

BUILDING LEADERS, BUILDING POWER: HOW SOMOS BUILT AN ORGANIZER PIPELINE

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We think it works better if folks are from our communities. If we're not developing the capacity of our leaders in our movement to do multiple jobs within our work, then we are failing.

— MARCELA DÍAZ

Executive Director, Somos un Pueblo Unido



Fifteen years ago, [Somos un Pueblo Unido \(Somos\)](#) faced a common problem in the organizing field: they had a few open organizer positions in rural areas but couldn't find the right mix of people for the job. They knew they needed someone from their community. Because in the small, rural areas Somos works in, trust is everything. Without it, it's harder to organize new members, develop membership teams, or effectively make change.

Somos, a rural- and immigrant-led organization dedicated to advancing worker and racial justice in New Mexico, had previously tried hiring folks from outside their base. But as Marcela Díaz, their executive director, describes it, they just weren't the right fit for Somos.

Every organizer has a place in the movement, and different organizations organize in different ways. **But for Somos, it's critical their organizers are folks from within its communities who know their ground inside and out.** They come with trust baked in, and they have a better sense of how members are feeling, because they're neighbors, family friends, and old coworkers.

For Somos, trying to recruit from their base wasn't merely a staffing issue—although the constant turnover was hard to absorb as an organization busy trying to advance worker and racial justice in New Mexico. It also presented an opportunity to further the organization's philosophical commitment to community-led organizing and building leaders from their base.

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[Those hired from outside Somos' base] get excited about the work, and then they want to move away from those rural communities. That's normal, and we don't blame them, but then we've got to start all over.

— MARCELA DÍAZ
Executive Director,
Somos un Pueblo Unido

That commitment has been around since Somos' founding, and it's one Marcela has carried forward since joining the organization as its executive director.

"If we're not giving [our community] the opportunity to do it, then what are we doing? What is this for?" Marcela asks.

So, Somos created an internship program.

The overarching theory of change behind the program is that by providing an opportunity for its members to level up their organizing skills and become leaders, their members will become more active and more knowledgeable in their future organizing campaigns—whether as staff or as dedicated members. Either way, it's a win-win for Somos *and* the person who's gained valuable skills while earning a steady paycheck.

An added benefit is that this creates a pool of talented future staffers who reflect the lived experiences of its community and will want to stay for an extended period of time.



HOW SOMOS DEVELOPS LEADERS AND ORGANIZERS FROM ITS BASE

Because developing leaders and organizers from its base is so instrumental to the organization's mission and success, Somos prioritizes the internship program in numerous ways: making sure there's always funding for the program, creating thoughtful opportunities for interns' development, and more.

Since the inception of the program, Somos has made changes here and there to refine how it identifies leaders and develops them. But for the most part, the program has stuck to the same core values that have been there from the start.

The program is intentional and reflective of their values as an organization: its purpose is to develop community members into leaders. That's why the program focuses on the interns' learning and growth, not on how interns can assist staff.



The internship lasts three months and is up to 20 hours per week. It's also paid, and can be extended to last six months. The ability to extend can be crucial in determining whether the intern might be a good fit for a future organizing role.

"We just hired recently someone here in our Santa Fe staff who was an intern for three months, and then we extended," Marcela says. At the end of the person's second internship, Somos felt confident in hiring the person into a full-time position: "We were like 'Okay, you've been here for six months. You like us, we like you. Strong work ethic. You get it. You have a set of skills. You love the work. You're into it.'"

This is how Somos has refined its internship program.

PRACTICE 1:

Identifying intern candidates from Somos' base to turn members into leaders and organizers.

PRACTICE 2:

Creating meaningful learning opportunities for interns through training and shadowing.

PRACTICE 3:

Dedicating funding and time to invest in members' development.



PRACTICE 1:

Identifying intern candidates from Somos' base to turn members into leaders and organizers.

To identify possible interns, Somos' existing organizers are responsible for suggesting and selecting candidates from their existing network of members and leaders. They may come to Marcela and say "I have a fantastic member and I think we should bring her on." And to that, Marcela says: "Let's get them started as interns."

