Lessons from the Laotian Organizing Project's First Campaign

fighting fire with fire
Principles of Environmental Justice
The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit

October 24-27, 1991
Washington, D.C.

Preamble

We, the people of color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual inter-dependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic, and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice.

1. Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species and the right to be free from ecological destruction.

2. Environmental justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.

3. Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

4. Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.

5. Environmental justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

6. Environmental justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and containment at the point of production.

7. Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

8. Environmental justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

9. Environmental justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.


12. Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.

13. Environmental justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.

14. Environmental justice opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.

15. Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, people and cultures, and other life forms.

16. Environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations, which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experiences and on appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.

17. Environmental justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

Adopted October 27, 1991
The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit
Washington, D.C.
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Fighting Fire with Fire

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Laotian Organizing Project

The Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) is a grassroots organizing effort to bring together the diverse Laotian ethnic groups of West Contra Costa County, California, to organize, develop indigenous leadership, and build the community’s capacity to create systemic social change through environmental justice. The concept of environmental justice comes from a grassroots movement recognizing the disproportionate impact that pollution and toxins have on communities of color, indigenous peoples, and poor people, which is a phenomenon known as environmental racism. Environmental justice asserts the right of all people to live, work, learn, play, and thrive in a clean and healthy environment. We believe that environmental justice is achieved by building a powerful social movement led by grassroots organizations comprised of people of color and indigenous constituencies.

LOP’s vision is to build a grassroots democratic organization that develops proactive solutions to problems in the community and involves all sectors of the Laotian population in changing the relations of power between the community and established decision-makers. Members are involved in many ways, including: identifying problems that impact the quality of life in Contra Costa County; participating in campaigns that bring justice to the community; mobilizing and participating in meetings to confront key decision-makers and hold them accountable to community concerns; and getting people involved in building the power of the community.
Launched in 1995, LOP is the first direct organizing project of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). We define direct organizing as a process of organizing individuals most impacted by the problems and conditions and who are identified as necessary leaders in the fight for systemic social change. APEN was founded in 1993 to build a united network of grassroots organizations in Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities to focus on environmental justice issues. Two years earlier, some 30 API organizers and activists participated in the historic First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, where over 600 activists of color and native peoples from around the United States gathered to address the pattern of environmental racism in communities of color and native lands. Recognizing the need to continue building the environmental justice movement “from the ground up,” two key mandates, among others, came out of the Summit: the need to continue building strong regional grassroots networks, and the need to build a strong network of grassroots Asian and Pacific Islander organizations. This latter mandate aimed to address the lack of participation by APIs in the environmental justice movement, which informed and inspired a group of API activists from the movement to form APEN.

APEN strives to form a powerful and united voice among diverse API communities. To do so, APEN focuses on direct organizing—building grassroots organized power in low-income API immigrant and refugee communities with the capacity to drive campaigns that institute progressive solutions to environmental and social problems. Recognizing that no one organization can amass the power necessary to win broad-sweeping change, APEN’s strategy combines work on three levels—building new models of grassroots community organizing within the most marginalized API communities, linking organizations in order to build a cohesive network of API groups, and collaborating with the other environmental justice networks—as part of building a broad movement for environmental and social justice.
Executive Summary

Fighting Fire with Fire highlights the Laotian Organizing Project’s first significant grassroots campaign. A major chemical explosion in March 1999 at the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, California, followed by two more leaks in June and July, revealed Contra Costa County’s inadequate emergency response system and the daily health risks faced by residents living in this industrial zone. Many of the area’s residents were poorly informed of emergency safety procedures including the “shelter-in-place” information, and among those most impacted were limited English-speaking residents and children. In response to this, the Laotian Organizing Project launched a campaign targeting Contra Costa County’s Health Services and the Internal Operations Committee of Contra Costa County’s Board of Supervisors to implement a multilingual emergency phone-alert system. After a lengthy campaign, the County committed to establishing such a system, and LOP won an historic victory. LOP continues to work with members to monitor the implementation of the warning system.
Main points of this document are derived from a shared reflection and evaluation of the Warning System Campaign during recent LOP staff discussions. We share this with our environmental justice and movement allies. By writing about the lessons learned from the campaign, LOP hopes to underscore the importance of evaluating, analyzing, and assessing our organizing practices towards developing more strategic approaches to our campaigns and organizing work. Through this document, we also assert that grassroots organizations can and need to articulate social change theories based on the practice.

Documentation of environmental justice organizing is critical in archiving a rich history of social justice struggles in communities of color. We also believe strongly that our story of organizing in the Laotian refugee community fills a significant void in environmental justice studies literature on API and Laotian communities.

Although we recognize the considerable work that still needs to be done to create systemic social change in West County’s Laotian community, LOP celebrates the successes we made in: encouraging the involvement of grassroots women, men, youth, and diverse tribal groups as key leaders and active participants in changing conditions in their community; projecting the principle that there is never just one leader in the face of media and in confronting campaign targets; asserting that the entire community must work together to create systemic social change; insisting that the government had a responsibility for the community’s well-being and health protection; confronting government figures on inadequate health protection; empowering people to speak in front of government officials and setting the precedent that the community can stand up to the government and hold it accountable; challenging the current “English-only” emergency warning system, and breaking stereotypes of API refugees as passive and silent through grassroots organizing.

In our organizing we faced many challenges and barriers to effectively engaging Laotian residents in the Warning System Campaign. *Fighting Fire with Fire* discusses these barriers and how we overcame them in greater detail. The following are some key lessons we learned about how to work effectively with the Laotian community and build a membership base during our campaign.

*Underlying the accomplishments are key organizing lessons, summarized below, gained from LOP’s Warning System Campaign.*

We need to develop multiple and effective methods for participatory learning and culturally-appropriate organizing.

Working with diverse, preliterate ethnic communities required complex interpretation and translation in and between multiple languages during campaign meetings and threatened to impede collective discussion, equal participation, and democratic decision-making processes. To address this, LOP staff organized ethnic- and language-specific house meetings for full participation and designed the larger campaign meetings to be short, dynamic, and interactive with contextual visuals to sustain members’ interest and focus. Developing more participatory and creative organizing
approaches is key to engaging and actively involving our members in democratic decision-making processes.

**We must support and cultivate multilingual organizers.** Through the Warning System Campaign, LOP realized the immense importance of multilingual organizers in our work in the Laotian community. But language proficiency alone did not adequately characterize the qualities required of these organizers. We learned that they must have a fundamental understanding of the campaign’s principles and direction, and a solid knowledge of organizing concepts. The campaign became a hands-on opportunity to deepen the skills of our organizers. LOP must continue to grow our own organizers drawn from the community and to cultivate indigenous leadership.

**We must assert the importance of developing new grassroots leaders.** LOP prioritized leadership goals as an essential part of the Warning System Campaign and attempted to raise the voices of grassroots seniors and women along with adults and men from multiple tribal groups. In response, a few leaders in the larger Laotian community disparaged the viability of LOP’s campaign. We continue to develop ways to both assert our vision of grassroots leadership while maintaining working relationships with established community leaders.

**We need to create a multiethnic Laotian membership.** LOP sought to break down historical divisions and bridge the various multiethnic Laotian communities. To exercise and win power necessitates this. As a result, LOP framed the problem of a lack of health protection as having an impact on anyone who does not speak English. Through this, campaign members made connections to the importance of working together with all of the Laotian ethnic groups and with other communities of color.

**We must ensure the empowerment of women organizers and members.** Women are a critical constituency for LOP. We learned that they generally had less experience working in organizations and also had greater limitations that prevented them from continuing their campaign involvement. We struggled with organizing a critical mass of people to push the campaign forward while consciously trying to recruit more women. Although it has taken time, LOP has recently seen a transformation in the gender makeup of its membership and leadership base. We need to continue refining and tailoring our organizing methods to fully support and equip our women members and organizers in order to break down gender barriers in the community and dominant society.

**We must counter fear of government in immigrant and refugee communities.** LOP found that by projecting the Warning System Campaign as an effort to combat institutional racism and demand government accountability, residents had their first introduction to civic participation and participatory democracy. This motivated people to take action, helped to break down their existing fear of government authorities, and encouraged them to exercise their rights as residents.

The campaign also helped LOP to clarify our long-term goals and reflect on the larger movement we are a part of. Through the evaluation and analysis of our work it became clear that our long-term goals require that we practice deliberate and proactive organizing that promotes systemic social change, builds politically conscious organized power, and contributes to a larger environmental justice movement.

