

## Shared Leadership and Survivor Mobilization: The Organizational Transformation of Community United Against Violence (CUAV)

### Organizational Strengths Grant Case Study

This case study was developed with support from Blue Shield of California Foundation, through the Strong Field Project (SFP), to share the story of CUAV's transition to a shared leadership model and community organizing approach with the larger domestic violence field. It is informed by interviews with CUAV leaders and materials published by the organization.

### Organizational Background: An Anti-Oppression Framework

Community United Against Violence (CUAV) used an Organizational Strengths Grant (OSG) received through Blue Shield of California Foundation's Strong Field Project (SFP) to move forward with a groundbreaking three-year initiative to transition to a shared leadership staff structure and integrate its longtime LGBTQ services into a larger community organizing approach. The grant was also instrumental in CUAV's implementation of an innovative membership model to enhance its capacity to reach low-income and immigrant LGBTQ domestic violence (DV) survivors of color.

CUAV's mission is to build the power of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning) communities to end and prevent violence and oppression. CUAV supports the healing and leadership of people impacted by abuse and mobilizes broader communities to replace cycles of trauma with safe environments for all.

Galvanized by growing police violence against San Francisco's gay community, as well as the assassination of prominent gay politicians Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, a group of activists formed Community United Against Violence (CUAV) in 1979 "as an organized effort to promote community safety in San Francisco's Castro District." In its first 5 years, CUAV focused primarily on anti-gay based violence. In 1984, the agency began to include LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> domestic violence in its scope of work. Some of the agency's most notable programs and services during the 1980s included a safety whistle campaign, a LGBTQ speakers' bureau that sought to raise student awareness of LGBTQ issues, and a 24-hour crisis line. CUAV was also heavily involved in anti-violence policy during this period, frequently providing expert testimony in Washington D.C. According to Pablo Espinoza, current Operations Director at CUAV, this reflected the organization's and the LGBTQ community's belief that "we could legislate our way to safety."

CUAV also prioritized organizational expansion throughout the 1980s, subscribing to the belief that a larger organization would necessarily have a greater impact on the community. At one point in the 1980s, the organization grew to over 15 FTE, employed multiple interns, and frequently collaborated with consultants. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, a nationwide economic recession significantly reduced the funding available to social justice organizations. Against this backdrop of limited resources, CUAV was forced to re-think its approach to LGBTQ work.

Moving away from the growth-driven model, CUAV turned to an anti-oppression framework in the late 1990s to guide its work. This framework, which viewed violence as interconnected with forms of oppression such as racism and sexism, stressed being proactive through grassroots, community-based strategies. For Morgan Bassichis, former Organizing Director at CUAV, the adoption of this framework marked an important step towards a "return to anti-violence movement roots."

1. Note: While "LGBTQQ" is a fairly new term, CUAV has implicitly stood for all persons with non-heterosexual identities throughout its history. Furthermore, staff members consistently used this term to describe CUAV's past work. For these reasons, we will use LGBTQ throughout this case study to describe CUAV's constituency.

Programmatically, the anti-oppression framework expanded CUAV's scope and strategies and diversified the populations it served. This included the development of an outreach program for monolingual Latino survivors of domestic violence, collaborations with youth-leadership organizations such as Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC), and the creation of TransAction, a collaborative effort with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights to organize against police violence toward transgender people.



## Readiness and Vision for Change

In 2007, CUAV began an intensive strategic planning process in an effort to clarify its role in the domestic violence field and larger social justice movement, and to determine how to maximize its impact in the context of constrained economic resources. In 2009, after a year and a half of difficult conversations, CUAV made two major shifts.

First, they established a bold, new organizational vision focused on “build[ing] the power of our communities to transform violence and oppression.” The crux of this new vision would be a re-vamped membership model that empowered participants and volunteers to take on larger leadership roles in the organization. Guiding CUAV's implementation of this model was a three-year, four-step plan:

1. In Year 1 (2010), CUAV staff members would conduct **research** to explore how other membership models involved volunteers.
2. In Year 1-2 (2010-2011), CUAV staff members would **co-create** CUAV's membership model with current volunteers, constituents, and ally organizations.
3. In Year 2-3 (2011-2012), CUAV staff members would **conduct outreach** to core constituencies to become members.
4. In Year 2-3 (2011-2012), CUAV staff members would **pilot and evaluate** its membership model.

