

A CAMPAIGN FOR DIGNITY AND RESPECT

How Step Up Louisiana and the New Orleans Health Department used inside-outside strategy to secure an important victory for workers' rights in New Orleans

Leona Ellis remembers, with clarity and pain, what it felt like to work for wages that made it impossible to be the parent she wanted to be – wages as low as \$4.25 an hour. When her children came home from school excited about joining a sports team, cheerleading squad, or band, she had to say no. There wasn't enough left over after bills to buy uniforms and shoes. "It was so hurtful," she says, "to not be able to do the simplest things for your child." After many years, Ellis eventually worked her way into a job that paid an hourly wage that gave her more latitude to support her kids and their passions. "It felt so good to be able to say yes," she says, smiling. Still, she recognizes that so many New Orleans workers are stuck in the same situation she was. Ellis wants *all* low-wage workers to have the improved financial stability that she now has. That's why she joined a local workers' justice group, Step Up Louisiana.



The hurt and loss of dignity that Ms. Ellis felt doesn't evaporate; it translates into ongoing stress and adverse health outcomes, including decreased life expectancy. These, in turn, show up as stark disparities in health and longevity. In New Orleans,

residents of more affluent White neighborhoods can expect to live over 20 years longer than residents of low-income Black neighborhoods. At the New Orleans Health Department (NOHD), these data were being tracked by Jeanie Donovan, Deputy Director for Population Health and Disease Prevention. From both personal and professional experience, Donovan knew firsthand how economic security drives health as one of the many "social" or structural determinants of health that are often far more significant than anything that happens in a hospital or clinic.

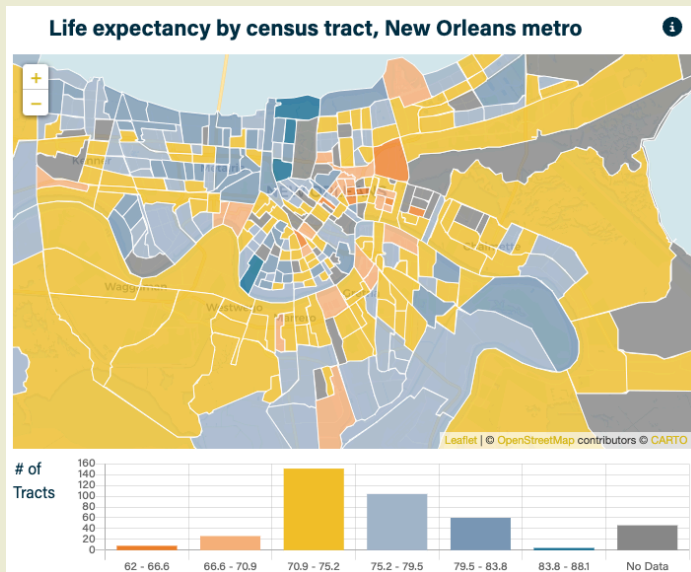
These individuals and the organizations behind them all converged when Step Up Louisiana's workers' rights movement aligned with the local health department's focus on economic stability as a driver of health. This intentional alignment and coordination around a shared aim – between people in community power-building organizations (CPBOs) on the outside of government institutions, and government players on the inside – is an "inside-outside" strategy to change the *status quo*. Inside-outside strategy is effective because it amplifies the strengths of both insiders and outsiders, working together to make changes that would be difficult to achieve alone.

Fighting for Progressive Pro-Worker Policies in a Hostile State

The state of Louisiana is a tough, oppressive environment for workers' rights. Like the rest of the state, New Orleans reflects a history of racial injustice dating back to the slave trade. Today, many Black workers continue to contribute to the city's culture and infrastructure with few protections or benefits to show for their contributions. A state preemption law restricts

local laws and ordinances from passing and enforcing minimum wage requirements, paid leave, and other measures perceived to harm private businesses. One in four New Orleans households live in poverty, including one of every three children. One-third of residents are living just above the poverty line, as Leona Ellis did – employed but unable to build any assets, let alone cover basic needs.

housing fights, and collaborated in responding to the uneven devastation of hurricanes and infectious diseases. Step Up hosted COVID-19 vaccination clinics and canvassed neighborhoods with higher vaccine hesitancy, guided by NOHD data. When Hurricane Ida struck New Orleans on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, Step Up served as a distribution hub for hot meals and essential items including baby and feminine hygiene products.



Source: datacenterresearch.org map of data from US Small-area Life Expectancy Project, CDC

Through their campaigns to organize low-wage workers, Step Up Louisiana’s members had a clear understanding of what they were up against. Step Up’s Co-Director, Ben Zucker, researched what other jurisdictions had done in similar circumstances, and learned about models that rewarded companies for doing right by their workers – an incentive or “carrot” approach, rather than the “stick” of enforcement. Step Up had a strong, trusted ally in the local health department, whose Community Health Assessment (CHA) and subsequent Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) had identified bolstering economic security as one of the most effective ways to improve health.