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*Staff help LOP leaders get hands on experience with bulk mailing. Left to right: Mouang Sio Saeliew, Loun Saechao, Khamphay Phahongchanh, Khamfoy Sisombath, Nouth Seneno, Khamsao Vournvilaipahn*
Numerous articles and studies have characterized the city of Richmond in West Contra Costa County, California as a "toxic hot spot" community. Over 350 industrial facilities encircle Richmond, including hazardous waste incinerators, oil refineries (such as the Chevron plant, one of the major polluters in the San Francisco Bay Area\(^1\)), dry cleaners, pesticide, fertilizer, and other petroleum-based chemical manufacturers. Many of these industries closely neighbor schools and homes. According to a 1989 report by Communities for a Better Environment, at least 210 different hazardous chemicals are stored and/or released into the Richmond environment.\(^2\) In a pattern consistent with established findings about the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on communities of color, it is mostly low-income African Americans, Latinos, and a growing but hidden population of Asians and Pacific Islanders who live in the heart of this toxic area. Among the most vulnerable are Laotians, who are further economically and politically marginalized due to their linguistic and cultural isolation and lack of access to information, services, and decision-makers as a refugee community.
**Fighting Fire with Fire** highlights the Laotian Organizing Project’s first significant grassroots campaign. A major chemical explosion in March 1999 at the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, California, followed by two more leaks in June and July, revealed Contra Costa County’s inadequate emergency response system and the daily health risks faced by residents living in this industrial zone. Many of the area’s residents were poorly informed of emergency safety procedures including the “shelter-in-place” information, and among those most impacted were limited English-speaking residents and children. In response to this, the Laotian Organizing Project launched a campaign targeting Contra Costa County’s Health Services and the Internal Operations Committee of Contra Costa County’s Board of Supervisors to implement a multilingual emergency phone-alert system. After a lengthy campaign, the County committed to establishing such a system, and LOP won an historic victory. LOP continues to work with members to monitor the implementation of the warning system.

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**Rationale for this document**
A victory in LOP’s first campaign has allowed us to “practice what we preach” about organizing—building a membership base, consciously developing grassroots leadership, exercising power, and shifting power relations to community people.

**Through defining Warning System Campaign successes and challenges ourselves, LOP wishes to encourage further dialogue with our allies about today’s approaches to community organizing and how to build power among diverse communities**

LOP believes it is critical to document this first campaign and to share it with our environmental justice and movement allies with the hope of sparking more discussion within each of our organizations of the need to be more strategic, proactive, and intentional in our organizing.

In the same vein as the environmental justice principle “we speak for ourselves,” there is a critical need for grassroots community organizations to write about themselves without the interpretation or translation by those outside the community including lobbyists, politicians, or academicians. Although the various writings on environmental justice efforts by those inside the community often are represented in books, articles, and conferences, the specific concerns of APIs and the challenges they pose to environmental justice organizing are not always obvious within the movement. API experiences in the United States are similar to those of other communities of color in terms of social, economic, and environmental discrimination. Yet this is often overshadowed by the ethnic and class diversity of the API community and by the “model minority” myth—the notion that APIs have overcome past discrimination to be successful and highly-educated nonwhites through hard work and strong family ethics. Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups are lumped into one broad racial category, despite the lack of a common language, tremendous differentiations in class, unique ethnicities and cultures, varied motives for migration, and different patterns of settlement and adaptation in the United States. Highlight in layout. U.S. immigration policy informs the diversity of the community, and APIs living in the United States are refugees, recent immigrants, native-born persons, low-wage workers, scholars, and highly-skilled professionals. For LOP, an understanding of Laotians’ history of settling in the United States as political refugees and how it shapes the community’s political ideologies, is integrated into our organizing approach. Some of the challenges that the diversity of the Laotian community poses to environmental justice organizing are highlighted in this document.
LOP is all too conscious of the way in which the model-minority myth effectively pits Asians and Pacific Islanders against other groups of color and hinders collective organizing among diverse communities. Sending a distinct political message, the model minority image contrasts supposedly hard-working, successful APIs with other people of color who are alleged by this myth to be lazy and culturally inferior. Deflating the demands and claims of injustice by people of color, this in turn blames them for failing through their own fault to “make it” in society. Furthermore, the model-minority image does not reflect the severe social class disadvantages and conditions of the Laotian community and other working-class API groups. Through our work and this document, LOP projects the experiences of working-class APIs and an alternative agenda that promotes systemic social change.

We recognize that the Warning System Campaign is LOP’s first step on a long road to wage campaigns and build a strong, broad base to fight and improve the many environmental and social problems that impact the community. Although the multilingual emergency warning system is a significant victory for Laotians and other immigrant families in West Contra Costa County, as well as for the broader environmental justice movement, we realize that the problem of exposure to toxic emissions is still a daily reality. Our recent victory is at best a liberal band-aid to the bigger problem—the production of chemicals that are harmful to all life forms and the ecosystems dependent on them. This document, then, draws lessons from LOP’s 1999-2000 Warning System Campaign and assesses what needs to change in how we do our organizing so that we can be much more proactive in our campaigns and come closer to reaching our long-term systemic social change goals.

Definitions of key organizing terms, such as systemic social change, base building, leadership development, and the theory of social change framework, are drawn from the Environmental and Economic Justice Project’s Strategic Training and Education for Power (STEP) training sessions. APEN has participated in STEP trainings since 1996. The STEP project provides a process where base-building organizations can jointly deepen their understanding of the challenges facing them and develop effective strategies for addressing these challenges. Participating organizations utilize a process of collaborative analysis and strategic problem-solving to develop a set of tools that they can use both in their strategic planning and day-to-day work. Through this, STEP aims to build a more coordinated and powerful movement for systemic social and economic change.

This document puts into writing the shared reflection and evaluation of the Warning System Campaign as discussed during recent LOP staff discussions. In this document, we define West County, where most of LOP’s constituent base resides, as the cities of Richmond and San Pablo. Chapter One highlights the political history of Laotians as refugees to the United States as well as general background on this community in Richmond and in the United States. Chapter Two gives a context of LOP’s past community projects in Richmond and a more detailed description of Warning System Campaign events. Chapter Three provides background on the elements of organizing that informed our work during the campaign process, and the challenges these elements presented. Chapter Four concludes the document and suggests the need for a clear long-term vision of social change with a dedicated focus on more direct organizing in impacted communities.
The Laotian population in the United States is a legacy of the Vietnam War. In support of South Vietnamese forces to eradicate communism in Southeast Asia, the U.S. government bombed, deployed troops, and sent millions of dollars in aid and resources to the region. Some Laotian ethnic minorities, most notably the Hmong, were recruited to fight on the side of the U.S. government. During the war, Laotians suffered years of chemical exposure from the toxic defoliant Agent Orange. In addition, as a result of 2 million tons of bombs dropped on Laos by the U.S. government, much of the agricultural land and forest area was destroyed, and water sources were poisoned. By the early 1970s, after 30 years of warfare, millions of Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese fled the environmental disasters and political repression in their home countries to live in crowded and unsanitary refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Thailand.
The influx of refugees to the United States was thought to be only a short-term consequence of the communist takeover of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in 1975. Various political upheavals and natural disasters in Southeast Asia, however, spurred a massive increase of refugees and constituted subsequent waves of migration. Between 1975 and 1991, just over 1 million Southeast Asians had been resettled in the United States.2

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service required early refugees entering the country to register with one of the voluntary agencies. Contracted by the federal government to resettle the refugees and to find sponsors for them, these nine agencies were the United States Catholic Conference, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, International Rescue Committee, United Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, World Church Service, Tolstoy Foundation, American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees, American Council for Nationalities Services, and Travelers’ Aid—International Social Services. Refugees could enter the United States once they found sponsors. Sponsors provided basic living necessities—food, clothing, and shelter—until refugees could support themselves and helped them in various ways to ease their entry into American society. Of these sponsors, 60 percent were families, 25 percent were churches and other organized groups, and the rest were individuals.3 The second wave of refugees relied heavily on family relatives already in the United States who could serve as sponsors.

Over 40 percent of all Laotians in the United States now reside in California. Other states with sizeable Laotian communities include Texas, Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts. Thirty seven percent of the Hmong community are located in the contiguous states of Minnesota and Wisconsin and represent the largest Asian ethnic group in the region.5 Within California, Laotian ethnic groups have resettled in metropolitan areas such as Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, San Francisco/Oakland, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Jose.

Laotians residing in West County included only a few in the late 1970s but has grown to several thousand today. In 1979, nine families living in West Contra Costa County were comprised of Mien, Lao, Khmu and Hmong ethnic groups. The small number of families necessitated that tribal groups work together, and they subsequently formed Tribal Unity, an organization to provide resettlement support services to other Laotians who would later settle in the area.6 Arriving in 1975, LOP staff organizer Torm Nompraseurt was among the first Laotians to settle in West County. He asserts that resettlement agencies relocated refugees in cities such as Richmond and San Pablo, because they had the most affordable housing in a particular region. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 3,321 Laotians lived in Contra Costa County in 1989. Community leaders argue that the census of Laotian families in the County is a severe undercount and estimate that the community numbers around 10,000 individuals today. According to Nompraseurt and other community leaders, the Mien community is the largest of the six ethnic groups in the County, followed by Lao, Khmu, Thaidam, Lue, and Hmong.

