OCTOBER 2025

FROM ISOLATION TO POWER:

WORC'S MODEL FOR ORGANIZER DEVELOPMENT

“Community organizers are the backbone of our organization.

– **SYDNEY AUSEN**
Leadership and Capacity Director,
Western Organization of Resource Councils

As COVID lockdowns began to lift and life settled into a new normal, the Western Organization of Resource Councils, or WORC, noticed that the ten groups in its network struggled to adapt their organizing to the new landscape.

During the pandemic, their capacity and skill to organize and build community power had atrophied. Pressing community needs and limited opportunities to organize in-person led WORC organizations to shift their focus to direct services and advocacy. Many had effectively stopped organizing. And when the pandemic subsided, many WORC organizations had trouble jump-starting it again.

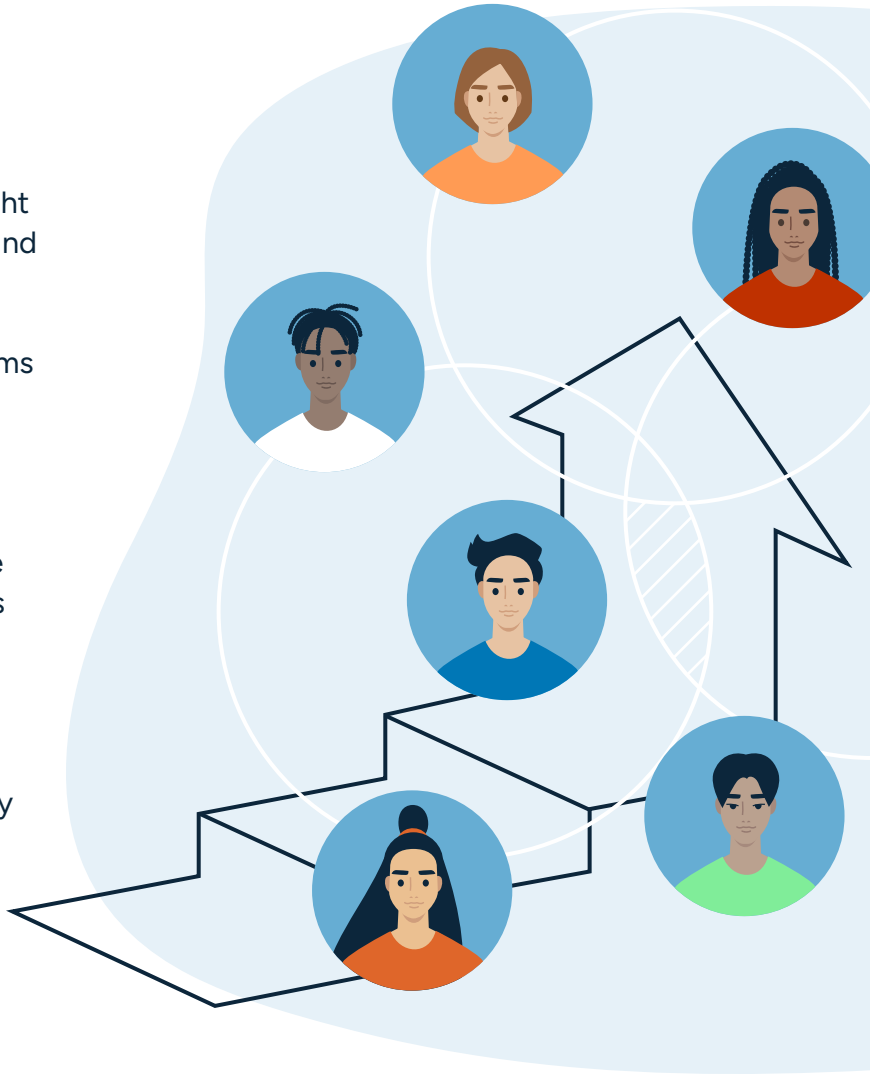
As WORC member organizations emerged from the pandemic, they found themselves with a newer, greener crop of organizers. Compounding stressors had led many senior organizers and directors to leave. The remaining organizers were geographically spread out and isolated, many with limited experience organizing communities in-person.

WORC's network organizations weren't prepared to support them in their development as grassroots organizers. It's not that they didn't want to; far from it. They simply didn't have the in-house capacity for comprehensive onboarding and ongoing development.

