



**The New Now:**  
Working Together  
for Social Change

September 2015



## Building Movement Project

For over a decade, The Building Movement Project (BMP) has been working at the national level to support and advance the potential for nonprofit organizations to be sites for progressive social change. We develop research, tools, and training materials that help nonprofit organizations support the voice and power of the people they serve.

### About the Authors

**Frances Kunreuther** is the founder and co-director of the Building Movement Project. She is co-author of *From the Ground Up: Grassroots Organizations Making Social Change* (Cornell, 2006) and *Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership* (Jossey Bass, 2008).

**Sean Thomas-Breitfeld** is co-director of the Building Movement Project, where he has authored reports on community organizing alliances and efforts by service agencies to embrace social change practices. He previously worked at the Center for Community change and the National Council of La Raza.

### Acknowledgements

The authors first want to thank the many organizers, advocates and volunteer activists in New Mexico and Ohio who gave their time to make insightful observations about the way their state was addressing the intersection of LGBT and other social justice issues. Thanks to the New Mexico interviewees: Adriann Barboa, Tannia Esparza Adrien Lawyer, Rachel Lazar, Havens Levitt, Andrea Quijada, Christopher Ramirez, Amber Royster, Joan Lamunyon Sanford, Alma Rosa Silva-Banuelos, and Cande Vazquez. Also, thanks go to the Ohio interviewees: Karen Andermills, Suzanne Burke, Tiara Chambers, Shawn Copeland, Josh Culbertson, Eris Dyson, Detra Evans, Debbie Flood, Bryce Garrett, Jack Gordon, Phyllis Harris, Rev. Cheri Holdridge, Elyzabeth Holford, Rev. Lesley Jones, Eric Kinnell, Tami Lunan, Pam Reed, Mary Ann Robinson, Karla Rothan, Paul Schwitzgebel, Mark Szabo, and Nicole Thomas.

The authors thank Desiree Flores, U.S. Social Justice Program Director at Arcus Foundation, and Rebecca Fox, Program Officer at Wellspring Advisors, for their support and guidance of this project from beginning to end. Thanks also go to the other staff members of the Arcus Foundation – Roz Lee, Jason McGill, Cindy Rizzo and Daniel Werner – who provided invaluable feedback on an early draft. Lastly, thanks to Caroline McAndrews, who helped with the report's editing and production, and Emily Herrick, who designed this report.

# Introduction

The astounding success of the marriage equality campaign has left LGBT groups reeling—both from giddiness and trepidation. The Supreme Court of the United States has movingly affirmed the right of same sex couples to marry. But LGBT movement leaders know that the discrimination LGBT people face—embedded in cultural norms, policies, and laws—is still a part of the fabric of our everyday lives.

As the Supreme Court was writing their opinion, the leadership of Freedom to Marry—the campaign widely credited as a key architect of the marriage equality movement—was making preparations to launch Freedom for All Americans, a new organization that will fight for legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It plans to use the strategy, leadership, and support that Freedom to Marry developed, applying that winning formula to the next policy demand in the ongoing struggle for the rights of LGBT people.

There is another thread of LGBT activism, though, that has been developing alongside the Freedom to Marry campaign. Grassroots activists around the country are moving from a discussion of marriage equality to talk about broader issues of equity and justice. They see LGBT rights as part of other fights, such as fair immigration policies, police reform, reproductive justice, and addressing climate change. Their frame is based on organizing, relationship building, and leadership development of LGBT people across issue silos at the local, national and even global levels. These activists often work with—or are already part of—a range of efforts, including Dreamers, ending stop and frisk policies, and #blacklivesmatter, where LGBT leaders have been visibly at the forefront of those struggles even when the policy demands are not centered in LGBT identity.

Many of today's LGBT social justice activists take their cues from the work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who addressed what she called “intersectionality” in the late 1980s. Crenshaw wrote about the need to understand how people living at the margins on multiple levels cannot fully benefit from gaining rights one issue at a time. Her key example<sup>1</sup> stemmed from a legal discrimination case of black women who were denied standing in an employment discrimination complaint where they reported being locked out of both jobs where black men worked (in the males-only factory) and where white women worked (in the whites-only office). The court refused to acknowledge that black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination and insisted that they prove discrimination on the basis of either race or gender. Rather than looking at an issue through a single either/or lens, intersectionality asks us to widen our view to see issues through the multiple lenses that reflect people's lived experience.

These contrasting strategies of single-issue and intersectional organizing—one, typified by the razor sharp focus that won the marriage campaign, and the other, based on acknowledging the ways different types of injustice work together—reflect two ways LGBT activists are doing their work.

1. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics* [1989] <http://politicalscience.tamu.edu/documents/faculty/Crenshaw-Demarginalizing.pdf>

Though much has been written about the lessons of the marriage equality campaign, less attention has been paid to the emergence of intersectionality as an organizing strategy in the LGBT community. In fact, like many new ways to make change, it is barely on the radar of those funding LGBT issues.

This report highlights the intersectional approach through case examples in two states where LGBT activists have been using a multi-issue lens in their work to build a strong web of organizations and activists working together. This type of activism is important for several reasons. First, an intersectional approach reflects the lives of people who are often made invisible in single-issue campaigns and stresses the importance of listening to their experiences in order to inform the strategies and tactics of the broader movement. Second, centering an analysis in the lived experience of people who are the target of multiple systems of marginalization helps to avoid the “unintended consequences” of pitting those with the least power against one another. Third, by broadening the base and leadership of the movement to bring in communities of

color and addressing a more diverse set of issues, the intersectional approach is forward thinking and anticipates where the country is heading demographically.

