

# **A Conceptual Mapping of Healing Centered Youth Organizing: Building a Case for Healing Justice**



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Tyrell Davis woke up to shouting coming from outside his home in East Oakland. It was July 2014 and although summer days in Oakland are usually cool, temperatures in the past week had reached nearly 100 degrees. Like most homes in Oakland, Tyrell's didn't have air-conditioning. By 9am his sheets were damp from his sweating all night. On this morning, he didn't have time to listen to another argument between his brother and his brother's girlfriend because Tyrell was running late for an organizing training that he was beginning to enjoy. The evening before, he was part of a group comprised of young African American men who formed a healing circle where they shared stories, concerns, and a vision for their lives. Afterward, 18-year-old Tyrell shared with the circle leader, "Man, I felt like a ton of bricks had lifted off my back after our circle. I didn't even realize that I was carrying all that. But I'm glad that I got to talk about it. I think folks really felt what I was saying cuz they going through the same shit as me." Tyrell is part of a young men's healing and support circle dedicated for African American men who are sometimes reluctant to reach out for emotional support or to access more traditional mental health services.

As the demographics of California and the Nation continue to shift, communities of color are becoming more and more central. In many ways, the future of young men like Tyrell and his peers will determine the future of our whole country. Yet, low-income communities of color continue to experience deep economic and racial inequality, the impact of which often places constraints on individuals' capacity to hope or even to imagine a different, more just, world. And to make matters worse, young people of color experience the brunt of the social and economic policy attacks faced by low-income communities of color. Many young people find themselves caught in a cycle of violence that is fueled by these same policies. From 2006-2010, homicide was the leading cause of death for African American males between the ages of 10-24, and for Latinos of the same age it was the second leading cause of death (Phillips and Bryant 2013). Up to one-third of children and youth in urban neighborhoods reported having witnessed a homicide (Buka, Stichick et al. 2001). Furthermore, Black and Latino students in urban schools are more likely to report fearing for their safety in school and staying away from school (Roberts, Kemp et al. 2013). Studies have also shown that African American children taking achievement tests within a week of a homicide occurring in their neighborhood score significantly lower than other children (Sharkey 2010). There are two key impacts that these systemic and institutional barriers impose on low income communities of color: 1) Structural Inequality – that is that we are setting up and perpetuating a society in which certain groups reap benefits and privileges as a result of other groups' oppression; and 2) Social Trauma – that is the impact that living in a racially and economically unequal society has on the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being of people.

In more recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of more holistic models of youth organizing that are taking shape in various places around California. This movement is gaining momentum among youth organizers who are expanding our understandings of the kinds of practices that can help promote the social, mental, psychological, and emotional well-being of young people and activists. These youth and adult organizers are increasingly exploring modalities and methods

that not only work to change the systemic causes of structural inequality but are also providing spaces in which members of organizations and communities can experience healing in the process. For the purposes of this discussion, healing is understood as a regenerative process that is inclusive of the mind, body, and spirit and that aims to restore and renew the individual and collective emotional and spiritual well-being of youth, families, and the broader community. Thus, healing centered organizing represents a growing practice in schools and community organizations where youth and adult organizers place healing at the center of their social change strategies.

In this paper, we offer a conceptual mapping of healing centered organizing and argue three key ideas. First, we argue that healing centered organizing is a response to decades of toxic and harmful policies that disproportionately impact low-income youth of color. Second, we offer principles of healing centered organizing and illustrate key practices across organizations in California. Research suggests that civic engagement activities like youth and community organizing contribute not only to improved academic outcomes, but also to greater social capital and higher levels of well-being for young people who are involved (Prilleltensky 2008; Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2006; Rogers & Terriquez 2013). Third, we offer recommendations to social justice practitioners and philanthropic stakeholders about key supports required to expand and strengthen healing centered organizing efforts.

## **WHY THE NEED FOR HEALING CENTERED ORGANIZING?**

Over the past three decades, low-income communities of color have been negatively impacted by a series of social and economic policies that have resulted in disparate outcomes for people of color. During the 1980s and 1990s California experienced the rise of mass incarceration and the criminalization of youth and men of color, the enactment of anti-immigrant policies, the war on drugs, and the crack epidemic. In this same time period, California saw the rise of a politically conservative, “tough-on-crime” climate that carried with it the portrayal of young people of color in the media as dangerous criminals and “super-predators” who needed to be locked up in order to protect the “good and the innocent.” The result was a host of tough-on-crime laws passed in subsequent years, which targeted and criminalized youth of color, such as the Gun-Free Schools act in 1994. That same year, the mainstream perception of immigrants as “dangerous” and a drain on the economy would fuel a growing national anti-immigrant sentiment that would result in Californians voting into law Proposition 187. Although never enacted, Proposition 187 would have denied public services, including public education and non-emergency health care, to immigrants and their children living in the state “illegally.”

