

Gathering Justice Unites Community Members Towards a Just Arizona



On Saturday, October 5th, Arizona Community Action Association (ACAA) hosted the Gathering Justice summit. We brought together community experts from across Arizona. Throughout the day we dove into many of the challenges Arizona faces and we spent time envisioning just and equitable solutions to these challenges. In our visioning sessions, participants articulated an attainable vision of justice and laid out the steps we must take to realize justice in Arizona. Gathering Justice concluded with an inspirational keynote from Dr. Matthew C. Whitaker, Director of the ASU Center for the study of Race and Democracy. The day was inspiring and connected community members around justice.

Our Beginning

Gathering Justice began with Bryan Stevenson's notion that the opposite of poverty is justice. As an organization seeking to end poverty in Arizona, ACAA has been challenged as we have watched poverty and disparity rise in our state in spite of the hard work and the dedication of committed, passionate

members of the Arizona community. As we struggled with this reality, we began asking deeper questions. What are the larger, systemic reasons for poverty? Who benefits from poverty? As a society, do we really want to end poverty? How are we each complicit in maintaining poverty? How do we bring more voices to the table to talk about poverty?

As we struggled with these questions, we realized that 1) we are not the only people struggling to answer these questions and 2) we must begin to work for justice and the end of poverty by creating the space for community members to gather, connect, and envision the work that we must do together. From this position, Gathering Justice was born.

Our Process

As we put together Gathering Justice, we committed to shape the day using just processes. We envisioned an open space where participants and families from diverse communities could participate. In addition, we sought to remove as many barriers as we could that traditionally prevent community members from participating. We held Gathering Justice on a Saturday, because working families often cannot attend conferences that happen during the work week. We provided childcare for families that brought their children. We provided hotel rooms and gas cards for participants that had to travel from the across the state to join us. During the day, we provided vegetarian and gluten free food options and we provided language interpretation for Spanish-only speakers.

As we organized the day, we invited elected officials, community members, and our partners. However, we primarily relied on community based groups and organizations to gather members to attend. This capacity was fostered through intense relationship building. As we raised funds for Gathering Justice, we asked sponsors to help us by providing scholarship funds to cover the cost of attendance for community members that expressed this need.

The Structure

The plan for the breakout sessions, keynotes, and events throughout Gathering Justice were also crafted with an eye towards just processes. We committed to assuring that everyone serving as an expert, whether a breakout speaker, keynote, or facilitator, had a stake in Arizona. Everyone was local. What we brought to the table was specifically grounded in this state and all of the ideas harnessed through Gathering Justice were born of people living in Arizona. Our structure started with a desire to



present challenges to justice in Arizona that are compounded by poverty. While we could have focused on numerous challenges, we oriented our search towards challenges that disproportionately affect low-income and marginalized communities. Our hope was to present challenges that often do not receive the attention that they deserve because they are located in low-income and oppressed communities. Our 1st round of breakout sessions included:

- *Balancing Energy Production and the Environment*: Hosted by Jihan Gearon from the Black Mesa Water Coalition, this breakout considered the impact of the Navajo Generating Station on the Navajo Nation and Arizona.
- *White Privilege*: Hosted by John C. Dorhauer for the Southwest Conference of the United Church of Christ, this breakout focused on the cultural and personal biases that create privilege as a result of skin color.
- *Justice, Sex Trafficking, and Prostitution*: Hosted by Dominique Roe-Sepowitz and Jessica Smith of Project Rose, this breakout discussed just procedures for working with individuals working in the sex trade beyond criminalizing.
- *Who Belongs, the Politics of Exclusion*: Hosted by West Cosgrove of the Kino Border Initiative, this breakout session highlighted deeper issues that perpetuate unauthorized immigration into the United States, including how the United States defines who belongs.

Our second round of breakout sessions was designed to provide attendees with concrete tools for doing the work of justice. Where conferences traditionally present attendees with an overload of information followed by limited means of responding, these breakout sessions were designed to provide tangible, tested tools for justice workers. The second round of breakout sessions included:

- *Accompaniment: From Managing Differences to Unleashing Diversity*: Hosted by Bjorn Peterson of ArcWorks Consulting, this breakout session explored the methodology of accompaniment as a way of coming alongside communities and embracing diversity and group difference.
- *Building Community Power and Impact*: Hosted by Otoniel Navarrete of Promise Arizona, this breakout session presented tools for community mobilization and organizing with an eye towards Latino communities and voter engagement.
- *Moving Towards Justice: A Discussion on How to Sustain Ourselves in Our Struggle*: Hosted by Luke Black of Arizona Community Action Association, this breakout session highlight strategies for sustaining ourselves for the long-term struggle for justice.

- *Introduction to Kingian Nonviolence*: Hosted by Kevin Hengehold and Mark Klym of the Phoenix Nonviolence Truthforce, this breakout session explored concepts of nonviolence as articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a starting point for achieving justice.

The breakout sessions were meant to inform and equip participants. After the breakout sessions, we invited participants to join us for two rounds of visioning sessions. The visioning sessions were designed to facilitate opportunities for participants to name a vision of where we, as justice workers, need to head and how we get there. The visioning sessions were participatory and the end result was entirely the authorship of the participants. Throughout the visioning sessions, we created a flat authority structure. This meant that all voices were valued equally regardless of social location. In other words, we listened to and valued the voice of the community member, the high school student, the business owner, and the elected official equally and lent equal authority to them all. The goals were to allow the voice of the community to dictate the direction of our actions and provide the framework from which ACAA can pursue community based social movement.