In our examination of work being done in Ohio and New Mexico, this report looks at LGBT activism before the Supreme Court decision and asks: what is the difference in organizing LGBT issues with an intersectional lens, what sort of leadership does it take, and what outcomes can we expect. The New Mexico example shows how in 2014, LGBT organizers leveraged long-standing relationships to work with LGBT, immigrant rights and reproductive justice groups to support and reinforce each other’s activities. At that same time, Equality Ohio decided to move from focusing on a contested marriage campaign to working on anti-discrimination protections using an intersectional lens. As a result, both groups had a focus on LGBT issues that extended beyond marriage equality—the dominant issue at the time—to embrace the full diversity of LGBT people.

---

## Framing Principles of an Intersectional Approach

Three basic practices, described in more detail below, help to build a successful intersectional approach: 1) embracing a **values base** for working together, 2) strengthening the work through **alignment**, and 3) building strong ties between people and groups in ways that **augment** effectiveness.

**Values Base:** Applying an intersectional approach begins with understanding of how multiple issues are interrelated. This connection between constituencies and issues creates a whole community that is bigger than the sum of its parts. Through the process of listening to the experiences of people at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, advocates develop values for working together that foster a sense of mutual commitment and unity the foundation for long-term and deep alliances that

guide decision-making.

**Alignment:** Building on shared values, groups can align their work and move beyond transactional relationships. Part of that process is considering the short- and long-term effectiveness of actions, including unintended consequences that a win on one issue may have on another. In this way, thoughtful and effective work can take place that strengthens connections between groups and issues. Aligning with a common vision and a set of values/practices results in doing more than any single organization could achieve on its own.

**Augmentation:** Rather than narrowing advocates’ perspectives, the intersectional approach allows advocates and organizations to expand their

analyses and strategies. Using multiple levels of analysis better reflects the realities of people's lives. Developing values and alignment creates ways to move on the work—both together and separately—without sacrificing one group for another. It means that even when a policy is not perfect, groups can work together for the best result.

Success in developing values, alignment, and augmentation that leads to substantial wins depends on certain fundamentals. First is recognizing that **relationships matter**, as does the process of building these relationships. Developing relationships takes time and means that there must be a willingness to share power and decision-making. It is especially important that there is strong support for people with lived experience across different issues areas. We found that activists with multiple identities crossing different movements were not only important leaders, they also were crucial in forming the analysis of how to move forward.

Second, we noticed that groups developed **movement-building practices** based on their shared values. In New Mexico, airing and working through disagreements was an important value and practice. In order to unite a diverse LGBT community in Ohio, activists were practicing working through the intersections of race, class, gender, and gender identity as a core perspective. These practices helped groups in campaign mode focus both on short-term wins and long-term goals, and to reinforce their ability to work together.

The third theme that emerged about intersectional alliances was the need for **infrastructure to support change**. The people we interviewed were working together at the local and state level, but the organizations they worked in often were connected to national organizations focused on a more focused set of issues. Local and statewide groups formed strong horizontal alliances, all the while maintaining important relationships with national partners. When working well, this weaving together of horizontal and vertical support structures was mutually reinforcing. The national groups understood the importance of the local and statewide groups' work and their need to work with partners across issue siloes.

The following case examples are designed to show contrasting points in the process of building alliances. The selection of New Mexico was based on the impact of the work that queer women of color had done for over a decade, and shows the resulting commitments between LGBT, reproductive justice and immigrant rights groups. Ohio was selected both because of more recent investments in the state that focused on anti-discrimination and because it was starting to adopt an intersectional frame. The Building Movement Project (BMP) co-directors conducted a total of 31 interviews with activists identified by local groups: in New Mexico by Strong Families and in Ohio by Equality Ohio.

# New Mexico

New Mexico is geographically large, but is one of the least dense states in the country with just over 2 million residents. A little over a quarter of the population lives in Albuquerque where our interviews took place. New Mexico is also one of four “majority minority” states in the US; 47% of its population identifies as Latino, 39% white (non-Hispanic), 10% Native American, almost 3% African-American, and less than 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. Twenty percent (20%) of New Mexicans live below the poverty line;<sup>2</sup> that may be one reason that New Mexico vies for last place in child well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Electoral politics in New Mexico confirms its reputation as a purple state both nationally and locally. Although it has voted for the democratic presidential candidate 5 out of the last 6 elections, it has a conservative Republican governor, Susana Martinez, who won a second term in November 2014. The legislature in the past has served as a counterweight to some of the Governor’s moves towards privatization and cutting taxes, but with a Republican dominated House of Representatives, even the Democratic Senate has become more conservative. For example, they have failed to increase the minimum wage, but have successfully held the line on blocking the Governor’s efforts to take drivers licenses away from undocumented residents.