Similar attacks were made in education. Two years after Proposition 187 was passed, voters approved Proposition 209, which barred affirmative action for college admissions and public hiring decisions. In 1998, the passage of Proposition 227 effectively banned bilingual education in public schools. Moreover, following the aftermath of the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School, there was a rise in the use of zero tolerance policies across our nation. Research has pointed to the ways in which zero tolerance policies punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs, and students of color are overrepresented when it comes to being suspended and expelled (Noguera 2003; Gregory et al. 2010; Kang-Brown et al. 2013). The over reliance on suspensions and expulsions as forms of school discipline has led to many students being pushed out

of school as well as to an increase in the likelihood of their incarceration, a process commonly referred to as “the school-to-prison pipeline.”

All of this set the stage for California’s Proposition 21, a ballot measure that passed in 2000, which, among many things, made it easier for minors to be tried as adults (even for minor offenses). These tough-on-crime policies ushered in an era of mass incarceration as the prison population in California and across the country skyrocketed. The school-to-prison pipeline rapidly expanded at the same time that there was a decrease in funding for education and public services.

However, it is important to note that the consequences of these laws did not only occur at the level of public systems and public policy. These policies have left devastating, deeply traumatic, and in many cases deeply personal impacts on families and communities, such as the trauma of having an incarcerated parent or the trauma of having a family member deported. And these policies have had disproportionately negative impacts on communities of color and on young males of color in particular. This is compounded by the fact that these same youth who have been unfairly impacted often have few opportunities and little support to address the psychosocial harm resulting from persistent exposure to an ecosystem of systemic violence, harm, and trauma.

In this context, “healing justice” is understood as a broader framework that aims to describe the relationship between social justice work and spirit by focusing on both the consequences of systemic oppression on the hope and agency of community members as well as how communities can heal and be restored to vibrant ways of living (Ginwright 2015). In this way, “healing justice organizers” are acutely aware of the ways in which stress, lack of resources, failing educational systems, violence, and prolonged exposure to trauma all diminish the capacity to foster optimism, empowerment, and social change. In addition, healing justice organizers are critical of public policies that create more violence, stress, hopelessness, and lack of opportunity in schools and communities, and treat these policies as harmful to the individual and collective social, spiritual, and emotional well-being of community members. Rather than viewing healing as simply an individual act of self-care, healing justice organizers view the practice of healing as a political act that makes communities more whole while empowering people to bring about changes in the system (Ginwright 2015).

## **OVERVIEW OF MAPPING PROJECT**

The healing centered organizing mapping project identified youth organizations statewide that express and practice an explicit healing and wellness strategy within their existing social change model. From this sample of community based youth organizations, between five to ten organizations were invited to participate in this project. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews with adult staff from these organizations were conducted. Participant observation of key organizational activities was conducted over a full day and semi-structured interviews lasted anywhere from forty minutes to two hours. The research questions guiding this project were as follows:

- How do organizations understand healing and organizing work?
- What are some of the principles guiding their work?
- What kinds of practices inform their approach?

Data collected was collaboratively analyzed for patterns, themes, and ideas that emerged in relation to the organizations' theories of change, approaches, and strategies. Based on these findings, this work highlights some of the ways in which community based organizations throughout our state are implementing innovative activities and practices aimed at building individual and community health and well-being anchored in a healing and organizing informed approach. As such, this piece highlights some of the principles and common practices guiding "healing centered organizing" (see Lee 2014)

## **DEFINING HEALING CENTERED ORGANIZING**

While extensive research has focused on addressing individual trauma, much less is known about the transformative potential of healing strategies in supporting the collective capacity of a community to move beyond trauma and engage in social change work. As systemic forms of oppression threaten the social, spiritual, and emotional well-being of young people, their families, and entire neighborhoods, the process of *radical healing* becomes an important strategy to foster more humanizing and transformative spaces of possibility and hope (Ginwright 2009). Yet, overwhelmingly activists and policymakers have traditionally focused on changing the structures of society without attending to the socio-emotional harm that those structures have perpetuated. These forms of community-wide and generational trauma can have devastating impacts on the individual and collective spirit and sense of imagination of communities. Additionally, when trauma is only examined as an individual experience, it leads to an over-emphasis on interpersonal violence without a systemic analysis of the root conditions that created the problem in the first place.