If there aren't any immediate people that come to mind, organizers will also ask members if they have suggestions for candidates to broaden the candidate pool.

Another way the program's design is tailored to attract people from its base? Somos constantly keeps an eye out for members who lose their jobs because they're retaliated against for their organizing with Somos—and then offers them an internship to ensure they don't lose their financial footing. This also lowers the possible costs for members considering taking part in Somos workers' rights campaigns, boosting participation and the efficacy of the campaign.



But it's also a strategic way of ensuring that that member stays connected to Somos and involved as a strong, active member moving forward. That member, whether they decide to move into organizing full-time or not, now has a deeper relationship with Somos staff and knows how difficult the work of organizing is—and is more likely to want to help organizers even when they're back in their role as a non-intern member.

PRACTICE 2:

Creating meaningful learning opportunities for interns through training and shadowing.

If an organizer tells Marcela they “need an intern,” alarm bells go off in her mind.

Because at Somos, interns are there to learn everything about organizing and to develop as leaders. They’re not there to assist organizers, or do grunt work. They’re in the program to learn.

So, Marcela will tell the staff member: “An intern is actually going to make more work for you because they’re not here as your helper. You’re here to help develop them as a leader.”

To instill the basics of organizing to interns in a three-month span, Somos has devised a rigorous training and shadowing program.

Every quarter, Somos hosts an organizing training in Santa Fe—the frequency lines up with the internship program cycle so that every intern will be able to attend a training during their time with Somos. This training emphasizes the practical skills behind successful organizing.

Interns and organizers learn about politics, policies, and practices during their three days together. They cover the policies their members care about, the politics underlying those policies, and, most importantly, practice, practice, practice. Whether it’s holding one-to-ones or facilitating a meeting where members are going off topic, the training focuses heavily on setting interns up to be able to deploy these skills in real life.



The rest of interns' training comes from shadowing their organizer (each organizer in the six counties Somos covers can have up to two interns at a time). Even though it's an internship program, the program functions like more of an apprenticeship. Every day, interns work side-by-side with the organizer supervising them. This gives interns the chance to learn real-world basic organizing skills.

How would a typical phone banking event work?

Other intern programs might have their interns making calls with members.

But at Somos, because interns are supposed to be working alongside staff organizers, they're the ones coordinating the event, getting members to come, and supervising the members' calls.

That's what distinguishes Somos' program from so many others—it places interns' growth and development above all else so that whether they become a staff member down the line or a dedicated member, they'll be more effective, tenacious organizers.



PRACTICE 3:

Dedicating funding and time to invest in members' development.

If you don't intentionally set aside funding and time to invest in members' development, it won't happen.

That's why the team at Somos always finds a way to include a line item in the budget for the internship program, even though there isn't always a lot of funding available for this kind of vital, transformational work.

This can mean getting creative and resourceful—making opportunities for funding when there don't appear to be any.

"My job is to look for those opportunities and to seize those opportunities when they come to keep growing our organizer base statewide," Marcela says.

Just recently, a funding opportunity came up for Somos to have one of its existing organizers work on a new project. Somos jumped at the chance to invest in one of its existing interns: Marcela suggested using the funding to allow a current intern to become a full-time organizer running the campaign.

Somos' pitch worked.

Now Somos has a new organizer role, and another example of successfully bringing someone in from their base through the internship program and onto their team.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN ORGANIZATION THAT NEVER STOPS INVESTING IN ITS BASE

Fifteen years into creating a successful program for developing their members' growth and organizing skills, Somos has learned a thing or two about how to leverage an internship program to support authentic organizing. They also know that an internship program is just one small part of the long journey it takes to really develop effective organizers. After all, no three- or six-month internship program, no matter how tightly packed with trainings, shadowing, and learning, can teach someone everything they need to know about organizing—a process that takes years, if not decades, and ongoing support and development.