New Mexicans are proud of their LGBT anti-discrimination laws covering housing and employment, especially that their state laws were among the first

in the country to cover transgender people. They gained marriage recognition through the courts after a frustrating and losing battle in the legislature. Given this mixed record, it is no surprise that New Mexico ranks as “medium” on the Movement Advancement Project’s LGBT Policy Tally.<sup>4</sup>

We interviewed just short of a dozen people in New Mexico, all representing different organizations and projects. The questions to respondents did not cover the history of their own movement/issue work but focused on their current goals, how they work with other groups and their relationship to LGBT issues. The interview list was generated in conjunction with Strong Families New Mexico’s Field Director, Adriann Barboa, with a concentration in three areas: LGBT issues, reproductive justice, and immigrant rights.<sup>5</sup>

2 U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/35000.html>

3 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014 KIDS COUNT Data Book. [www.aecf.org/2014db](http://www.aecf.org/2014db)

4 See the New Mexico State Profile by the Movement Advancement Project [http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality\\_maps/profile\\_state/33](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality_maps/profile_state/33)

5 Strong Families New Mexico is a project of Forward Together, which invests in state-based work to inform their national work. Strong Families NM both leads and supports state based organizing efforts, bringing in resources such as increased capacity, strategic positioning to facilitation, mobilization efforts to policy analysis and change, and can leverage the national resources when needed. Forward Together knew Adriann when she was at Young Women United, and YWU has been on the Strong Families leadership team.

## Personal History and Relationships

Several of the people interviewed worked in organizations that partner with Strong Families New Mexico and all were living and working in Albuquerque. Though some organizations were local, many others had a larger reach, including statewide. All of the organizations were linked together in some way, even if it might be loosely. As one person put it, “We are a close knit state.” Yet Albuquerque is large enough that relationship building takes time, work, and attention. Not everyone was close, but the depth and type of connections was particularly interesting, even for those who were outside of what might be perceived as a strong inner circle.

Adriann Barboa came to Strong Families after eight years as executive director at Young Women United (YWU), a community organizing group founded in 1999 that is run for and by young women of color. YWU was at the center of long-term relationships held by several of the leaders we interviewed and is still a powerful force, especially on issues related to reproductive justice, education, and health. Deep and powerful connections were formed between those involved in the early years of YWU. The group’s members and staff learned together, using a frame that weaved in feminist and critical race theory and that continues to inform their work today. YWU’s strong intersectional approach is not just based on analysis; it comes from the lived experiences of those involved—young, queer, women of color, parents, New Mexican, and so on. As one interviewee involved in YWU’s early days put it, “We walk with a lens, with multiple ways of thinking and seeing.” Interviewees reported there was the expectation at YWU that members and staff talk about their disagreements and work through their conflicts. One of the YWU founders explained, “We came out with a fierce analysis and with confidence and courage; and we all became strong leaders who don’t fear being accountable and being held accountable.”

YWU not only built relationships internally but they pursued them externally as well. As the organization grew into a highly respected organizing presence, they were intentional about creating

“We came out with a fierce analysis and with confidence and courage; and we all became strong leaders who don’t fear being accountable and being held accountable.”

connections to other organizations without compromising their values. Adrien Lawyer, the head of New Mexico’s Transgender Resource Center—which started just a few years ago—talked about how YWU offered his group space, “They are one of our proudest partners; they really do what they say.”

In the recent Respect ABQ Women campaign,<sup>6</sup> which successfully defeated a ballot initiative banning late-term abortion, Strong Families NM and YWU were both on the executive committee of the Coalition for Choice. YWU and Strong Families NM pushed the Coalition to broaden messaging to include multiple communities. “Some of our coalition partners did not think it valuable or strategic to be working alongside LGBT groups, but many of us ... challenged that; we worked with Equality New Mexico, All Families Matter and the University of New Mexico’s LGBTQ Resource Center and we knew they could mobilize their base to contribute to the GOTV efforts. It was a huge win to mobilize different communities and to get buy-in from groups that are not usually asked to participate.”

Not everyone we talked to had been in YWU or had a long history of developing an intersectional analysis, but they had thought about and contended with similar issues. The three leaders of LGBT groups that we interviewed—all white—expressed a strong commitment to be involved in areas beyond LGBT rights. They each explained how they had

<sup>6</sup> For more information on this campaign and the critical leadership of women of color, see BMP’s report on The Respect ABQ Women Campaign: [http://buildingmovement.org/reports/entry/the\\_respect\\_abq\\_women\\_campaign](http://buildingmovement.org/reports/entry/the_respect_abq_women_campaign)

come to understand the importance of working across identity and issue silos. For example, Havens Levitt from All Families Matter had been part of a lesbian group that had intentionally changed from an all-white board to one that was majority people of color. She explains, “It’s about relationships and being present for other people’s stuff, and putting energy into things that matter for other organizations; also letting other people tell you and not assuming or projecting what is important and what you can do to help.” Another LGBT leader left New Mexico to go to a college that “changed my life. It is an institution that teaches you to reflect and think beyond yourself. I was taught to be humble, that no one person has all the answer, to let go of our egos enough—that we have to do this together.”

Lived experience was often emphasized in the story of how people ended up in their current positions. For example, one interviewee told us, “The things I was involved with in high school were really about labor rights because my dad had just died of pesticide exposure so I was always more concerned about the race side of things. My parents really pushed me to stand up for your rights ... It

really helped me come out in my own way and a healthy way because I felt I had a community that was going to understand and the community was all farmworkers. We were organizing with all farmworkers not just heterosexual farmworkers.” He noted he “felt safe” at his job supporting immigrant families to learn English and become civically involved; “they learn about their rights in addition to learning English.” He was also involved in Strong Families, a place where he could talk about the intersectional approach and participate in a group that offers support and education to LGBT immigrants and their families.

Relationships among the groups were not without their problems. For example, of the people we interviewed, there was a core group that was close both personally and professionally, leaving others more on the outside. Some of the insiders raised criticisms of groups outside of the inner circle. We also picked up on some generational tensions. Yet it seemed that there remained a deep commitment to stay in relationship with one another despite these differences.