In this context, healing justice organizers argue that achieving social justice requires a multidimensional approach to healing and community change. As such, healing centered organizing acknowledges how recurring trauma and stress limit the individual and collective agency of communities of color and implements a dual strategy to social change. The first strategy focuses on building individual and collective health, well-being, and hopefulness by combining emotional and spiritual healing and a range of wellness practices. The second focuses on organizing strategies aimed at changing public policies. It draws from an understanding of Transformative Organizing (TO), which aims to simultaneously transform both inequitable "external" political, economic, and social structures and institutions, and the "internal" perspectives of the people who are participating in the social change work itself (see Social Justice Leadership 2010). In this way, healing centered organizing involves addressing individual and community-wide healing as well as transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the trauma in the first place. It works to address the institutional causes of trauma while simultaneously building practices in schools and communities that promote the healthy development and emotional resiliency of young people and community members.

## **KEY PRINCIPLES GUIDING HEALING CENTERED ORGANIZING**

Based on participant observation, interviews, and academic research, we have identified the following four principles that inform healing centered organizing:

1. Healing is in response to the needs of the community.

2. Healing is political.
3. Healing and organizing intersect.
4. Healing is found in culture and spirituality.

Following an explanation of each principle, we will highlight some of the ways in which healing justice organizers are drawing from these four principles in order to more holistically build resiliency and hope among youth, families, and communities. The voices of the healing justice organizers highlighted here possess extraordinary compassion and vision, combined with the courage to work in the face of tremendous challenges.

***Principle #1: Healing is in response to the needs of the community.***

The first principle informing healing centered organizing is an understanding that healing is a response to the needs of the community. As we have argued, decades of toxic and harmful policies have disproportionately impacted urban youth of color. Given this context, healing justice organizers work to address the root causes of systemic and institutional oppression by first recognizing and acknowledging the reality that communities of color face on daily basis to better understand how facilitating healing is necessary to restore balance and harmony.

Juan Gomez is the co-founder of Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA), a Salinas-based collective dedicated to cultivating the movement for community health through culture, critical consciousness, and leadership for social transformation. From his perspective, communities of color are healing from a legacy of colonization and discrimination. He shared that communities of color are “healing from social historical trauma, estrangement, and detachment from your land, your customs, from a place of hurt.” Addressing and healing this generational trauma becomes key to building more holistic approaches to respond to the needs of individuals and communities.

In this way, healing justice organizers are responding to the needs of their staff, members, and the community at large by being intentional about creating spaces for collective healing work and building the capacity of individuals to re-claim their sense of power and solidarity with each other. Jackie Byers, Founding Director of the Black Organizing Project (BOP), a community based organization in Oakland that works with Black communities for racial, social, and economic justice through grassroots community organizing and policy change, shared:

When we came together [...] people who had been invisible or dismissed, or feared, and we would be in this space together speaking and telling our truth in a space that was honored, you could see that light starting to come. And it was like some of the most powerful moments for all of us. We were in a collective space that we had felt like we had created, a space where healing was beginning - where you could actually understand that your experience was not just your experience but it was connected. And you were not isolated and you were not alone.

Beyond acknowledging the trauma caused as a result of systemic oppression, healing centered organizing also recognizes that much of this trauma stems from long standing social institutions that

have upheld these systems of oppression for generations. Some of the trauma that people experience in the present has been passed down from the experiences of previous generations. In this context, healing work presents an opportunity to intervene in cycles of trauma that have been passed down from one generation to the next.

For Sammy Nuñez, Founder and Executive Director of Fathers and Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ) healing has been critical to addressing generational trauma. He shared:

Interesting to be at this point now where all of these experiences have become medicine for others who are struggling to find their way out through the same darkness. Sitting there and imagining that the smoke starts to cleanse me, starts to reconnect my heart, my spirit, my thoughts and my intentions was powerful and I wanted others to join me. Through this process, not only have I become un-raged, but I have been able to heal and as a result I have broken generations of pain.

