About CVH

Community Voices Heard (CVH) is an organization of low-income people, predominantly women with experience on welfare (receiving public assistance), working to build power in New York City and State to improve the lives of our families and communities.

We accomplish this through a multi-pronged strategy, including: grassroots organizing; leadership development; training low-income people about their rights; grassroots-driven research; civic engagement, and direct-action issue campaigns. We work on welfare reform, job creation, public and truly affordable housing, community development & governance, and other economic justice issues that affect low-income people, particularly low-income women of color.

While we focus on welfare reform, we broadly define welfare activism to be multi-issue, and thus must include issues such as education, training, jobs, housing, economic development and other community issues. We fill a crucial gap in that our organization connects public policy with grassroots organizing and leadership development.
CVH works to build a society in which the systems that govern us foster economic justice, not economic exploitation. When all people – regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender expression, and ability – are treated with respect and when privileges of one group over another do not exist. When all people are able to make ends meet and live a life of dignity – when people can count on living wage jobs when they are able to work, and unconditional support in their time of need. When governmental structures encourage community participation and, thereby, actually address community needs effectively. When policies address the needs of all people and strengthen our communities. When all people are civically engaged and when those in government truly represent the needs of and are accountable to all those who elect them. We believe in a society where the ‘have nots’ do not exist and the ‘haves’ do not have excessive wealth…where there are not ‘experts’ and masses, but where directly affected people are valued as the experts that they are.

Since our founding, Community Voices Heard has continually won concrete improvements for low-income communities.

- Educated over 53,000 low-income people about their rights and how they relate to pertinent policy issues.
- Mobilized over 12,000 low-income people to take action against injustices in their communities.
- Developed the power-building skills of 3,400 low-income people in organizing for social change through trainings in campaign development, power analysis and other tools to successfully create change in their communities.
- Released ground-breaking reports on New York City’s Welfare-to-Work programs, Back to Work program, and the decision-making process in NYC public housing.
- Created new job opportunities and training programs in Newburgh through the Newburgh Builds Newburgh program.
- Pushed New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg to create a new Deputy Mayor position to focus on Health and Human Services.
- Got New York City to create the Commission for Economic Opportunity to focus on poverty and joblessness.
Community Voices Heard subscribes to the following values and principles to help guide us as we move forward in implementing our strategic plan and in expanding our work:

- CVH believes that membership must have meaningful decision-making and control of the organization and the work we do.
- CVH believes that base building is the foundation of what we do – we actively work to increase the numbers of low-income people involved in social change.
- CVH believes that leadership development of community leaders is core to our work.
- CVH believes that affected constituencies must represent the organization to power and be the key decision makers in the organization.
- CVH does not do for people what they can do for themselves; we motivate people to do what they can do for themselves.
- CVH is about organizing, not service.
- CVH values, nurtures and supports women’s leadership, while welcoming all.
- CVH is a multi-racial, multi-cultural and diverse organization that integrates and respects different groups of people and actively seeks to promote and develop leadership of people of color.
For fifteen years now, CVH has made the impossible, possible - creating a grassroots movement among the most disenfranchised New Yorkers and empowering them to become a voice to be reckoned with.

We started as an organization by women, for women - fighting the welfare reform policies that threatened the very existence of our families. While we continue to battle against the oppressive welfare reform laws, we now also have public housing and sustainable communities’ campaigns. We have also expanded statewide with chapters in Yonkers, Newburgh, and Poughkeepsie. While each chapter works on specific local issues, all four come together to tackle state and federal issues that affect members and constituents similarly across geography.

It’s been a tough fight with many hard earned successes along the way, and the struggle continues. We are proud of our accomplishments and we will continue to build leaders in our communities to fight the good fight --- fighting for ourselves, fighting for our families, fighting for our communities.

Our statewide expansion has developed a network of low-income people across New York State that works together in constituent-led coalitions, and gives voice to low-income New Yorkers who previously lacked organizing power.