---

## Movement Building Practices

Overall, the culture of relationship building was part of and reinforced certain movement practices. People talked about these practices in a variety of ways, ranging from staying in challenging coalitions in order to change the culture and build power, to clearly defining what it means to be a social justice organization.

In the interviews, we heard how groups were willing to work together on different issues. These efforts went well beyond joining a coalition or campaign. They were creating deep alliances and over time developing a set of shared values and practices. It was interesting that rather than being exclusive, groups kept expanding the circle to include others who shared those values and practices, and there was a willingness to help others learn in order to extend the base of power. The values that groups shared were not always articulated, but they

seemed embedded in the culture among those working together and had an impact on the larger progressive community. One respondent summed it up saying, “Consensus building, transparency, decision-making together, time for hard conversations—not skirting around things that are difficult, showing up. Dollars can help but food is really important, good facilitation with an anti-oppression analysis and framework, calling each other out in a gentle and compassionate way.” The commitment

““ Consensus building, transparency, decision-making together, time for hard conversations—not skirting around things that are difficult, showing up.”



“ I stepped out of our little box to say, ‘vote against this damaging ballot initiative’ and that went a long way [with allied groups] even at the risk of losing our constituents. We said it is a value of equity. We need to go there and take that risk.”

to these ways of operating together allowed for strong alliances to emerge that could help a variety of progressive coalitions and campaigns succeed.

One practice that was evident, but less often raised in the interviews, was the willingness to take risks. Movements for social change challenge the status quo: LGBT people seeking full equality, new immigrants demanding their rights, women of color defining reproductive justice, and so on. The people we talked with were used to taking risks in their own work, but they also were willing to take risks on other issues in order to offer support to their partners and allied groups. For example, the head of Equality New Mexico, Amber Royster, talked about the decision to publicly endorse the Respect ABQ Women campaign that was opposing a ban on late term abortions, in spite of the possible loss of support from LGBT members and donors. She observed, “I stepped out of our little box to say, ‘vote against this damaging ballot initiative’ and that went a long way [with allied groups] even at the risk of losing our constituents. We said it is a value of equity. We need to go there and take that risk.”

Another example came out when we interviewed the director of an immigrant rights group about their work with the LGBT community. When asked about the connection with LGBT issues, the answer was, “we don’t work on LGBT issues.” But as the interview progressed, the director mentioned their group was part of the All Families Matter coalition which supports same-sex couples and their families. The organization had used images at their offices provided by Strong Families that showed

many different types of family configurations, including same sex couples. This “endorsement” of LGBT rights had resulted in the loss of important funds and public endorsements from the Catholic Church for their workers’ rights campaign. When asked about why the organization took this position, she replied, “well, you know, it was hard [to lose the money and support], but we are a social justice organization.”

Taking a position based on values —regardless of the risk—did not go unnoticed by colleagues. However, this did not mean that organizations could always endorse each other’s work. In contrast to their support for LGBT rights, the same group—which is member-led—did not publicly support the Respect ABQ Women campaign. This decision was certainly noted but also accepted, with one of the leaders of the campaign saying, “We understood.” Another interviewee mentioned that he wished this same immigrant rights group would move further to support LGBT issues. And a third one, who also worked on immigrant issues in a different organization, observed there was a need to build support for LGBT issues among new immigrants. He was participating in a small group of people working on this intersection, and explained, “This really low-key coalition is really helping through these small meetings and events. The idea is not really to create a movement but to start it from a dialogue point; some people start from an action point. We want it to grow exponentially through the grapevine and having their [constituents’] voice.”

## Structures for Social Change

To work in close alliance and to stay focused on certain issues meant that groups were in close touch with many different partners. Interviewees talked about their relationships to other groups—in the state or in their locality—within and outside of their issue area.<sup>7</sup> In addition, all of our interviewees were part of national groups that provided them with information, support, and national exposure. Both local/statewide relationships and the national connections brought important value to alliance building and issue-oriented work.

Strong Families New Mexico is a project of the national group Forward Together. Bringing in resources and leveraging national support when needed, Strong Families NM supports state-based organizing by offering increased capacity, strategic positioning, facilitation, and policy analysis. According to Adriann, the national organization saw the importance, potential, and opportunity in the New Mexico work. Forward Together knew Adriann when she was at Young Women United, and YWU is a founding member of the Strong Families leadership team, along with Tewa Women United, the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and the Media Literacy Center. Tannia, YWU's current director, noted that being part of Strong Families meant, "We are able to leverage a lot of resources and expertise in moving work forward nationally and locally." She added that "Strong Families creates a vehicle for groups like YWU to participate on a national level." Consistent with the perspective of the national network, Strong Families begins with an intersectional framework, not one issue. Based on this frame, Strong Families NM has supported a variety of issues especially as they relate to families, such as immigrant rights, LGBT issues, environmental justice, youth, and so on.

<sup>7</sup> All of the groups we interviewed were primarily based in Albuquerque and all had some involvement in statewide issues, especially during the legislative sessions that were held each year. In New Mexico, advocacy activities ramp up during these sessions which alternate between 60 and 90 days each year.