As the voices of these healing justice organizers suggest, healing requires a critical understanding of what communities of color are healing from, and it necessitates a focus on the whole person that is inclusive of one's physical, emotional, and spiritual well being, both individually and collectively.

### ***Principle #2: Healing is political***

The second principle of healing centered organizing is that healing is a political act. From a social justice perspective, healing justice organizers understand that their approach to social justice work must contend with both 1) systemic inequality and oppression, and 2) the trauma (that is the emotional, spiritual, and psychological harm) caused by oppression. Trauma is both a byproduct of systemic oppression as well as a barrier to achieving just, equitable, and thriving communities. Consequently, the act of helping communities to heal from the trauma of systemic oppression and inequality is a political act. In this context, healing justice organizers understand the importance of healing work and they understand that the healing of both individuals and groups of people is tied to the collective struggle for liberation for entire communities. This collective way of understanding healing departs from conventional modalities of well-being and mental health, which have tended to focus on individuals. Additionally, through adding the dimension of healing, healing justice organizers transcend conventional approaches to systems-change work, which tend to focus only on policy change, direct action, and the like. Nicole Lee, Executive Director of Urban Peace Movement (UPM), an organization that fosters youth leadership in Oakland to transform the culture and the conditions that lead to urban violence, shared, "If trauma and harm are the manifestations of our oppression, then healing is part of our liberation."

For Jackie Byers, from BOP, healing necessitates a commitment to addressing and responding to the needs of your staff and members: "We have members who are formerly incarcerated, who have been through foster care systems, and who have been through systems, and who are deeply traumatized." Similarly, for George Galvis, Founding Executive Director of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), an organization dedicated to interrupting the cycles of violence and poverty through community healing and developing youth

leadership to transform criminal justice policy, it is important to not ignore the need to create healing spaces to address the collective trauma that activists bring with them:

You know 80% of the movement is us fighting among ourselves because a lot of people bring all their “carga” all their baggage into the circles. So there are a lot of wounded people in the social justice movement. That’s why they are passionate about justice because they have been wounded. They are trying to stand up for justice but they still haven’t healed up and they are bringing it and they are projecting it and there is a lot of internal division.

Jackie Byers and George Galvis’ comments suggest that creating spaces to heal the collective and generational trauma that exists within communities of color and that is held within activist circles is, itself, a political act. This is especially important when one considers the ways in which many people of color have internalized racism and self-hate as a consequence of living in an unequal society. Ultimately, the activists with whom we spoke aim to disrupt cycles of violence and pain by healing themselves and by creating spaces to facilitate healing for others with the hope that this healing will have a ripple effect on generations to come. To this point, Mario Ozuña, a Senior Program and Training Specialist at the National Compadres Network shared:

My healing is never going to stop; it’s my journey for the rest of my life. My hope is that my kids don’t have the same pain I had because that’s where the true healing happens [...] when you don’t pass it to the next generations.

By explicitly positing healing as political, these healing justice organizers make a departure from conventional political change methodologies that typically measure and define change only in terms of political or material gain. Instead, healing justice organizers acknowledge the harm that has been caused by political and economic inequality and they, consequently, emphasize the importance of healing in their strategies to bring about a more just and more whole society.

### ***Principle #3: Healing and organizing intersect***

The third principle guiding healing centered organizing is that healing and organizing are interconnected. For healing justice organizers this interconnectedness is key to promoting alternative approaches and models that work to create the structural changes needed to achieve social justice and also promote the healing and social well-being of individuals, families, and communities. By combining healing and organizing strategies, healing centered organizing offers room for innovation and new possibilities that transcend what each of these approaches could achieve its own. For the most part, conventional social justice organizing models have tended to focus solely on strategies and outcomes related to creating institutional or policy change while healing informed approaches, such as in the mental health field, have mostly concentrated on restoring the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of individuals. Given the devastating ways that systemic inequality can erode hope and possibility for entire communities, the combined approach to healing and organizing is a much-needed marriage. This approach also makes it possible to sustain collective efforts for justice in more effective and holistic ways that attend to people’s whole selves. For Nicole Lee from UPM:

[Organizing and healing] are not separate or competing things. They are intricately bound together. For me, this means that healing can increase a person's sense of hope and agency to do social change work. But the reverse is also true. The experience of standing up, speaking out, and winning that happens in a community organizing campaign also helps to foster hope and a sense of possibility. It is part of the process of healing our communities.