One third of all Laotians in the United States live in poverty and receive public assistance income, two to four times higher than rates for the general U.S. population.4 Compared to any other Asian immigrant group, Southeast Asian refugees including Laotians have far larger proportions of people from agrarian backgrounds with lower educational levels. In West County, of the adult Laotian population ages 25 years and over, 40 percent live below the poverty level, and 46 percent have less than a fifth grade education. Nationally, only one third of the refugees from Laos were high school graduates and about the same number had less than a fifth-grade education. Consequently, in the United States, Laotians frequently work in hazardous, low-income jobs, and 44 percent of the working population is employed in the low-skilled jobs sector as operators, fabricators, and laborers.7
Laotian youth in West County attend public schools with increasing problems of gang activity and a chronic lack of resources for essential items such as updated textbooks, computers, clean and functioning bathrooms, and after-school programs. School expulsion and dropout patterns of Laotian students suggest that schools are failing to meet the needs of API immigrant students. Many of these students face a number of pressures such as dealing with urban poverty, violence, and environmental injustice in their community, being undervalued and marginalized as young people of color, and balancing obligations to supplement their family’s income by working while going to school. In many ways, they are abandoned by the schools and in some cases turn instead to youth gangs and criminal activities that lead them to become entrenched in the juvenile and criminal justice system.

The U.S. government now refuses to acknowledge full responsibility for the needs of this community and has exacerbated their plight by eliminating welfare, affirmative action, and bilingual education. Forced to leave an agricultural socio-
ety, where the majority have little formal education, and to live in an urban industrial environment, the Laotian community is left particularly vulnerable to the traps of urban poverty: sub-standard housing, dangerous workplaces, and unhealthy neighborhoods.

Due to their status as poor, racial minorities, Laotians and other people of color in West County are disproportionately impacted by petroleum-based industries. The 1990 U.S. Census figures for Richmond and San Pablo, two cities heavily impacted by the industrial facilities in Contra Costa County, indicate that people of color make up the majority, 68.0 percent, of the total population. Asians and Pacific Islanders comprise 12.6 percent of the total population, African Americans 38.2 percent, Whites 31.6 percent, Latinos 16.5 percent, American Indians 0.7, and other 0.4 percent. In the state of California, Contra Costa County has the highest amount of hazardous materials per capita.

The Laotian community in West County faces a multitude of toxic exposure. The community attempts to live a sustainable lifestyle in a very unsustainable environment. Laotian families often practice subsistence fishing from the local piers and may be consuming fish at a higher rate than the recommended amount of no more than twice a month. Health officials warn that fish from the San Francisco Bay are contaminated with PCBs, mercury, dioxins, and pesticides, but their efforts to notify the immigrant population are ineffective for the Laotian community since few are literate in their own language or in English.

Another source of exposure unique to this community is contaminants in the soil where they grow vegetables. As Laotians move into low-cost housing areas, they also bring with them their agrarian heritage from Laos. Many revitalize dilapidated public housing and unmanaged backyards with their communal gardens. Unfortunately, West County is also the site of many old industries and a number of Laotians may be gardening on top of sites where there are high levels of lead, other metals, and toxic chemicals.

This toxic exposure is exacerbated by linguistic and cultural isolation and a lack of access to information, services, and decision-makers. Effectively cut off from most major forms of mass communication, approximately 52 percent of Laotians in the United States live in “linguistically-isolated households,” meaning that no person age fourteen or over in a household speaks English only or very well. Laotians have over 62 dialects. Most are from preliterate cultures. In Laos, except for the lowland Lao, who were the most urbanized Laotians, the other tribes did not have functioning written languages until the Vietnam War. Chapter Three discusses in more detail LOP’s challenges in organizing in multiple languages and with a primarily preliterate community.

Politically and economically marginalized, the Laotian community in West County is largely segregated from the larger population. Despite this, Laotian residents maintain strong ethnic and community networks and persevere through forming ethnic and clan associations, other service organizations, and religious churches and temples. These associations are essential and hold the community together in a foreign and oftentimes hostile setting. LOP is one vehicle where Laotians in West County can engage in activities that address the root causes of social, economic, and environmental problems by leading campaigns that shift power relations and work towards systemic social change.
During the 1980s and 1990s, under very conservative presidential leadership, the United States experienced a reversal of progressive social policies won from gains during the civil rights movement, environmental movement, women’s movement, and labor movement. In the 1970s, there was an expectation on the part of the people that government should assume responsibility for the well being of citizens. Shifting from this notion to “serve the people,” the conservative right has successfully dominated and implemented the idea that government is permanently incompetent and government interference in the form of social program expenditures threatens economic efficiency. In California, statewide ballot initiatives, namely the Three-Strikes Laws and juvenile injustice Proposition 21, the anti-immigrant Propositions 187 and 227, anti-gay Proposition 22, anti-worker Proposition 226, anti-affirmative action Proposition 209, and the so-called welfare “reform” have attempted to strip the basic rights of youth, immigrants, gays and lesbians, workers, and people of color. Because of these assaults, progressive organizations are forced to involve themselves in these defensive battles. The fact remains that large sectors of communities of color, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities in particular, need to be organized and engaged in progressive, proactive campaigns. In general, more grassroots organizing is needed in every part of the country, including the Bay Area, a perceived hot bed of social justice activism, and West County is no exception.
Geographically and politically isolated from San Francisco, Oakland, and other Bay Area power centers, West County has very few vehicles to organize the African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Latino, and White populations and to bring people together to raise issues in the broader community. There are a variety of social service agencies that attempt to meet the wide breadth of needs of this diverse community, and some faith-based organizations focus on organizing around various social justice issues. But much more needs to be done. Laotian ethnic organizations exist as well, but most of these are limited to providing resettlement and much needed support services to the Laotian population. The majority of all these groups do not focus on direct organizing or environmental justice work.

Direct social services, both publicly and privately run, are a significant part of the infrastructure needed in West County. They help to facilitate LOP’s organizing, because they can offer direct support to meet basic needs of individuals, often our current and potential members. With that said, West County needs more youth programs including gang prevention, teen pregnancy services, and tutoring; medical services for low-income and limited-English-speaking residents including mental-health services; adult-education programs for adults and seniors to learn new vocational or personal advancement skills; and a variety of other services. All programs such as these should be provided in multiple languages. Besides the overall limited services from government agencies, language access and culturally competent services are key issues for the Laotian community. Without a strong presence of advocacy and social service groups, some Laotian residents have asked LOP for assistance with various concerns such as housing evictions, communicating with the Social Services Department regarding their social security checks, and even dealing with a child’s suicide.

Two environmental justice organizations, however, have worked in West County for over ten years. Communities for a Better Environment provides organizing skills, and legal, technical, and scientific resources to urban communities directly affected by industrial pollution. Founded in 1986, West County Toxics Coalition is a non-profit, multi-racial membership organization that aims to empower low- and moderate-income residents to exercise greater control over environmental problems that impact their quality of life in West Contra Costa County. While West County Toxics Coalition has an extended history of mobilizing the Richmond community on environmental justice issues and Communities for a Better Environment has done considerable research and has begun organizing in the past year in Richmond, much more environmental justice organizing is needed.
Laying the Groundwork for Direct Organizing

From the conception of LOP, working on direct organizing campaigns has been a central goal. Prior to the Warning System Campaign, LOP spent its first few years engaged in various community-building activities to lay the groundwork for organizing. Two categories of community-building activities that LOP used as vehicles to catalyze community organizing included support services to individuals and families during times of crisis or special need, and more programs to develop politically conscious individuals with effective tools for civic participation. We worked with youth and adults and recognized the importance of a separate space for youth to develop their voice and leadership skills. The primary vehicles for our community-building efforts have been:

- a leadership development program, called the Asian Youth Advocates, for high-school aged Laotian girls and young women;
- leadership development activities with adults, seniors, and different tribal groups;
- an education project on lead in Asian ceramic dishware;
- a community-driven survey project on contaminated seafood consumption in the Laotian community;
- a community-health and environmental-justice summer festival;
- managing land available to Laotian families for communal gardening to ensure food security;
- electoral campaign work against the racist statewide initiatives.

