

# Introduction

## Progressive social change and service organizations

This guidebook was developed for staff and board members of nonprofit service organizations who are interested in learning how to incorporate progressive social change values and practices into their work. Progressive social change aims to transform the underlying systemic problems that result in inequalities in the distribution of power and resources—inequalities that directly affect the lives of those served by the vast majority of nonprofit service organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Nonprofit service organizations provide a vital lifeline to individuals and families who lack access to resources, and whose needs and interests are often overlooked or ignored within the larger society. The paid and volunteer staff members of these organizations work tirelessly to help meet their clients' needs—from housing, food, and healthcare to information, skills, and support. Yet no matter how hard staff members try to help their clients, they are often stymied by the larger systems that seem to work against the people they are trying to serve. The individuals who staff these organizations recognize that there is more to their clients' problems than self-destructive behavior or poor personal choices. Addressing these larger systemic barriers is a daunting task, especially at a time when so many service providers face growing demands and reduced funding.

We believe that a way must be found to meet clients' day-to-day needs as well as to change the circumstances that currently reinforce inequality, injustice, poverty, and lack of access. This guide introduces a step-by-step process

that nonprofit organizations can use to identify how groups can address systemic problems through social change work within the context of their usual services and activities. The process proposed in this guide can help organizations decide which strategies and actions will work best for them.

This introduction provides a brief overview of the entire process. The chapters and appendices that follow provide in-depth information on each step in the process, including:

- » **Tips** on how to assess your organization's readiness to engage in social change/justice work.
- » **Methods** for identifying the underlying causes of the problems your constituents (including clients) face, along with ideas on how to address these issues in partnership with your constituent base.
- » **A glossary** that defines many of the terms used in this guide, including “social change work” and “constituents.”
- » **Stories** about what other groups are doing that can provide ideas and inspiration as you think about how to integrate social change values and practices into your work.
- » **A chapter-by-chapter list of resources**, including books, websites, articles, and tools for social change.
- » **Information** on how to assess or evaluate your efforts along the way.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this guide, we use the term “nonprofit service organization” to include all organizations delivering services to communities, including social service agencies, community development corporations, human services organizations and coalitions, food banks and soup kitchens, and service intermediaries.

This guide can be used in different ways. One option is to read through the entire document and engage in an activity over several months. You can also scan the table of contents and identify areas that you know your organization needs to work on. A third option is to begin by using the assessment tool in Appendix C to identify whether your organization can begin to embrace a social change perspective.

## The assumptions that guide our work

We have written this guide based on our strong conviction that direct service organizations can be a powerful force for progressive change in the United States. This belief is based on three important facts:

- 1 Most human service agencies are already organized around a mission** to bring about change, seeking to fill service gaps and meet human needs that arise from inequality and injustice.
- 2 Service delivery organizations have daily contact** with large numbers of underserved people, forming the basis for a significant constituency group.
- 3 The U.S. has a vast social service infrastructure** that can support organized activity for change.

This guide is also rooted in the belief that:

- >> Broad-based social change** is possible.
- >> Persistent and increasing** social, health-related, and economic disparities are the result of systemic policies, not