In 2011, much of CVH’s statewide activity centered on our work with coalition partners in the progressive taxation fight in New York State. Our formative work around the state-level Millionaire’s Tax paved the way for even broader statewide work -- amplified by the rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement -- that ultimately won $2 billion in additional state revenue.

We are also changing the very way our public structures function. Through Participatory Budgeting, we are bringing to New York City an innovative model that puts the communities usually pushed furthest to the margins right at the table to identify how public funds should be invested. We are leading this at a scale not before seen in North America.

Each year, CVH has increased collaboration across chapters and campaigns as our power builds by speaking out with a unified, statewide voice. In the year ahead, we will be working to deepen our statewide capacity and coordination, strengthen our partnerships and expand on our track record of winning real and meaningful victories.

In Solidarity,

Ketny Jean-Francois, Co-Chair
Agnes Rivera, Co-Chair
Sondra Youdelman, Executive Director
Our Yonkers, Newburgh and Poughkeepsie chapters aim to ensure that low-income residents have affordable places to live, access to good jobs and adequate training, and the supportive services that they need to take care of their families. Each chapter works collectively on shared goals at the statewide and national levels, and also focuses on issues specific to their city.

Yonkers

The Yonkers CVH chapter was formed in 2006 and has engaged over 2,100 low-income individuals. Low-income Yonkers residents are being left behind while the city invests tax money into luxury apartment developments and stores that most residents cannot afford.

This year, the Yonkers chapter expanded community involvement and transparency for Community Development Block Grants. CDBG documentation will now give more detail regarding important categories of how the city invests its administrative resources and economic development projects and there will be broader notification of CDBG meetings through posting at public housing sites, the public access channel and other public sites. We also won a commitment from the Yonkers Office of Community Planning to create a Section 3 enforcement policy in 2012, which will set more firm targets for developers that receive funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to hire local residents, including public housing residents and members of the low-income community.

To build on these victories, the Yonkers chapter is in the process of developing a campaign to save public housing and keep Southwest Yonkers affordable so that low-income residents are not displaced.
Newburgh

The Newburgh CVH chapter started in 2007 and has signed up over 2,700 low-income members. This year was a powerful year for the Newburgh chapter as many of the campaign objectives first set by members and leaders when the campaign started have been achieved. Newburgh leaders won $120,000 for the Newburgh Builds Newburgh program, which will provide local hiring and training, as well as and affordable housing opportunities within the Newburgh Land Bank. The Land Bank plans to redevelop 50 City-owned vacant properties within the next few years.

Members have played a crucial role in holding elected officials accountable for the appropriate disbursement of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money, resulting in the creation of a CDBG Advisory Committee with the City of Newburgh to oversee the allocation of funds. Through members’ participation on the CDBG Advisory Committee, CVH won the following in the 2012 CDBG budget:

- Continued funding for demolition of unsafe buildings (leading to either construction of new affordable housing or community gardens in their place).
- Fixing sidewalks in targeted low-income neighborhoods.
- Funding for a pilot program for tenant - landlord mediation.
- A commitment to implement the Section 3 regulation which encourages localities to make sure that 30% of new hires are low-income residents when money from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is used for capital improvement projects.

Members of the Newburgh chapter also led local elected and agency officials on a tour of Newburgh to illustrate the housing crisis in the city. CVH members have been appointed to various public positions, including the City of Newburgh Housing Loan Committee, the Distressed Properties Task Force, and the 2011 Charter Review Commission. After fighting to create these new decision-making structures, CVH members are now helping to lead them.

Poughkeepsie

In its most active year since its launch, Poughkeepsie members mobilized for all major CVH actions, including the civil disobedience and the Capitol Camp-In in March, the National People’s Action conference and actions in May, and a CVH member was appointed to the Community Development Block Grant oversight committee. By participating in our statewide and federal campaign work in partnership with other chapters, our newest members have seen firsthand what they can accomplish in Poughkeepsie.