Second, in an effort to cut operating costs, CUAV substantially reduced the number of full-time staff members, from fourteen to six. To offset the effects of these layoffs, CUAV staff also agreed to adopt a full consensus, shared leadership model of governance. Like the new membership model, CUAV created a multi-year, multi-step plan to guide the implementation of this new leadership model:

1. In Year 1 (2010), CUAV would solicit **mentorship and conversation** about effective shared leadership models.
2. In Year 1 (2010), CUAV would develop its **shared leadership and transition plan**, including: role of the board, decision-making processes, support and accountability, mentorship, staffing structure and roles, transition processes, and points of evaluation.
3. In Year 1-2 (2010-2011), CUAV would **begin its transition** to a shared leadership model.
4. In Year 2-3 (2011-2012), CUAV would **evaluate** its organizational structure at various points and refine its model.
5. In Year 3 (2012), CUAV would **document and share** its model, process, successes, and challenges.

The initial implementation of these two new models re-energized the organization. Some staff viewed this as a period of experimentation and refinement, of exploring possibilities and honing in on the most effective practices. Others believed that the process of implementing the new models represented a means of strengthening collaboration amongst staff members and reinforcing a deep personal commitment to the work. Still others regarded the restructuring as an opportunity for CUAV to form deeper relationships with community members. “The process was about really

listening to what's around us, both our intuition and the reality of the community around us," described Program and Interventions Director Carolina Morales.

However, different challenges arose for CUAV during the initial implementation process, stalling the integration of their new models. For instance, staff underestimated the level of effort required to transition to a shared leadership model. CUAV also faced the potential problem of alienating community members through these organizational changes. During the development of its new membership model, CUAV eliminated many valuable but inefficient stand-alone programs. According to Morgan Bassichis, former Organizing Director, such changes were risky because they would "end things you're known for doing [in the community]."

Another challenge for CUAV was helping its long-term volunteers adjust to the restructuring process. "We were unsure about our new models and... folks were apprehensive" explained Pablo Espinoza, current Operations Director.

CUAV had neither the resources nor the relationships with consultants needed to strategically address these challenges. "We had a few consultants work with us during the strategic planning process, but... [in general] we had very limited access, and time and money were huge barriers," explained Mr. Bassichis. CUAV also struggled to find funders who were willing to commit resources to approaches that were unproven and still in development. Furthermore, Mr. Espinoza explained that CUAV was unwilling to compromise its models for the sake of "chasing funding:"

*"We really committed to not chase funding and figuring out ways to find resources, like with grassroots fund raising, even if it was on a smaller scale. That was tied to the understanding that we...knew we had to create something new and there were [funders] who were really stuck on this one idea of how to deal with violence, and it was hard and risky to say no to that funding."—Pablo Espinoza*

*"We were trying to identify funders who were willing to take a little bit of a risk...on a model that was not yet created."*

*—Morgan Bassichis*

A major turning point came when former Executive Director Jovida Ross informed CUAV about Blue Shield of California Foundation's Organizational Strengths Grants (OSG), a capacity-building initiative that would provide the organization with much needed resources and support. In 2010, during Year 1 of its implementation process, CUAV was awarded an OSG grant, fundamentally shifting the agency's implementation process. "It really let us breathe in a sigh of relief and invite in some trusted consultants," said Morgan Bassichis. He explained that the OSG's flexibility was perfect for CUAV, which required constant experimentation to develop and refine its organizational models.

*"I think we knew from the beginning that it would be three years of intentional experimentation and we needed to find the resources to support that intentional exploration of what approach makes the most sense for us and the OSG was just heaven-sent—it was the right fit, right moment."—Morgan Bassichis*

## Organizational Strengthening Process

With the additional resources gained from the Organizational Strengths Grant, CUAV was able to implement its models in a more thoughtful and intentional manner. Most notably, the grant provided CUAV with the resources and networks it needed to access consultants who provided valuable feedback and direction. Additionally, these consultants often helped organize spaces for conversation and reflection, which staff members found invaluable for navigating challenges and refining their models.

### Shared Leadership Model

**Developing an infrastructure for a shared leadership model.** When CUAV began the implementation of its shared leadership model in 2010 (prior to the OSG), the organization severely underestimated the complexity of the process. "We thought it would be very simple at the beginning," said Carolina Morales, Program and Interventions Director. Staff members initially assumed everyone would play the same roles and share the same responsibilities. CUAV soon discovered, however,

that it needed to modify its organizational infrastructure, especially its division of labor regulations and its accountability structures, to support the shift to a shared leadership model. For this, CUAV turned to consultants Elizabeth Seja Min and the Center for Third World Organizing, who conducted a battery of internal assessments and held intensive conversations with staff members before finally recommending a broad set of structural changes—including the updating of personnel policies, board by-laws, and peer supervision practices. In order to strengthen CUAV's implementation efforts, the consultants also recommended clarifying CUAV's division of labor, developing new organizational and individual evaluation tools, and improving communication with the board. Working with the consultants profoundly accelerated CUAV's progress and gave staff members a more nuanced understanding of staff responsibilities and the decision-making process under a shared leadership model.

