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COMMUNITY VOICES HEARD

A BE FEARLESS CASE STUDY

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

MAKE FAILURE MATTER:

Failure teaches. Learn from it.

LET URGENCY CONQUER FEAR:

Don't think and overanalyze. Do.

REACH BEYOND YOUR BUBBLE:

It's comfortable to go it alone.
But innovation happens at
intersections.

To give voice to New York City's poorest residents and empower them to address the seemingly intractable problems they faced, Community Voices Heard pulled together a strategic coalition to implement a radical budgetary decision-making process.

SYNOPSIS/SUMMARY

Community Voices Heard was founded specifically to raise the voices of people often ignored in our society—those on public assistance or who are homeless, low-wage workers, women, or people of color. Led by a membership of these traditionally-disenfranchised community members, Community Voices Heard set out to improve the public housing situation in New York City and ended up introducing a new process called participatory

budgeting to accomplish their goals. This process is designed to ensure that the people whose lives are directly affected by a decision get to make that decision. Residents would suggest projects for funding and then vote on the allocation of funding. With this process, public housing residents who lacked safe gathering spaces or students who lacked access to critical technology could get those needs funded. Though participatory budgeting



was initially rejected by the public housing authority, Community Voices Heard persisted and built a coalition of partners that ultimately achieved what no one else in the United States had done—instituting participatory budgeting across a major U.S. city.

The following case study details how, in the face of initial failure, Community Voices Heard was motivated by its community's urgent needs to build unlikely partnerships and unrelentingly drive forward the participatory budgeting process.

THE BACKGROUND

The 1990s in New York City was a time of worsening economic conditions and increasing poverty. Though poverty and unemployment were declining across most of the country, New York City experienced the opposite effect. From 1990 to 2000, the U.S. poverty rate fell from 13.5 percent to 12.4 percent of the population, but in New York City, the overall poverty rate increased from 19.3 percent to 20.8 percent. Simultaneously, there was a push to make welfare more restrictive. New York City government increased its rejection rate of welfare applicants from 27 percent in 1994 to 54 percent in 1997, and up to 75 percent in 1998. Accompanying the stringent changes was a national discourse stigmatizing individuals receiving public assistance, which greatly limited this population's voice in the policy decisions affecting their lives.

In 1994, a group of New Yorkers—mostly women, some homeless, many receiving public assistance and unemployed—decided they had had enough and came together to make their voices heard in a fight for economic justice. Together, they formed Community Voices Heard (CVH), a member-led organization that, through grassroots organizing, leadership development, advocacy and creation of new models of direct democracy,

would build power to secure social, economic and racial justice.

CVH was founded on a commitment to ensure that the people directly affected by the issues are at the table when decisions about policy, budgets or regulations involving those issues are developed. The founding by-laws dictated that the Board of Directors had to include more than 50 percent women, more than 50 percent people of color and more than 50 percent low-income individuals. With these populations driving the organization's agenda, CVH began mobilizing residents around issues including: welfare rights; job access and quality; workforce development; neighborhood planning and rezoning; and affordable housing.

A NEW BATTLE BEGINS

While New York City's economy began to rebound in the early 2000s, economic success and infrastructure improvements were not equally distributed across the city. Many public housing buildings desperately needed repair—residents dealt with long-standing problems such as crumbling walls, leaky roofs, rotting plumbing, broken elevators and rodent infestations. At the same time, residents were hit with sudden rent increases and an onslaught of new fees for services that were previously free, such as some repairs and running household appliances, despite the fact that chronic mismanagement meant that any small amount of money going towards these repairs did not provide lasting, quality fixes. Realizing that action needed to be taken and that they needed to advocate for themselves, CVH's Public Housing Committee launched a campaign in 2006 to push back against the new fees.

However, the many years of disenfranchisement and exclusion from decision-making processes had taken a toll on public housing residents. They were wary of participating in an effort to push the New York City Housing

Authority (NYCHA) after years of having their perspectives ignored and their lives disrespected by those in power. Government officials, media and society at-large routinely stereotyped and criticized public housing residents for not caring about their communities, when the reality was quite different. Residents wanted to improve their living conditions but the systems meant to facilitate their engagement and participation were broken and regularly undermined by conflicting policies and lack of enforcement.

AS YOUDELMAN NOTES,

“We choose to tackle big policies that others aren’t attacking—yes, it’s a risk to choose this fight. We may not win, but someone has to try.”

