
TMO focuses on 'people power'

For nearly 40 years now, The Metropolitan Organization has been pushing, collaborating and negotiating to improve the lives of Houstonians.

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Sister Christine Stephens leads an evaluation meeting in TMO's early days in 1979 to discuss the outcome of a mayoral candidates' "accountability session."

There's a story that sounds almost apocryphal, except it isn't, about how the Network of Texas IAF Organizations, which focuses on community-leadership development, came to anchor itself in the consciousness of elected officials across the state.

In a mid-1970s meeting with San Antonio officials to discuss persistent and deadly flooding that plagued some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, the story goes, leaders of the fledgling San Antonio-based Communities Organized for Public Service learned

that the problem was well-known to those in power. But the drainage needs weren't addressed because "nobody had complained," Andy Sarabia, a COPS founder, told the San Antonio Express-News in 2009.

The "complaining" hasn't ebbed since, and the seed of successful community organizing planted by the Industrial Areas Foundation via COPS 40 years ago would spread statewide to several Texas cities, including Houston. Countless battles later, organizations affiliated with the Texas network have a seat at the tables of power in Austin, Amarillo, El Paso, Dallas, the Rio Grande Valley, San Angelo and San Antonio. Locally, the network affiliate is known as The Metropolitan Organization, or TMO. Primarily church-based, as the IAF organizations are in other cities, TMO is made up of 27 congregations largely located in east and southeast-side neighborhoods.

As the network of organizations marks its 40-year anniversary, we turned to TMO leaders for insights about the group's work here in Houston, its impact and vision for the future. Outlook editor Veronica Flores-Paniagua talked with the Rev. Robert McGee and Ana Cummings, who were among TMO's founders. These are excerpts from their conversation.

Q: What sparked the formation of Network of Texas IAF Organizations and The Metropolitan Organization?

Cummings: TMO was formed around 1980. COPS had been formed a couple of years before that. They had a lot of success initiating changes in their neighborhoods, especially on infrastructure and flooding. They began to talk to public officials about the needs in their neighborhoods. In Houston, there was a lot of interest in giving a voice to people in our community.

Q: What were the conditions in Houston that needed attention?

McGee: They're kind of the same as they are now. One had to do with flooding. Another had to do with policing and public safety. There was also health care. These are issues that will always need attention.

Q: Did you feel that city leaders were not giving your communities attention or priority?

McGee: They were not. There was a ditch along what now is MLK Drive. It ran from around Van Fleet to Selinsky. It would flood regularly. Until finally one day, someone died. What we did was get the city to install drainage culverts and people could have access to sidewalks there.

There was a proliferation of crime, too. There were crack houses that were being set up in our community. We wanted to address that.

Q: In Houston, how did city leaders receive TMO?

Cummings: They tried to divide and conquer. They tried to say TMO was a radical organization. They would say, 'We don't want to bring that kind of organization into Houston.' There was a lot of undercutting. As I recall, several religious leaders went to City Hall and sat outside the mayor's office. They wouldn't receive the leaders as a group. They said they could come in one by one. But the religious leaders refused to go in until the mayor met with them as a group.



The Metropolitan Organization leader Theresa Padilla and others from TMO member churches participate in a rally supporting immigrant rights, an issue that remains a priority for the Houston group.

Q: Many grassroots groups in Houston organize communities into action. How is The Metropolitan Organization different or unique?

McGee: What was different about TMO from the start - it was multiethnic and it was ecumenical. The concerns that were being expressed were not only coming from the African-American community or the Latino community. TMO began to address things with a unified voice. When (city leaders) began to see we were working together, along with our communities and churches, they began to listen to what we had to say and began to work with us to address these issues.

Cummings: The way TMO works is different, too. Education of the leaders is part of the work that we do. We equip leaders to work with others to research together issues that are affecting their lives and then teach them to work with public officials to address those issues. Those leadership skills that are developed can be used in other places.

Q: How does TMO decide what issues to address?

Cummings: We hold what we call house meetings. These are small group conversations between six to eight people, leaders of the different congregations. An agenda is developed, where people share the pressures that are affecting their families and their neighborhoods. People begin to speak out - 'This is what's happening to me' - and people begin to realize they're not the only ones.

Q: Briefly, tell us about a few TMO accomplishments that have influenced public policy in Houston.

McGee: We brought it to the county's attention that we needed more locations for dialysis treatment.

Cummings: That came out of house meetings at St. Anne's (Catholic Church) on Westheimer. One lady talked about her brother not having insurance and needing dialysis. He didn't get care and got very sick to the point he had to go to the emergency room. Others began talking about how they were on dialysis, too. Turned out that Harris Health did not have a dialysis facility that low-income and uninsured residents had access to. We went before the Harris Health board and got them to build a dialysis center in the Third Ward (to serve low-income and uninsured patients.)

McGee: Community policing is another area. We felt that if there was a police presence in our community, if there were some street-front substations, we could get to know them and they could get to know us, and it would bring about a reduction in crime. We approached the police chief about that, and that's how we got community policing in Houston.

Cummings: We had done a lot of research. There was a 30-minute response time from police in some neighborhoods.

We also started Capital Idea Houston, a workforce development effort that partners employers, community college officials and community leaders. It's modeled after Project Quest, which has been in operation in San Antonio for 20 years. There are six of them now, including in El Paso, the Rio Grande Valley, Dallas and Austin.



The session was moderated by Frank Rollins of Ascension Lutheran Church.

A study by Trinity University in San Antonio showed that the economic return of Project Quest was \$17 for every dollar invested after five years. It's a combination of earning power, paying taxes, saving money in public aid programs. Now, the people who've gone through the program are self-sufficient.

TMO and sister organizations across the state also worked to pass the indigent health care bill during the 71st Legislature in 1989. Because of that, the poorest of the poor must now be taken care of. It's hard now for the poor to access health care; it was even worse back then.

Q: Your organization has been at this for nearly 40 years. What does it take to get policymakers' attention? What do they respond to?

McGee: I've learned that politicians respond to people power. Across the years, we have learned that when we organize around issues that affect our families, our communities, our churches, policymakers have a tendency to listen to what we're talking about. We're not just out there tooting our own horn about what we're trying to accomplish.

Cummings: They know we've done our research. We go to the officials we know can respond. We don't just go out on the street or talk to random city officials. The focus is to be at the table where the decisions are being made. We're building power to be able to do politics - negotiating and compromising around the issues that affect our families. We're not about ideology or partisan party.

Q: What's next for TMO?

Cummings: Expanding Capital Idea within Harris County to reach more people, and also expanding it outside of Harris County, especially to Fort Bend County. It's a fast-growing, diverse area. We want to expand the reach of the organization geographically. There are issues that affect people that cross county lines. We want to create the same kind of awareness in the communities that TMO has historically done in Houston.

McGee: Working on immigration - trying to get comprehensive legislation to help persons obtain a path to citizenship. But with the gridlock on this issue, we are focusing on local immigration issues and making sure that families are treated fairly.

On a living wage, we're pushing for \$13 an hour locally. And we're working in the Denver Harbor area to stop unjust housing. The community is trying to prevent old, family neighborhoods from being turned into townhomes. They've gotten a lot of energy for that.