In response to the lack of opportunities for young women in the community, and in keeping with our overall goal to build an organization where all sectors of the community participate equally, LOP began Asian Youth Advocates (AYA) to develop the leadership and organizing capacity of young Laotian women. Our goals with AYA are to strengthen the Laotian community in West County through developing the leadership of girls and young women and to create a model for youth organizing in the broader API community. Our training program helps young women develop skills in public speaking, administering surveys, documenting problems in their neighborhoods, identifying solutions to problems that impact their community, and developing action plans to implement those solutions.

Through the young women who participate in AYA, we are able to develop relationships with their friends, families, and in particular, their parents. Other LOP projects, such as a community-driven survey on seafood consumption and the communal gardening project, have helped increase our visibility and develop relationships with individuals and groups in the community. While addressing the need for food resources, LOP identified toxic-free public land and made it available to Laotian families to maintain their tradition of communal gardening.

Working with Californians for Justice, a statewide grassroots organization that builds power in low-income communities and communities of color, LOP organized Richmond community residents to vote against anti-affirmative action Proposition 209 in 1996 and anti-bilingual education Proposition 227 in 1998 by doing door-to-door education and get-
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General Chemical Explosion

On July 26, 1993, the worst chemical spill in Contra Costa County history occurred at the General Chemical plant, eventually sending 25,000 people to area hospitals. The huge toxic cloud resulted from a botched attempt to unload sulfur trioxide (oleum) from a rail tank car, and the cloud spread 10 miles across the community. The most heavily impacted were communities of color in Richmond and North Richmond. After the disaster, in response to intense community demands, the company agreed to a $1.2 million financial settlement that funded the construction of a local health clinic.

On May 2, 2001, General Chemical leaked clouds of sulfur dioxide and sulfur trioxide into the air for over four hours. Over a hundred went to local hospitals for treatment. Residents were instructed to shelter-in-place, though no multilingual phone warnings were disseminated, as the County has been slow in implementing the promised system. LOP continues to pressure the County to implement the multilingual emergency phone-alert system.

Seizing an Organizing Opportunity

When the March 25, 1999 explosion at Chevron occurred, LOP staff called people in the Laotian community to assess the crisis. We found that limited-English-speaking residents were not effectively informed on how to protect themselves. Many were even unaware that an industrial explosion had occurred and thought the black smoke came from a burning house. Others could not understand the English-language news announcements notifying residents of emergency procedures.

When Chevron’s hydrocracking unit suffered a leak of hydrogen sulfide and released a toxic cloud of various chemicals, the severity of the explosion mandated the need for households to receive calls from the automated phone-alert system. The calls were set up to inform residents to “shelter-in-place,” meaning to seek shelter, close the doors and windows, and shut off ventilation systems as a measure of protection. Several aspects of the emergency warning system did not work. Many households never received a call. Those that did were called several hours after the explosion and after residents in the households had already been exposed.
The few who received the automated phone calls did not understand the message. The automated phone calls went out in English, which was ineffective in informing the large immigrant, limited-English-proficient population in the area.

In the Laotian community, seniors and children were most impacted by the explosion because of language and age barriers. Elders typically take care of the young at home during the day. Because the majority of residents were not informed of the scale of the Chevron accident and the associated health risks of the chemical fire, many suffered health symptoms such as skin rashes, nausea, headaches, and respiratory ailments.

LOP contacted AYA program youth and their families as well as participants in the gardening project, and held a community meeting shortly after to collectively discuss and assess these issues. Adults and seniors in the community were particularly angered about the failure of the existing emergency warning procedures. They knew that the Chevron explosion was not the first accident of this kind in their neighborhood but rather just one of many in the last several years. The Warning System Campaign was born out of this accumulation of anger and frustration over exposure to repeated accidents. LOP made the decision to focus resources on building a full campaign as an avenue for achieving government accountability and organizing residents around an environmental justice issue. The Warning System Campaign became a political opportunity not only to build upon our past work but also to galvanize limited-English-speaking Laotian adults and seniors on an issue that directly affected them—the need for multilingual emergency warning systems.

The Chevron explosion was not the first disaster to hit this community, but it came at a moment when LOP was prepared to turn it into a focal point for the community’s energy. Although we learned a tremendous amount about what else needed to be developed in the organization and

Photo by Sam Deaner

March 25, 1999 Chevron oil refinery accident
in the community during and after the campaign, had we not done the community-building and organization-building work first, LOP would not have been in a position to take advantage of the moment. Having attempted numerous times to develop campaign issues with different sectors of the community, the Warning System Campaign was created out of a successful confluence of events, only some of which were within our control, which is just one of the many lessons we can learn from for the development of future campaign and organizing efforts.

Because we were new to dealing with County-level decision-making processes, structures, and players, LOP initially anticipated the campaign to be a fairly expeditious process for residents to spark change in their local government. Instead, LOP faced entrenched resistance to this change within the County’s elected leadership, body of public workers, and conservative policies, and the Warning System Campaign became a protracted struggle. The County was not willing to solve the problems of their own emergency warning system, and LOP had to develop solutions for them. In the process, we wanted to consciously track and build our membership base. Consequently, after the first three months of campaign work, LOP moved away from outreach to and mobilization of community residents, to campaign events and shifted to more intentional recruitment and one-on-one and small-group contact with LOP’s first adult and senior membership.

As mentioned before, AYA had planned to launch a school-based campaign in the upcoming summer, and LOP, not knowing how long the Warning System Campaign would continue, believed it was important to move forward with the AYA campaign development process. However, all of the youth felt a connection to the issue of a lack of health protection, because their families were directly affected. As youth, they did not receive proper emergency safety information from their schools. Many were released from school as if under normal conditions and then became exposed to the toxic fire. In solidarity with seniors and adults, AYA youth participated in many Warning System Campaign activities including campaign meetings, accountability sessions, and a press action.

Choosing Our Targets

LOP would have wanted to hold Chevron accountable for the environmental and health threat that they pose to Richmond neighbors in a campaign. We have continued to stress a moratorium on new polluting facilities and for existing ones to have clean facilities that will protect workers and residents. While we believe in corporate accountability to communities, LOP did not have the capacity or the power to confront Chevron at the time. Chevron is an enormously powerful multi-national corporation with both a refinery and their corporate headquarters based in the Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties, respectively. Three petrochemical facilities reside in Contra Costa County with Chevron as the largest of them in terms of
capacity for the manufacturing of crude oil. Established in 1902, the Chevron refinery in Richmond is the company’s oldest and third-largest refinery. Within the San Francisco Bay Area, Chevron is the fifth largest company (as measured by net income) and is one of the largest employers in the County. To this end, LOP determined we were not prepared to challenge a major corporation vital to the economy of Contra Costa County and the larger Bay Area. Instead, residents identified the need for improved emergency notification, and LOP’s campaign targeted the government as the main body responsible for the protection of the people.

We believe that it is the County’s responsibility to notify residents of emergency safety procedures in the event of an industrial accident. When accidents occur, industries must inform the County of any existing threat or possible threat to public health so the County can be prepared to take necessary action and assess the degree to which the public needs notification. Within the Contra Costa County Health Services Department, the Hazardous Materials Division regulates and monitors industrial facilities in the County. We targeted the highest-ranking County staff person who oversees the Health Services Department, because he had the responsibility of ensuring the accuracy of the phone-alert system as well as the authority to change elements of the system. As the campaign evolved, we elevated pressure and shifted our target to decision-makers with higher authority, the elected County Supervisors, because the struggle would ultimately involve a strong commitment from the highest officials and a fight for resource allocation.

We targeted the highest-ranking County staff person who oversees the Health Services Department, because he had the responsibility of ensuring the accuracy of the phone-alert system as well as the authority to change elements of the system. As the campaign evolved, we elevated pressure and shifted our target to decision-makers with higher authority, the elected County Supervisors, because the struggle would ultimately involve a strong commitment from the highest officials and a fight for resource allocation.

The political tone of “rebuffing responsibility” by our local government mirrors much of what we see around the country. While communities of color are routinely exposed to environmental toxics, corporate and government policymakers are increasingly unwilling to protect us or to deal with these injustices. The shrinking role of the government and a rise in the
privatization of public programs and facilities is a salient trend that has shifted the burden of service to disadvantaged communities from the government onto non-profit organizations and the private sector. Over and over again in our campaign, we heard from County bureaucrats and elected officials that they are not set up to inform diverse populations of emergency warning procedures, and that community organizations such as LOP should do the work of educating the Laotian population. We were even told by one County Supervisor “just to use a phone tree” to contact Laotians when accidents happen. The apathy of County decision-makers perpetuated the prevailing neo-liberal and conservative view that government is ineffective. LOP believes that it is the government’s responsibility to uphold standards and protections for the public good. Because industrial accidents occur so frequently, effective warning systems are necessary and should be standardized and provided in multiple languages so all members of the public can be equally informed and protected. It is this perspective that was the driving force behind our one-and-a-half-year campaign to pressure and influence decision-makers towards this view.

