



A Brief History of IKAR Community Organizing

June, 2020

Since June 4, when Rabbi Brous sent out an email reminding us that we are all responsible for acting in this moment of national reckoning, we have seen an outpouring of messages from people who want to join this work. We hope that this helps to remind ourselves what it means to organize, why and how we do this work, and what we have accomplished.

IKAR Community Organizing has its roots almost a decade ago. When it started, as “IKAR Minyan Tzedek Organizing Path” there were a few different streams: one working to address food deserts in LA and one focused on ending a city towing practice that was devastating to our undocumented neighbors. Through that work, we came to know and join LA Voice, and thanks to our essential partners, we began to understand the practice of community organizing.

Organizing is about coming together as a community to build power, and to use that power to advocate and realize meaningful policy change. We work primarily at the local and state level, although we have taken on national calls to action when it made sense. We have encouraged IKARites to write their representatives, to vote, and to show up with our partners for marches, meetings, and vigils.

Partnership with LA Voice

Although we collaborate with a number of local, state, and national organizations, one of our primary relationships is with our main partner, LA Voice. LA Voice has guided and deepened our work on key issues -- immigrant rights, criminal justice and policing reform, and affordable housing and homelessness in particular. Many people in the diverse LA Voice community have been at the forefront of advocating for justice around these issues for years, and we have learned from their wisdom and lived experience, and followed their lead on what reforms will make the most meaningful change.

So, what does it mean to organize as a community of faith? It means that we come to this work guided by the wisdom and values of Torah. It means that we come to this work from a place of moral imperative -- as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “In a free society, some are guilty; all are responsible.”

And there are some practical implications. As a religious non-profit, we aren’t permitted to endorse or work on behalf of specific candidates or political parties, or we risk losing our tax-exempt status. Many of our members choose to act *as individuals*, and on their own, join other efforts to elect people who they feel share the values of our community.

But as a *group*, we focus on issues. Sometimes these take the form of ballot measures, sometimes as specific bills in various levels of government, and sometimes we consider whether or not elected officials are upholding commitments they made, such as the LA City Council's still largely un-met commitment to build 222 units of affordable housing in every district.

Criminal Justice Reform

We look for issues that are central to our values, that we know will mobilize our community (even if they take a little nudging) and allow us to work with our partners, because we know we're stronger when we work together. We look for campaigns where we think our involvement can help to move the needle, and to achieve meaningful change. We recognize that we can't join every fight, so we try to be strategic. For example, when our partners in LA Voice asked us to join in the fight for Fair Chance - a measure to eliminate a barrier that prevented formerly incarcerated people in the city of LA from getting desperately needed jobs - because our members lived in city council districts whose members weren't getting enough pressure on this issue - we took up the cause.

We have had many victories along the way, particularly around issues in the criminal justice and policing system. We helped pass ballot measures such as Prop. 47 that decriminalized minor offenses and Prop. 57 which made crucial sentencing reforms -- steps that impacted many thousands of lives -- as we work towards the larger goal of ending mass incarceration.

In recent years, we joined a coalition to end money bail in California. (The bill passed, but as is so often the case in complicated work making change, the work hasn't ended.) Significantly in this moment, we made phone calls, met with representatives, and wrote letters to legislators and helped pass SB 392, the California Act to Save Lives, which restricts when police can use deadly force, and makes sure that police officers who kill unjustly can be held legally accountable for the murders they commit.

Many of these are ongoing efforts and we need to defend these victories even as we imagine taking further and -- following the lead of Black activists -- even more transformative steps.

Getting out the Vote

Over the last few years, we have built that network, ensuring that nearly 100% of IKARites vote even in non-presidential elections (up from 60%!). We have canvassed and knocked on doors to get out the vote throughout Southern California. In 2018, we made phone calls to every IKARite to encourage them to vote in the election. In our effort to be a 100% voting community, 93% of IKARites headed to the polls. We hope to reach 100% voter turnout for the November 2020 elections.

Meetings with elected officials

We have been educating our community with speakers, readings, and house parties, and making sure that they know who represents them. In that spirit, we've developed a series of ongoing "Know Your Reps" meetings with elected officials who represent parts of our community, so that they know who we are, what values and issues we hold dear -- and that we consistently show up to the ballot box with those values. Again, organizing is about relationships.

We are continuing to meet with members of the state legislature to hold them accountable for passing a moral budget that focuses on racial equity and undoing racist systems, even as they face budget cuts during this crisis. In the past few weeks, we have had candid and productive conversations with Assembly members Sydney Kamlager-Dove, Jesse Gabriel, Richard Bloom, Bob Hertzberg and Senator Ben Allen, with more in the works.

Housing and Homelessness

In 2017, we worked with our partners at LA Voice to help pass Proposition HHH and Measure H, which make significant funds available to build housing and provide supportive services for houseless people who are most at-risk. This year, we focused on advocating to get bridge and supportive housing built specifically in LA City Council District 5, IKAR's home district, which has not yet met its commitment to develop a fair share of new housing. We attended and spoke at public meetings, learned from guest speakers at a Shabbat lunch and learn, met with our city council members and their staffs, and are partnering with LA Voice and Everyone In to address housing in LA. We also supported two bills:

SB 329: Source of Income Discrimination. This bill prevents landlords from discriminating against people using housing vouchers or subsidies to cover their rent.

AB 1482: Tenancy - Rent Caps. This bill protects renters from skyrocketing rent costs and unjust evictions

And last fall, a group of 40 IKARites took educational tour of several bridge and supportive housing spaces to learn more about what's possible so we can be better informed when we meet with legislators.

Immigration:

We continue to put pressure on our elected leaders to protect immigrants' rights. Last year, we took part in a multi-faith action with LA Sacred Resistance, CLUE, Bend the Arc, LA Voice and CHIRLA, our immigration activist partners, designed to shut down

unjust ICE enforcement action at the downtown Metropolitan Detention Center when they mobilize for large scale arrests in LA.

Scott Shulman and Cipra Nemeth, two IKARites, made several trips to the Una Luz de Esperanza migrant shelter in Tijuana. Many IKARites donated items for the people forced to wait there while they ask for asylum in the U.S.

The Future

We're looking to address the issues that arise in this moment of reckoning. But we haven't forgotten the important work we're already doing. For example, many IKAR Community Organizers gathered signatures for Schools and Communities First, a ballot measure that would change how corporate property tax is assessed in California, close much-abused loopholes, and potentially bring billions of dollars into education and other important services that our communities urgently need. The measure made the ballot, and we are strategizing about how best to organize for the upcoming election.

Soon, we will be launching our Get Out the Vote effort, with the hope that every IKARite will join us to get out the vote in this very critical election.

If you'd like to get more involved, please continue to show up at our meetings, and write to us with any questions here: mtorganizing@ikar-la.org.