In 2011, members continue to actively organize low-income Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County residents dealing with issues of housing, jobs and training, public transportation, youth programs and social services. They are currently exploring how to make the public investment of Community Development Block Grants and public financial incentive programs better benefit the community and respond to residents’ needs.
CVH aims to expand civic participation by low-income people of color through non-partisan voter engagement in order to increase the power of low-income people of color. We target low-income precincts, particularly those with historically low voter turnout rates, and raise issues to ensure that candidates address and commit to working on issues of concern to our membership. In the years ahead, we will be expanding on this work through our newly-established sister 501(c)4 organization, Community Voices Heard Power, or CVH Power.

Through 2011, we conducted a range of electoral activity, particularly in the Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, and Yonkers chapters.

In Yonkers, we hired a field coordinator to build out our voter outreach and mobilize voters around the mayoral election and to deepen our electoral capacity in the city. Members interviewed mayoral candidates Mike Spano and Carlo Calvi about job creation, affordable housing and community oversight over federal funds. Through this electoral project we contacted thousands of voters through door-knocking, phone banking, and direct mail, leading to hundreds of voter pledges and face-to-face conversations, as well as a number of new members that have remained engaged in our issue campaigns post-election.

In Poughkeepsie, we hosted a candidate forum for the Mayoral Democratic Primary, which over 60 people attended. We also contacted voters at the doors and by phone, and launched a new effort through which we partnered with Vassar College students who joined us at the doors to get voter pledges for the 2011 primary and general elections in Poughkeepsie.

Newburgh members identified and mobilized low-income voters in support of two ballot initiatives. The initiatives, which were both successful, will see the creation of four distinct wards for City Council seats. This new system, with smaller geographic districts for Council Members, will allow CVH members to hold elected officials accountable to their specific communities. The other initiative gives more control to the City Council over the hiring and the firing of the City Manager, a position which has held a large amount of power in Newburgh city government.

For 2012, we expect to:

- Carry out door-to-door, non-partisan voter education during election season related to positions of local importance.
- Convene educational workshops in target communities about the electoral process, the various positions up for election, and the roles that such positions play in making decisions that affect local people’s lives.
- Hold local non-partisan Candidate Forums that provide low-income community members the opportunity to hear from candidates in their community and pose questions to them about community priorities.
- Train community members in how to do traditional Get Out the Vote (GOTV) work, including making repetitive contacts.
- Public education and limited work around community input into the redistricting process.
- Register low-income New Yorkers to vote, or update old voting records that would prohibit people from taking part in elections.

In addition, CVH's sister organization -- CVH Power -- expects to participate in more partisan electoral work.
CVH’s Building the Workforce Campaign brings welfare recipients together to fight for improvements in welfare policy, access to good training programs, and the creation of real jobs with real wages. The campaign works to transition welfare recipients into living-wage jobs, influence the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Reauthorization debate, end New York City’s Work Experience Program, or WEP, and develop a powerful base of welfare recipients.

Welfare policy changes that push for “work first” over education and training result in relegating a population of New Yorkers to permanent poverty. At the same time, welfare recipients are made to work for free in unpaid positions around the state – denied all of the rights and benefits provided for other workers.

2011 Summary

- Made U.S. Department of Labor agree that worker protections apply to workfare workers and that an earlier memo stating this was still valid and relevant.

- Held a large Town Hall in collaboration with the Excluded Workers Congress which brought together excluded workers across the region to position their exclusion as a human rights violation and lift up their work as work that needed protection and value under the US Department of Labor.

- Organized a 5-city upstate tour to educate others and learn about workfare and Transitional Jobs across the state and develop connections to help fight for ongoing statewide funding for the program.

- Worked with Transit Workers Union Local 100 to fight to eliminate WEP/ workfare from being included in their contract with New York City MTA and implement a paid Transitional Jobs Program with Career Ladder opportunities instead.

- Held a briefing in Albany about the Statewide Transitional Jobs program, releasing the policy memo that we prepared on the new program.

Focus For 2012

- Continue to chip away at New York City’s WEP and other unpaid workfare programs around the state, and nationally.

