



# ECHOING JUSTICE

Communications Strategies  
for Community Organizing  
in the 21st Century

**CASE STUDIES IN JUSTICE  
COMMUNICATIONS**

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## Communications Strategies for Community Organizing in the 21st Century

### Stories Of Success And Innovation

*Echoing Justice* is an action research project of the Echo Justice Communications Collaborative—a multi-year initiative to incubate, innovate, and implement movement building communications strategies that strengthen racial justice alliances and their impact.

The *Echoing Justice* report team includes staff of the Center for Media Justice (CMJ), the Praxis Project, smartMeme, the Movement Strategy Center (MSC), Community Media Workshop, and UNITY Alliance.

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# HOW MOVEMENT COMMUNICATIONS WORKS: STORIES OF SUCCESS AND INNOVATION

Julie Quiroz

The grassroots organizing sector has no shortage of creative and strategic capacity. It is this strategic creativity that has led to so many organizing and communications successes, even with little to no resources. There is a growing body of evidence on what works in communications to support our movements. The stories in this section are meant to show some recent examples of

what works in movement communications. They are representative of many more stories of movement communications success happening at the local, regional, national, and international levels that demonstrate that there is communications innovation happening that is worth investing in and growing.

## Healthcare is a Human Right: Confronting the Immigration Wedge in Vermont

*Be prepared for divide and rule tactics.*  
—James Haslam, Vermont Workers Center

**Problem: Making the Seemingly Impossible Inevitable.** Advocates and media believed universal healthcare in Vermont was a political impossibility. Organizers had not yet built a large and conscious base of support capable of winning universal healthcare.

**Movement Communications Approach:** When you start with health, stories open up hope for racial justice. Organizers gathered and shared personal healthcare stories across race and class lines to build a large base of support and deepen members' and allies' commitment to a racial justice frame and a human rights message.

**Impact: This is the first of many.** Vermont became the first state in the U.S. to pass universal healthcare.

In the state of Vermont—where the population is 95% white—organizers for universal healthcare didn't wait for voters to be divided by racially charged fears about immigration. In



the fight to win 100% publicly funded healthcare for everyone in the state, Vermont Workers' Center (VWC) planned ahead to win healthcare for that was truly for everyone.

Despite traditional approaches to communications that recommend avoiding explicit mentions of race in order to unify middle class white majorities, organizers at the VWC decided to confront the potential immigration wedge

head on, boldly asserting that “healthcare is a human right” means it is a right for “everyone, everywhere.”

Long before their bill was up for vote in the state legislature, the Vermont Workers’ Center took decisive steps to cultivate a racial justice consciousness and constituency into its campaign. The result was an unprecedented victory—not only over a healthcare system that had failed for years to serve the people of Vermont, but also over the assumption that to win hearts and minds in a majority white state, organizers must avoid talking about race. “Be prepared to counter divide and rule tactics,” advises the VWC Director James Haslam. Unlike healthcare reform efforts at the national level, the VWC campaign understood what people like Keith Rushing of the Advancement Project have long asserted: that “race and racism gets tied up in any effort to assist low-income Americans—such as the 47 million uninsured [nationally] who are disproportionately Black and Brown.”<sup>1</sup>

### Racing the Frame

Years before they entered the policy arena, VWC conducted a grassroots survey of nearly 1,500 people gathering information about their experiences and concerns with the state healthcare system. In response to the question “Do you think healthcare is a human right?” a whopping 99 percent of respondents answered “yes,” emboldening VWC to push forward with the powerful framing of healthcare as a basic human right.

Despite this shared belief, VWC knew that winning 100 percent publicly funded healthcare in a majority white state meant that their members, and then their allies, would need to see their health and well-being as linked to the health and well being of the 5 percent of the state made up by people of color.

Employing this framing concept of “linked fate,” led organizers to engage their members in an

1. Keith Rushing, Advancement Project, November 2009

extensive political education process to understand and eventually challenge racial stereotypes about Latino immigration. VWC collaborated with the Bay Area-based Catalyst Project, holding a series of anti-racism workshops for more than 170 members and supporters all over the state. These daylong trainings included role play exercises in which participants acted out tough organizing scenarios, such as the potentially divisive issue of covering undocumented immigrants in a universal healthcare system.

This training underscored VWC’s core message that healthcare is a human right, regardless of immigration status.

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2. Keith Rushing, Advancement Project, November 2009

### The Unlikely Alliance

VWC deepened the framing process by building intentional relationships with immigrant communities in Vermont who, like immigrants everywhere, faced harsh policies and racial animosity. VWC joined Migrant Justice, the only migrant farm worker-driven organization in Vermont fighting for the rights of the nearly 2,000 migrant workers who sustain the state’s dairy industry.

“Our organizing began with talking together about problems in the community,” explains

Natalia Fajardo, organizer with Migrant Justice, “Access to healthcare was a priority that our community expressed.” For the farm workers, access to healthcare meant securing two things: universal healthcare and access to driver’s licenses. Taking part in the healthcare campaign became a key part of the farm worker strategy. By building an unlikely alliance to achieve a shared goal, VWC expanded the base for universal healthcare in Vermont.

**Rather than allow the limits of political imagination to define their framing strategy and organizing goals, the Vermont Workers’ Center chose to re-frame what “politically possible” meant.**

### **Making Vision Outweighs Differences**

Vermont Workers’ Center organizers recognized early that to ensure a universal healthcare bill that would be truly universal, they needed to hold the line on who benefits and who pays. In fact, early on in their healthcare work, Vermont Workers’ Center had tried to engage in a policy advocacy coalition until, says VWC’s James Haslam, “little by little we saw our core principles get watered down.” VWC had been working hard to commit the coalition to healthcare as a human right, public financed, and decoupled from employment. “In the end the coalition went to the lowest common denominator,” says Haslam.

