



# VOICES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

OUR STRATEGIC VISION  
2018-2022



Taking the time to pause and reflect is challenging in a world driven by crises and urgency. For those of us working to address issues of institutional and structural racism, 2017 was a particularly challenging time. The national political landscape was a backdrop to the local acquittal of police officer Jeronimo Janez in the killing of Philando Castile, an explosion at the Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center, and the daily fear experienced by immigrant communities.

But heightened moments like these can also be just the right time to gather together and imagine a different reality. In April 2017 Voices for Racial Justice began such a journey by working with Vision Change Win in a strategic planning process to envision the next five years of our organization. Over eight months, our team worked with consultants YaliniDream and Krystal Portalatin to assess the health of our organization, hear from our community partners, analyze the political and movement landscape, and dream.

As is so often true, the journey was as important as the outcome. Through our strategic planning process, we deepened our relationships as a staff and board, shared many meals and laughs, and put into practice some of the values that ultimately became the grounding of our five year vision. We look forward to sharing this vision with you, and inviting you into our work together.

## **Grounded in Our History**

The seed for the organization we now know as Voices for Racial Justice began as the Organizing Apprenticeship Project in 1993. Initiated by a group of visionaries deeply committed to grassroots organizing and the power of communities naming and building the world we imagine, OAP's sole focus was an apprenticeship community organizer training.

Led by founding executive director Beth Newkirk, the six-month organizing cohort became a respected model for developing strong leadership in our community. Alumni of the OAP cohorts have gone on to lead campaigns for economic and racial justice within progressive groups in Minnesota and nationally. Some are now leading organizations themselves. Others are working in philanthropy, with a strong lens of the principles and practice of community organizing.

A theme that emerged in our strategic planning process was the organization's history of being adaptable and shifting as communities needed and demanded change. In 2005, OAP made one such change when alumni came back to the organization asking for more support in racial justice organizing. Until then, OAP's curriculum was grounded in developing organizers, taking approaches from multiple schools of thought, and committed most of all to learning through real experience in an apprenticeship model. But without a strong racial analysis, organizers, especially those of color and indigenous communities, were left without the tools to lead for racial justice both within their mostly white organizations and within the larger community. So with that push, OAP shifted its approach, adopting a strong racial justice framework and tools with the guidance of the Applied Research Center, now Race Forward.

2014 brought more change, including a change in leadership and the expression of our commitment to racial justice with the new name Voices for Racial Justice. Change comes with stretching and struggle, but through that work, we have been able to solidify who we are as Voices for Racial Justice, and see that our work ahead is grounded in this history of developing organizing leadership and continued commitment to the movement for racial justice in our communities. That clear sense of who we have been and deep appreciation for the leaders who first guided that work, along with the ability to listen to our communities and shift, has supported our vision for the next five years.

## Organizational Assessment

Our Vision Change Win consultants guided our team, including board and staff members, through an assessment process that included a detailed survey called My Healthy Organization. Yalini Dream and Krystal Portalatin followed that process with phone interviews with board and staff. In July 2017, they visited us in Minneapolis and led three listening sessions with multiple stakeholders in our work. They also guided the staff through a process of articulating our theory of change. Finally, our consultants led a strategic planning retreat of our board and staff in September that offered the space to both envision our future and make concrete plans for the next five years.

The assessment process confirmed the effectiveness of Voices in building relationships, listening to, developing trust with, and centering the communities who define our work. Our history of being flexible and adaptive through shifts in the movement and desires of our community was highlighted as key to our effectiveness.

One theme our team noted is the challenge of an organizing context in Minnesota that plugs people of color and indigenous peoples into campaigns rather than allowing for true leadership. We reflected on a dynamic of many organizing spaces not serving the holistic needs of communities. As a result, these spaces have become unsustainable and even harmful to our communities.

The assessment named our policy tools, including the 10 year practice of developing a Legislative Report Card on Racial Equity, as valued by our community partners. But even as the language of structural racism has made its way into spaces like the Minnesota State Capitol, racial disparities in Minnesota remain among the largest in the country. This reality opened questions about whether the effectiveness of these tools could be evaluated and improved to have greater impact on both organizing strategies and outcomes. A prior assessment of our training program was conducted in 2015 and led to emerging shifts in our organizer training. A similar review of our research and policy tools is due now, with the goal of hearing from partners and assessing the current landscape to inform the next phase of our work.

We identified a pressing need for people of color and indigenous communities to lead through deep participation in organizing efforts that transform the systems that affect our lives. Many conversations during the strategic planning process were guided by a desire for far deeper and healthier leadership by communities most impacted by systemic racial violence. Staff and community partners saw a failure to address intergenerational trauma as an obstacle to cultivating widespread and sustainable leadership from people of color and indigenous communities.

Although we have been involved in organizing campaigns in the past, this work was not named as a priority moving forward. Board, staff, and community partners were in clear alignment that the work of Voices for Racial Justice has shifted to caring for the soil of racial justice organizing. This metaphor came to us from our community partner and artist organizer Ricardo Levins Morales, who has drawn from an ecological perspective the importance of tending to the ecosystem of organizing for this work to be successful and sustainable over time.