- Organizing low-income New Yorkers to work to push NY City and State to prioritize the development of low-income people as a well-trained, well-paid and strong workforce as part of the city and state’s efforts to reduce poverty among its residents, through the creation of living wage jobs, paid transitional jobs and supportive work programs with education and training components.

- Seeking transparency and accountability of the government, at all levels, and community participation in determining the allocation and spending of workforce development funds.
New York City public housing, which is home to over 5% of the city’s population, is in a state of financial crisis. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) has been operating with a deficit, leading to deteriorating conditions and cutbacks in services for residents.

Since 2006, CVH’s Public Housing Campaign has been fighting attempts to balance its budget on the backs of its residents through rent and fee increases and further cuts in services.

The campaign increases the power of residents to influence policy-making, reverse the national trend of disinvestment in public housing, shift public consciousness about public housing from one of crime and violence to one of families and communities, and to develop public housing residents to be a powerful, collective voice on issues related to public housing and beyond.

2011 Summary

- CVH members met with NYCHA Board Members, HUD officials, and a NYC Deputy Mayor, and secured commitments to include job opportunities at NYCHA in every resident’s rent receipts, create a scanning system for better record keeping, expand the consolidation repair program for specific developments, and audit how the NYC Police Department spends $88 million of NYCHA resident dollars.

- In June, CVH members brought NYCHA senior staff to Philadelphia to tour the Philadelphia Worker Center and learn about Philadelphia’s Section 3 program, which pushes for entities receiving HUD funding to provide 30% of its new jobs to low-income residents.

- The campaign partnered with similar organizations to release a NYCHA report card compiling surveys of public housing residents – we compiled 500 of surveys. In the summer of 2011, we kicked off a campaign to push for repairs at NYCHA buildings, and to hire public housing residents to complete those repairs.

Focus For 2012

- Greatly increase NYCHA public housing resident access to jobs through the enforcement of a federal regulation (known as “Section 3”) that mandates public housing authorities to provide a certain percentage of jobs to public housing residents through projects awarded to contractors.

- Increase participation and involvement from tenants in public housing through conducting educational outreach aggressively throughout the city.

- Improve use of public housing resources through mechanisms that provide tenant input into how funds are prioritized, such as through participatory budgeting.

- Expand the number of repairs made to public housing units and speed up the process so people don’t wait years for badly needed repairs.
Over the past year, we have worked to generate new funds for investment in our communities and in the programs that we rely on. We have come together to lead public education efforts and have taken our fight directly to those in power.

But new revenue means nothing without good decisions on how to invest those public funds. Deciding how those public funds are invested is exactly what participatory budgeting is about.

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CVH played an integral role in bringing a new form of direct democracy to New York City called “participatory budgeting,” or PB, which some people call the People’s Budget.

CVH leaders first learned about participatory budgeting at the World Social Forum 10 years ago in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where community members have been utilizing a participatory budgeting process since 1989. More recently, CVH traveled to Toronto to see how public housing residents there have used this participatory process to prioritize investments in their developments.

In 2011, CVH organized the participatory budgeting process alongside four New York City Council Members, the Participatory Budgeting Project, and over 100 New York City organizations to engage a diverse set of New Yorkers in direct democracy in their own community.

In these communities, residents came together to brainstorm ideas on the types of public investments their community needs. Communities identified project ideas of all sorts, including more everyday projects, such as stop signs to make a street safer to more uncommon proposals, such as developing a greenhouse in public housing.

CVH is the lead community engagement partner for PBNYC, as the initiative is known, and has been involved in every element of the process – from assembling the City-Wide Steering Committee (SC) and supporting local District Committees, to co-facilitating the workshops that crafted the PBNYC Handbook and acting as co-chair of the City-Wide PB Steering Committee. We also chair the Outreach & Mobilization Work Group, which supports District Committees and Council Member offices in the development of outreach & mobilization plans for Neighborhood Assemblies and the vote.

In Council District 8, which covers East Harlem, Manhattan Valley, Mott Haven, we took lead mobilizing community members to participate in the process and for the March 2012 vote.

