

Witnesses  
to Hunger

# A POSITIVE PARTNERSHIP: ADVICE FROM WITNESSES TO HUNGER ON ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY IN ADVOCACY



*Photo by Witness Christina K, Philadelphia*



## Welcome!

By picking up this booklet and committing to creating partnerships for advocacy, you are beginning a transformative and rewarding task. We started Witnesses to Hunger in Philadelphia in 2008 with 42 mothers of young children eager to share their experiences with the world. In the course of three months, the women had taken more than 10,000 photographs and hundreds of videos. The exhibit, comprised of photographs and videos taken by the witnesses, along with their personal testimonies, drew a crowd of over 200 to the opening during a vicious rainstorm.

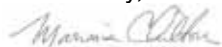
Following our first exhibit, we knew that we couldn't stop, and that the Witnesses were a powerful group of advocates that demanded a stronger, more sustainable platform from which to share their experiences. Witnesses to Hunger is about breaking down the usual barriers between "policymaker" and "welfare recipient" so that everyone can engage in dialogue on a more even playing field. We brought the exhibit to Capitol Hill at the invitation of Senator Bob Casey, Jr. from Philadelphia, and the Witnesses had opportunities to speak with senators, congresspeople and others working to end hunger.

Since that small beginning, Witnesses to Hunger has expanded in size, geography, and our level of engagement. Over the past three years mothers from across the state of Pennsylvania, in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Maryland have joined Witnesses to Hunger. A father from Baltimore has joined the group, as well as a great-grandmother taking care of her great-grandchild in Harrisburg, and Witnesses of many ages, races, and ethnicities who are coming together with a common purpose: to end child hunger. The Witnesses have shown their photographs around the East Coast, and have had the opportunity to speak with and educate policymakers and the public. Now, we look to expand even further, opening chapters of Witnesses to Hunger around the United States.

When I first started Witnesses to Hunger, I was told that it wouldn't work, that no one would want to put such personal and difficult pieces of their lives on display to the world. What I have found, however, is that many people are eager to share their experiences so that they can make a difference. No one, it seemed, thought to provide them that platform for their continuous engagement.

I hope you find this book to be helpful. Participation is at the core of the work we do with Witnesses to Hunger, and we welcome your commitment and dedication to this work. If you are interested in furthering this partnership, please get in touch with us regarding starting a chapter of Witnesses to Hunger in your own community. Until then, enjoy, and please stay in touch!

In solidarity,



Mariana Chilton

Founder, Witnesses to Hunger

Director, Center for Hunger-Free Communities

## Building Partnerships

Engaging with your clients and community members is necessary for change to happen. This booklet offers guidance and lessons from our own experiences with Witnesses to Hunger to help you in your efforts to end hunger in America.

Building partnerships is rewarding, but challenging, work. Your team will now include people from all different backgrounds. You will face structural barriers. Some may not have easy access to technology. Some may be dealing with major personal problems or concerns that take precedence over advocacy work. Others might prefer communication styles that differ from those that your organization usually uses. But these differences should not stop you. Rather, you should acknowledge these issues to create a growing, diverse, nurturing, and supportive environment.

### Goals in Engaging Clients and Community Members in Advocacy:

- Change the role of people with firsthand experience in hunger or poverty. Move them from the status of client, patient, or program participant to **advocate**.
- Create an environment of acceptance that values diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, personal experience, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. This environment includes both your own staff, as well as the local community in which you and your fellow advocates reside.
- Redefine how you think of community. Build partnerships with people from every level of the community, from families and friends of people with firsthand experiences in the area, to local and state politicians and leaders. Connect the entire community in your work.
- Break down barriers between the organization and community members. Clients are not passive recipients. They are your partners in working to create change.
- Recognize that the most important people in anti-hunger and poverty advocacy are those who actually experience hunger and poverty.

