and improvement—all in service of becoming the best power builders they can be.**

"As we have strengthened our ability to be more direct and agitational and have a culture of growth and tension, the [agitation] tables have, in my opinion, become less of the only place where that happens, and helped us get to a culture of those practices don't just happen within this one structure of a meeting," Dana says.

That means direct reports feel comfortable agitating their supervisors—because it's in service of the greater good.

Andrea Escalera, another organizer at CHP, describes how she'd go about agitating her supervisor, who happens to be CHP's co-executive director Joe.

"Even if I'm agitating Joe, who is my direct supervisor, it's obviously risky, but we have built that relationship where we are investing in each other. And so it's not scary, like 'shoot, I'm going to get fired because I agitated Joe,'" she says. "It's just very open and it's safe."



# PRACTICE 4:

## Compensation and personnel policies that provide economic security and work-life balance and reflect CHP's commitment to a culture of care.

"If you're not feeling well, then why are you working?" Yesenia recalls her supervisor, Dana, asking her one day when she felt ill but still logged on.

**At CHP, fair compensation and pro-worker personnel policies aren't just words written on a page in a company handbook, they're values that leadership actively encourages.**

CHP pays organizers more than most comparable organizations ($67K-$75K, higher for lead organizers and organizers who stay with CHP longer) and has a document available to staff that outlines the base salary for all positions within the organization, allowing for full salary transparency.

CHP also has a 32-hour work week, covers 100% of health care premiums, provides a good vacation policy (15 to 20 days per year depending on how long the employee has been at CHP, in addition to three weeks every year where the organization closes) and health leave, and offers a 12-week sabbatical after five years of employment. It also provides $2,500 if a staff member speaks a work-related language fluently and weighted annual cost-of-living adjustments if the budget allows for it.

CHP also explicitly rewards retention by providing a $500 increase in salary for each full year of employment at the organization when staff are promoted.

**But even the best policies are meaningless if they're not supported by leadership.** CHP uses its culture of being direct and challenging people on their selflessness to push staff to take advantage of these policies and create a solid work-life balance. Yesenia says that Dana agitates her by asking if she has time to take a vacation, reminding her about the option to take mental health days, and reducing the pressure to be constantly producing.

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN ORGANIZATION THAT NEVER STOPS CHALLENGING ITSELF

"Before, I used to organize. I organized for 14 years," Yesenia says. But now? "I no longer organize. I power build. It's different."

According to Marissa, an organizer with CHP, building power among people who really have something on the line is necessary for driving transformational change. Before CHP switched to a power building model, CHP was advancing change through policy and mostly upholding the status quo because the people who were most impacted were not in the room shaping those changes.

"There were maybe some improvements, but it wasn't actually aligned with what needed to happen to best serve communities and be in line with what people want for themselves and their families," Marissa says.

Now, CHP's leaders, structure, and policies all work in concert under one unifying theory of change: to succeed in its mission to reduce health disparities, CHP needs to build power among its base. To successfully mobilize its base, CHP needs organizers who stay at the organization long enough to build trust with each other and with their base, and to grow into their own skills. And to encourage longevity and skill-building within its staff, CHP must invest wholeheartedly in its organizers.

**To do this, CHP has created a culture of care, rigor, and accountability through an array of practices and policies.** While these investments come with a cost, both financially and in time, CHP believes those costs are more than recouped in the benefits gained. They're making the kind of change that impacted communities want to see–and they're doing it with those communities leading the way.

## LESSON 1:

Retaining organizers requires an immense amount of CHP's time and money. Each organization needs to decide how much it's willing to invest and what it's willing to trade-off or say "no" to, to prioritize organizer growth and well-being.

## LESSON 2:

Investing in organizers' growth is ongoing. It requires embracing risk-taking and failure as growth opportunities.

## LESSON 3:

Creating a culture that retains organizers is complex, and there is no silver bullet. It requires fostering and balancing care, rigor, accountability, transparency, and adaptation.



# LESSON 1:

## Retaining organizers requires an immense amount of CHP's time and money. Each organization needs to decide how much it's willing to invest and what it's willing to trade-off or say "no" to, to prioritize organizer growth and well-being.

"How much are you willing to support people's learning curve to stay at an organization and be successful?"

That's *the* question you must ask yourself if you want to prioritize organizer retention, according to Dana. And at CHP, the answer is clear: a lot.

**CHP spends significant time and money on its organizers—because they see it as an investment that will pay off in the form of stronger power building and more significant progress towards health equity.** Whether it's spending $100,000 on individual coaching for organizers, implementing a 32-hour work week that gives organizers more time to rest, or requiring its supervisors to be organizers so they can be better mentors, CHP is constantly finding opportunities to invest in its organizer's growth and well-being.

This is a natural outgrowth of CHP's philosophy, but it's also a strategic decision. After all, hiring and onboarding new organizers is time- and resource-intensive.

Re-building relationships with members of the community after an organizer leaves requires significant time and energy. **For CHP, the choice is clear: retaining organizers is the best way to go if they want to build power and enact radical change.**

"We just have to say no all the time," CHP's co-executive director Joe says. "Just say no to all sorts of things that maybe typical executive directors would do, whether that's joining a coalition or doing a coffee meeting with a partner for no reason, you know…I think we say no more than typical organizations do."