VWC decided to pull out of the coalition and focus on organizing. “Incremental solutions weren’t good enough,” says Haslam, “From our discussions with our members we knew that healthcare was a real crisis in people’s lives.”

### **Racial Justice and Human Rights are Politically Possible**

Organizers report that at the time, no one believed VWC’s vision of 100% publicly funded healthcare was politically possible. Rather than allow the limits of political imagination to define their framing strategy and organizing goals, the Vermont Workers’ Center chose to re-frame what “politically possible” meant.

Building on their human rights frame, VWC organized “healthcare is a human right” hearings around the state. Unlike many public hearings, VWC didn’t invite legislators. Instead, they focused on the exchange of stories as a framing strategy, inviting survey respondents with compelling stories to testify. The sharing of strategic stories across the lines of race and class helped members and allies internalize a racial justice frame and human rights message. The hearings were covered by public access television, which disseminated stories to an even broader audience.

**The sharing of strategic stories across the lines of race and class helped members and allies internalize a racial justice frame and human rights message.**

“We didn’t even have a video camera then,” recalls Haslam, “But we saw how useful it was and finally started doing our own videos with interviews and clips from the hearings.” VWC used the videos on the web and in social media, as well as in presentations, house parties, and classrooms, which became a powerful component of their organizing.

After more than two years of grassroots organizing, VWC had succeeded in building a state-wide network of organizing committees, even in the traditionally more conservative rural areas of the state.

**“Healthcare gets really bogged down in the details,” observes Haslam. When allies urged them to use policy talking points in their communications, “we stayed focused on the crisis people were experiencing.”**

With a strong place-based strategy, VWC shifted gears to begin focusing on policymakers’ accountability. Haslam adds, “We wanted to make it hard for legislators to defend the status quo. We wanted to build a case against the healthcare system, to put it on trial.” Even as they moved toward the policy arena, VWC stayed grounded in people’s stories. “Healthcare gets really bogged down in the details,” observes Haslam. When allies urged them to use policy talking points in their communications, they stayed focused on the stories of crisis people were experiencing.

### **The Impossible Became Inevitable**

In 2009, VWC decided to breath life into a single payer bill that was languishing in the Vermont legislature. Fueled by the momentum of their human rights hearings, VWC planned a huge rally in the capitol to deliver thousands of postcards that read: “Universal healthcare isn’t just politically possible, it’s politically inescapable.”

By Spring 2011, as the bill was on the verge of passing, with only days left before the vote, opponents introduced an amendment to exclude undocumented immigrants from coverage. Democrats and Republicans piled on, passing the amendment and threatening to derail universal healthcare in Vermont. “It was a mix of racism and political tactics,” observes Natalia Fajardo, “The lead sponsor was motivated by fear of the other and he used fear to scare others, even supporters, by saying ‘this is the only way to pass this bill.’”

What happened, instead, made history. It was what VWC had been preparing for. First, VWC released a bold statement to the press, vowing to move forward with a bill that would include all residents:

When we say healthcare is a human right, we mean for everybody who lives and works in Vermont regardless of legal status. We will not tolerate racial profiling and accept the unjust immigration and foreign policies of the federal government. We can do better than that.

Then VWC called on their members and allies to show up for a May 1 rally. Migrant Justice was one of the groups that mobilized, urging their members to attend.



When the day came, thousands of community members converged and spoke out, including Javier Franco, a Mexican farm worker who suffers a chronic lung condition that could have been prevented if he had had access to healthcare. This rally sent a powerful message to the state legislators and attracted national media coverage, from Fox News to the National Journal. The mainstream story portrayed “outraged immigrant advocates” putting the amendment’s supporters on the defensive.

“We had done a lot of work with our members in preparation for this,” says Kate Kanelstein, an organizer with VWC, “but you never know how it will really play out. We were amazed at how strongly our people stood up.”

Not only did they stand up—they won. The exclusionary amendment was dropped and the rights and dignity of all people, regardless of immigration status, was affirmed.

Five years later, using an aspirational frame that echoed a long-term vision, an organizing strategy that cultivated a commitment to the common good, and communications tactics that explicitly confronted the immigration wedge, VWC transformed an issue many considered politically impossible into a victory that was politically inevitable.

On May 26, 2011, Vermont passed Act 48, the first and only universal, single payer healthcare law in the country.



## Si, Se Puede

“The victory in Vermont was extraordinary,” observes communications strategist Doyle Canning of CSS who provided early guidance to VWC, “It’s extraordinary not only for the changes it will bring to the lives of all Vermont residents, but because it opened a public conversation on the political possibilities of universal healthcare that enriched rather than neglected or inflamed the public debate on race.” It proved that organizing with a strong human rights frame can withstand an inflammatory debate steeped in racial stereotypes about immigration, and win a major policy victory. Today, VWC’s continued support on MJ’s food justice work and their campaign for immigrant drivers licenses, is positioning them to win future policy victories that might otherwise disintegrate in the face of anti-immigrant messaging.

While James Haslam beams with pride over this success, he remains troubled by how it has been understood outside Vermont. “Even in the progressive left media, it’s been the governor and a doctor that have been lifted up as heroes,” laments Haslam, “not the thousands and thousands of grassroots Vermonters who drove the effort.” According to Haslam, even the left media fell for an individualistic, top-down telling of the story. In this, Haslam sees a broader challenge for movement communications: “We need to be able to claim the victories of people power and movement building.”

Despite the narrow framing of this victory in media outlets, the multiracial leaders that effectively defeated the immigration wedge on healthcare in Vermont stand out as the real heroes.