Deep, systemic challenges like these would cause many organizations to give up. But since CVH members are the ones affected by these issues, they are less likely, and less able, to back away from this type of challenge. “Since our members are those affected, we can’t just let it go,” says Sondra Youdelman, Executive Director. She explains, “We choose to tackle big policies that others aren’t attacking—yes, it’s a risk to choose this fight. We may not win, but someone has to try.”

Realizing that its members were caught in a vicious cycle of disrespect, disenfranchisement and disengagement, CVH needed a new strategy—one that would

change the system and return power to the residents of New York City Housing.

THE “AHA MOMENT”

After exploring a number of different ways to advance their agenda around decision-making power without success, CVH members decided to pursue a new approach called participatory budgeting. Several CVH members first learned about this process in 2002, when a funder sent four CVH representatives to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. At the Forum, the group learned that participatory budgeting empowers community members to decide how parts of a government budget are used. Residents recommend community-benefit projects which are then placed on a ballot. The residents then vote and the money is allocated to the winning projects. This process directly engages the community in governance and allows them to influence how their tax dollars are spent while also requiring them to consider tradeoffs in these budget allocations.

As Youdelman describes, “I was fascinated with the agency and voice [participatory budgeting] gave to ordinary citizens, and how it involved real resources. [With our campaigns] at the time, I felt like we were fighting over crumbs in the budget, and so I was inspired that there was another method of budgeting that gave real voice to the community.”

THE BE FEARLESS RESPONSE

A ROADBLOCK IN THE NEW PATH

Through research on participatory budgeting, CVH learned that it had been instituted in multiple places around the world, but not yet in the United States. CVH sent a delegation to Toronto to learn about the participatory budgeting in their public housing oversight agency. Upon their





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return, the delegation members urged CVH to explore adding a participatory budgeting element to its public housing campaign.

Such a decision would dramatically shift CVH’s role from traditional activist—fighting government to change specific policies—to partner—working with government to implement a process and the subsequent community recommendations. This was uncharted territory for CVH, breaking the mold for the grassroots organizing field, and the organization’s leaders asked themselves the same questions they asked before starting anything new: “How will this be useful for us in building our base and building power? Will it take us off track?” Ultimately, they decided that taking on this new role in the near term would serve their long-term goal of getting public housing residents a greater voice in decision-making about their homes and lives.

CVH staff approached NYCHA in 2010 and proposed that public housing residents, who would be the most affected by budget decisions, be included in those decisions via participatory budgeting. The outcomes, CVH emphasized, would not only be more effective commu-

nity advocacy but also a lighter decision-making burden on NYCHA. Ultimately, this process would bring more understanding within the community about the trade-offs that NYCHA had to deal with, given limited resources and massive need. Though CVH conducted a series of meetings and panel discussions about participatory budgeting with NYCHA officials, the agency was averse to trying something that had not been widely implemented or proven in the U.S. The risk seemed too high and NYCHA turned CVH down.

Despite this initial rejection, the challenges facing CVH members and public housing residents were too dire and their anger over being marginalized from decision-making processes yet again was too great to ignore, so CVH went back to the drawing board.

NOT TAKING “NO” FOR AN ANSWER

CVH was familiar with rejection and had built an organizational resilience in the course of struggling for the members’ cause. As member-leader and public housing resident Agnes Rivera described, “What we do is we don’t give up. We can’t give up, because when we do, we are

losing ourselves and our lives. We think of another way. We come together and put out as many ideas as possible and break it down to what's most sensible." This perseverance had gotten CVH multiple wins in the past, and this time would be no different.

CVH members and staff had been inspired by the idea of participatory budgeting and the possibilities it held for democratizing decision-making in NYCHA, and they weren't ready to give up on it yet. Perhaps if they could demonstrate success with participatory budgeting in another area of city government, they might then be better positioned to convince NYCHA to adopt the process.

To do this successfully, CVH would need some new partnerships. They connected with leaders of the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), an organization that creates and supports participatory budgeting processes in North America that deepen democracy, build stronger communities and make public budgets more equitable and effective. PBP had recently made inroads with the process in one Chicago alderman's district and was interested in supporting potential participatory budgeting efforts in other cities, including New York City. CVH also recalled that during the attempt to convince NYCHA to use participatory budgeting, a handful of City Council members heard about the process and were intrigued by the idea of potentially trying participatory budgeting in their districts.