## Creating a Deeper Community Participation

- The photos, artwork, stories, and experiences of the community are never to be exploited. The only way to avoid this trap of misuse is by making sure that community members lead the project. They should have the final word in the direction and focus of the work. It is only through this partnership that true change can occur.
- Working together is one thing, but partnering together is another. Partnering with the community requires you to support one another. We suggest having a staff that supports community members in their day-to-day struggles and helps all members deal with personal and communal issues.
- The advocacy work done by community members should not be used for fundraising purposes. The purpose of engaging the community is to create change through education and advocacy, not to raise money for the organization.



*Photo of advocates at the State House in Boston, MA*

No real change can happen without the voices of the real experts: those with firsthand experience. There are many ways to promote the involvement of these experts in your work. Hire people with personal experiences of hunger and poverty to work on your staff. Diversify your staff. Conduct community-based research. This list can go on. In this booklet, we will discuss two ways in particular - community advisory boards or organizing committees, and the use of art, in our case through photography, to engage the community in advocacy and spread the word about hunger.

## Community Advisory Boards and Organizing Committees

*“No social movement in history has achieved victory without significant leadership from the people most affected by the problem. There is no way we can end hunger and slash poverty in American unless low-income Americans, who have experienced the problems themselves, play a central role in the movement.” - New York City Coalition Against Hunger*

Community advisory boards, organizing committees, or any other group of local community members, are important for guiding the work of your organization and inspiring change. In the same way that a nonprofit is accountable to its board of directors and funders, it is essential to be held accountable by the people you serve. By coming together to speak out on an injustice, community members can take a leadership role and both teach and learn from others. By including every voice, we can better understand an issue and discover solutions.



Photo from a Witnesses to Hunger exhibit at University of Pennsylvania

## **A Message from the Witnesses to Hunger Advisory Board**

*We as members of Witnesses to Hunger believe that an advisory board is one of the most effective ways to engage community members with the advocacy work of an organization. Through the Witnesses to Hunger Advisory Board, we have seen the growth of both the organization and each other. The Board allows Witnesses to form a structured group, assigning roles and responsibilities to each of its members. This structure helps promote collaboration within the group. Together, we see the piece of the puzzle that was missing. We can finish our tasks and achieve our goals.*

*Working together on the Advisory Board has made us grow as leaders. We have learned to take responsibility for ourselves and our work. We know how to make decisions as a team that will further the organization's mission. But most importantly, we have seen that leaders are only as strong as their community. Our efforts are ineffective if our community is not unified in creating change.*

*With the Advisory Board, we can get a group of community members together in unison, on the same page, working to end hunger in America.*

*To make this group as productive and successful as possible, it is important to remember that there must always be constant and clear communication between the Board and the rest of the organization. Transparency is key. The Advisory Board acts as a bridge from the community to inside the office. We are all working together as a team. We can only create change if every person that is a part of the organization communicates with each other and respects each other.*

*Our experience on the Witnesses to Hunger Advisory Board has taught us a great deal about ourselves, our strengths, our goals. We hope that you consider creating an advisory board, or some other form of community organizing group, in your own organization.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Advisory Board of Witnesses to Hunger*

# The Power of Photography

*“Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. It entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change, in their own communities.”*

*- Caroline Wang, DrPH*

Using photos and videos as advocacy tools places power in the hands of the individual. Witnesses to Hunger is based on a model of research and advocacy called “photovoice,” in which people use cameras to document their own lives and the things they would like to see changed. Photovoice is a tool of empowerment, especially for groups of people who have been historically disempowered and whose voices have been ignored. It connects them with the public and those with the power to make real political change. It is the person with firsthand experience who puts himself or herself behind the lens and decides what should be captured. This is not a project for professional artists or photographers. This is an opportunity for the real experts on hunger and poverty to express themselves and reflect on their daily lives. Pictures and videos can show what a report never could - the experiences of the person affected by poverty and the policies and programs that are related to the cycle of poverty.