They also benefited from previous professional relationships, including working together on fair

In 2023, both organizations – Step Up Louisiana and the New Orleans Health Department – joined a cohort of other CPBOs and health departments convened by Human Impact Partners (HIP) called Power-building Partnerships for Health (PPH). Reflecting on that experience, Zucker and Donovan appreciate the dedicated time and space that PPH provided to build trust between the organizations, to plan and strategize together, and to learn from others tackling similar shared goals with inside-outside strategies.

Power-building Partnerships for Health (PPH) cultivates powerful collaborations between local health departments and community power-building organizations to advance health equity together. PPH provides resources and support for strategic actions through peer-learning cohorts. Learn more at humanimpact.org/power-building.

Applying Powerful Pressure Inside and Outside New Orleans City Government

To encourage employers to do right by their workers, Step Up and NOHD leaders came up with a plan to add a Workers’ Bill of Rights to the City’s charter by placing it on the ballot. The proposed Bill of Rights would address the issues identified by Step Up’s previous workers’ rights campaigns: a fair, living wage of at least \$15 an hour, paid leave, protection for union organizing, and affordable health care coverage. They also envisioned a

staffed and funded Health Department Certification Program to reward and recognize employers who voluntarily meet these standards, along with Step Up representation on a Workers' Rights Committee within the City's Human Rights Commission to ensure accountability and expansion going forward.

Each organization had a role and a lane in this effort. At the health department, Donovan brokered connections on the inside to other City departments, provided testimony on the health implications of economic injustice, and helped Step Up navigate the political landscape that the health department knew well from working with the Mayor and City Council. Working in parallel on the outside, Step Up members organized town halls and Workers Movement Assemblies to hear directly from workers, held candidate forums, formulated and refined the Workers' Bill of Rights based on members' ideas, and canvassed to boost support and turnout once the Bill of Rights was on the ballot. Step Up ultimately knocked on over 30,000 doors, sent over 40,000 texts, made over 45,000 calls, and held countless 1-on-1 conversations and outreach events. The result was a groundswell mandate for change.

A Victory for Workers' Rights – and for Inside-Outside Strategy

On November 5, 2024, the two lanes in which Step Up Louisiana and the New Orleans Health Department had been working converged in a triumphant moment: New Orleans voters passed the ballot initiative to add the Workers' Bill of Rights to the City's charter by a resounding margin of 80 percent. Many factors made this possible: the powerful messaging and data connecting economic justice and health; the trust the two organizations had built up over years; the dedicated time and space to craft their winning

inside-outside strategy together by participating in the PPH cohort; and the creative solution of focusing on incentives when enforcement policy doors were closed.

Donovan notes that the health department learned it does not have to lead. In this case, NOHD knew they could be more effective in a supporting role, following Step Up Louisiana's lead. Zucker agrees:

“An inside-outside strategy is necessary if you actually are trying to do something big and hard that is connected to the government. You absolutely need to be having conversations in the community, bringing folks in and giving them meaningful opportunities for action ... but if the policies we're trying to fight for are going to happen, then we need to have the folks in City Hall on board, interested, and motivated too.”

Playing just the outside game or just the inside game doesn't get it done: changing policies takes both.

The ballot victory is impressive and essential, but plenty of good inside-outside work still lies ahead. The partners want to make sure the Worker's Commission is empowered to keep fighting for these and other rights for workers and that more City departments and employers follow the health department's lead on the Healthy Workplace Policy. Tracking progress will be part of the accountability and sustainability, as well. Ultimately, the minimum wage, paid leave, health insurance coverage, and organizing protections should translate into better health outcomes for workers across the City. “It's important to have better pay and wages,” agrees David Williams, a Step Up Louisiana member and Dollar Store worker. “But the most important part is our dignity and respect.”



"In a majority-Black city that was built by Black people and is known for its Black culture, upholding the well-being of Black workers who too often make up industries with the fewest protections should be the utmost priority. All workers, no matter their neighborhood or race, deserve a healthy workplace and a job that guarantees every aspect of the New Orleans Bill of Rights."

– Step Up Louisiana

→ Watch [this video](#) about the collaboration to hear people talk about the campaign and what it meant to them!

For more information:

- [Step Up Louisiana](#)
- [Verite News: 'The other 80%': How the city Health Department pivoted to social, economic justice programs](#)
- [Human Impact Partners / Power-building Partnerships for Health](#)