

STRATEGIC USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



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Working for Equality & Economic Liberation: Databases and Low-Income Families During TANF Reauthorization Debate

Through the application of an ebase database to track membership and voter turnout, a grassroots social justice organization in Montana has been able to affect achieve changes in welfare policy at the local, state, and even federal levels of government. By tracking membership and integrating voter turnout data, social justice organizations can let politicians know that their members are voting. In a state like Montana, showing how your members are the difference between a candidate winning and losing gets low-income people the attention they need from government.

Working for Equality & Economic Liberation (WEEL) is a grassroots economic and social justice nonprofit in Montana working with low-income families through advocacy, education, and action. Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1996. As these sweeping welfare reforms shook low-income families throughout the late 90s, WEEL was founded to organize low-income families to ensure appropriate representation in the legislative process as well as to educate the families on benefits to which they were entitled.



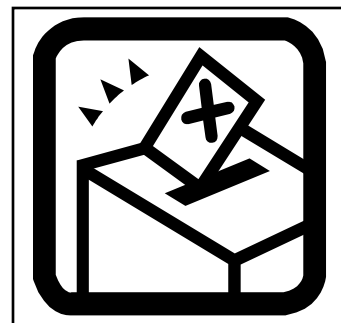
TANF came up for reauthorization in 2001. Seeing that their members and constituency had to be part of the reauthorization discussion, WEEL staff recognized the need for a special campaign. As they attempted to contact and organize low-income families and single mothers on welfare, WEEL quickly found their administrative capacity woefully inadequate. Wendy Young, then an organizer for WEEL, says that she had been working out of an address book littered with notes and jottings, which quickly became illegible. Having first met a representative from LINC at the Western Regional Welfare Activist Network meeting in 1998, WEEL contacted LINC to see how technology could help them increase civic engagement among low-income people and take advantage of historic changes in welfare to get their message across.

The Challenge: Deploying Technology Solutions in Advocacy Settings to Ensure Legislative Representation
Recognizing the need to influence changes in TANF reauthorization as early as 1999, WEEL turned to building its “Get Out the Vote” work. WEEL staff and leadership quickly realized that they needed to do more than simply increase voter turnout among low-income people: they also

had to engage these voters on poverty issues over time. However, maintaining membership lists, and targeting people for campaigns became increasingly difficult for several reasons: WEEL relied on a single address book with notes next to entries to track members and membership information; the organization had only three staff people to oversee campaigns and operations; WEEL's membership, namely low-income families throughout the state were a transient population that often moved in and out of crisis situations and faced many barriers to participating in the political process. WEEL recognized the need for a membership database to help solve these problems. In addition, they required a database without a steep learning curve and one that could be implemented quickly if they were to mobilize their constituencies in time for TANF reauthorization hearings in 2001.

The Solution: An *ebase* Database to Track Membership and Voting Records

As they began their special campaign on TANF reauthorization, WEEL realized that their pencil and paper system was not going to take them very far. WEEL began to work with LINC to implement a database solution known as *ebase*. Dirk Slater, senior circuit rider from LINC, says *ebase* made a good choice because it could be easily adopted by other groups in the network, enabling those groups to share data. LINC worked with WEEL to customize the database, which was then distributed and implemented elsewhere. With the database, WEEL tracked membership demographics, but also information about members' relationship with the organization, enabling WEEL to connect people to the issues with which they were most concerned.



Once the database was running, Wendy Young began populating it with membership data, including names, addresses, and other contact information, like email addresses, where this member was recruited, special topics in which they might be interested, their voting district, representatives, and which elections they had voted in. She noticed quickly that WEEL was able to connect people with their local and state legislators, which came in handy during their "Lobby Days." "Lobby Days" are events in which WEEL brings together low-income mothers to take trips to the state capitol to talk with representatives. Wendy recognized that with the new database, she was able to target specific members on specific topics and bring them in to discuss problems with their state representative. As she explains the power of being able to do this:

"With this database you could type in a members name and their membership page would pop up in the database. This membership page would allow you to target shier specific legislator on lobby days. With this database you could print out all of the members from one legislative district and have them speak with that legislator together... It's good to have a bunch of people and to do a rally at noon at the capitol steps and all that stuff. But if you could find someone from a very rural corner of the state that's willing to come in and speak to their legislator, it makes quite an impact. The database allowed us to do it much more efficiently."

Through a partnership with a local labor union, WEEL's membership data was integrated with data from voting records, which meant they could now demonstrate to elected officials that not only did their members vote, but how many of them voted and how often they voted. In a state where several dozens of votes can determine the outcome, the ability to show that several hundred members voted in a given district was powerful information. Being able to produce such information meant that WEEL staff and leadership had instant credibility with local and state representatives, and ultimately with their US Senator.