The New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (NM RCRC) is a state affiliate of the national Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and belongs to several local coalitions such as the NM Coalition for Choice, All Families Matter, NM Unites for Marriage, and Strong Families. The New Mexico director, Joan Lamunyon Sanford, explained that the group's volunteers provide a variety of services to help women who are coming to New Mexico for reproductive health help, especially abortion. Describing their support of LGBT issues, Joan said, "I just think it is so important to have that voice of the faith community that says ... a family is not the patriarchal institution people want to make it. Our faith traditions teach us that we have to love and care—it doesn't matter whether people are of the same gender or a blended family. We want to make sure people can care for families in a way that is healthy and whole."

The organizer with Boys and Men of Color Community Builders and UNM Dream Team, Christopher Ramirez, was also involved in multiple local coalitions including Strong Families New Mexico. He noted that UNM Dream Team was LGBT inclusive from the beginning, "We went to a national gathering of United We Dream and there was a training about being Queer inclusive." He uses national resources in his work helping local immigrant groups be more LGBT friendly, including training Promotoras de Salud.<sup>8</sup>

“We are able to leverage a lot of resources and expertise in moving work forward nationally and locally.”

<sup>8</sup> "Promotores de salud", also known as "promotoras", is the Spanish term for "community health workers". Promotoras are lay health workers who work in Spanish-speaking communities, provide culturally appropriate services and often serve as patient advocate, educator, mentor, outreach worker and translator.



We are so under-resourced and we get so much done [through collaboration]... Funders need to fund a group of us; no one is doing it all.”

Andrea Quijada at the (now closed) Media Literacy Center talked extensively about the connections to different national groups and the important role these groups can play in the state. At the same time, she emphasized that the groups within her community rely on each other to make needed changes. She explained that New Mexican organizations have very little funding, “We are so under-resourced and we get so much done. I even developed the hashtag #nmgetsitdone. We do it in collaboration ... Funders need to fund a group of us; no one is doing it all.”

The movement structures that supported groups to do their work allowed multiple issues to be addressed simultaneously without one issue being privileged over another. Part of what may keep groups together is their common analysis of the issues facing the state. Almost everyone we talked with responded that poverty was the biggest problem facing New Mexicans overall. They were aware of the increased financial challenges facing families but also of the issues facing children and the need for resources for families and children. People frequently raised issues of sovereignty rights, fights for saving programs such as drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants, and helping families of all types survive and thrive.



# Ohio

The Buckeye State is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest state in terms of population. Ohio's 11 million residents are 81% White, 13% Black, 3% Latino, 2% Asian, and less than 1% Native American. More than half of Ohioans live within the three metropolitan areas of Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland. Each of the “three C’s”—as they were often referred to—has a metro population roughly equal to the population of New Mexico as a whole (2 million people).

Ohio is the quintessential “swing state” in presidential elections: one interviewee proudly told us, “No president [since the 1950s] has ever won the presidency without winning Ohio.” Ohio’s Governor, John Kasich who is now a Republican presidential candidate, gained national prominence in 2011 by working with the Republican-controlled state legislature to attack collective bargaining rights of the state’s public employee unions through passage of Senate Bill 5 (S.B. 5). In response, the state’s unions worked with community organizing groups to pass a referendum repealing S.B. 5 in November of that year. This victory was hailed in progressive circles as a sign of the potential for cross-constituency organizing and alliance building.<sup>9</sup> These alliances and organizations continued to challenge Ohio’s conservative legislature on both “voter id” and “stand your ground” bills, contributing to a growing progressive infrastructure, particularly around the intersection of economic and racial justice issues,<sup>10</sup> but not fully including the state’s LGBT groups.

9 An article by AFL-CIO President, Richard Trumka titled “The Lessons of Ohio,” asserted that “working people’s solidarity was the message” that helped win the campaign. ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-trumka/ohio-labor-law\\_b\\_1096986.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-trumka/ohio-labor-law_b_1096986.html)) Similarly, an article by John Ryan, a senior consultant for the “We Are Ohio” campaign, described how they won by bringing together labor unions, community organizing groups, churches and African American organizations, writing that the campaign was “truly an 88-county campaign of working people and their allies pulling together in unity.” (<http://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2011/11/28/ohio-issue-2-a-different-kind-of-campaign/>)

10 The “We Are Ohio” coalition that was formed in 2011, in response to S.B. 5 has continued to be a leader in the fight for voter rights (<http://weareohio.com/voter-bill-of-rights/>). Similarly, the Ohio Student Association—also formed in 2011—has been a lead organization in the fight against “stand your ground” legislation (<http://www.thenation.com/blog/176507/ohio-students-fight-back-against-stand-your-ground-laws#>).

Ohio ranks as a “low” equality state,<sup>11</sup> and even though the Supreme Court’s decision legalizing same sex marriage nationwide overturned the state’s gay marriage ban, Ohioans still lack protections against discrimination. We partnered with Equality Ohio (EO) to explore and learn from the organization’s efforts to address both these barriers, with a special focus on their anti-discrimination campaign, where they were advocating adding sexual orientation and gender identity to Ohio’s laws against discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations. Before the Supreme Court decision, the organization also led a grassroots public education campaign—Why Marriage Matters—to build popular support for marriage equality.

Working with Shawn Copeland, EO’s Lead Organizer, we generated an interview list that included EO staff, staff of allied groups, new and longtime EO volunteers, and community activists not affiliated with the organization. The interview protocol focused on interviewees’ perspectives on the non-discrimination effort, how the organizing was fostering connections within the LGBT community and between LGBT people and other constituencies, as well as broader perspectives about intersectionality and the LGBT movement in Ohio.