**Ongoing learning and revision through experience and discussion.** Staff members found it important to simply go through the organizational transitions as a team. This experiential component, which included deep and ongoing discussions, was critical in helping staff members understand, internalize, and practice the logic and processes of a shared leadership model.

*It was a dual process of consultation and experiential learning that enabled CUAV to create and refine a shared leadership model that dramatically improved the organization's efficiency and sustainability.*

*"You actually have to practice this stuff over time. The skill of how to have a check-in, where we talk about difficulties we're having, or making a decision that's hard where there's a strong difference of opinion. That's just a muscle that you have to build... So in the beginning I think we had an idea about it, but now we're at a place where it is in us."—Morgan Bassichis*

Facilitating staff discussions was the horizontal nature of CUAV's shared leadership model, which promoted open and honest conversation. "In a hierarchical system, you can't review the higher-ups," explained Pablo Espinoza. Equal power relationships, on the other hand, removed that barrier, creating a safe space for staff members to share all of their thoughts and frustrations.

## Survivor Mobilization Model

**Building the foundation.** Along with its new shared leadership model, CUAV also looked to implement an "innovative membership model to build the capacity of LGBTQQ community members to intervene in and prevent domestic violence." During early phases of the project, CUAV focused primarily on building the capacity of staff members. More specifically, it hired Causa Justa/Just Cause, a local organization known for its multi-racial, multi-lingual service-based organizing model, to provide trainings on different topics, including: membership models, various organizing approaches, community-based political advocacy, merging social services with community organizing, and effective recruitment strategies.

**Creating the support group.** With a strong knowledge-base in place, CUAV staff members were able to begin implementing their new membership model in mid 2011. The centerpiece of this model was a new weekly survivor support group, which provided participants with a safe space for healing and at the same time exposed them to new ideas around political advocacy. During the initial phases of implementation, CUAV prioritized quickly transitioning participants into politically engaged members through intensive trainings, including membership orientations and peer advocate trainings. Staff members, however, soon found that this approach was too overwhelming and too disconnected from other aspects of survivors' development. As Morgan Bassichis explained, "It is important to ensure that emotional support, healing, and wellness remained at the center of our program given the high levels of trauma that our participants experience on a daily basis."



**Adopting a popular education, arts-based curriculum.** CUAV eliminated some of its stand-alone political trainings and consolidated them into a new integrative curriculum centered on popular education<sup>2</sup>, root-cause analysis, healthy relationships, and wellness. This curriculum, particularly the ideas and themes within popular education, merged the personal with the political and struck a better balance between advocacy and healing by positioning "behavior change, skill-building, and political development" around participants' own life experiences.

*"Ultimately we realized that transitioning survivors from being participants to being members is a long-term process that requires a significant investment of time and development."*

*—Morgan Bassichis*

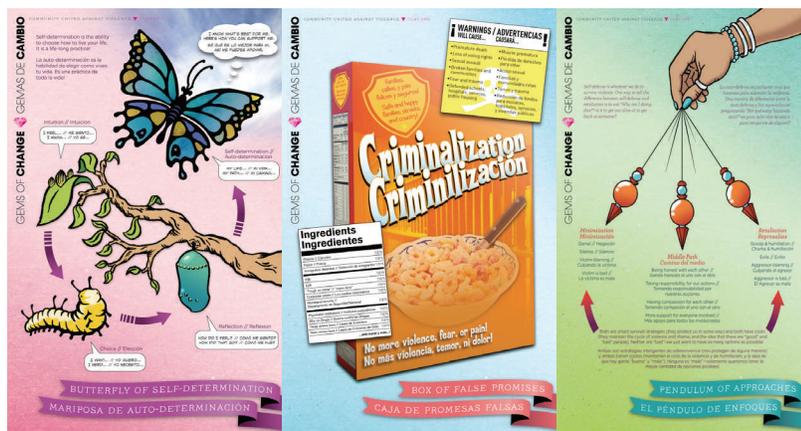
2. Based on Paulo Freire's concept, often described as "education for critical consciousness," which emphasizes education for the poor and politically disempowered with the aim of empowering the socially and politically marginalized to take control of their own learning and to effect social change.

*“A significant opportunity has been our exploration and integration of popular education as a guiding approach to our work with participants and members. This approach accesses their own innate wisdom and life experience as the ground for behavior change, skill-building, and political development.”—Morgan Bassichis*

**Incorporating language justice.** CUAV also strengthened the inclusivity of the support group by making materials, services, and educational opportunities accessible for non-English speaking survivors. As Morgan Bassichis explained, this commitment to language justice was vital for creating a safe space for members from all backgrounds to participate.

