

In 2009 Seattle had health problems, and it was the task of the Sound Alliance Healthcare research team to fix them. We were members of various community organizations, from church congregations to teachers associations and union locals that had joined the Sound Alliance to leverage their collective power to implement our “agenda for the common good.”

We understood that there were barriers to the health of immigrant and under-served communities but none of us were experts on these problems, so to find out we did a very simple thing: we asked. We set up meetings with community leaders, academics, community health centers and social services and asked them what barriers they saw from their perspective. Along the way we came to appreciate why they were driven to do the work that they did and we shared our own stories.

One key thing that we learned was that interpretive services, a \$16 million dollar program, was scheduled to be completely eliminated due to budget cuts. Interpretive services had already been cut, and medical interpreters have the lowest wages of all interpreters. Dr. Polly Fabian, a community health center family doc, told us a story of trying to deliver a child with a telephone interpreter, which sounds absolutely terrifying until you imagine trying to do it with no interpreter at all.

The healthcare team brought the issue up to the Sound Alliance Action Committee. Interpretive Services was a concrete issue we could address in the short term, and it would help us continue to build relationships all the people we had met with. The power of the Sound Alliance is its broad base. When, in the course of working an issue, relationships are developed with new organizations an opportunity arises to expand the base, and thus to build the power of the Sound Alliance. The campaign was approved and the Sound Alliance leveraged the 100,000 households it represented through its member organizations to get behind interpretive services.

Together with the interpreters, who were pushing a bill allowing them to unionize, we lobbied our representatives in Olympia. I had been to Olympia to lobby with only medical students two days before that and the experience was like night and day. When we were there as students, we met with aides and were encouraged to stay involved; a lesson in civics of sorts. However when I returned as a member of the Sound Alliance, we met with our state senators and representatives directly, and they paid much more attention. That is the power of broad based organizing; it allows people who normally have little power to develop power with one another and have their voices heard.

In 2010 Seattle still has health problems, but it also still has interpretive services. The Sound Alliance healthcare team is looking for its next campaign, but now we have relationships with the heads of the community health centers, Downtown Emergency Services and academics at the University of Washington. In short, we are building our grassroots power, broadening the base to tackle bigger problems.

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