**Building a Base in the Warning System Campaign**

At the beginning of the Warning System Campaign, LOP did not start with a formalized body of members, but by the end we had a base of 500 campaign activists and formalized 100 members. The Campaign involved activating residents and identifying those who wanted to become members. There were varying levels of involvement by Laotian residents, and thus specific terms to describe peoples’ participation. Community residents refer to the larger body of Laotians who have not necessarily worked with LOP or who have perhaps worked with LOP in the past but not on the Warning System Campaign. Campaign activists are those who felt the campaign issue resonated with them and were willing to support it in one concrete way, such as by signing a campaign postcard, attending a meeting, or expressing interest in becoming an LOP member. Campaign members and leaders signed an LOP membership card and consistently participated in campaign pressure activities (such as delegations, accountability sessions, and media actions) and organizing activities (such as neighborhood meetings, general member meetings, and leadership meetings).

To build contacts with community residents, LOP staff made presentations to churches, adult education classes, Laotian ethnic associations, and maintained lists...
of people who came to our community meetings. One of the first campaign actions was a community accountability meeting with the Contra Costa County’s Director of Health Services on April 8, 1999 where seniors and youth filled a church room and demanded that the County take responsibility for protecting the public’s health. For many, the Warning System Campaign was the first opportunity for Laotian residents to express their concerns about county policies and practices that directly impact their lives. LOP staff helped the senior and youth speakers prepare for their public testimonies by meeting with them individually to deepen their understanding of the activity’s goals and purpose, and to work with them to shape the points they wanted to articulate.

LOP developed four initial demands to the County:

- the Department of Health Services must commit to including and reaching out to diverse populations in the County;
- the County Health Services Department must conduct a “Language Equity Analysis” on the County’s capacity to

serve non-English-speaking populations, particularly Laotians, in the event of an emergency;
- the County Health Services Department must develop a plan that addresses language access for limited-English-speaking populations, particularly Laotians;
- the County must conduct community-based education activities on emergency warning procedures for Laotian residents.

At the accountability meeting, Contra Costa County’s Health Services agreed to these recommendations, and it was an initial victory for LOP. However, LOP felt that these demands were not explicit enough and wanted to push for specific changes. Working with the Environmental and Economic Justice Project, a national training program and technical assistance project, LOP began to think more systematically about the campaign work and developing LOP into a membership organization. LOP staff initiated a plan to conduct ethnic/language-specific house meetings to develop a range of solutions that addressed the lack of multilingual emergency warning systems. Fully engaged at house meetings, campaign activists ultimately developed a solution of a multilingual phone-alert system as the primary demand, as opposed to demands for a multilingual radio station or community outreach by the County. Those people most
interested and involved attended the larger community meetings and hosted language-specific neighborhood meetings and general membership meetings later on.

Realizing that even senior-level County staff did not have the power to structurally change the telephone ring-down system, LOP shifted attention to the County’s Board of Supervisors to make a commitment to add Laotian and other languages in the system. Neighborhood meetings were a way for LOP staff to obtain input from campaign members and to refine our demands. The Campaign Planning Committee formed as the main leadership body to develop campaign strategy and tactics, to identify ways to involve the broader Laotian community, and to prepare for the different campaign pressure activities. This leadership committee was made up of both women and men from the Mien, Lao, and Khmu communities. Through AYA meetings, we also convened separate youth discussions.

Throughout the campaign, LOP organized several successful campaign activities to put pressure on key decision-makers. Early on in April 1999, we organized a press conference outside an apartment complex overlooking Chevron’s smokestacks whose residents are mostly Laotian and African American. The purpose of the press conference was to highlight the proximity of housing to the refinery and to escalate pressure on the County. Through sustained media attention, we were able to heighten the importance of this issue and pressure key County

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**Tactics LOP applies in our organizing**

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<th>Maintain and Deepen Involvement of members</th>
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<td>Exercise Power</td>
<td>Regular membership &amp; leadership meetings</td>
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Supervisors to respond to LOP’s demands.

Other ways we pressured the County included conducting postcard drives. Hundreds of concerned campaign activists signed these postcards asking Contra Costa County to hold true to their charge of protecting public health and improving the inadequate emergency warning system. LOP also formed delegations of campaign members and leaders to meet with Contra Costa County Supervisors to voice community concerns, outline our demands, and generate support from key decision-makers.

On September 27, 1999, after six months of pressure and community organizing, Contra Costa County Supervisors on the Internal Operations Committee approved changing the County’s English-only emergency phone-alert system to include multiple languages. But by the beginning of 2000, the County again was slow in implementing the new system claiming the need to secure funding first. LOP began a second campaign to pressure Supervisors to allocate resources and develop a model pilot program for the County to reach the Laotian community and enroll households into the new system.

Finally, on July 24, 2000, members packed another Internal Operations Committee meeting, and the Supervisors committed to LOP’s demands:

- To secure outside funding sources for the implementation of the Laotian language pilot program;
- To investigate potential Chevron penalty money that would go towards funding the telephone ring-down system;
- To launch a new comprehensive health-access program that would address Laotian health issues and concerns.

At press time of this document, eleven months after the County’s commitment to secure money to implement the pilot multilingual phone-alert system, County staff still claim they have no resources to move forward. After two years of struggling with government bureaucrats, LOP believes that they are deeply entrenched in the status quo and unwilling to act on a baseline measure to mitigate toxic exposure by vulnerable populations. For LOP, it is a reminder that monitoring the implementation of our victories is essential for change to become institutional reality. The challenge, of course, has been how to sustain the pressure and not to fall into actually doing the work for the County, because they claim they have exhausted all resources for actualizing the changes. LOP continues to monitor and pressure County officials to fulfill the approved mandate.
There are a range of difficulties that serve as challenges to LOP’s organizing. Common to many communities, LOP deals with the fundamental obstacles to members’ participation (e.g., physically getting from their homes to the meeting place, having someone care for their children during the meeting). More difficult challenges involve promoting self-transformation among members that support changes in their beliefs and ingrained worldviews. How can LOP begin to advance the idea that people can impact institutional decisions that directly affect their lives? These concerns are relevant to all communities, but some are specific to API and Laotian communities. This chapter illustrates how LOP addressed these larger challenges.
On a basic level, particularly as poor and working people and/or as women, campaign activists and members face barriers that prevent them from participating in grassroots institutions. To address this, LOP had available childcare at all events so parents could attend meetings and bring their children, offered rides to and from campaign activities for those with no access to transportation, and provided food and snacks when meetings ran into mealtimes. LOP staff visited the homes of campaign activists and members to have one-on-one conversations about the campaign and to encourage them to attend upcoming meetings. Staff made follow-up and reminder calls to them in preparation for a campaign event. Meetings were mostly in the evenings and on weekends to accommodate members’ work schedules. Indeed, while worth noting, providing such things as childcare or transportation is not enough in developing a membership base. It was necessary to work with campaign members in an ongoing, long-term process that applied the organizing elements discussed below.

LOP’s agenda begins with an environmental justice framework. This framework stresses the principle of people speaking for themselves, exposes the role of corporate power in shaping our communities, and calls for building a grassroots social movement that identifies the links between communities nationally and globally that suffer from environmental racism. In our organizing work, we inject this perspective in the community and do bring a set of values that counters dominant societal views.

LOP’s main approach to achieving systemic social change is in building grassroots power through direct organizing. As mentioned throughout this document, LOP asserts the fundamental need to develop a skilled and politically conscious membership base that exercises its power as a key strategy in achieving systemic social change. Base-building is “systematically developing an increasing number of individuals who understand and agree with the organization’s mission/long-term goals, consistently participate in its activities, and are committed to action as the organization’s primary power base.” Intentional base-building of grassroots members is significant in that LOP believes that those most impacted by community problems and environmental injustice must be at the forefront of creating systemic social change. To this end, we identify low-income Asian and Pacific Islander communities as among those directly impacted and the importance of focusing on these communities due to the scarcity of groups
that see direct organizing as the main approach to address large institutional problems facing working-class APIs.

LOP actively sought to apply the above organizing elements in working with campaign members and leaders as well as in evaluating our organizing approach throughout the campaign process. How these principles were tested through the campaign and the primary challenges LOP faced in implementing them are discussed in this chapter.

It should be clear that what we assert as challenges internal to the Laotian community mirrors that of all communities. Community problems and tensions related to individualism, competition, racism, classism, sexism, patriarchy, ageism, and homophobia are not just present in new communities and are in fact reinforced by the dominant culture. Revealing these challenges illuminates existing tensions and is significant in opening discussion among various organizations.