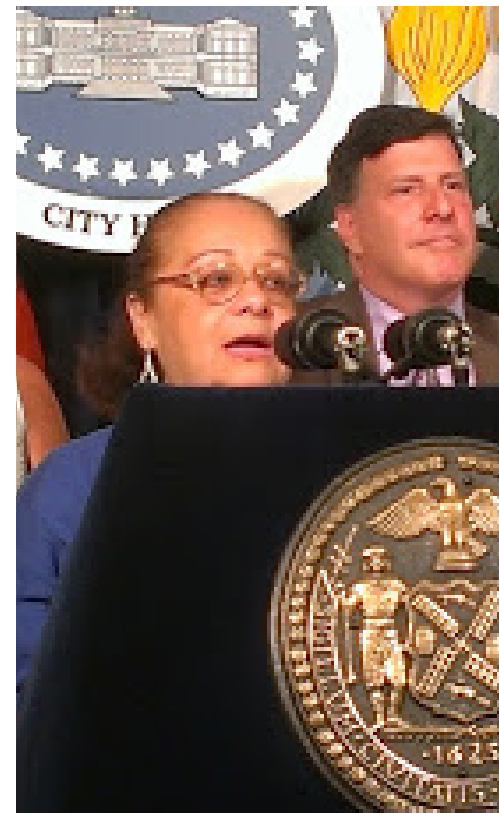
Sensing a unique moment in time—with the confluence of PBP offering its expertise and Council members expressing interest—CVH decided to pursue participatory budgeting at the City Council level. This decision was a departure from CVH's initial intent of using participatory budgeting to bolster its public housing campaign and some members and staff were initially resistant. Was CVH abandoning its efforts to improve public hous-

ing? Why was an organization that typically focused on citywide policy "scaling back" to work at the individual district level? CVH leaders considered these concerns, but ultimately determined that instituting participatory budgeting at the district level would empower residents to fight for the same changes sought by the original public housing campaign. If City Council members whose districts included public housing agreed to participate in participatory budgeting, they reasoned, those residents would be able to use the process to advocate for changes in public housing.

In October 2010, CVH and PBP co-organized a panel on participatory budgeting and invited City Council members to attend. The panel highlighted the positive impact participatory budgeting could have, stressing that the process was a win-win. The burden of budgeting would fall on the community members rather than the Council members, which would ultimately result in what was best for the residents. CVH also noted that by allowing residents to have a voice in the decision-making process, Council members could win residents' support for their leadership.

Although the politicians did not commit immediately, with additional education and advocacy by CVH and its partners, ultimately four Council members agreed to sign on, allocating a total of \$6 million from their discretionary budgets to a participatory budgeting pilot in 2011. Based on residents' votes, some of this money was eventually directed to New York City's first-ever library vending machine, enabling residents of Breezy Point, where there is no public library, to access materials from the Queens Library system. Another winning project, initially proposed by students in Brooklyn, brought field lights to an athletic field, creating a safer environment and extending the hours during which the community could use the field.

From the beginning, this initiative had important buy-in from both sides of the aisle. Melissa Mark-Viverito, Brad Lander and Jumaane Williams were progressive leaders who had





already developed relationships with CVH, while Eric Ulrich was a conservative leader who agreed to sign up for participatory budgeting because it was, as he described, simply a good government practice. As Councilman Lander expressed, “This is revolutionary civics in action. Participatory budgeting helps to restore confidence in democratic government as a vehicle for collective action to solve problems.” The commitment of these four Council members gave CVH and PBP the opportunity to pilot participatory budgeting and refine a process that could be easily replicated elsewhere in the city.

FORGING A NEW PATH WITH UNLIKELY PARTNERS

CVH and PBP knew that successful participatory budgeting processes were typically guided by a Steering Committee representing multiple organizations and constituencies, rather than being driven exclusively by one or two organizations. So they, along with their four Council allies, brainstormed ideas for who should be invited to join the Steering Committee. Some groups were obvious—key community organizing groups as well

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as those with experience in community outreach and engagement, particularly of marginalized and disenfranchised populations.