WORC's interim executive director Sara Kendall knew something needed to change. She turned to one of WORC's long-standing beliefs: we're stronger together than we are individually.

Founded in the 1970s by a handful of grassroots organizations fighting to protect their land from coal development, WORC has a long history of supporting its network organizations to learn and act together. Kendall recognized that the organizations needed to reconnect with one another for support and growth, and that WORC needed to offer more diverse and ongoing support to organizations to rebuild and strengthen their organizing. To bring this vision to life, she brought in Sydney Ausen, an experienced organizer from the network who could provide the multi-faceted organizer development the network needed.

HOW WORC NURTURES AND DEVELOPS ORGANIZERS



When Sydney started as WORC's new Leadership and Capacity Director, she got right to work. First, she completed an intensive round of one-to-ones with member organizations' senior organizers, organizing directors, and executive directors to understand the problems they were each facing.

Sydney quickly realized two things from this health assessment: new organizers weren't getting the onboarding they needed, and role expectations for different levels of organizers were murky.

"What does it look like for an organizer who excels two years into the role versus five years into the role?" she asked herself. Sydney answered the question by putting together a career trajectory document for organizers, spanning from brand-new organizers to seasoned veterans.

Sydney split the trajectory up into "learning objectives," categorized by where you should be when. What skills should you just be beginning to master as a new organizer with just a year of experience? What competencies should you have down as a mid-level organizer two to three years into the role? And for senior organizers more than four years in the role, what new skills can you still gain?

With these learning objectives in mind, Sydney and WORC began to develop and implement a range of practices to support organizer growth across the network through their Leadership and Capacity program. The goal was to develop organizers with staying power.

"We need good, strong organizers for the longevity of these organizations," Ausen says. "It takes time for organizers to build the relationships in communities that allow them to push and challenge people, develop leaders, and get people to take increased action. If we're losing people every two to three years just when they are starting to build those solid relationships, then we are not getting things done."

What's unique about WORC's Leadership and Capacity program is the diversity, breadth, and depth of support it provides for organizer development. In addition, WORC mixes network-wide trainings and peer learning opportunities with customized, one-to-one support for organizers and member organizations.

PRACTICE 1:
Trainings and Organizer Cohorts

PRACTICE 2:
One-to-One Organizer Mentoring and Coaching

PRACTICE 3:
Member Organization Consulting

PRACTICE 1: Trainings and Organizer Cohorts

By separating organizers into groups of people at similar points in their career, WORC creates spaces for organizers to connect and problem-solve with their peers. These spaces not only provide organizers with critical skills, they also provide a shared sense of camaraderie. Often an organizer will raise a challenge they're facing and hear echoes of support from organizers facing the same problem at a different organization. WORC currently has four regular trainings and cohort spaces for organizers with similar levels of experience to develop together.

Training or Cohort	Who It Serves	What Organizers Learn
Principles of Community Organizing (POCO) Training: 3-day, in-person	New organizers in the network–every organizer in the WORC network receives this training	POCO provides foundational organizing principles and skills to new organizers. This curriculum includes: • History of and approaches to organizing • Holding one-to-ones and identifying self-interest • Storytelling and public narrative • Identifying issues and developing campaign plans • Developing leaders • Running actions
Continuing Education for Organizers: Annual, in-person training	Organizers with one to five years of experience	Focuses on "next-level" skills, and the curriculum is based on what the organizers are interested in digging into. Topics have included: • Facilitation techniques • Running powerful actions • Developing a power analysis • Leadership development plans • Work planning for organizers
Organizer School: Monthly online training and workshop series (see Curriculum Outline here)	Organizers in the network who do not supervise others	Organizer School gives organizers space to continue building foundational skills. During these sessions, organizers dig into the nitty-gritty details of an organizer's role. Topics are chosen from an intake survey completed by cohort participants. Past topics were: • Perfecting the art of the one-to-one and coaching members • Digital organizing in rural contexts • Developing effective teams of members

Training or Cohort	Who It Serves	What Organizers Learn
Supervising Organizers Cohort: Monthly online convening for staff who supervise organizers (see Organizers Curriculum Outline here)	Organizers in the network who supervise other organizers	Monthly "Labs" focus on specific topics of supervision and emphasize systems supervisors can use to build strong organizing practices and more resilient organizing teams. Topics have included: • Hiring organizers and onboarding processes • Developing organizers: creating work plans and coaching and mentoring • Retaining organizers: employee evaluations and hard conversations for accountability • Sustainability as a supervisor • Approaches to supervision and emotionally supporting your team Labs also include time for supervisors to jointly workshop a challenge that one of them is facing. Each month a participant is invited to bring a challenge to the Lab to share and receive feedback and ideas from the rest of the group.