11 See the Ohio State Profile by the Movement Advancement Project [http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality\\_maps/profile\\_state/36](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality_maps/profile_state/36)

## Organizational History and Relationships

The first thing the interviews revealed was the contentious and fractured history of statewide LGBT organizing in Ohio. One long-time resident and activist who had been involved in failed attempts to create a statewide LGBT organization more than a decade before Equality Ohio was founded, reflected on past efforts saying they always fell apart because each of the “three C’s” would try to play “king of the mountain.” He went on to explain that Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati have traditionally had very distinct cultures of organizing and activism. Cincinnati has a tradition of grassroots organizing, whereas Columbus advocates are primarily oriented to lobbying for legislative change, and Clevelanders believe in the power of major institutions such as unions, foundations and other large nonprofits. Other interviewees with long histories of activism in the state agreed that working together was hampered by the different theories of change held by the three C’s.

Another complicating factor was that several LGBT organizations formed in the wake of the 2004 election, including Equality Ohio, when the state’s voters passed a constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. One interviewee who participated in meetings that led to EO’s founding said being confronted with voters’ support for the discriminatory amendment marked, “a real turning point; I think that people had a very realistic expectation of it taking at least ten years before changing the constitutional amendment.” Nonetheless, strategic differences—about the pace and timeline for repeal—between EO and other marriage equality

“People had a very realistic expectation of it taking at least ten years before changing the constitutional amendment.”

groups in the state led to clashes that many interviewees recounted in striking detail. Karla Rothan, Executive Director of Stonewall Columbus (the LGBT community center), said that the “Why Marriage Matters” public education campaign was a positive step toward helping to heal the “fractures” between EO and other marriage equality groups that wanted to push immediately to repeal the state’s gay marriage ban at the ballot box.

Elyzabeth Holford inherited this complicated LGBT history and organizational landscape in 2012, when she became Equality Ohio’s fourth executive director since it was founded in 2005.<sup>12</sup> After three years at the helm of EO, Elyzabeth left the organization soon after the Supreme Court decision<sup>13</sup> but during her tenure she was widely credited by interview respondents for creating a “new” organization. She expanded Equality Ohio’s staff dramatically,<sup>14</sup> and focused on building a diverse team. Tami Lunan, who was the Southwest Ohio Organizer based in Cincinnati, reflected on her background—as a woman of color from a family of Jamaican immigrants—noting she did not fit the typical profile of staff at organizations like Equality Ohio, “There’s been a conscious effort to hire outside of that pool of candidates.” Elyzabeth echoed Tami’s comment, saying “it does not always happen that way for organizations, but it has been a conscious commitment for us.”

12 “Equality Ohio names Elyzabeth Holford as new executive director,” by Anthony Glassman. <http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories12/november/1130122.htm>

13 “Equality Ohio Director Elyzabeth Holford ends short stay in Ohio,” by Alan Johnson, July 28, 2015 <http://www.dispatch.com/content/blogs/the-daily-briefing/2015/07/07.28.2015-holford-leaving.html>

14 Various interviewees offered estimates of the increase in EO’s staff capacity; they ranged from “five to 18 or 20” to “five to 28 people” but the organization’s website only listed 10 staff at the time of the interviews.

This “conscious commitment” that both Tami and Elyzabeth remarked on was certainly an important step in ensuring the organization better reflect an LGBT community that is diverse in terms of race, class and gender identity. However, one interviewee suggested Equality Ohio still needed to move from hiring people of color to promote EO’s agenda, and to instead empower staff of color to ask communities what they need and bring, “our agenda to them [EO].” This suggested reversal of the direction of agenda-setting may reflect what the EO staff was already trying to do. For instance, Elyzabeth discussed EO’s movement building intention saying, “That means that when we go into a community, every meeting isn’t just about our campaign priorities.” But in the midst of two major campaign efforts (to advance nondiscrimination legislation and to educate the public about the importance of marriage for same-sex couples) it may have been hard for EO to fulfill this intention. For instance, Phyllis Harris, Executive Director of the Cleveland LGBT Center, said that while EO was in “campaign mode” there was a lull in relational work,<sup>15</sup> she described “having to remind them more about not just asking people to do stuff ... the relational stuff was getting weaker.” Even with these concerns, she and others noted that these dynamics were considerably improved from earlier years and that EO was demonstrating a consciousness and commitment to including and reflecting diverse experiences and issues.



[Intersectionality] means that when we go into a community, every meeting isn’t just about our campaign priorities.”

---

## Movement Building Practices

One of Equality Ohio’s movement building practices was certainly its commitment to reflecting the diversity of the state’s LGBT community, but the organization was also promoting the concept of intersectionality and we heard it reflected in how people talked about the work. One volunteer decided to get involved with Equality Ohio after hearing Elyzabeth speak at a town hall meeting because she “brought the subject of intersectionality into the conversation.” Similarly, Tami Lunan said “Elyzabeth has made it a priority that in addition to working on the things we’re supposed to be working on, we’re also supporting people at the intersections.”

<sup>15</sup> In follow-up with Ms. Harris three months after the initial interview, she indicated that Equality Ohio’s regional coordinator (now EO’s managing director) and the addition of two more EO staff in Cleveland had made the relational work better than ever. As examples, she pointed to EO supporting both the annual Black Pride Family Picnic and a Black Queer Theology conference held in Cleveland. Furthermore, a year after the interviews were conducted, Equality Ohio supported the Movement for Black Lives convening held in Cleveland in July 2015, by sending staff and encouraging the organization’s social media followers to donate to support the conference.