Leveraging the Database to Influence National Policy

With TANF coming up for reauthorization, WEEL began conducting its "Get Out the Vote" work, registering low-income voters, educating them, and tracking their voting patterns in local, state, and federal elections.

Working with a local labor union, WEEL integrated voting data into its membership database, which enabled them to target specific geographic areas throughout Montana. In the state, as Kate Kahan reports:

“We see people win statewide elections by 15 votes and city elections by three. We just had a city council candidate that lost by three votes. We have had this philosophy that if candidates actually spoke to low-income issues, low-income people would turn out to vote. So we tried that in 2000 with a huge coalition of folks, and we were right.”

When it came to federal senate elections in 2000, WEEL’s targeted voting work increased voter turnout by 9% to 28% in low-income neighborhoods throughout the state. Ms. Kahan continues, “In fact we increased the low-income turnout so much that we are now sitting at the federal policy table because our folks vote. That’s been a real wake up call to our elected officials.”

Thanks to their strategies of coalition building, education, and organizing combined with a database that enabled them to target members and track whether they voted, WEEL demonstrated that low-income people will turn out to vote when meaningfully engaged. WEEL was able to support their claims by producing data that showed



how much voter turnout increased in the neighborhoods they targeted, versus those they didn’t. This gave WEEL credibility to legislators. Through fortuitous circumstance, Max Baucus became the chair of the Finance Committee in the Senate, just as TANF was coming up for reauthorization. WEEL was suddenly thrust to the forefront of federal policy-making around the very issue they worked so diligently to influence. Through tracking their voter mobilization efforts, WEEL demonstrated that low-income votes impact elections. Baucus in turn listened to what WEEL had to say, introducing a reauthorization

bill in the Senate that, while not a windfall to low-income people in the US, was much better for the poor than either earlier drafts or what was being debated in the House. As Kate explains, “In 2000, we were able to move him [Baucus] because of our proven and measurable ability to move votes and policy in other arenas and to come with strong solutions.”

Lessons Learned

Based on the interviews conducted in the course of creating this case study, we can identify key areas that are important to the successful implementation of such projects in the future.

Adopting the database into the organizational culture: Planning, building and installing the database were only the first part of the effort, and in many ways the easiest. It took considerable time to fully populate the database. It is important to allot sufficient staff time to getting the database off the ground after planning and implementation are over. Training is one part of the equation. Another is adapting the technology to the culture of the organization. WEEL staff members spent considerable time learning how to use the database, but did not really understand how they could best use it until they adapted it to their organizational culture. Research shows that nonprofit staff is often resistant to new technology, fearing that it will alienate them from the people they work to help. In WEEL’s case, the database enabled them to get in touch with many more people,

ultimately mobilizing enough of them to gain access to federal policy makers, but only after they made a concerted effort to integrate the use of the technology into the organization.

Maintaining the database: As WEEL staff members admit, it was easy to turn to the database only when they saw a pressing need, neglecting the technology during other times. Maintaining up-to-date information about members, such as keeping track of address and telephone number changes, is critical for outreach. As data in the database becomes stale, it becomes less useful, meaning that the staff is less likely to turn to it. This can quickly begin a cycle of neglect rendering the most powerful databases useless. Databases are only as good as the information stored in them. For WEEL to accomplish its goals, staff members had to dedicate time specifically to the task of updating and maintaining the information in the database. This is not always easy for small staffs with myriad other tasks to accomplish, but it's an effort that yields significant rewards.

Conclusion

Technology can play a strong supporting role in the efforts of grassroots organizers. For WEEL, the implementation of a database meant more than better administration; it meant the ability to fine-tune its strategic civic engagement efforts. The ability to move the database from a record-keeping instrument to a strategic tool leveraged WEEL's small staff and focused efforts into real influence, ultimately at the federal level. In a small organization, that ability could translate into the difference between successful and unsuccessful endeavors.

Working for Equality & Economic Liberation's experience is an example of how merging technology with other strategic activities can significantly enhance the capacity of organizations working with limited resources. By integrating data from multiple sources, WEEL was able to target specific audiences for their message, concentrating their efforts on work that would bring the greatest results. Then, by recording those results, the organization was able to prove to legislators that their work had an impact. In WEEL's case, that meant a direct line to the Senate. Technology not only enhances the organization's ability to effectively manage data, an administrative task the value of which is difficult to overstate; it also provides grassroots organizations with the ability to use data strategically, to achieve impacts stretching beyond the concerted efforts of individuals alone.



WEEL Kids making mother's day cards at Mama Jam, a membership event.

Editor's Note: While this article focuses on the use of technology, non-profit 501c3 organizations need to be aware of regulations regarding their activities around elections. For more information see the Alliance for Justice website at <http://atwww.afj.org>.

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