Knowing that organizing conditions and needs can change, WORC facilitates flexible and action-oriented spaces for organizers that focus on troubleshooting challenges and responding to pressing issues. On a recent "Supervising Organizers Cohort" call, Sydney asked if anyone had to have a hard conversation with one of the organizers they manage. On a prior call, some organizers had mentioned needing support and guidance in this area, and Sydney made it the topic of their regular meeting.

Together, the senior organizers on the call created a list of hard conversations. And though they were able to put the list together, what surfaced for Sydney was that even though the organizers knew what hard conversations were, they didn't know how to have them.

Folks were either avoiding having the conversations altogether or going in without any type of preparation. So, she asked: "How would we want to receive hard feedback? And what can we use from that to structure how we're delivering hard feedback to our teams?"

They looked at examples of performance improvement plans and broke off into pairs to role play having a hard conversation with a direct report. Having organizers on the call with experience in this area allowed other organizers to gain concrete advice and examples from organizers who have been where they are right now.

PRACTICE 2: One-to-One Organizer Mentoring and Coaching

For organizers at all experience levels, Sydney and WORC believe one-to-one coaching is invaluable. It's the key to unlocking organizers' growth and retention, which opens organizing groups' ability to really build bases and make change.

But for a lot of organizations in the network, this kind of tailored mentoring isn't an option. They simply don't have the capacity or direct experience to provide mentoring and coaching to all their staff, and certainly not at an individualized level.

That's the gap WORC fills for the organizations in its network. Organizations can request one-on-one mentoring and coaching from WORC for organizers. Chase Jensen's story is one such example.

Chase started as an organizer at Dakota Rural Action after Sydney began at WORC. Starting as a new organizer, Chase says he "had the common experience of taking on responsibility at a rate faster than my experience might have warranted."

"Sydney has provided training on the nuts and bolts of supervision, walked me through difficult staff conflicts, and coached me on how to balance the competing demands of my role, along with many other timely conversations," he says. "It is hard to imagine having been able to remain in this role these past years, much less begin to thrive, without the support of Sydney and the WORC network."

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– **CHASE JENSEN**
Dakota Rural Action

PRACTICE 3: Member Organization Consulting

WORC doesn't just offer coaching and mentorship for organizers. **It offers organizations in its network a broad range of consulting services to build capacity and efficacy so that individual organizers and entire organizations can grow.**

While conducting the network-wide health assessment after the pandemic, Sydney realized it wasn't just organizers facing new and different challenges than before the pandemic–member organizations were in a new landscape, too.

Organizations needed assistance shoring up internal capacity and infrastructure to support organizers. This led WORC to expand the extensive consulting support it provided to member organizations (see Examples of support and services that WORC can provide via the Leadership and Capacity Program for a non-exhaustive list).

Key organizational consulting supports include:

- Help designing agendas for trainings and important, complex meetings
- Help facilitating custom trainings for organizations
- Assistance in hiring and onboarding new staff, including developing interview questions, participating in interviews, and developing onboarding plans
- Assistance and advice on organizational development matters and best practices
- Support implementing new chapter organizing assessments and drives
- Support devising membership and leadership development goals and plans
- Tech assistance and training
- Foundation and grassroots fundraising assistance
- Communications strategy and systems