At the end of the day, when CHP says no to a meeting outside their theory of change, they're saying yes to continuing to focus on organizer retention and building power long-term.

CHP focuses less on enhancing its own reputation as a leader in the sector so that its leadership can focus on fostering organizer retention and growth, and organizers can focus on building power and their own skills.

As a result, organizers are staying at CHP longer and developing deeper, more authentic relationships with leaders in the community.

Andrea, a leader member turned staff organizer, has seen the change first-hand. She sees it in the agitation, the accountability, the deepness of the relationships, and the trust. Leader members like she once was now know that CHP is their organization, not the other way around.



# LESSON 2:

## Investing in organizers' growth is ongoing. It requires embracing risk-taking and failure as growth opportunities.

When asked what she would tell other organizations considering switching to a power-building model embedded in a culture of care like CHP's, the first thing Yesenia says is: "See the value in people failing."

**For Yesenia and the rest of CHP, the incredible attention to benchmarks, reports, and other forms of accountability are not designed to be punitive. They're designed to identify growing edges—opportunities where the individual organizer has room to grow.** Pinpointing these opportunities then allows CHP to invest in the organizer's development in that area, using its plethora of resources tailored for this very purpose, like its individual coaching or supervision from other organizers.

Another organizer, Andrea, also says that she finds these mechanisms of accountability helpful because they help her prioritize her workload and focus on what's important.

"In organizing, I think it can be very easy to get lost in a lot of other little things," she says. "It's really helpful to meet with someone and be able to say, 'what are my growing edges?'"

Yesenia's advice to other organizations: Embrace failure.

> **"See the value of that [failure] and support the individual to grow.**
>
> **– YESENIA BEASCOCHEA**
> *Lead Community Organizer*

# LESSON 3:

## Creating a culture that retains organizers is complex, and there is no silver bullet. It requires fostering and balancing care, rigor, accountability, transparency, and adaptation.

Andrea was a leader member at CHP, not on CHP staff, when the organization really committed to dramatically reorienting their work around power building. As an outsider, she saw how the changes CHP was making internally affected its work with member leaders like her.

"Things were being decided [by CHP staff] and then [leader members] were kind of just being told," she says. But towards the end of Andrea's time as a leader and now as a CHP staff organizer, she noticed that leader members were beginning to run CHP's campaigns and teams. Instead of being informed of decisions, members were making them.

While Andrea witnessed that and other changes at CHP that reflected its new commitment to power building, she was less privy to what was happening internally.

**Inside CHP, staff were building out a culture that would retain organizers through care, rigor, accountability, transparency, and adaptation. But figuring out the right balance wasn't easy, and there's no silver bullet for what will work at every organization.** CHP staff went through a tense transition period where management was identifying and implementing changes in these areas.

"It really was not this seamless transition," Carly, another CHP organizer, says. "There was a lot of strife and conflict between us, as staff, about how...we were changing what was required of us and what our jobs looked like."

The formula for organizer retention is complex—and constantly shifting. But by remaining committed to fostering a culture that organizers will want to be a part of and being willing to adapt and try new things, organizations can find the combination of policies and practices that will work for them.

# ORGANIZERS ARE THE KEY

Before coming to CHP, Yesenia had worked as an organizer at plenty of other organizations.

But at CHP, Yesenia feels safer being open and vulnerable about her own experiences and self-interest with CHP staff and with the community members she builds power with. This is because CHP has intentionally poured its resources into its organizers, committing to their growth, development, and connections to one another.

The ability to bring her authentic self to her work has strengthened Yesenia's organizing by creating a shared sense of trust with the community members she encounters: "People are more willing to do one-on-ones and to be in relationship with you because you are willing to take a risk of being more vulnerable," she says. The better Yesenia's organizing, the more power she's able to build within the communities most impacted by Colorado's health disparities and the more they're able to create more equitable health care systems.

And, according to Dana, this sense of openness and authenticity also enables more organizing across race, class, immigration status, and geography because people find common threads connecting their story to the organizer's experiences.

All the while, being open about her background has deepened Yesenia's relationships with other CHP staff members. As a result they're more able to lean on one another to take over a campaign or share news about a recent organizing tip—all of which strengthens their collective organizing and their power building.

> **"I'm more willing and more open to say what my experience is at the moment. I wasn't able to do that in other organizations.**
>
> **– YESENIA BEASCOCHEA**
> *Lead Community Organizer*

