Community Voices Heard

2020 Annual Report

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What We Do

We are the largest Black-led grassroots organizing institution in New York State. Community Voices Heard (CVH) is a member-driven, multi-racial organization principally comprised of Black and Latinx women and low-income families across New York State. CVH tackles tough issues and builds power to secure racial, social and economic justice for all New Yorkers. Through grassroots organizing, leadership development, policy changes, and creating new models of direct democracy, CVH is working to build a truly equitable New York State.
About CVH
Strategic Approaches

Base Building  Leadership Development  Civic Engagement  Partnerships

CVH has chapters and offices in New York City, Westchester County, Orange County, and Dutchess County with member hubs in communities within each of our chapter regions.
A Message from Our Executive Director

Beloved Members of the CVH Community:

This has been a difficult year for us all. Yet, in spite of Herculean challenges, we have made it through the year. Not only did we make it through, we continued doing amazing work throughout our chapters. Even though the COVID pandemic rendered in-person meetings and gatherings untenable, we were able to make the necessary structural shifts to purchase hundreds of wireless internet enabled tablets to distribute to members so we could continue to be in relationship with one another. Many of you rolled up your sleeves and volunteered to participate in food distribution to other members in need. You learned how to use Zoom, engaged in meetings and trainings virtually, and participated in virtual actions! We’ve celebrated victories and mourned the losses of relatives and friends. We’ve done all of these things together. Though forced to socially distance we continue to build power, together. I look forward to building with you all in the new year, stronger and bolder together.

— Afua Atta-Mensah
Our Work

Cross-chapter highlights

Member Assemblies

In April and August 2020, we held virtual Member Assemblies that brought our members from across New York State together to address the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on our communities, share our challenges and successes, and develop a just recovery platform that includes maintaining the safety net, supporting schools, housing justice, relief for Black and Latinx-owned small businesses, and creating jobs.

Defund the Police Teach-Ins

In response to the widespread uprisings against police brutality following the state-sanctioned murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others, Community Voices Heard convened our community for three Defund the Police Teach-Ins over the summer months in partnership with the New York Working Families Party and the Brooklyn Movement Center. Attendees learned how to reimagine public safety by divesting from the police and investing in critical infrastructure for Black and brown communities, including housing, health care, youth services, and more. One session focused on how to build a defund the police campaign and take action in your neighborhood to reduce police violence.

Follow Black Women

In 2019, CVH and our sister organization, CVH Power, launched Follow Black Women: A Survey for the Frontlines, with the goal of surveying 5,000 Black women about political issues that they care about. As of October 2020, 2,300 Black women across New York State have completed the survey. Follow Black Women has also held 15 sister circles, 2 wellness sessions and 2 town hall meetings to discuss the issues affecting our communities and our priorities. Our members and supporters also played a critical role in our electoral work to get out the vote prior to the November 2020 presidential election, demonstrating the power of Black women’s organizing and political engagement.

2020 Census

In 2020, one of our key priorities was to make sure our communities across New York State were counted in the decennial Census. We rolled out a rigorous community outreach program and social media campaign to educate and encourage people to take the Census.

With a team of 12 paid canvassers (including 3 CUNY Census Corps Students), as well as a group of 15 dedicated volunteers from Riverside Church, we were able to get close to 7,000 people to complete the Census, with an additional 1,189 people who pledged to complete the Census.
Homes Guarantee
We started the year off sending a delegation of NYC members to Albany to fight for the NY Homes Guarantee, which asserts that every New Yorker has the right to safe, stable and affordable place to live, and that this can be achieved through investment in social housing, universal rent control, and reforming budget and tax policies to increase revenue through redistributing wealth and reducing tax inequality that currently favors the wealthy.

2020 Lights of Freedom Goes Virtual
On October 27, 2020, we held our first virtual Shirley Chisholm Lights of Freedom Annual Gala, celebrating our 26th anniversary of strengthening the power and civic engagement of people of color across New York State. We were thrilled to honor Congresswoman Barbara Lee, CVH members Lutonya Russell-Humes and Yolanda Torres, and DJ D-Nice this year for their outstanding contributions and commitment to improving the lives of Black and brown communities. It was an evening to be remembered, with a tribute to the iconic Shirley Chisholm, an homage to the lives we lost this year, and a virtual dance party with DJ Pleasure on the turntables.

NYC
East Harlem Tenant Organizing
In East Harlem, CVH tenant leaders took decisive action to fight back against their negligent landlord Isaac Kassirer and his company Emerald Equities. Starting on May 1, tenants organized a rent strike after not having gas or heat since November 2019.

NYCHA Campaign
In 2020, our NYCHA campaign shifted from supporting a focused base-building effort in the Polo Grounds with a series of six trainings during January and February to a citywide response to address the COVID-19 pandemic which began in March. To protect our health and continue building power, we shifted from in-person organizing to virtual organizing.
In April 2020, our NYC members Maria Pacheco, Emily Johnson, Jenny Rivera, Rose Fernandez and CVH Board Member Giancarlo Fernandez led a food distribution effort in NYCHA to provide relief to those hardest hit by the pandemic.

In May 2020, our NYCHA campaign launched a petition demanding to cancel rent and fully fund, fix and repair NYCHA. Our members got 4,000 supporters to sign the petition, giving a powerful boost to our base-building efforts.

As NYCHA residents struggled to pay their rent and bills, hundreds of CVH members and residents called to push NYCHA to implement their policy of rent reduction. As part of this effort, we were able to get the City to accept self-certification of income loss due to the pandemic, removing a major roadblock for those seeking reductions. 20 percent of those who called successfully got their rents reduced.