But CVH, PBP and the Council members didn’t stop there. Participatory budgeting was still unproven in the U.S. and Council members were going out on a limb to be the first to try it on a multi-district scale. It was essential that CVH and PBP do everything they could to make it successful and that included thinking expansively about what and who would be necessary for success. So they invited a research organization that could evaluate the pilot

effort as well as groups with expertise in design, marketing and mapping technology to ensure their efforts were as successful as possible. As Youdelman said, “It took everyone and coalition-building and partnership-formation was a critical part of this process. We definitely couldn’t do it alone. We coled a process that brought the right players together to make it happen.”

Although CVH had been a part of, and even led, a number of coalitions in the past, the participatory budgeting effort required building new alliances with different types of stakeholders. In particular, this was the first time the organization had truly partnered in a deep way with government officials. As an organizing group, CVH was more accustomed to an “us vs. them” mentality regarding policymakers; typically, CVH members and staff were fighting against a government policy or action. Now, these same leaders were being asked to work with government officials to accomplish something together. This new cross-sector collaboration was sometimes frustrating but ultimately led to greater understanding between government, CVH and its nonprofit partners.

GETTING ALL COMMUNITY VOICES HEARD

When the pilot process for participatory budgeting had been designed by the Steering Committee, CVH began reaching out to the community to galvanize support and participation. CVH tapped into its existing networks from its public housing and welfare campaigns and began educating people on the process—residents would brainstorm spending ideas for the allocated money, volunteer budget delegates would develop proposals based on these ideas, the residents would vote on the proposals and the government would then implement the top projects.

As CVH began conducting outreach, some members and staff worried about mission creep. In addition to the new partnership role with city government, this process would shift CVH's efforts from exclusively targeting low-income neighborhoods to inviting budget proposals and votes from residents at all socioeconomic levels. For example, Councilwoman Mark-Viverito's district included two primarily low-income neighborhoods (South Bronx and East Harlem) and one primarily high-income area (Upper West Side). CVH worried that their participatory budgeting efforts might result in more projects being funded in high-income areas, rather than in areas with the greatest need. CVH also worried that funders would be more excited about this new project than CVH's existing work and CVH's funding for its core work would suffer.

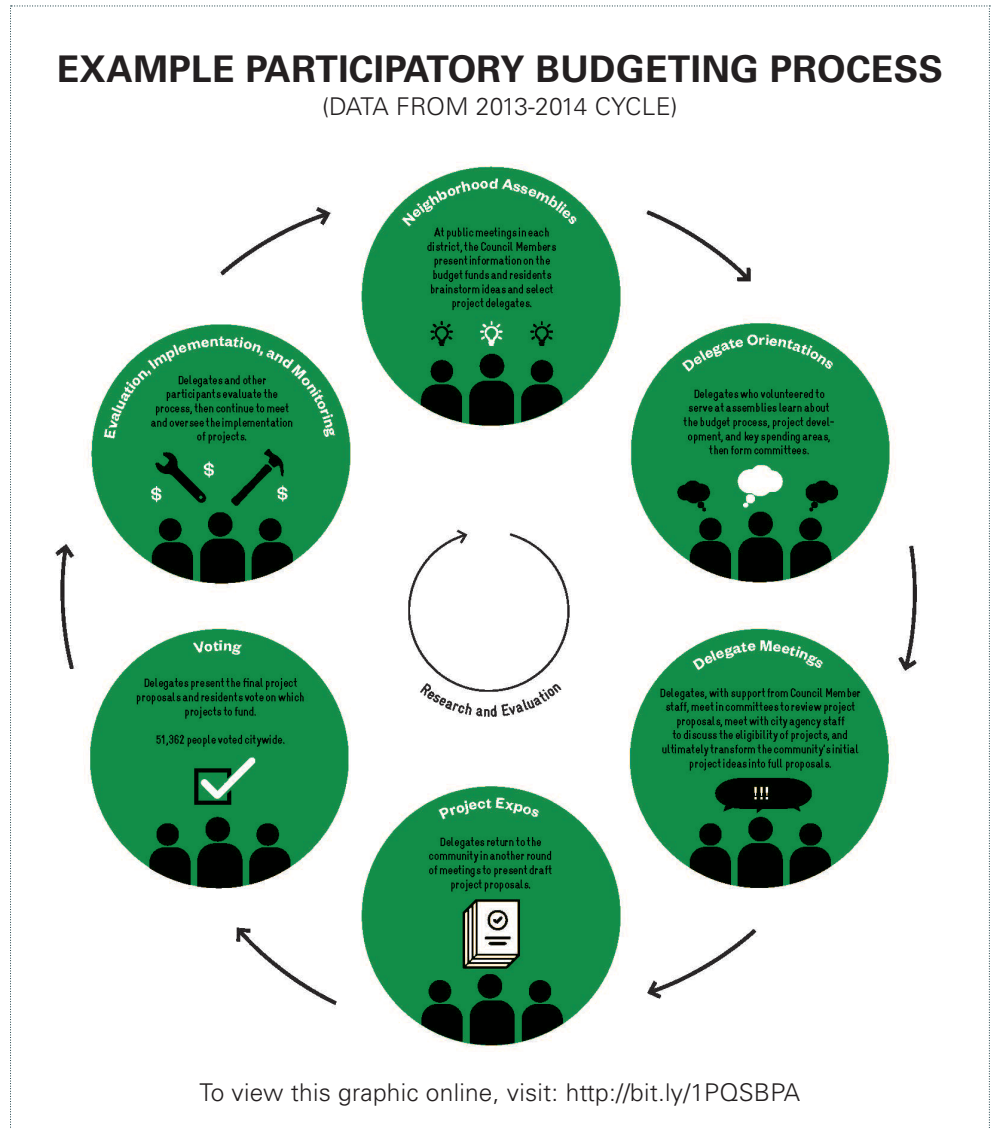
To address some of these concerns, CVH resolved to declare participatory budgeting a "special project." Dedicated staff were hired