But the internship program is a key part of that trajectory for Somos' leaders. Here are the lessons Somos' team has learned—and the challenges they're still figuring out.

LESSON 1:

The mental transition from being a leader to an organizer is hard and requires support.

LESSON 2:

Interns need access to next-level organizing training that is context-specific and language-accessible.

LESSON 3:

To bring in organizers from your base, meet them where they are.

LESSON 1:

The mental transition from being a leader to an organizer is hard and requires support.

The mindsets that make a leader successful aren't always the same ones that make an organizer successful.

Leaders from the base are empowered and encouraged to use their voices—they are at the center of Somos' work. Organizers, on the other hand, play more of a behind-the-scenes role. Their job is to facilitate the leaders' growth, not to be center-stage themselves.

Somos discovered through their intern-to-organizer pipeline that a lot of leaders must overcome this change as they transition into a formal internship role.

"There's a transition that we have to be really, really deliberate about going from leader to organizer. And that can be tougher for some people than other people," Marcela says.

That means that Somos does a lot of training to get interns to shift away from the mindset they had as a member or leader.



Somos' training emphasizes the importance of taking a step back, prioritizing listening to members over speaking up, and overall de-centering yourself to allow members to be at the helm.

The fact that the transition is steep for so many interns speaks to how effective their development as Somos leaders was. Many leaders gain a sense of personal power when they join Somos. But when they become an intern, their sense of the source of their power shifts: it comes from organizing other members. "All of a sudden they had this strong voice within their communities [as leaders]," Marcela says. And then, when they become interns, they get a new message:

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All of you were leaders before. Now you're not. That means you're not the center of the meeting. That means that you're not the one giving the information. That means that you're not ever going to be the spokesperson. And that's really hard for people.

— MARCELA DÍAZ

Executive Director, Somos un Pueblo Unido

While Somos can't get rid of the transition altogether, they do what they can to mitigate it—putting a name to it so new interns can recognize what they're feeling and hosting as many trainings as it takes so interns understand their new role, and how they'll still be contributing to power building—just in a different way.



LESSON 2:

Interns need access to next-level organizing training that is context-specific and language-accessible.

Somos hopes that through the internship program and other organizer development, its members can refine a deeper set of skills that take years and sustained investment to learn.

To kickstart that process at Somos, that means training their interns on some of these next-level skills, like developing campaigns, building relationships with allies, and researching possible actions.

That's often harder than it should be, because it's challenging to find national trainings and resources that are designed with groups like Somos in mind.

Because Somos organizes in mostly rural areas, its members-turned-interns have fewer opportunities to interact with other organizers and to pick up on the tips, tricks, and secret sauce to becoming a good organizer.



For those reasons, Somos' interns need accelerated, intense training and opportunities to strengthen their strategic thinking and become effective organizers.

The trainings Somos has found are often piece-meal, instead of providing the kind of comprehensive, get-me-up-to-speed-fast training their interns need.

And to top it all off, many of the trainings that could be a good fit are only offered in English. Interns who don't speak English have to wait for the few Spanish trainings that happen every year.

It's not just about improving language accessibility, either. Another challenge is that the national trainings that do exist also don't understand the contexts and lived experiences of Somos' members.

For instance, trainings might not answer the question of how to organize inside mixed-status communities.

Somos hopes that national trainings can one day better reflect the lived realities and languages of their target audiences. Until then, it does the work of making sure its base can become effective organizers by providing the culturally relevant, tailored organizing training they need to succeed.



LESSON 3:

To bring in organizers from your base, meet them where they are.

At Somos, whose base includes mixed-immigration-status families, rural communities, and low-paid workers, meeting people where they are requires creating a culture that is accessible and welcoming for people facing regular economic challenges, access issues, and fear of deportation or other adverse immigration actions.

When the state targets your base, the stakes rise dramatically and organizations must be even more responsive to the needs of their members. Asking communities facing immigration enforcement, police harassment, and other forms of state violence to organize is asking them to put themselves under the constant threat of losing their freedom or their lives. Organizing while fearing you could be detained, deported, or separated from your family generates an immense personal burden. It shapes not only the strategy and pace of the work but also the moral responsibility of the broader movement to provide support.