**BREAKING LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIERS**

Only speaking their tribal language with little knowledge of English or other Laotian languages, many in the Laotian community are monolingual. Although Laotian ethnic groups share a common written language, an inability to read written Lao is prevalent. Given LOP’s staff makeup, organizing all six Laotian ethnic groups was not possible. LOP had at least one Khmu organizer who spoke fluent Khmu and Lao and basic Mien, as well as one Mien administrative assistant who spoke Mien confidently but had no prior organizing experience. With two LOP staff at most who could communicate with the base, other LOP organizers and staff faced considerable language barriers during all campaign activities. It was essential to conduct campaign activities in such a way so that people could speak in their first language. We wanted campaign participants to be comfortable and to be able to fully articulate their thoughts. Because multilingual interpretation between Lao, Mien, and English was necessary, meetings were long and ultimately affected our organizing efforts.

LOP focused on organizing the Khmu, Lao, and Mien communities, because we did not have staff who spoke other Laotian languages to effectively organize residents of other ethnic groups. Since most of our Khmu members understand and speak Lao fluently, needs were minimized by conducting meetings in primarily Lao and Mien. Logistically, multiple interpretation was very difficult. Meetings were run mostly in English and then interpreted separately into Lao and Mien. English was also the common language for multilingual staff to communicate with one another. If a person made a comment in Mien, it was interpreted into English, and then interpreted into Lao. While
translation equipment helped to expedite the interpretation of multiple languages by allowing for simultaneous interpretation, extensive interpretation still affected the meeting’s flow and people’s attention spans. When campaign leaders or members participated in meetings, written materials such as the agenda and meeting notes had to be translated from English to written Lao. Additionally, all other written materials including flyers, postcards for the postcard drives, and membership forms needed to be translated. Written materials were used, but there was not a strong reliance on them since many members had come from a preliterate background. Preparation for these multilingual events took significantly more time, and meetings became longer.

Interpretation alone was also an obstacle. LOP staff quickly learned that particular organizing terms and concepts could not be easily defined in Laotian languages. Highlight in layout. Some words used in organizing are not readily interpretable and multilingual organizers found understanding and applying the appropriate terminology a challenge. Explaining the U.S. governmental system and various structures through interpretation was complex, because there are no equivalent words and ideas in Khmu, Lao, and Mien languages. Words that are not commonly used in everyday language were also difficult to communicate.

For our members, accessing and participating in LOP events and public processes such as participating in campaign activities, confronting decision-makers, working with allies, and attending conferences was equally challenging. Most non-LOP sponsored public events provided neither interpretation services nor translation of written materials for our Laotian members, so LOP was required at all times to provide our own interpretation. At one particular conference, LOP staff and campaign members were met with open hostility and racism from other conference participants for communicating in other languages. Indeed, interpretation services to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee communities continue to be an issue that is hidden and diminished within the larger social justice community.

LOP staff recognized the difficulty of organizing and simply running meetings in these multilingual settings. The challenges of complex and extensive interpretation and the inability of campaign members to communicate with one another and with organizers could profoundly impede collective discussion, equal participation, and democratic decision-making. LOP fashioned unique ways of organizing to meet these challenges.

Conducting ethnic and language-specific house meetings. In the campaign’s early phase, house meetings minimized the need for multilingual interpretation and allowed for the full participation of members. They were run in the language of the ethnic community as well as in English. In each of these meetings, LOP organizers and campaign members discussed the problem of the Chevron explosion. Follow-up meetings deepened community members’ ongoing involvement and a collective understanding of the problem in order to develop a collective solution. Campaign members produced seven broad solutions including a community outreach program by the County, simple street signs informing residents of safety procedures, a multilingual radio station, and a multilingual emergency phone-alert system. Campaign members from all ethnic house meetings came together at larger community meetings to discuss the ideas and then to vote altogether on which solution to further pursue. In the end, they chose a multilingual phone-alert system based on research, practicality, and winnability.

Crafting multilingual and interactive community meetings. In working with a multilingual and pre-literate community, meetings could not be run in a lecture-style format with a great amount of written materials. LOP organizers designed

Other elements of organizing that direct LOP’s approach include:

- Exercising grassroots power and changing relations of power through direct action campaigns;
- Prioritizing leadership development, which means, “supporting the formal development of the skills, abilities, and political consciousness of grassroots leaders, and their increasing participation in the development of the entire organization towards achieving its long-term goals.”
- Advancing the idea that people should speak for themselves;
- Practicing democratic decision-making processes;
- Identifying the need to intentionally develop our own organizers;
- Modeling behavior that does not reinscribe racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism, and other forms of oppression;
- Organizing disenfranchised sectors of the community including youth, seniors, and women, as active participants and the driving force in the fight to win LOP’s campaign goals and systemic social change goals.
multilingual community meetings to be short, interactive, and dynamic. Visuals presenting symbols and graphics were also emphasized in an attempt to facilitate and to deepen members’ understanding of the campaign. Within the context of a verbal discussion, visuals were often used to concretize an understanding of the focus of discussion.

Meetings often highlighted a review of the campaign to date. A visual timeline showing the campaign’s progression was drawn with graphics of the explosion, and key campaign events such as the accountability meeting with the Director of Health Services and the promises made to the community, the postcard drive, delegation meetings, and so on. There was a sustained effort to encourage members to participate and voice to the rest of the group what they thought about the problem and the progress of the campaign.

**Deepening the skills of LOP staff.** It was imperative to have multilingual staff who could speak in the languages of the community we were organizing. But in order to organize effectively, LOP found that language skills alone were not enough. Our multilingual organizers needed not only to speak Khmu, Lao, or Mien but also to develop and deepen their organizing language competency and skills.

Organizers had to be able to gauge people’s interest, know how to facilitate discussions, and hold a strong concept and direction of the campaign. As mentioned before, interpretation of organizing terminology and other concepts unfamiliar in Laotian languages was difficult for organizers. In the campaign’s first community meetings, the lead organizer, who had no previous knowledge in Laotian languages, facilitated discussions in English with multilingual staff mostly interpreting and observing how to run meetings. After a few meetings, this shifted to multilingual organizers running the meetings. In this way, the Warning System Campaign was a period of tremendous growth in staff organizing skills.

**Effectively communicating with members through multilingual organizers.**

With all of the challenges associated with multilingual interpretation in a direct organizing campaign setting, hiring outside interpreters, then, was even more challenging. To supplement the minimal capacity of multilingual staff, LOP attempted to contract interpreters. But without any previous knowledge of and familiarity with organizing concepts and skills, it was difficult for them to interpret ideas and campaign principles. LOP’s conclusion is that there is a great need for multilingual organizers in contrast to contracted interpreters to communicate effectively with campaign members.

**LOP’s conclusion is that there is a great need for multilingual organizers in contrast to contracted interpreters to effectively communicate with campaign members.**

**Leader Profile**

**Thongsoun Phuthama**

LOP campaigned to pressure the County to seek money for the development of the phone-alert system in different languages. [In the first year of the campaign], we campaigned to get the County to commit to change the system, but they never put money to make it happen. We had to pressure the County to set up the emergency phone-alert system, because many immigrants live around the refineries and many do not understand English. This is the case for Laotian families, especially for the elderly who take care of their grandchildren at home everyday. The most important thing about this victory is that both the County and the community acknowledged LOP’s work on this issue. This is the first victory for the Laotian community, in this County and possibly in the nation.

This is the first time that I have seen Laotians represent themselves in this country and receive a big victory. Furthermore, this environmental justice victory is important, because it is not only beneficial for Laotians, but for other immigrant communities as well.
MOVING TOWARDS INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND SHARED POWER

Within API communities as in many others, men hold positions of authority and political power. Men in the Laotian community have historically maintained leadership roles as clan and tribal heads. Within the Laotian community in West County, men of status continue in this vein to be active in leadership roles and as the official spokespeople on behalf of the larger community. Ethnic and class distinctions also privilege some men as leaders over others. Some were identified as leaders during the Vietnam War and have continued to be seen in this way by community members and local County officials.

The Lao ethnic group, in contrast to other ethnic tribes, also has had strong representation in community leadership both in Laos and West County. Various ethnic groups remain fairly separate due to language differences and do not have a history of actively working together. In light of all this, LOP’s goals to gain the diverse participation of women, members of all tribal groups, youth, seniors, and adults were met with some uncertainty and reluctance from existing leadership in the community. We describe these challenges and the ways in which LOP dealt with them below.