We would like to thank New York City Council Members Brad Lander, Melissa Mark-Viverito, Eric Ulrich, and Jumaane Williams for stepping up and working with us and the rest of the Steering Committee to push this unique experiment forward. The participatory budgeting model crafted in NYC with these elected and community partners is perhaps the most community-oriented participatory budgeting model active in the world today.

In the years ahead, CVH will be working to expand PBNYC to additional city council districts and to additional funding streams within New York City agencies, such as the NYC Housing Authority. Statewide, CVH members outside New York City are already latching onto the idea, and we may soon bring participatory budgeting to Yonkers, Newburgh or Poughkeepsie!

We know at CVH that our communities need investment. We are fighting not only for good jobs and quality housing, but to raise revenues and craft policies that will more effectively meet the needs of our communities.

As we join our organizing and policy work with participatory budgeting, we are forging new models and changing the very dynamic of how public decisions get made.
CVH 15th Anniversary

On June 2nd, 2011, Community Voices Heard celebrated our 15th anniversary at the Museum of the City of New York…and it was quite an affair! Our evening was filled with laughter, fun, dancing and camaraderie. We presented the Hon. Shirley Chisholm Lights of Freedom Awards to Juan Gonzalez, David Hansell, Frances Fox Piven, and Lillian Roberts who are setting the standard in media, government, academia and labor. The society our membership aims to build cannot be created alone, and it is great to have people like these honorees on our side. Thank you to Cause Effective for their support in helping us pull off this event, and Mertz-Gilmore Foundation for supporting the partnership.
Building Power to Win

CVH focuses its organizing to ensure that low-income communities of color in New York State have full access to jobs, education and training, affordable housing, community infrastructure and social safety net programs. Our organization works to:

- Achieve a more equitable New York State in which all current residents have access to decent and affordable homes and employment, high quality jobs, education and training to develop job skills, and an adequate social safety net for those unable to work.

- Create more participatory forms of government in which low-income residents actively participate in decisions and oversight around funding meant for low-income communities and development within their neighborhoods and City.

- Get municipal leaders to prioritize the creation of living wage jobs, transitional jobs with education and training components, and to improve working conditions and training for participants in job programs.

- Expand civic participation by low-income people of color through non-partisan voter engagement, and other activities in order to increase the power of low-income people of color in NYC, Yonkers, Newburgh and Poughkeepsie in campaigns and elections, and to ensure that candidates address and commit to working on issues of concern to our membership.

- Ensure the preservation and improvement of public housing and services for public housing residents. This includes getting greater levels of government funding for public housing and preventing and monitoring privatization of public housing stock.

The CVH Model

CVH uses a combination of strategies to build our base and our power, including:

- Base-Building: Conducting outreach at locations where significant numbers of low-income people are. Sites include public housing developments, job sites, job programs, welfare centers, parks, childcare and Head Start centers. We also do hundreds of one-on-ones each year, and conduct teach-ins at service providers, community based organizations, and other organizations to educate their clients, our base!

- Membership and Leadership Development: Developing low-income individuals personally impacted by the issues at hand to become leaders in the campaign by being able to identify those public officials with the power to change the policies we work around and how to do campaign planning and strategy development.

- Direct Action: Organizing collective action to bring attention to our issues, and encourage those in power to address members’ concerns.

- Policy Advocacy: Members give voice to their issues and concerns—with concrete recommendations—to all levels of government by meeting with critical policy makers and testifying at public hearings on related issues. This is supported by our capacity to produce grassroots-driven research.

- Voter Engagement: Building power through mobilizing our base and members of low-income communities to take part in the electoral process – and moving these contacts to action even after election day.

- Coalition Work: Members collaborate with like-minded grassroots community organizations and other allies in New York and across the country to work on complementary strategies and to present a unified force for change.

CVH contributes to the building of a more grassroots-driven national movement by drawing connections between our local work and global forces and struggles. We educate membership and staff about larger forces impacting our own organizing context and movements where lessons can be drawn from or solidarity can be exercised. We engage strategically in coalitions that help to build our organizational power and power on the issues important to our membership.
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