

# Parent Voices Oakland:

## *Developing Leaders for Child Care Justice*



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## BACKGROUND

Parent Voices Oakland (PVO) has established itself as a leading advocate for affordable, quality child care in California's Bay Area. With support from the Voices for Health Justice project, PVO has built an innovative approach to organizing and relationship building that focuses on systemic change and ensures families have access to affordable, quality child care—fundamental components of health equity and community well-being. Operating at city, county, and state levels, PVO's model demonstrates how power building can drive policy change while advancing health equity and developing sustainable community leadership.

What distinguishes PVO from other advocacy organizations is their unwavering commitment to building and nurturing authentic relationships with their base. PVO developed a relational organizing model that centers the lived experiences of parents and providers, creates sustainable leadership development pathways, and achieves tangible policy wins while addressing the holistic needs of families.



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***“At a time when public narratives often devalue care work and parental leadership—particularly from Black, Brown, and immigrant families—PVO’s model not only seeks policy wins, but rebalances power by building organizing infrastructure led by those most impacted.”***

*- Clarissa Doutherd, PVO Executive Director*

## THE CHALLENGE

PVO identified a need for an updated outreach and leadership development model for organizers in child care advocacy working directly with parents. This recognition that child care challenges don't exist in isolation but are connected to broader health, economic, and social concerns forms the basis of PVO's holistic approach. By understanding the full context of a family's situation, PVO develops more effective advocacy strategies and connects parents and child care providers with comprehensive support.

### Core Strategy 1: *Parent Leaders Drive Decision-Making*

The organization began with intentional outreach to parents struggling with child care access, followed by in-depth one-on-one conversations that explore not only child care challenges but also interconnected issues affecting families' well-being. This holistic approach recognizes that child care challenges intersect with housing insecurity, employment, education, and health care access.

***"Relational organizing is key to a base-building organization. We really value our base—our leaders, our members."*** - Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing



PHOTO COURTESY OF PVO

Parent leaders actively shape organizational priorities through a structured yet flexible decision-making framework.

***"At our annual retreat parent leaders collectively set our policy agenda for the year ensuring that the campaigns reflect the needs families actually have. This approach has evolved from general advocacy to incorporating deeper power analysis."***

- Clarissa Doutherd, Executive Director of PVO

***“When I first got involved, we weren’t talking about power; we weren’t talking about race and gender and why conditions were so bad.”***

*- Clarissa Doutherd, Executive Director of Parent Voices Oakland*

PVO has evolved from simply advocating for better conditions to directly addressing power imbalances from the bottom up. This shift means campaigns now incorporate deeper analysis of how race, gender, and economic systems impact families differently, ensuring strategies target the actual decision-makers and systems maintaining inequality rather than just symptoms.

By intentionally centering marginalized voices, particularly Black mothers, and building strong relationships through “one-to-ones,” PV Oakland demonstrates how organizations can create authentic opportunities for those most affected by policies to direct advocacy strategies and efforts. Meaningful parent involvement in governance produces more effective responses to the complex barriers families face in accessing early childhood care and support.

### **Core Strategy 2:** *Structured Leadership Development*

Central to PVO's success is their structured leadership development system, visually represented by a leadership chart that organizers maintain and reference daily. This tool transforms abstract relationship-building into a concrete, measurable process.

#### ***The Leadership Development Ladder:***

- **Level 1:** Fully developed leaders who "stay ready"—typically long-term members who independently organize and mobilize others
- **Level 2-3:** Developing leaders at various stages of engagement and responsibility
- **Level 4:** New contacts who have shown initial interest in leadership but have not yet deeply engaged



For each level, PVO has established specific criteria for advancement:

1. **Initial Engagement:** Simply showing up to events
2. **Expanding Reach:** Attending actions and bringing others
3. **Building Knowledge:** Completing political education trainings
4. **Taking Ownership:** Leading outreach and organizing efforts

*"Every week leaders are checking in to ask questions like, "What are you doing to make sure that they're developing into a three?"*

*- Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing*

To ensure sustainability, PVO also focuses on continuously bringing in new leaders to prevent burnout by:

- Creating peer-to-peer systems that don't rely solely on staff capacity
- Developing clear, accessible political education that connects policy to personal experience
- Balancing immediate campaign needs with long-term relationship building

## IMPACT AT A GLANCE

PVO measures success through movement along their leadership ladder, policy wins, leadership readiness, proactive engagement, and representation in implementation decisions.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PVO