Focusing on the development of grassroots leadership. LOP believes in the importance and necessity of supporting and working with other Laotian community organizations. Many of these organizations, including churches, ethnic associations, and service groups, value and acknowledge LOP’s organizing principles and social justice vision. Early on in the Warning System Campaign, however, a few recognized leaders in the community disparaged the viability of LOP’s potential for grassroots monolingual adults, seniors, and youth in presenting their concerns to the County and achieving success through their demands. Although understanding the tone set by some leaders, LOP proceeded to focus energy on working with grassroots community members. Over time, some ethnic organizations were willing and able to participate in the campaign by writing letters of support to County officials. Once we found ways for established leaders to have a role in the campaign, criticism of LOP’s approach subsided. LOP recognizes that every organization that works with a membership base faces similar challenges in advancing their vision for grassroots leadership. Struggles about who can or should represent the community mirrors debates and conflicts within the larger society. Open dialogue with allies about these common community issues can help to create further strategies as part of our organizing work.

Building a multiethnic Laotian membership. The Khmu, Lao, and Mien campaign members had diverse experience taking on leadership roles. Lao and, to some extent, Khmu campaign members and leaders had a higher level of previous leadership experience and familiarity participating in an organizational setting. In sharp contrast, our Mien membership base was comprised mostly of women and had little to no experience working in organizations.

LOP worked to confront the situation of diverse Laotian residents living in West County and to foster collective action. In our house meetings, as well as in contacts with individuals, we framed the problem of a lack of health protection and multilingual information not only as a Mien problem, or a Lao problem, for example, but a problem that affected anyone who does not speak English. Community members understood that everyone who has limited English skills was not fully informed, and this not only has an impact on them but on diverse communities of residents. In turn, campaign members and leaders saw the need for all ethnic Laotian groups and other communities of color to be involved, and there was an eagerness to pull together the diverse Laotian communities to address the issue. Although members recognized the importance of working with other people of color who are also affected by environmental toxics, there was no staff capacity for LOP to organize a multi-racial as well as multi-ethnic campaign. LOP staff and members, however, continually made connections to the importance of working with other communities of color.

In ethnic-specific house meetings, LOP staff continually reported ideas from other ethnic groups. Each group would report back at the larger community meeting to vote. The process of people working in small groups to then share their ideas in a larger group was demonstrated and instilled the idea that they were never alone in developing a solution. LOP attempted to project the importance of looking beyond the self-interest of a single group and to come together for the good of the broader community. Through this, LOP attempted to change the historical views on leadership and attempted to actively involve grassroots
people in leadership roles and in working with other ethnic groups.

**Supporting women members and organizers.** The campaign’s evolution, in terms of gender involvement, went from having more men in the beginning to increasing women’s membership in its current stages. Maintaining consistent participation of women has been a difficult challenge. While men had the ability to stay involved, women as active caretakers of the family had more limitations that prevented them from continuing to participate. But the challenge of making the campaign more accessible to women was more than just the ability to provide childcare. Historically not seen by the community as traditional decision-makers, women campaign members often did not self-identify as campaign leaders. Mien women had an added difficulty as members of a more marginalized ethnic group in the Laotian community.

**LOP strove to balance the demand of organizing a critical mass of people to push the campaign forward and consciously recruiting women and cultivating diverse participation**

In Laos, mostly the men control everything. In the United States, both men and women know that women have equal rights, but this does not always work perfectly either. Most of our women are interested in the campaign, because we are the ones that have to raise children and have to be concerned about family health. I feel women and the elderly have a lot of stake in the Warning System Campaign. I feel very proud of the Laotian Organizing Project, that we have taken the lead in helping people feel really strong, passionate, and informed about how to fight for our own rights. At the same time, I feel very proud and happy to see many diverse Laotians coming together. As grassroots people, we come to learn together and work together to solve our community problems.

The people in the community see that this organization is by the people and for the people, and that we work on issues that benefit society as a whole. When more people in the community understand all of what LOP is about, we will see an increase in the membership, an increase in grassroots community leadership, and bigger campaign victories.

I am very happy and very proud to have been involved in the Laotian Organizing Project’s campaign for multilingual emergency warning systems where we fought and won a big victory. I have had the opportunity to be involved in many delegation meetings and negotiations with County Supervisors and County staff. When I see people such as Supervisor Uilkema, as a woman sitting on the Internal Operations Committee, I think about myself also as a powerful woman. I may not be a Supervisor like her, but I am on the LOP Campaign Planning Committee and proud of what I am doing.

LOP strove to balance the demand of organizing a critical mass of people to push the campaign forward and consciously recruiting women and cultivating diverse participation. Two years after the beginning of the campaign, Mien and Khmu women have become more involved. Building the membership of women has taken time, and everyone has had various comfort and learning levels. With increased involvement of both women and men, LOP has seen a transformation in the makeup of its membership and leadership base.

With limited staff capacity of multilingual organizers, LOP relied heavily on our Khmu organizer to recruit, interpret, and lead meetings. The Mien membership base, comprised mostly of women, was small in
the beginning of the campaign, and LOP recognized the need to be more intentional about Mien membership recruitment and consolidation. In regard to this, our Mien organizer helped significantly. As a woman and relatively young person, the Mien organizer, however, faced larger obstacles to organizing, because in many ways she directly challenged historical views on who can represent the community. Perhaps it was uncommon to see a woman who was not an established leader in the community voicing her views on community problems and organizing residents around these concerns. This affected who and how effectively she was able to organize and called attention to the necessity for LOP to more fully support women organizers. Despite the gender barriers, our female Mien administrative assistant-turned-organizer was able to cultivate relationships with adult and elderly Mien women—a key constituency we wanted to build because of the multiple oppression they suffer in the community as Mien tribal people, as women, and as low-income adults and seniors. Also, the Mien community increasingly became a focus for our organizing, because they are the largest ethnic group in West County and have less experience in organizations than other groups. We learned the tremendous importance of having women organizers to reach and connect with women community residents and of providing separate spaces for women campaign members.

COUNTERING FEAR OF GOVERNMENT AND ENGAGING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Given the Laotian community’s political history, LOP encountered specific cultural challenges to organizing for the first time. Coming from a country where they experienced considerable fear of repression and imprisonment during the years of the
war and living in the United States where they have repeatedly experienced the government’s withdrawal of support for immigrants and poor people, the Laotian community is wary of challenging powerful government institutions. The community’s status as limited-English-speaking residents and as refugees to the United States further isolates them from participation in their community and in democratic processes, and as a result, Laotians may have less of a sense of ownership of U.S. issues. Generally, LOP also finds that the community is new to an understanding of community organizing and civic participation. As recent arrivals to the United States, many campaign members were unfamiliar with U.S. history, particularly with the struggles and gains of the Civil Rights and Power Movements where people exercised power through direct-action efforts.

Most of the grassroots campaign members had little experience participating in an organizational campaign or attending meetings of this kind. In most formal settings other than social ones, people generally tend to sit in rows, look to one individual speaker, and do not express their ideas or concerns. Members had little practice speaking in front of others in a meeting, particularly in a setting where everyone is seated in a circle and encouraged to contribute equally. Women, particularly older women, had difficulties speaking and leading during LOP’s formal decision-making.

Some men not usually identified as central leaders also faced challenges. Members experienced considerable growth through participating in the campaign.

**Breaking barriers by participating in the campaign.** In LOP’s organizing equal participation is a fundamental principle and we worked to challenge notions of who can lead and speak for the community. LOP also struggled with members’ anxiety and fear of confronting government officials and public speaking. Framing the issue of a lack of health protection as the government’s responsibility and error, members were slowly willing to participate in the campaign. Once they learned of their exclusion from the existing English-only emergency phone-alert system, it was clear to them that they had to do something about the problem—the community could not rely on themselves for health protection, but rather the government needed to be held accountable. With some reservations, campaign members agreed to participate in the first accountability meeting.

After attending and speaking at this meeting where LOP won its initial victory, campaign members were less anxious about their participation in the campaign. LOP discussed their health protection rights as residents, and through campaign successes, they gained confidence in their ability to exercise power. Having additional delegations and meetings with County Supervisors as well as organizing press activities gave legitimacy to the community’s concerns and to the campaign work. After campaign members worked for concrete changes and experienced no government retaliation, they continued to participate in LOP activities. However, there was still fear by some members that if they participated in LOP’s political activities, they would be at risk of having their welfare and social security checks terminated. Community members carry recent memories from Laos of retaliation when expressing their views and these images are compounded by the legislative attacks on people of color and immigrant and refugee communities in the United States. Due to this fear of retaliation, some Mien members ended their participation early on in the Warning System Campaign.