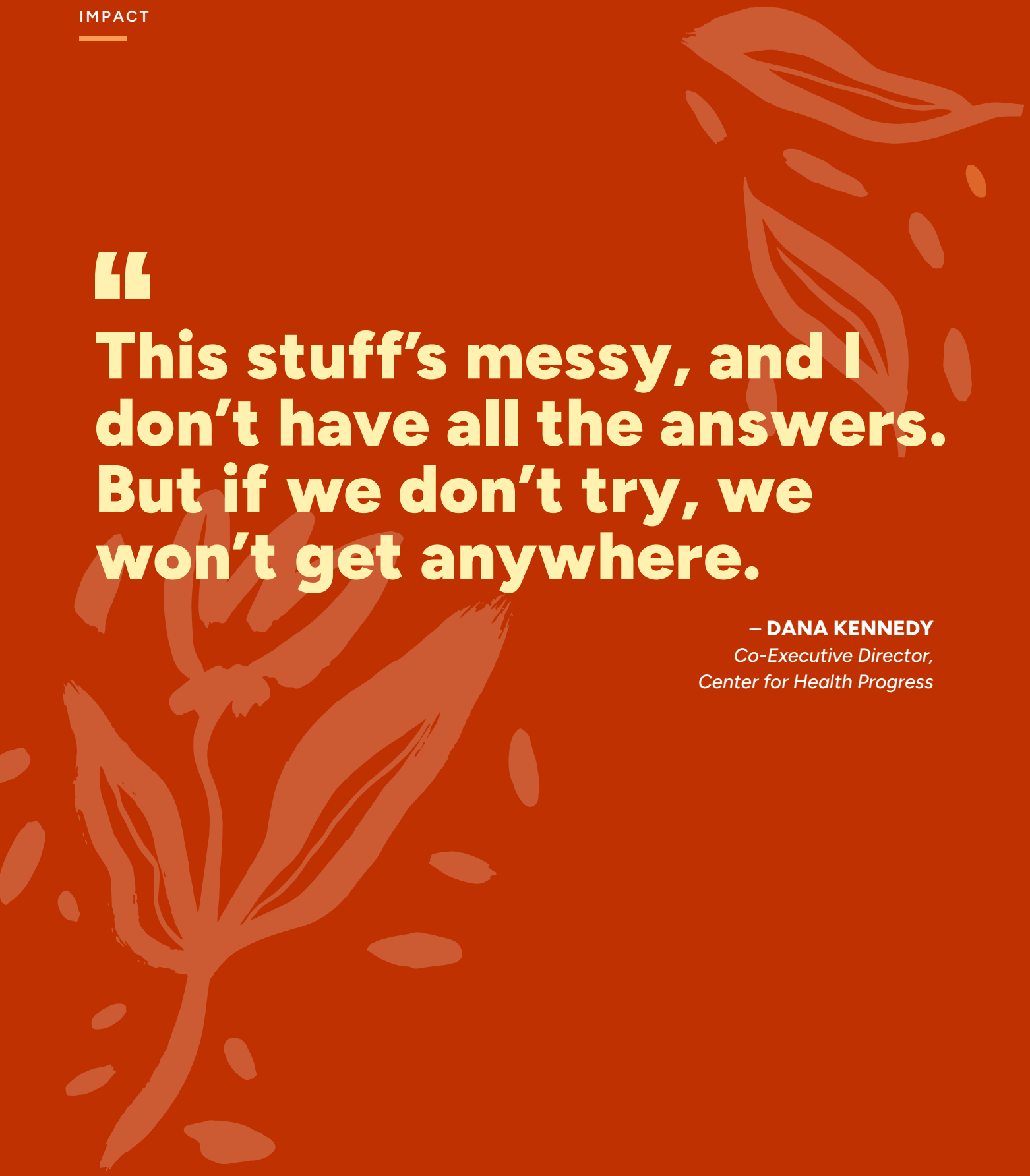
**Yesenia's story, Dana and Joe's story, Andrea's story—they are all CHP's story. Because CHP knows its organizers are the key that unlocks real power building and change.**

According to Dana, "the benefits to our power and to our people have far outweighed the challenges that have come with it."

And so, CHP has worked hard to make organizers want to stay—to fuel their commitment to the work and the organization by creating a culture people will want to be a part of through sustained growth opportunities, fair pay and good benefits, and rigor and accountability. This incentivizes organizers to stay on longer, which means more seasoned organizers, more in-depth relationships among staff and community members, and more power built.

Dana puts it well: "This stuff's messy, and I don't have all the answers. But if we don't try, we won't get anywhere."





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**– DANA KENNEDY**
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# ABOUT US

## The Organizer Staffing Stories of Practice Project

Led by Grassroots Solutions, the Organizer Staffing Stories of Practice project seeks to gather and share stories about successful approaches to organizer recruitment, development, and retention. The project is funded by the Freedom Together Foundation and conducted in partnership with Community Change.

CENTER FOR HEALTH PROGRESS

**Center for Health Progress** is a vibrant, grassroots organization spanning communities across Colorado, with deep ties in Fort Morgan, Metro Denver, and Pueblo. We are a people-powered, multi-racial, member-led organization. We want our communities—not greedy corporations and executives—to have power over the decisions that impact our lives.

Grassroots SOLUTIONS

**Grassroots Solutions** is an engagement strategy and evaluation consulting firm that works with nonprofits and foundations to build healthy, just and equitable communities. We're a diverse team of leaders who come from wide-ranging backgrounds in policy, campaigns, philanthropy and advocacy.

COMMUNITY CHANGE
Power from the ground up

**Community Change** is a national organization that builds the power of low-income people, especially people of color, to create a multiracial democracy and a fair economy where everyone can thrive.