and the budget (both fundraising and expenses) was handled separately from the main CVH budget. Regarding concerns about participation from all socioeconomic levels, staff also knew they would have to draw on their community mobilization expertise to ensure strong participation from the low-income residents in these districts.

Voting rules, another key part of the project design, were also used to ensure plurality and diversity of community voice. The Steering Committee established voting rules that were much more inclusive than those for other government processes. Residents did not have to be registered voters, citizens or even legal U.S. residents to vote for community budget allocations. To participate, the voter simply had to be a resident of the district and at least 16 years old (the minimum age was subsequently reduced further to 14 years old).

CVH focused its efforts on engaging people at the outside margins of community deci-

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sion-making, such as low-income individuals, people of color, those with language barriers and undocumented immigrants. It was a challenge getting all of these individuals involved, especially those who were undocumented and therefore wary of the legal system and officials. So CVH established additional partnerships, this time with schools, agencies and community groups already working with this population, which enabled a more trusted outreach. As Carmen Piniero, current Individual Giving & Events Coordinator and previous Sustainable Communities Organizer at CVH, noted, “It was new and exciting to see these individuals have a voice in the community. For the first time they didn’t have to hide.”

THE RESULTS

Between 2011 and 2015, New York City completed four full cycles of participatory budgeting, while continuing to expand the number of participants and money available each year. By the fourth cycle, the amount of money allocated to participatory budgeting had increased more than five-fold to \$32 million and the number of participants increased from 5,985 in the first year to 51,362 in the 2014-2015 round. In this most recent cycle, residents voted to fund projects including public housing playground renovations, raised crosswalks for pedestrian safety, a mobile food pantry, air conditioning for public schools and emergency call boxes in public parks.

Although the funds allocated through participatory budgeting still represent a small portion of the city’s total budget, four rounds of this process has had a meaningful impact on civic participation, particularly among those populations that have been historically disengaged and disenfranchised. Each successive round of participatory budgeting has engaged increasing numbers of women, people of color, immigrants, young

people and low-income people. In the 2013-2014 cycle, 62 percent of participants identified as people of color, up from 41 percent the year before. Nearly half of participants (49 percent) came from households making less than \$50,000 a year, as compared to 32 percent in the previous cycle. Perhaps more significantly, these people are voting at higher rates in the participatory budgeting process than they do in traditional local elections:

- 11 percent of PB voters identified as Asian, compared with 4 percent of 2013 local election voters.
- 24 percent of PB voters identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, compared with 14 percent of 2013 local election voters.
- 66 percent of PB voters were women, compared with 56 percent of 2013 local election voters.
- 7 percent of PB voters were between the ages of 18 and 24, compared with 4 percent of 2013 local election voters.
- 39 percent of PB voters reported household incomes below \$35,000 per year, compared with 21 percent of 2013 local election.