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The major challenges in this chapter illustrate that the day-to-day work with members is critical to building a lasting organization and is a necessary and challenging piece of waging a campaign. Empowering members involved not only supporting the development of their skills and abilities to improve conditions in their community but also instilling an alternative view of the world that leads to self-transformation and a sense of dignity. In this regard, we learned a great deal about what it takes to do direct organizing and win a campaign as well as the importance of reflecting upon and evaluating this work. LOP needs to continue to internally develop additional tools and approaches to meet these challenges. There is not just one model of organizing, but rather models need to be adaptive to the context and conditions in a particular community. LOP believes strongly that our evaluation of the Warning System Campaign can contribute to the myriad of approaches to environmental justice organizing and offers a unique piece about refugee communities that is sorely missing.
We believe that LOP and other environmental justice movement allies need to step back and reflect on our work and develop more strategic approaches to our campaign and organizing approaches. As such, LOP embarked on a series of staff discussions evaluating the Warning System Campaign. We illuminate some key points that have had importance for us in order to spark discussion within each of our organizations about the need to be more proactive and deliberate in our organizing.
For the past several years, LOP has been developing and refining a framework for analyzing and increasing the effectiveness of our work. The Environmental and Economic Justice Project, a Los Angeles-based intermediary organization that has played a crucial role in supporting LOP to develop this framework, refers to it as a “theory of social change.” LOP’s theory of social change provides a context for our work and helps us think about how to be more strategic and intentional in our organizing. It is a theory grounded both in the long history of social justice organizing in the United States and in the practice of our own organizing work, and one that evolves dynamically as we become more experienced in organizing low-income Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant and refugee populations.

LOP’s Warning System Campaign allowed us to test and deepen a theory of social change. Components of this theory include a worldview analysis, power analysis, motive forces analysis, social change goals, arenas of struggle, campaign strategies and tactics, and form of organization. These different components influence and inform each other and as a whole create our theory of social change.

**LOP’s evolving theory of social change**

- In our worldview analysis we realized the need to intentionally develop the political consciousness of our members so that they could confront and challenge dominant worldviews that promote racism, patriarchy, sexism, and government as an untouchable authority.

- Throughout our campaign, we constantly updated our analysis of the political landscape in Contra Costa County to inform the position of key decision-makers and organized forces, as well as assess the power of our organization, constituency and allies to achieve our goals.

- The campaign provided a vehicle to test out part of our initial motive forces analysis, that poor monolingual Laotian senior and adult women and men are one of the key social sectors who have the potential to move a progressive social change agenda.

- Throughout the campaign, members and staff realized that while we fought for a basic mitigating measure of emergency warnings during accidents, we ultimately want the kind of systemic social change that can fundamentally dismantle the power of oil-chemical corporations.

- The social arena where we contacted and developed politically conscious organized power was at the neighborhood level with the Lao, Khmu and Mien tribal constituencies. In this campaign we chose the arena of government accountability as the arena of struggle.

- As we evolved our campaign goals, we seized the opportunity of utilizing campaign strategies and tactics to both build the political consciousness of our members and to exercise our mass power through direct accountability of the decision makers.

- As we continued to work closely with members and cultivate their leadership skills throughout the campaign, we were able to evolve LOP’s form of organization into the membership-based entity we had envisioned it becoming.

LOP’s youth, Asian Youth Advocates, sewed and embroidered images to tell their story as Laotian refugees in Richmond.
Advancing Systemic Social Change

While LOP’s campaign victory was a significant step for the organization and the Laotian community, we realize that by itself, it was a band-aid solution to the larger problem of toxic poisoning and economic marginalization. Every day the 350 industrial polluters in West County emit toxic chemicals into the air and water, threatening the well being of the residents and the ecosystem. LOP believes deeply that no one should be exposed to environmental degradation from industrial production. In order to truly change the rules of the game, our campaigns need to add up to more than reforming a system that maintains the rights of polluting industries. People have a right to a clean and healthy environment in which they can live, work, learn, play and thrive.

Defining the long-term social change goals of an organization is essential to building a plan to achieve that vision. LOP would like to see systemic social change where fundamental rules of the game are altered and root causes of problems are addressed. Systemic social change can take the form of policies that shift large-scale public resources towards eliminating inequities and injustices, and laws that guarantee human rights and the protection of mother earth. Systemic social change promotes the right of every person to a decent, safe, affordable quality of life, the right of every person to participate in collectively made decisions that affect our lives, and prioritizes public good over profit. Systemic social change seeks not only to change policies but also to transform worldview and to equalize power relations. Some examples of advancing systemic social change relevant to LOP’s work are: a moratorium on new polluting facilities, public-directed planning and development of toxic sites, phasing out of the production of polluting compounds and transitioning facilities to clean production, and production that is locally owned and run where workers and residents are protected and valued first.

LOP sees direct organizing as a key strategy that emphasizes developing the skills, abilities, and political consciousness of a growing mass base in order to exercise power to achieve systemic social change. Direct organizing also embodies the principle of shared power to create a process where our communities can speak for ourselves.
Building Politically Conscious Organized Power

LOP’s campaign experience confirms a lesson some groups already know: developing a politically conscious mass base committed to developing and exercising the power of the organization is essential to both winning our immediate campaigns and to building infrastructure for a social movement. People who enter our organizations do not automatically come with all the necessary skills, abilities, or experience to formulate an informed opinion or develop an action plan on an issue. It is our responsibility as organizing institutions to develop methods and processes that both value the experiences members bring, but also engage them in critical thinking, analysis, and planning.

Leadership activities do not happen in a vacuum, but in the context of our campaigns. Through campaigns we push proactive solutions to institutional problems and challenge the dominant worldview that exists in our own communities that promotes individualism, competition, racism, classism, sexism, patriarchy, ageism, homophobia, and corporate power and government privatization. The development of mass-based democratic leadership requires systematic and ongoing recruitment and programs, because there are no shortcuts in the daily, direct work with people to build grassroots power.

Building a Movement for Environmental Justice

During this campaign it became clear to us that the only way LOP can build the scope and scale necessary to achieve systemic social change is through building alliances with other grassroots organizations and progressive institutions. The movement as a whole needs both strong organizations and strong multiracial and multi-issue alliances, because alliances are only as strong as the grassroots organizations that comprise them. LOP believes that multiracial and multi-issue alliances, led by people of color, poor people, women, and young people, can achieve systemic social change goals, and we organize and develop the leadership of low-income APIs within this framework.

LOP recognizes that no one organization can bring about the possibility of large-scale structural change. While this campaign victory represents an important shift in the power relations between local government and the Laotian community, if LOP were able to organize every man, woman, and child in the Laotian community of West County, we still would not be able to win the level of systemic social change that would significantly improve the day-to-day quality of life of the community. To achieve systemic social change we need a movement with infrastructure. We need permanent organizations and networks of organizations that build strong, organized, and politicized power bases in all poor, working class, people of color, and Native communities. The environmental justice movement is one vital social movement in the United States that has effectively brought together these sectors. In writing and sharing this document, LOP hopes to contribute our experiences and lessons to the growing fire of the environmental justice movement.
Endnotes

Introduction


3 Initiated by the Environmental and Economic Justice Project and refined through input from organizations participating in the Strategic Training for Education and Power cluster, the working definition of systemic social change is “[striving] to eliminate problems of inequalities and/or injustices through fundamental systemic social changes in the rules of the game (laws, decision-making structures [power relations], institutions, control/allocation of public resources) that have large-scale effects in addressing the root causes of problems.”

Chapter 1


3 Chan, 1991.


5 Torm Nompraseurt interview, March 12, 2001.


Chapter 2

1 Taken from the Contra Costa County website, www.co.contra-costa.ca.us:

“Major industries in Contra Costa County include petroleum refining, telecommunications, financial and retail services, steel manufacturing, prefabricated metals, chemicals, electronic equipment, paper products and food processing. Most of the County’s heavy manufacturing is located along the County’s northern boundary fronting on the Suisun and San Pablo Bays leading to San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean.

The production of petroleum products formed the initial basis of industrial development in the County…The Richmond [Chevron] refinery, located on 3,000 acres, has a manufacturing capacity of 365,000 barrels per day. Shipping facilities include the company’s own wharf, which is capable of handling four tankers at a time, making it the largest in the Bay Area in terms of tonnage. Petroleum products are also shipped by truck and by two railroad carriers as well as distributed by pipeline…The company has approximately 6,500 employees located among its various facilities in the County and East Bay communities.”

Chapter 3

1 Definition taken from the Economic and Environmental Justice Project’s Strategic Trainings for Education and Power cluster.

About the authors

Maria Kong interned at the Asian Pacific Environmental Network during the summers of 1996 and 2000, and was on staff for 9 months in 1999. She recently earned her Masters degree from UCLA’s Asian American Studies Program.

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