In July 2020, CVH and our partner Regional Plan Association released “The Impacts of Living in NYCHA." The report came out of an extensive door-to-door survey conducted by CVH Board Co-Chair and NYCHA resident Vernell Robinson and other resident leaders to document health and living conditions in NYCHA buildings in The Rockaways. It provides a unique glimpse into the deplorable living conditions of CVH members and other NYCHA residents in The Rockaways, and highlights the urgency with which we need to bring better conditions to NYCHA to ensure the health of hundreds of thousands of residents.

Also in July 2020, CVH members leading our NYCHA campaign launched borough-based hubs that expanded our leadership development efforts in public housing developments across New York City.

**Westchester County**

In Westchester County, members organized and attended meetings around housing affordability and Defunding the Police. Members were moved by the uprisings taking place after the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. They not only attended some of the protests, but they organized virtual house meetings to discuss what happened and how they felt about it. One of the things to come out of those meetings was the need to understand what it meant to Defund the Police. CVH Westchester organized and turned out for two teach-ins, What is Defund the Police and Defund Campaign 101.

Also, the County of Westchester released its long awaited Housing Needs Assessment. CVH Westchester fought for the allocation of funds for the assessment and its completion. Members are now in the process of conducting research to offer a response and plan for affordable housing that truly addresses the needs of the County’s low-income and working class residents.

**Dutchess County**

In Poughkeepsie, CVH members initiated organizing meetings with tenants in Luckey Platt, one of the city’s largest privately owned apartment buildings, who are facing displacement due to construction and rent increases. CVH Poughkeepsie was central in supporting these tenants’ efforts to organize their building.

CVH Poughkeepsie members took a more active role in chapter building work this year and participated in our voter outreach effort for the November presidential election.

**Orange County**

Newburgh members spent the beginning of the year canvassing and informing tenants about the new rental protections that were passed in 2019. Particular attention was given to buildings that could be covered under the Emergency Tenant Protection Act and Good Cause Eviction. On the doors we met several new members, some of whom took action through door-knocking their neighbors and hosting teach-ins. When COVID-19 hit, the Newburgh Chapter set out to survey the community to see how people there were impacted. Newly activated members took the lead in getting the survey out to residents in Newburgh and elsewhere in the Hudson Valley.

The country was wrecked by the assassination of George Floyd at the hands of the police. Many of our members felt the need to take action and hit the streets of Newburgh on June 8th with a list of demands. On July 14, 2020 the Right to Know Act was passed by the Newburgh City Council, thanks in part to the efforts of CVH Newburgh Chapter members. Members of CVH’s Newburgh Chapter now sit on key committees charged with oversight of police actions and developing proposals for police reform in Newburgh.
There’s no right way to handle a pandemic... Seeing the work our staff continues to do, thinking about organizing during a pandemic - dealing with the loss of members, and their relationships - seeing the ways our membership and staff have risen to the occasion, is so inspiring. Facing this reality can be dark, but seeing people still organize, channeling pain and anger into justice, it reinforces that there is nothing that can hold us down. We are still driving our campaigns forward. It’s miraculous that we can still come together to move things forward - that very drive is the heart and soul of CVH.

We have been living lives where crisis response is nothing new. When we entered this year we were already dealing with the crisis of four years worth of the Trump administration. Those of us who faced violence, systemic racism, and oppression have been the most resourceful during this time of the pandemic. We are experts in crisis management, we’re primed to deal with it. CVH was fighting before the pandemic, and we will be fighting after. I’m really proud that when chaos came, we were able to not get defeated by it. We are still building power to reach the reality we deserve.

We’ve made great strides in connecting with people despite the pandemic. It shows what kind of organization CVH is. CVH was out there connecting with our community and supporting people who were voting during this tough election. We made people feel connected and were able to connect the community to CVH. The Follow Black Women events provided a platform for women all over to connect about how they were feeling about the current social climate in a safe, respected space. We learned from one another and inspired one another in a number of ways. CVH did a great job before the pandemic, but the pandemic has shown that we can survive anything. Through these unprecedented times, CVH continues to stand with the community and has been successful at keeping the work going.
Looking Ahead

• Organizing for Housing Justice to reverse decades of disinvestment in public and other affordable housing in NY State, seeking $2 billion for NYCHA, and $1 billion for public housing in other parts of the state.

• Engaging our communities in visioning for an equitable Post-COVID recovery plan for New York, ranging from disinvestment from police budgets to investments that improve our communities including housing, education, supporting Black- and brown-owned businesses, etc.

• Developing a cadre of Black women to be organizers, working to build the civic and political engagement of their peers and developing civic and political leaders among Black women.

• Working with community partners to facilitate impactful, mission driven development of truly affordable housing for low-income and working class residents, particularly the formerly incarcerated, in Morningside Heights/ West Harlem.

• Responding to Westchester County’s Housing Needs Assessment with a much more robust plan for new housing that truly addresses the grave shortage of housing accessible to low-income and working class residents in the County.

• Partnering with the City of Newburgh and Legal Services to lead an anti-displacement tenant organizing project

• Continued engagement of rent stabilized tenants in East Harlem in fighting back against predatory landlords, and exploring forms of not-for-profit and tenant ownership in order to improve and stabilize their living situations.

• Beginning Rent Stabilization campaigns in Newburgh and Poughkeepsie

• Developing bases and hubs in additional communities in New York City and the Hudson Valley.
“Radical simply means grading things at the root”
— Angela Davis