Not only are these residents engaged in decision-making, their perspectives are influencing broader funding decisions in city government. In some cases, Council members have decided to allocate additional funding to projects that were on the participatory budgeting ballot but did not win the vote. Seven of the 10 Council members who participated in the third participatory budgeting cycle did this, directing an additional \$2.9 million dollars to these communities to fund projects such as security system upgrades, improved bus stops and new community gardens. In other cases, the participatory budgeting process has highlighted a need for changes in the city budget. When numerous projects related to improving school bathrooms made it onto the ballot, the city subsequently agree to add \$50 million in funding for bathroom improvements to the Department of Education’s budget.



Projects now funded through participatory budgeting—from laptops for students to transportation for senior citizens—reflect residents’ desires to improve their lives and their neighborhoods. For instance, the Solar-Powered Greenhouse at Milbrook Houses in the Bronx will employ disengaged youth in growing healthy foods for the community, engage them in selling the vegetables grown through a Farmers’ Market and provide them with valuable exposure to careers in agriculture, business and renewable energy.

Though directing city funds to residents’ most critical needs through participatory budgeting had been CVH’s main motivation, the organization found an unexpected win in the community connections built around these efforts. People came together to fix and enhance their communities, working on projects beyond those that had won participatory budgeting money.

Though directing city funds to residents’ most critical needs through participatory budgeting had been CVH’s main motivation, the organization found an unexpected win in the community connections built around these efforts.

For example, the first cycle of participatory budgeting included a proposal to fix a local basketball court that had become run-down and dangerous. The project did not win on the ballot, but the Police Athletic Office, which also used the court, took notice and decided to fund the project from its own budget. In

another instance, there was a public housing building with lighting issues that posed a security problem, and though it did not win the participatory budgeting money, a local electrician came forward to volunteer his time and expertise to fix it.

Ultimately, participatory budgeting was building stronger communities as the process expanded and brought together more community members. By the third cycle, 68 percent of voters reported that prior to the participatory budgeting process, they had never worked with others in their community to solve problems. This surge in civic engagement has helped build awareness among community members of each other’s needs. As one participant reflected, “My eyes are now opened to the existence of a lot of needs that I wouldn’t have realized.”

The success and popularity of participatory budgeting has grown exponentially. CVH continues to petition Council members and works to get residents involved. In the most recent cycle, more than 51,000 residents voted to allocate \$32 million dollars for locally developed capital projects in New York City and by 2015, 28 of the 51 Council districts of New York City had signed on for the fifth cycle of participatory budgeting.

Participatory budgeting has become so widespread in New York City, and its success so evident, that the process has now been institutionalized within city government. Even as CVH continues its recruitment and resident engagement efforts, there are now dedicated staff members within the City Council Community Engagement Division and Policy & Innovation Division who bear primary responsibility for implementing the process and they receive additional support from the Finance Division and Communications Division. In recognition of its success,

AS RIVERA NOTES,

“I learned that no matter how hard the fight is, never give up on it, never ever give up on it. Always know that there’s a way.”

participatory budgeting in New York City was one of two recipients of the Harvard University Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation’s 2015 Innovation in American Government Award.


Throughout the entire effort, CVH never gave up on convincing NYCHA to try participatory budgeting. Over the years, CVH and its partners met with high-level NYCHA staff numerous times to familiarize them with the process, share participatory budgeting victories, and discuss ways in which NYCHA could benefit. Finally, five years after CVH’s initial ask, the agency agreed to pilot participatory budgeting and the Council even allocated funds to support NYCHA during the implementation process. As a member-led organization working to make its initial failure with this agency matter, CVH is now intent on growing the amount of money allocated to participatory budgeting through NYCHA, to ensure more funds are allocated to projects that will directly benefit public housing residents.

As Rivera reflected in summing up her participatory budgeting experiences, “I learned that no matter how hard the fight is, never give up on it, never ever give up on it. Always know that there’s a way.”




Guiding Discussion Questions

In what ways has your organization let urgency conquer fear?

 _____

How have you or your organization reacted in the face of failure? In what ways have you been able to push forward?

 _____


What new ideas have emerged out of failure?

 _____

In what ways does your organization ensure that it is giving a voice to individuals who are not typically represented in greater society?

 _____

What unlikely partnerships might you form to better engage less visible community members in your efforts?

 _____

Have you experienced any initial failures in trying to establish new partnerships? What do you do to balance patience with urgency in addressing the issue?

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