*“That is part of the healing process too, ensuring that people are able to come as they are. And that’s been a big part of being able to build multi-racial relationships, particularly among African-American and Latino participants. And really investing the money and time into it—like if there is no interpreter, the event is not happening.”*

—Morgan Bassichis



**Supplemental training for members.** Along with the development of the support group, CUAV also created numerous skill-building trainings on topics such as facilitation, advocacy, and media. These trainings supplemented the discussions that took place in the support group and provided members with additional ideas and tools for political engagement.

**Political mobilization.** By late 2011, the first group of ten member-participants completed CUAV’s training program, transforming themselves from survivors to politically engaged advocates. These members capped off their program completion by campaigning against a national program that sought to encourage more collaboration between police and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This type of mobilization exposed members to the actual process of advocating for policy, crafting policy language, utilizing media, and teaching political education to other members.

## Emerging Outcomes

Overall, staff attributed increases in organizational efficiency, capacity, and sustainability to the Organizational Strengths Grant and its facilitation of CUAV’s shared leadership model. Furthermore, the OSG’s facilitation of CUAV’s survivor mobilization model has led to critical increases in individual-level confidence and skills. Survivors now have a pipeline by which to become members and political advocates. The OSG project has led CUAV to form partnerships and/or peer mentorships with several organizations—including Mueres Unidas y Activas, the San Francisco Immigrant Rights Defense Committee, Causa Justa/Just Cause, Glide Memorial Church and Glide Women’s Center—which have been great sources of learning for CUAV and have enhanced the organization’s ability to reach more individuals in the community. For example, in order to strengthen outreach to Single Room Occupancy hotel (SRO) residents, who form the majority of CUAV’s participant base, CUAV has partnered with a non-profit agency that manages six SROs that offer holistic, supportive, wrap-around services for residents. They have also partnered with a city-run clinic to begin conducting outreach there, which staff described as “a great way to have more direct interface with our constituency [and] increase the number of people who access our services and can then enter into the participant-to-member pipeline.” In these settings, CUAV members hone their newly acquired facilitation and advocacy skills by working with SRO residents and clinic patrons, further modeling the organization’s empowerment philosophy of letting clients make a difference. Finally,

CUAV has also begun forming relationships with local politicians that will facilitate their future advocacy efforts and has enjoyed a growing sense of community with other domestic violence agencies, leaders, and practitioners.

Another key outcome of CUAV's capacity-building efforts include increases in staff's knowledge of the power of community organizing, how it can be harnessed within the domestic violence service arena, and what this integration should look like on the ground. On a more technical level, CUAV staff members have also increased knowledge about self- and program-assessment, as well as organizational budgeting processes. In a way, staff growth and development has mirrored that of the populations they serve—for example, in areas such as heightened self-confidence, greater ability to take initiative and speak up in public settings, and new collaborative and political advocacy skills and strategies.

## Looking Ahead

Now that CUAV has implemented a shared leadership model, CUAV has received a second OSG award to continue to mobilize its membership base and allies to focus on developing successful political advocacy campaigns. Building upon its participant-to-member pipeline, CUAV's immediate plans are to continue to prepare members and constituents to secure concrete policy wins that will engender community safety and economic security. Along these lines, CUAV continues to forge relationships with local politicians and partnerships with other domestic violence, social justice, and community-based agencies that will help advance the development of effective advocacy campaigns. Further engagement in cross-sector work will be a critical component in future efforts to address the root causes of violence.

*"One thing I think could be good for the whole field in general is more interaction with non-DV agencies that are doing community-based organizing in communities of color around racial and economic justice...because I think those are the root causes of so much violence, so there's so much to learn from organizations who have been doing that work for decades. So I just want to see more interaction, integration, alliance, collaboration, and learning from folks in different sections."*

—Morgan Bassichis

Based on their experiences with organizational change over the last few years, CUAV staff can offer some recommendations about how to manage and optimize transformation processes:

- **Don't feel pressured to justify your changes to all your constituents.** This can lead to making untenable promises. Instead, accept the fact that "you can't be all things to all people" and focus on improving the organization's ultimate impact.
- **Accept the complexity and uncertainty that comes with change.** "Bumps and mistakes" are necessary parts of the learning process, and key to understanding how to function under new organizational circumstances.
- **Allocate a substantial amount of time for reflection as you try out new things.** CUAV encourages other organizations to set aside specific and dedicated time for gauging how implemented changes are working, and reflecting on how well they address the original reasons for change.
- **Relate the organizational change process to how people themselves change.** This is particularly important for organizations that work intensively at the individual level. "We have a lot of wisdom about how people change that needs to be central in how we think about organizational change," said a CUAV staff person. "Do people change by telling them they're awful, and that they're not doing a good enough job, and that they'll never make it, and that they're really inadequate?" continued this staff member. "That's just not how people change. Real, sustainable change does not happen on the 'no,' it happens on the 'yes.'"