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People have real-life challenges, they come from our community and experience all the challenges that come with it, like coming from mixed-status families.

— MARCELA DÍAZ
*Executive Director,
Somos un Pueblo Unido*

When members and organizers put themselves in harm's way for the sake of organizing, it is up to organizations to ensure they are providing adequate resources for members and organizers' safety, sustainability, and well-being.

Somos' internship program demonstrates what this responsibility can look like in practice. Their internship is not an "extra" program—it is central to their mission. Many current staff members are from the very communities Somos organizes, and many began as interns. This is the result of deliberate planning, ongoing mentorship, and significant resource allocation. Somos dedicates \$96,000 annually to internships and continually seeks additional funding to strengthen this pipeline. They know that building leadership from within their base requires constant, sustained support—not one-off training sessions or short-term opportunities.

The lesson is clear: to commit to building organizers from a community's own base, you must commit to providing sufficient budget, staff time, and learning opportunities to match. For rural, low-income, and mixed-status communities, success requires additional investment in training, safety, and culturally relevant resources, paired with the patience and intentionality to see organizers through the long arc of development. This is movement work—and it must be treated, funded, and protected as such.

"We're organizing folks in our community who have a lot of challenges," Marcela says. "We are collectively trying to address those challenges by building power, changing institutions, and making concrete improvements in the lives of our members."

And one major way they're doing that is by making their organization a home their members can feel safe at. For Somos, the results of these efforts speak for themselves: just look at their staff, all of whom are from the communities Somos organizes in and many of whom are former interns.



OF, BY, AND FOR ITS BASE

A passionate commitment to building up its base is what fuels Somos. It's been there since the very beginning, when Somos' founders dedicated the organization to community organizing and base building. It's the flame that ignites Somos' internship program, crafted in service of a long-term path towards organizer development for its members and staff.

Right now, the federal government is terrorizing immigrants across the country, throwing the lives of many of Somos' communities in peril. As its members navigate constant and dehumanizing attacks, Somos' work is more critical than ever. And its model—predicated on building up its members and being a community-led organization—is exactly the one that's needed in this moment.

Because Somos has invested in developing its members and has organizers with longstanding ties and trust with their communities, the organization is more able to fight back and protect its people from these inhumane acts. Plus, those existing ties and legitimacy within the community are making it easier for Somos to push forward

some of their proactive campaigns, too: members organized recently to secure state funding for an ESL class in their community, and now it's coming to fruition.

Because Somos' staff is made up of its base, they are better able to understand how its communities are feeling and put together forceful campaigns to defend and provide for its community members.

Somos' organization is made of, by, and for its base. That's what makes its foundations so strong and its campaigns so successful. Members are at the center of everything Somos does, and everything it fights for.

As Marcela puts it: "If we're not spending [our resources] on building the capacity of our own movement, then honestly, what the hell is it all for?"

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ABOUT US

The Organizer Staffing Stories of Practice Project

Led by Grassroots Solutions, the Organizer Staffing Stories of Practice project seeks to gather and share stories about successful approaches to organizer recruitment, development, and retention. The project is funded by the Freedom Together Foundation and conducted in partnership with Community Change.



Somos un Pueblo Unido is a statewide, immigrant-led organization dedicated to advancing worker and racial justice in New Mexico. We provide community education, create leadership opportunities, and engage immigrants and low-wage workers in the political and electoral process in order to strengthen our communities.



Grassroots Solutions is an engagement strategy and evaluation consulting firm that works with nonprofits and foundations to build healthy, just and equitable communities. We're a diverse team of leaders who come from wide-ranging backgrounds in policy, campaigns, philanthropy and advocacy.



Community Change is a national organization that builds the power of low-income people, especially people of color, to create a multiracial democracy and a fair economy where everyone can thrive.