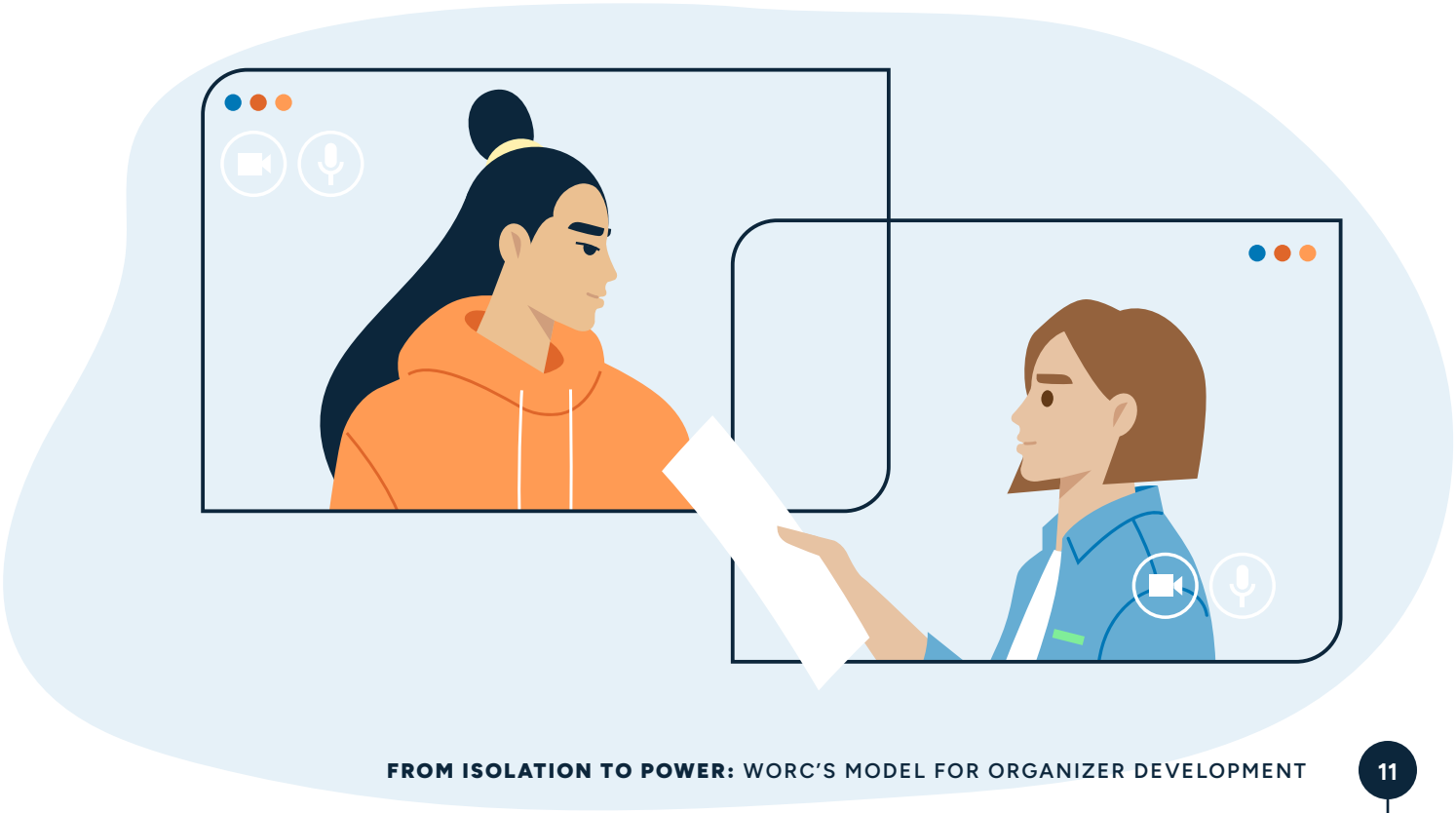
These all came into play when one organization in the WORC network struggled to retain organizers after the pandemic. People lacked clarity on their roles, what their work was informing, and the organization's bigger strategic vision–and where they fit into that vision.

Because of WORC's unique array of supports, Sydney was able to help attack the problem from multiple angles. For example, in one-to-ones she worked directly with staff members of all levels at the organization needing assistance. She helped define roles, making their responsibilities and expectations clear.

Throughout the process, Sydney also worked with the newer organizers to develop their skills and helped the organization put together a hiring plan–including candidate questions and an ideal candidate profile–when they were ready to bring on new organizers.

This kind of robust, all-encompassing support rejuvenated the organization's organizing. And it was successful precisely because of the unique elements WORC brings to its organizer development program: it assists organizers at all levels, not just entry level or senior management; it provides customized, one-to-one support instead of relying solely on overly generalized trainings; and it recognizes that peer learning and training facilitates connection network-wide, leading to higher organizer retention.

Through one-to-ones, trainings, cohorts, and consulting, WORC is providing an antidote to the isolation many organizers face and building their skills up at the same time.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN ORGANIZING DIRECTOR WHO NEVER STOPS GROWING

WORC's revitalized Leadership and Capacity program has made the network an organizing powerhouse. And for Sydney, who built the program brick-by-brick to execute WORC's vision of support at every stage and from all angles, there are a few guiding lessons she's learned along the way.