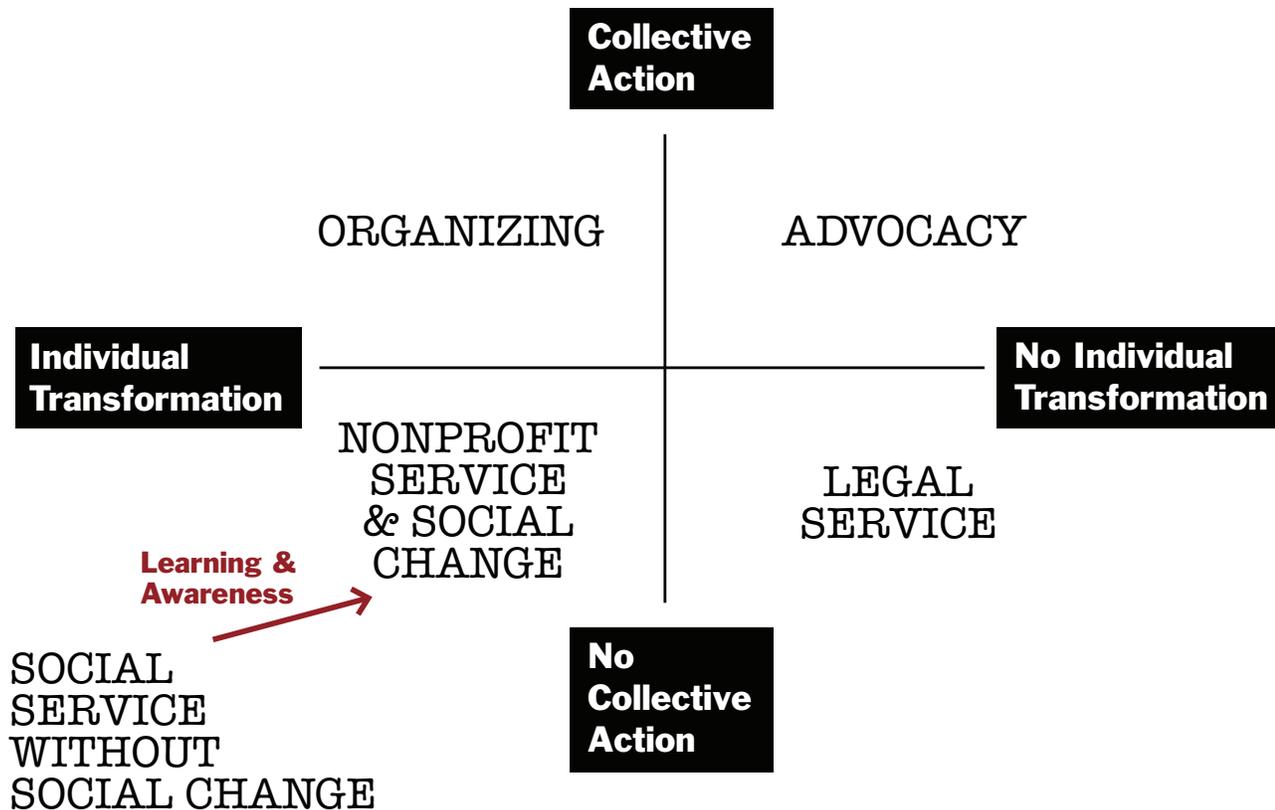
individual behaviors.

- >> Advocacy, civic engagement, and community activism** remain viable strategies for addressing the underlying causes of these disparities.
- >> The people** directly affected by these issues—those who use social services to help meet their basic needs—must play an active part in crafting solutions to the problems they face.

## Moving toward social change

Many social service groups are already involved in progressive social change. A key element of social change organizations is that at some level their constituents are involved in setting the organization's agenda. Service groups working for progressive social change recognize that constituents' problems are in large part caused by systemic issues rather than personal failure. Such organizations work with their constituents to address systemic change as well as personal change.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 (top of next page) diagrams four different types of social change organizations. Organizing groups (in the upper left quadrant) work to transform the awareness of individuals in a community, making visible the policies and laws behind the problems they face and then taking action collectively to promote change. Advocacy groups (in the upper right quadrant) are generally less concerned with individual transformation than with social change brought about through collective action. Legal service groups (in the lower right quadrant) tend to work with individuals to remove larger structural barriers; like advocacy groups, legal service

**Figure 1: Different Types of Social Change Organizations<sup>3</sup>**

groups are generally not focused on individual transformation.

Nonprofit service groups that actively work for social change (in the lower left quadrant) provide direct services to clients while also working to transform the consciousness of their clients and constituencies to make them aware that the issues they face are largely systemic.

Notice that not all service organizations fall within the structure of this diagram.

Specifically, the category of “Social Service without Social Change,” located on the lower left edge of the diagram, falls outside the four main quadrants and represents service organizations that are not yet engaged in social change work but are interested in moving into this quadrant. An important part of making this transition is to raise the awareness of the organization’s board, staff members, and constituents about the root causes of problems and the importance of involving constituents as partners in promoting systemic change. This guide can help.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Chetkovich, C. and Kunreuther., F. *From the Ground Up: Organizations Making Social Change*, Cornell University Press, forthcoming, Fall 2006.