## **Questions to Get Started with Photovoice:**

***Questions based on the mnemonic “SHOWeD,” credited to Dr. Caroline Wang and her colleagues***

1. What do you **See** here?
2. What is really **H**appening?
3. How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
4. Is this a problem or a strength? **W**hy does this problem or strength exist?
5. What can we **D**o about it?



## Photographs by Witnesses to Hunger

*So this is basically what you're going to see in mostly every corner store: food stamps and lottery. Perfect, huh? Great combination, food stamps and lottery. The lottery gives the poor people dreams to win something that they're probably never going to win. Giving your money away to try to have that one chance out of a billion.*

*-Photo and Voice by Ilesha, Boston*



*With the money food stamps provide, I was able to feed her breakfast that morning. Without it what would she have eaten? I wanted to show that with the help she was able to eat breakfast that morning. She had cereal. She had milk. She didn't have to go without.*

*-Photo and Voice by Crystal, Philadelphia*

*My girls keep me going. I don't want them to go through what I went through. I don't want to say perfect, because nothing's perfect, but I just want them to just have, like, a perfect little upbringing. I'm not promised any day, but I try to make the best out of what I can, and teach them as much as I can teach them, and what they need to know, as far as living, life, bad things, good things, bad people, good people. I just try to do what's right, what's best for them.*

*-Photo and Voice by Juell, Boston*



We hope that you will seek out ways to build partnerships with others in the community. We encourage you to go out and make your own unique mark in this work and to find solutions to poverty and hunger. If you are interested in creating your own chapter of Witnesses to Hunger, please contact us at [info@witnessestohunger.org](mailto:info@witnessestohunger.org), and we will work with you to build your project.

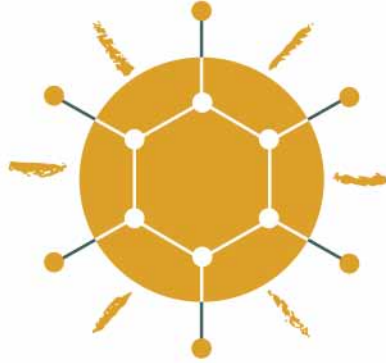


*Photo of Witnesses to Hunger at the U.S. Capitol*

## Resources

Here are a few sources of information that you may find valuable in your community engagement efforts. By exploring these links, you can learn more about organizations that have community advisory boards and community organizing committees. You can learn more about the photovoice technique and the impact of participatory art in advocacy. Use these resources as a starting point for creating your own positive partnerships in the community.

1. The Center for Hunger-Free Communities website, [www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org](http://www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org)
2. New York City Coalition Against Hunger website, [www.nyccah.org](http://www.nyccah.org)
3. Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, *Empowerment through Photo Novella: Portraits of Participation*, published in the magazine Health Education and Behavior in 1994. <http://heb.sagepub.com/content/21/2/171.short>
4. Mariana Chilton and Jenny Rabinowich, *Witnesses to Hunger: Participation Through Photovoice to Ensure the Right to Food*, published in the magazine Health and Human Rights in Practice in 2009. <http://www.hhrjournal.org/index.php/hhr/article/viewFile/136/225>
5. Photovoice: Participatory Photography for Social Change [www.photovoice.org](http://www.photovoice.org)
6. Media Voices for Children: an article by Witnesses to Hunger's Angela Sutton, using her voice and her photos to advocate on the importance of the food stamp program. <http://mediavoicesforchildren.org/?p=6817>



CENTER FOR HUNGER-FREE COMMUNITIES

solutions based on science and the human experience

**Email: [info@witnessestohunger.org](mailto:info@witnessestohunger.org)**

**Phone: 215-762-1945**

**Address:**

**Center for Hunger Free Communities  
1505 Race St. 11<sup>th</sup> Floor, Mail Stop 1035  
Philadelphia, PA 19102**

**Website: [www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org](http://www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org)**