Many of the interview questions were intended to explore what people meant by “intersectionality” and how they saw an “intersectional” perspective both reflected in the issues EO selected to work on and informing the organizing practices. We asked about the most important issues for Ohioans in general and the most important issues for LGBT people in Ohio to see where the issues intersected. Most interviewees identified the economy and jobs as the most important issue for Ohio in general (11, out of 18), but when asked about the issues facing LGBT people, most interviewees almost unanimously defaulted to naming the two campaign priorities of marriage and nondiscrimination—despite the push for an intersectional analysis.

However, the interviewees who had experienced discrimination were best able to make the connections between economic justice and LGBT rights. For instance, women who had experienced discrimination related to their gender, gender identity and/or sexual orientation spoke particularly clearly about the connection between these intersecting struggles. One volunteer, a transgender woman, reflected on anti-trans discrimination in the state saying, “All Buckeyes worry about losing their jobs based on economic issues, but as a member of the LGBT community you have a whole other factor of employment discrimination.” Another EO volunteer, a cisgender woman, talked about the impact of the wage gap between men and women on the economic security of lesbian couples like hers, “Income inequality affects our community in ways it doesn’t affect others; it can be very costly to be LGBT.” Additionally, one gay white man described how anti-gay harassment and discrimination at a previous job had made nondiscrimination a higher

“ I lived under that fear [of being discriminated against] and once you have lived under that context, the right to have where you live and work be safe becomes far more important.”

personal priority for him than marriage. He worried that gay men in big cities, “Don’t know what it’s like for someone who gets married on Sunday and then gets evicted or fired on Monday. I lived under that fear and once you have lived under that context, the right to have where you live and work be safe becomes far more important.”

To address this tension between the priorities of marriage and nondiscrimination, Equality Ohio staff and other professional organizers talked about another practice they called “redirecting” or shifting the conversation from marriage to nondiscrimination. Several of the organizers noted the difficulty in focusing on nondiscrimination in the LGBT community. Elyzabeth explained that nondiscrimination has less visibility and appeal, “All you have to do is mention marriage and you’ll get lots of media attention.” Rev. Cheri Holdridge—a straight woman who pastors to an LGBT-inclusive congregation in Toledo—talked about the challenge of broadening people’s analysis of the range of issues facing the LGBT community, saying straight allies would, “much rather have a rally about marriage than learn about how transgender people are dying in Ohio.” Nicole Thomas, EO’s Northeast Organizer based in Cleveland, described how she dealt with

“ The first thing they ask about is marriage, even [if] it isn’t the thing I came to talk about . . . I have to redirect and explain how nondiscrimination and marriage have to go hand in hand.”

the challenge of having two concurrent campaigns: “There’s always this sort of dueling battle between marriage and nondiscrimination, but I always say that they’re both critical. [Sometimes] I joke that ‘I’m greedy, I want it all’ [but] the bigger picture is that full equality means achieving both of these things and many other things too.” Tami Lunan described many of her conversations with organizations and activists similarly: “The first thing they ask about is marriage, even [if] it isn’t the thing I came to talk about ... I have to redirect and explain how nondiscrim and marriage have to go hand in hand.”

Many of the people of color and transgender respondents we interviewed were particularly concerned that nondiscrimination was taking a backseat to the fight for marriage equality in the state. One grassroots leader said, “right now, I’d definitely say that marriage has received more focus, but if you go around to the trans community, nondiscrimination is much more important to us.” One interviewee who was particularly focused on the concerns of people of color and transgender people explained, “I worry that once marriage equality is achieved, those with the most power, who have the money to get it done, will have what they need and the rest will continue to suffer ... [and] those organizations that are looking at and supporting us now will disappear.” These movement level concerns, which were mostly expressed by transgender women and women of color were validated by some comments made by other interviewees, such as one gay white man volunteer who said, “We do all want marriage, *that’s the end game*, that’s where we’re trying to get to” (emphasis added).

Nicole and other Equality Ohio organizers spoke compellingly about the importance of structuring their work in ways that help those in the community whose primary experience with discrimination is only based on their sexual orientation to instead “see the bigger picture and how identities intersect.” It was noteworthy that Nicole—who identifies as a queer African American woman—always talked about the LGBT community as an “us” and a “we.” This commitment to talking inclusively was evident when she spoke about those elements of the LGBT community (certainly not herself) for whom “it’s the first time in our lives where we’ve been discriminated against.” That commitment to have everyone included in the “us” seems an important perspective for building an inclusive and intersectional movement.

In Cleveland, Nicole joined with other women of color working for several groups—such as Planned Parenthood, the city’s LGBT community center and a transgender group—to educate people at the city’s Pride events about the nondiscrimination campaign. Eris Dyson, who was Public Affairs Manager with Planned Parenthood at the time of the interviews, acknowledged that this fledgling coalition—which included five queer women of color, two white transgender persons and one white queer cisgender woman—was focused on Equality Ohio’s nondiscrimination effort, but said, “the hope is that when my stuff comes up, they’ll be able to support me as well.” Elyzabeth saw building EO’s commitment to work with other key progressive groups, such as unions, reproductive justice and civil rights organizations, as part of a five year effort. She hoped that some collective wins would highlight Equality Ohio as an integral part of the fabric of how progressive change happens in Ohio.