LESSON 1:

Whether you are a network or organizing group, dedicate at least one staff person to developing organizers.

LESSON 2:

Provide multiple types of support for organizers to grow individually.

LESSON 3:

Organizations need to secure buy-in from the folks who make decisions about and have influence over how organizers use their time and capacity.

LESSON 1:

Whether you are a network or organizing group, dedicate at least one staff person to developing organizers.

Making organizer development a significant and important part of at least one person's job description is key, according to Sydney. As she puts it: "Without someone at the organization focused on organizer development, it will not happen."
In organizing networks, like WORC, this may be a Leadership and Capacity Director like Sydney, or in individual organizing groups, this may be Organizer Directors or Leads.

But it's not just about finding a person–it's about finding the right person. The right person for the role will be knowledgeable about and experienced in organizing so they can offer specific advice and points of view. That means they should have recently been an organizer themselves and have opportunities to keep their organizing skills current even in a more consulting-focused role. The right person will also be able to connect emotionally with organizers and build a foundation of mutual accountability, trust, and relationship. As Sydney discovered when she was an organizer, you can't dole out accountability if you didn't provide the necessary support to succeed.

LESSON 2:

Provide multiple types of support for organizers to grow individually, in relationship with others, and through both training and experience.

Sydney's experience has shown her that there's no one silver bullet that will ramp up organizers' skills–it takes many different kinds of support, used in tandem. For WORC, that means offering individualized support through one-to-ones and creating collective spaces among similarly-situated organizers, like WORC's Organizing School or the email listservs it maintains for organizers. It means holding in-person trainings, like POCO, regularly and in multiple languages and it means consulting for the organization on things like hiring plans when that's what will ultimately benefit organizer development.

Sydney has also found that the manner in which she shows up matters. She tries to attend organizers' events in-person when possible, finding that it demonstrates a willingness to fully immerse herself in the organizer's world and builds a lot of trust with organizers. "I think it's been really appreciated the degree to which WORC staff are just trying to show up in our member group spaces as just bystanders...with no other agenda than just to be there with them and stand with them," she says.

LESSON 3:

Organizations need to secure buy-in from the folks who make decisions about and have influence over how organizers use their time and capacity.

Another lesson Sydney learned: it doesn't matter how good your organizer development program is if your organization—from the board and leadership to organizer's supervisors—isn't bought in. After all, organizers can only implement the teachings they've learned from Sydney and their peers if they have the time and support to do so. If their time is completely usurped by working on campaign work and other tasks, they won't have the space to do the organizing work they've been taught how to do.

Even the best organizing director can't help organizers who don't have organizational support to set aside time for regular one-to-ones and trainings.

IMPACTING ORGANIZERS, IMPACTING COMMUNITIES

Organizing is a notoriously hard job. It's emotionally taxing; it's isolating; it's constant. It only makes sense that organizers require constant support. **With a position dedicated solely to developing organizers, WORC's model demonstrates that when you invest in systems to support organizers, you create the conditions for them to stay, lead, and build long-term power.** It's not just about better trainings; it's about building the organizational scaffolding that makes development and retention possible.

Sydney believes that without WORC's support, the network may have lost a few of its member groups. WORC's injection of knowledge and support has led organizers at all levels to stay at their organizations longer. It's led organizations to be more effective, because their organizers have more skills and stay long enough so that they can use their institutional knowledge and skills to fortify their impact.

> **"I think without this kind of [organizer development] support, WORC would have continued to build regional campaigns with our member groups that did not have real, directly impacted people at the table being a part of developing and carrying out that campaign.**
>
> **– SYDNEY AUSEN**
> *Leadership and Capacity Director, Western Organization of Resource Councils*

Organizers within the network feel more grounded and effective. They've upped their hard skills, but they've also received the emotional support needed to stay in a demanding field.

By providing an influx of reinforcement, WORC's organizer development program makes them feel like they have a partner in their work–and a community of other organizers ready to commiserate and celebrate with them whenever they need.

As community organizers know, the work of organizing and improving is never finished. Sydney's story teaches us that organizer development can never stop reiterating, reimagining, and reinventing itself either.

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.

Western Organization of Resource Councils is a network of ten grassroots organizations (located in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Montana's seven Native American reservations, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming) with 22,750 members and 38 local chapters. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing training, coordinating issue work and advancing the vision of a democratic, sustainable and just society through community action.

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 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.