Gathering Justice concluded with a keynote address from Dr. Matthew C. Whitaker, Director of the ASU Center for the study of Race and Democracy. Dr. Whitaker gave us a vision of what challenges we must address if we are to move forward and crafted steps for building justice that we must take if we are to see significant, just change in Arizona.



The Results

During Gathering Justice we hosted 131 attendees of which the largest group was scholarship attendees (53). It included students, working families, Spanish-only speakers, and community members from as far away as Yuma and Tuba City. This was exciting for us because from the beginning we had hoped for a rich discussion that included voices from communities that traditionally are not represented

well in planning sessions. We had a wide diversity of ethnicity and races represented throughout the day. Additionally, we had diverse age, gender, and sexual orientation participation.

Based on attendee feedback, the breakout sessions, especially the White Privilege session, were highly valued and many attendees expressed a deepening understanding of the issues and a renewed understanding of strategies for doing the work of justice. The visioning sessions were also well received with many participants expressing gratitude for the opportunity to contribute and have their voices heard. Gathering Justice attendees expressed a strong appreciation for the opportunity to meet other justice workers, build relationships, and sit in community with fellow workers committed to Arizona and justice. Finally, participants overwhelmingly expressed their appreciation for Dr. Whitaker and his keynote address, a valuable asset for our community.

Improvements to Make

Of course, Gathering Justice was not without its challenges and there is always room for improvement. Process-wise, we had hoped to see more community involvement in the planning of the event. While we were able to bring in diverse voices that shaped the order of the day, there was room for more and our outreach strategy needs to include more time and deeper relationships. Additionally, while we had

a high community turnout, there is a need to foster more relationships with community groups and create more space for their participation and for their voices to be heard. There are many communities impacted by poverty that were not represented at Gathering Justice and we need to do a better job building relationships with those communities.

Relative to the events of the day, the overwhelming area that attendees would have liked to see improvements on was the availability of more breakout sessions. The feedback clearly reflected that the breakout sessions were so well received that participants felt torn in their choices and wished that they had had more opportunities to interact with the subject areas they were not able to attend.

Additionally, we were challenged in our facilitation methods during the breakout sessions and the visioning sessions. The inclusion of the youth facilitators was well received but our overall facilitation structure was at times confusing and did not provide as rich a conversation as we attended. Also, during the visioning session it was hard to hear the facilitators and other participants. And finally, participants as a whole expressed the regret that we did not have longer breakout sessions and more time to dig deeper into the material and explore the relevancy of the material to their personal lives.

Future Objectives

The goal of the visioning sessions was to name a direction and steps that ACAA could begin to implement to bring about an end to poverty and justice in Arizona. We plan to engage Gathering Justice attendees and grow our engagement across the state. The process of naming the Key Elements and Key Characteristics present in a just Arizona yielded a substantial amount of structure which ACAA has been able to draft a list of objectives for our justice work in Arizona. Some of these objectives are implementable immediately and some will require further discussion and the creation of partnerships. The Gathering Justice objectives include:

- More network space to create better partnerships
- Themed, breakout session-style events to get information out to communities
- Organized panel conversations and forums centered on community needs and justice issues
- Increased diversity, power, and privilege forums and workshops
- Poverty and Justice regional roundtables
- Community newsletter, blog, social media, or other information source to keep communities informed
- Poverty and Justice local art festival
- Community-based, justice oriented leadership development
- Regional Gathering Justice summits
- Youth oriented Gathering Justice summits
- School outreach to mobilize parents and students
- Community based projects that communities can connect around (gardens, murals, etc.)
- Cross-field resource sharing (academia, non-profits, community organizations and members)

Throughout ACAA's efforts to implement the above objectives, we will be calling on the community for participation and ownership. The Gathering Justice attendees, our partners, and the communities that we work with must be the owners of the vision of justice in Arizona.

Next Steps

As ACAA begins the next year, we have identified the following projects, structured in response to the feedback from Gathering Justice.

1. We will continue with our **Poverty and Justice Project workshops**. The two workshops explore the social and cultural elements that maintain poverty, examine our personal relationship with poverty and our personal responsibility to end poverty, and expand our understanding of diversity and the relevancy of our social locations and the stories we believe as we work to end poverty. ACAA is looking for organizations and community groups interested in hosting a Poverty and Justice Project workshop.
2. ACAA will begin gathering regional **Poverty and Justice Roundtables**. The Roundtables will focus on bringing together committed advocates for social justice, create networking opportunities, and foster community based social movement. The goal for next year is to start a Roundtable in Central Arizona. However, we are also building the foundation for Roundtables in South Arizona and North Arizona. Please contact us if your organization or community group is interested in joining the Roundtable.
3. ACAA has begun laying the foundation for an intense, community-based **Leadership Exchange**. Our goal is to work directly with community organizations and groups to identify emerging leaders and develop the tools and understanding within them to create sustained social change. In the spirit of a true exchange, we will also invite these individuals to bring their expertise to the group and participate in the exchange of ideas and strategy. Please contact us if you or your group would be interested in joining our planning committee.

Get Involved

Arizona Community Action Association recognizes that there are committed community members and organizations throughout Arizona who are working on justice and an end to poverty. We need to be more in community with one another. If the vision and the next steps reflected in Gathering Justice resonate with you, we would love to meet and discuss how we can foster connections and build together.

If you would like more information about ACAA or would like to discuss partnering with us, please contact Luke Black at lblack@azcaa.org or call ACAA at 602-604-0640.