---

## Structures for Social Change

While Elyzabeth was at the helm of Equality Ohio, the organization expanded its staff and reach throughout the state. It also took advantage of national structures and organizations to invest in the capacity of state and local groups. This weaving together of horizontal relationships across the state and vertical relationships to national players was an important part of the strengthening of Equality Ohio's organizational infrastructure. But there was also anxiety about the capacity needs and trajectory of EO's rapid growth as well as its role vis-à-vis other more local groups.

Equality Ohio had been very willing to partner with national groups, focusing on bringing national resources of all kinds into the state. For instance, five of the 21 people we interviewed mentioned having attended trainings in the state sponsored and facilitated by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. A number of interviewees also attributed their first involvement with Equality Ohio to the campaign for the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act in 2013, in which EO partnered with the Human Rights Campaign and other national LGBT groups. Elyzabeth noted that working with national partners on the ENDA campaign was an important learning opportunity for the EO staff team saying, "for us it was perfect timing," because it helped the field team and volunteers get into a practice and pace of campaign organizing.

“ We have been chosen as a state where everybody from the outside wants something to happen ... and it feels really great.”

It was not clear from the interviews how long the national interest in supporting Ohio's LGBT work through EO would be sustained. A couple of interviewees worried that Ohio organizations can go through booms and busts in funding, depending on the state's political significance in the electoral cycle. Despite those concerns, the people we interviewed were very hopeful about the future of intersectional organizing and alliance building in the state. As Rev. Cheri Holdridge put it, "We have been chosen as a state where everybody from the outside wants something to happen ... and it feels really great."

# Recommendations

The New Mexico and Ohio stories illustrate what it means from an LGBT perspective to take the theory of intersectionality and put it into practice. The New Mexicans we interviewed have been building their intersectional alliance for more than a decade, and are now in a position to reap the benefits of their work. By contrast, the Ohioans were in the initial stages of trying to articulate an intersectional perspective within their base of activists for LGBT rights, and starting to create a culture of LGBT work where organizing in this way was the norm.

The alliances we looked at talked a lot about intersectionality. As this word becomes ever more commonly used among LGBT organizations and activists, it is a good time to understand how this approach is put into action by LGBT and other progressive groups. Some thoughts about investing to encourage this mindset are reflected in the following recommendations.

## Develop a Culture of Alliance Building with an Intersectional Lens

Though there are many examples of alliance building over the decades, there has often been a long history of fractured relationships both within and across movements for social change. As a sector, we are seeing a dramatic shift towards working together—whether it is framed as informal collaboration or a member-based network—as a way to build power. This type of alliance building depends in part on the readiness of a community or state, and on the willingness of leadership, to work collaboratively. Leadership that works across different issue divides—especially on issues such as race, immigration status, gender, class—can be supported and encouraged through training, facilitated opportunities to convene, and financial support for working together.

## Identify Coordinating Organizations

In the collective impact literature, a key component of success is the backbone organization. This organization is not the lead; it offers learning, facilitation, measurement, support, coordination, strategic ideas, and other functions that promote various groups working together towards a clearly identified set of goals. In our two case examples, we saw a modified backbone role played by Strong Families NM and Equality Ohio. Both these organizations have leaders who focused on values, bridge building, and tangible results. More importantly, both groups were trusted by others in the community—both within and across issue areas—to be inclusive and support the success of all.

“Dollars can help but food is really important, good facilitation with an anti-oppression analysis and framework, calling each other out in a gentle and compassionate way.”

“It’s about relationships and being present for other people’s stuff, and putting energy into things that matter for other organizations; also letting other people tell you and not assuming or projecting what is important and what you can do to help.”

### **Embrace Patience and a Long-Term Vision**

Organizations and funders interested in intersectional alliance building should consider the example of activists in both states and think about their own change efforts in time spans of five to ten years, rather than the two to three years of many campaign efforts. Already evidenced by the support of marriage equality, long-term support builds relationships integral to alliances for change.

### **Invest in Leadership of Women of Color and Transgender People**

The interviews revealed that women of color have been central in making an intersectional approach a reality for on-the-ground organizing in the two states. Both Young Women United in New Mexico and the coalition of LGBT and reproductive justice groups in Cleveland were founded by women of color. There is an ongoing need to listen to, promote the visibility of, and support the organizational leadership of people of color, especially women of color, in the LGBT movement. Similarly, the transgender activists we spoke to (all of whom were white) often expressed an analysis that was striking in its articulation of the intersections between transgender identity and issues of race and class oppression. The fact that some

of the transgender leaders we spoke to indicated concerns about being marginalized (either in issue-setting or securing financial support) means that there is still work to do to integrate transgender organizations fully as part of the LGBT movement infrastructure in states across the country.

### **Take Risks**

The organizational allies and funders who invested in Young Women United early on could not have predicted that this organization would be identified fifteen years later as a center of gravity for progressive alliance building in New Mexico. Rev. Lesley Jones suggested that Equality Ohio could support a roundtable of LGBT leaders of color to convene and step outside of their daily work. As she put it, this table should not be “about building a campaign, it’s about building something sustainable.” As we enter a new period of progressive movement building, it is hard to know how to invest in the successes of the future. That is why it is important to support newer formations that are learning from and challenging the tried and true ways of operating. And though not all will succeed, the ones that do will take us forward into the next decades of building a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.



For more information, please visit The Building Movement Project at [www.buildingmovement.org](http://www.buildingmovement.org) or contact us at [info@buildingmovement.org](mailto:info@buildingmovement.org)