This framework supports our strategic vision: that indigenous and people of color communities can lead – in healing, creative, and sustainable ways – in transforming the conditions that impact our lives. Within a context of healthy soil for racial justice organizing, we know that many seeds can thrive.

*“The soil is more important than the seeds. Almost anything will grow in rich, nutritious soil, whereas it’s hard to get anything to grow if the soil is barren and toxic and won’t hold moisture. So the seeds are our projects, our initiatives, our campaigns, our organizations, our institutions that we want to build and the soil is the compost of beliefs, ideas, values, narratives that create the environment within which we are working.”*

*-- Ricardo Levins Morales*

## **Our Strategic Vision**

Over the next five years, Voices For Racial Justice is committing to a strategic vision that includes:

**Healing Justice.** VRJ will model a healing justice framework in our convenings, trainings, and throughout our organizational practices. Organizing spaces will be accountable to histories of violence by being healing spaces. We will seek to model organizing itself as a healing practice that through thoughtful, relational, and culturally grounded work to bring to life our visions for our communities, we will also heal from the collective trauma of racism.

**How?** In 2018, our team is in a partnership with the People’s Movement Center to build and practice a healing justice framework internally that we can then share with our communities through all of our work. We are incorporating healing justice trainings into our cohorts and sharing this approach with partners.

**Tools and Research Grounded in Culture and Community.** Our organizing, narrative, research, and policy tools will be grounded in communities and culture by ensuring they are developed in partnership with the communities we engage. We commit to taking the time necessary to work in deeper partnership with our communities to build the tools that center their voices, honor culture, and support their visions. We believe that our tools will be stronger for this deeper work that will be transformative in process, not just outcome.

**How?** We are reflecting on our recent community-based research projects, and seeking opportunities to further our understanding of research justice. In 2018, we will engage in an assessment of our policy tools to inform how they will shift moving forward.

**Training and Shared Learning.** We will continue our commitment to organizer development through training and shared learning, recognizing that creating the spaces for collective wisdom to inform organizing practices is at least as important as transferring organizing skills. We are deepening our longstanding cohort model to form organizing circles that support shared learning and leadership. The practices of healing justice and cultural grounding inform these organizing circles, leading to transformative relationships and community power that transcend cyclical shifts in the political landscape.

**How?** Our training library is growing to include healing justice and cultural learning opportunities. Currently we have two organizing circles in Greater Minnesota, one in Worthington and one in Duluth. In addition, our summer youth cultural organizing institute will be in its fourth year this summer and will continue to incorporate these practices. Later this year, we have plans to offer our first BRIDGE prison justice organizing circle.

## Sustained Organizational Development

VRJ will be sustainably resourced and will effectively work in and across our communities. Our focus will be strengthening infrastructure; significantly increasing grassroots fundraising; and developing consistent systematic planning, evaluation, communication, accountability, and collaboration with and between community members, staff, and board.

**How?** We will be focusing on growing our network of grassroots supporters over the next five years, with an emphasis on building sustained relationships that transcend financial donations. We will grow our capacity to share and shift narratives coming from and speaking to people of color and indigenous communities. As board members roll off, we will welcome new board members, and will intentionally deepen the working relationship and collaboration between the board and staff.

The biggest shift over the next five years for Voices for Racial Justice from previous years is the integration of healing justice and cultural tools across program areas. Voices for Racial Justice staff and community members have identified that a significant barrier to sustainable leadership from communities most impacted by racial violence is the ongoing and intergenerational trauma caused by this violence, and the limited spaces and resources to build organizing power that heals from rather than replicates this trauma. Simultaneously, staff and community recognize that indigenous and people of color communities hold cultural and healing justice tools that have cultivated powerful forms of resistance, resilience, and thriving in the face of great violence and genocidal forces. Voices for Racial Justice intends to learn about, honor, and draw upon this rich and vast community knowledge to inform our work moving forward.

## Our Theory of Change

As part of our strategic planning process, the VRJ team spent many hours articulating its theory of change. The strategic direction named above is a manifestation of that theory of change.

We see the work of Voices for Racial Justice happening in that soil, below the surface, and supporting a strong root system that nurtures racial justice organizing.

Our long-term dream – held up in the sky above – is a world without racism that honors the culture, knowledge, power, and healing of black, brown, immigrant, and indigenous communities.

Our vision is for the healthy soil and thriving seeds of racial justice – represented by the lush, green plants reaching for the sky.

The outcome of this work are organizing strategies that are grounded in culture, healing, and the shared wisdom of multiracial, multicultural communities – which we see in the rich, brown soil that holds those seeds and plants.

Our work in the soil supports the three root systems named in our strategic vision: a healing justice framework, tools grounded in culture and community, and shared learning opportunities. Through this we seek to nurture those thriving seeds of racial justice contained within our communities, while working to remove the toxins, including a pervasive culture of white supremacy, that can damage the soil.

## Celebrating 25 Years

2018 marks the 25th anniversary of Voices for Racial Justice. From our seed as the Organizing Apprenticeship Project to the strategic vision that guides the next five years of Voices for Racial Justice, we have grown and shifted and thrived as a part of a rich movement for racial justice. We look forward to continuing to share our vision over the coming year, with deeper stories of why and how we are pursuing this direction. And we will be offering opportunities for our community that has long shared in this work to learn, grow, and build with us.



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