## Participatory Decision-Making Leads to Legislative Wins

- One of PVO's major policy wins was securing funding for child care through a voter ballot measure known as Measure C. In 2020, Oakland voters passed a ballot measure to increase taxes in order to generate approximately \$150 million annually to expand access to early childhood education and child care. **PVO leaders helped decide the framing for the Children's Health and Child Care Initiative for Alameda County (aka Measure C) campaign messaging after several community listening sessions.**
- PVO leaders worked with various public health partners at the county level, such as The Alameda County Early Childhood Policy Committee, and labor unions, including SEIU, to form a coalition and push for child care justice initiatives.
- Thanks to the persistence and organizing infrastructure of PVO's parent leaders a governance structure was created for Measure C to include pathways for democratic, community-led decision-making processes. These actions were to ensure Measure C would not simply lead to an audit oversight committee but rather an active participatory committee made up of community members with layers of decision-making power.
- **On March 3, 2020, Measure C passed by 64.35%, well above the threshold needed to pass a local sales tax.**
- When a lawsuit by the Alameda County Taxpayers' Association held up the funds, PVO activated its members and leaders to fight back with grassroots organizing efforts. PVO's leadership development model allowed for a level of growth and sustainability needed for what turned out to be a long-haul fight. In April 2024—over four years after Measure C passed—the state Supreme Court upheld the measure and Alameda County Board of Supervisors tentatively approved the first disbursement of funds.
- This win resulted in \$530 million in revenue becoming available to fund the services of youth and families in the county are entitled to.

## Leadership Readiness: Phone Banking Supports Leader-to-Leader Communication

By implementing a structured phone banking system with "phone captains" who reach out to families regularly, PVO sustains engagement between active campaigns or initiatives.

This "leader-to-leader" approach allows the organization to maintain connections with their base while freeing organizers to focus on developing new relationships and expanding their reach. It is also part of PVO's long-term vision for leader-led campaigns within the broader coalition movement of child care advocacy organizations.

## Proactive Community Engagement: Deep Investment in Face-to-Face Interaction

While many organizations have shifted toward digital organizing, PVO maintains a strong commitment to in-person engagement, finding it yields stronger relationships and more sustainable involvement:

*"You can make a million calls in a day, but it's not going to compare to you going out there and having those deep conversations with folks that literally are five to ten minutes away. It's not even a lot of time, but the investment seems to be stronger when you have that face-to-face interaction"* Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing

Through door-knocking and in-person conversations, PVO has built deeper connections with their stakeholders.

## Political Education Rooted in Lived Experience

Rather than presenting policy issues in abstract terms, PVO connects political education directly to the lived experiences of their base.

*"We do these political education trainings so that folks feel ready to go to the state capitol to tell their stories. So, if there's a state or federal budget cut, they [will] know they're directly impacted."*

- Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing

This approach makes policy concrete and accessible while empowering parents to be effective advocates.



*"Policy is just so scary to a lot of people. So, it's our job to break it down like, 'OK, no, this is what they're saying. It's very simple. [Policymakers] use fancy words and vocabulary around it, but this is what they are saying. How do you feel like it relates to your life and what you're trying to do and your needs and your community's needs?'"*

- Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing



PHOTO COURTESY OF PVO

## Facilitating Parent-Provider Connections

PVO's relational organizing extends beyond parents to include child care providers, recognizing the interconnected nature of the child care ecosystem.

***"Our child care providers have issues too, whether it's low wages or any kind of hiccup that's preventing them from working at their fullest potential. Bringing those folks together to meet each other is part of our strategy as well." - Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing***

By facilitating relationships between parents and providers, PVO builds a more cohesive advocacy community and helps address practical needs.

***"Once we get parents and providers into space together, [both parties] are able to meet and build relationships and figure out if those providers are a good fit for their families or if the families are a good fit for the providers." - Alia Phelps, PVO Director of Organizing***



## CONCLUSION

By centering authentic relationships, investing in leadership development through structured systems like their leadership chart, and connecting child care to broader health and social concerns, PVO has created a sustainable approach that not only wins policy changes but builds lasting community power.

PVO's relational organizing model offers valuable insights for organizations working toward health equity and social justice:

- 1 **Relationships First:** Authentic, sustained relationships must be the foundation of organizing efforts, not an afterthought.
- 2 **Development Over Mobilization:** Investing in leadership development creates more sustainable advocacy than mobilizing for single campaigns.
- 3 **Connect the Dots:** Recognizing how issues like child care connect to broader health and social concerns allows for more holistic advocacy.
- 4 **Quality Over Quantity:** The depth of engagement matters more than the number of contacts or participants.
- 5 **Balance Urgency with Sustainability:** Effective organizing requires both responding to immediate needs and building for the long term.