Similarly, for Alejandra Gutierrez, Program Manager and youth organizer at Fathers and Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ), a community based organization dedicated to promoting strong and healthy families and communities in Stockton and the greater San Joaquin Valley, healing and social justice go hand and in hand. For Alejandra merging healing and organizing is more than just an approach, it's "a life journey." She shared, "It's not like it begins with the healing, and then you go to the organizing, healing is a life journey and organizing to me is also healing. It's liberating and they converge together, merge together." For both Nicole and Alejandra, the lines between healing and organizing can be blurred when there is room for marrying the two. For other practitioners, the approach begins with healing and "healing is interwoven throughout process." George Galvis argues that healing is a critical first step and platform from which to build collective organizing. He shared:

I was organizing them [gang members] and I wanted to give them voice, and agency but I realized that we needed to help them move beyond trauma. So we started with ceremonies like healing circles, and building relationships and trust with each other. We did this before we got into all the politics and social justice framework. For us the framework begins with healing. It is an integral part and ongoing part. We never stop healing until we catch our last breath. We have to constantly be growing. So ceremony, spirituality, and healing have always been an integral part of it. It's a first stepping-stone.

***Principle #4: Healing is found in culture and spirituality***

The fourth principle of healing centered organizing entails a commitment to harness the power of culture and spiritual healing that already exists within communities of color. For many people of color in the U.S., learning that their own history is much more vast and expansive than just the history that has happened in the past 500 years on the North American continent can be part of a critical healing process and a process of empowerment, self-discovery, and self-love. Moreover, despite systematic attempts to misinterpret, distort, and in many instances suppress or co-opt non-western forms of cultural and spiritual traditions, these alternative ways of being and knowing continue to be embraced and practiced to varying degrees in struggles for liberation of peoples of color. For example, for Chican@ communities in California, Indigenous earth-based traditions have been key to facilitating the power of culture and spirituality to bring about healing, health, and well-being to people and communities (Acosta 2007).

Drawing on more than 30 years of experience with youth and families, Maestro Jerry Tello, Co-founder of the National Compadres Network and internationally recognized author, trainer, and community healer, weaves his own life experiences, his research-based knowledge, and Indigenous culturally-based teachings in his work. He provides capacity building and training to

public systems and community based organizations and facilitates healing among families and communities in Chicano/Latino communities and other communities of color. Jerry Tello shared, “Healing really has to do with you, first of all, being rooted in a spiritual way. It has to be you having a philosophy of life that is interconnected with your own sacredness and the sacredness of all things.” Through the healing informed model of the “*La Cultural Cura*,” (transformational living and healing) Maestro Tello makes the case that the knowledge and medicine needed to heal from trauma lives within individuals and families, and already exists within the community. He shared:

In essence what it means is the healing starts inside that individual’s sense of sacred purpose. Within every culture, within every family, within every individual, is everything necessary. All you need is right there. It’s in you. And some people take that individually but I don’t mean it that way. In your authentic self, you are connected to ancestral wisdom, rooted values, cultural traditions - the channel of your roots. Within that is everything necessary for you to find balance and harmony.

Moreover, through the curriculum of “El Joven Noble<sup>1</sup>,” Tello offers the premise that strength, harmony, and balance in families and communities are rooted in instilling cultural resiliency through spiritual and traditional rites of passage. He emphasizes the importance of providing guidance from community elders to assist youth in navigating the passage to manhood and beyond. (Tello et al. 2010; National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute 2012).

Similarly for many African Americans, spiritual healing has been a site for profound transformation and possibilities for change. In particular, Black churches have historically played a prominent role in facilitating spaces for healing and establishing social and political power bases for African American communities. In addition, many progressive African American circles are increasingly drawing from African-centered approaches to well-being and the sacred in order to deploy culturally relevant healing modalities that connect individuals to a greater sense of purpose rooted in African ancestral practices and ways of being. These approaches may include a commitment to learning and teaching Black youth about their African ancestry that includes but is not limited to the history of ancient Kemet and the history of other regions of the African continent. In addition, many have found indigenous, earth centered African spiritual traditions such as Ifa, which comes from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, West Africa, as a source of healing and spiritual empowerment and an affirmation of cultural identity. Speaking on the role of spiritual healing in relation to struggles of liberation, Jackie Byers from BOP shared:

As long as we didn't know who we were and as long as we stayed hopeless we were controlled. But as we began to break that bond, we were moving more than just what was physical, we were moving something spiritual. And there was a spiritual reaction. We have to look at things not just as what's the material reaction but also that we are fighting something

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<sup>1</sup> Maestro has other curricula on Family Strengthening, Fatherhood, Parenthood, The Wounded Warrior, Circle Keepers etc. that assist other target populations.

that's deeper than that. Because there has been such an attack on our sense of ourselves. I think for Black people, spirit, and healing, and prayer, and all of the manifestations of that have been part of what we have always brought into our liberation and our survival.

In addition to the use of traditional and ancient cultural and spiritual healing modalities, many urban youth as well as social justice youth organizations have also used contemporary urban youth culture, especially hip-hop culture, as a source of healing, inspiration, and self-expression. Since its inception in the early 1970's hip-hop has given urban youth of color a platform and an avenue for expression that allows them to reflect on the harsh realities of growing up in the inner city. In the 1980's and 1990's hip-hop helped to politicize an entire generation of urban dwelling young people of color. Today, healing justice organizers continue to draw on hip-hop culture to create spaces for young people to articulate their struggles and to create a point of entry to engage youth in addressing the issues that are relevant to their lives.

The organization Beats, Rhymes, and Life in Oakland has developed a methodology called "Hip-Hop Therapy" through which they use hip-hop as a way to help young people embark on a healing and self-discovery process. Another project called Turf Unity (which was collaboratively run in a partnership between the United Roots Center and Urban Peace Movement) used hip-hop music as a way to build unity amongst young people from neighborhoods with historic rivalries. Additionally, many social justice youth organizations around California incorporate hip-hop culture in their workshops, rallies, direct actions, and other campaign activities - using hip-hop as a tool for social change.

These are all diverse and important modalities of healing that allow for culture to be enacted and allow for youth to express themselves creatively and authentically, emphasizing the individual's connection to the community.

## **KEY PRACTICES IN HEALING CENTERED ORGANIZING**

Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with adult staff from participating organizations, we have compiled various healing modalities applied within a healing centered organizing approach. Table 1 depicts some of the key practices that are being deployed within various approaches to healing centered organizing. We do not attempt to include all the healing modalities that exist but rather focus on highlighting some of the prominent practices that are being utilized by the organizations identified in this project.

**Table 1: Modalities and Practices of Healing Centered Organizing<sup>2</sup>**

Healing Modalities	Key Activities	View on System Change	Understanding of Healing and Well-being	Examples of Organizations
Transformative Organizing	Focus is on increasing the overall efficacy of youth and community organizing efforts to win social justice and systems change campaigns by integrating healing, mindfulness, contemplative practices, talking circles, etc. into the organizing model.	Systems change is brought about by the transformation of humanity in the process of bringing about social justice (mostly through confronting power and winning changes to public policies).	Well-being is the result of healthy and just social systems and relationships in organizations. Well-being also contributes to the collective power and efficacy of social movements who are working to bring about social and political change.	Urban Peace Movement, Black Organizing Project, Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), Hunters Point Family, MILPA, United Playaz, Youth Justice Coalition, Forward Together
Restorative Justice	Focus is on conversations and circles that work to restore group trust and make a situation whole after a harm or conflict has occurred in a community, group, or school. May include one-on-one meetings and group circle process.	Restorative Justice is held up as an alternative to the current School Discipline System and as an alternative to the current Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems - all of which are based in models of punishment. Restorative Justice projects have been implemented by public systems in an effort to change from a system of punishment to one of reconciliation.	Well-being is a function of aggrieved parties working together to resolve conflict in humane and affirming ways.	Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), Community Works West
Contemplative Practices	Focus is on practices that provide pathways to healthy and vibrant ways to see the world. Key activities include: Mindfulness, Meditation, Positive psychology, non-violent communication and self-discovery, and Somatic practices.	Systems change comes from individuals and groups practicing and engaging in the types of change they want to see in the world, which leads to a shift in human consciousness and that shift in human consciousness lead to creating more equitable systems.	Well-being is the result of ongoing balance and awareness of our psychological, spiritual, physical practices.	Niroga Institute, East Bay Meditation Center, Mind Body Awareness Project, Mindful Schools, Challenge Day
Faith-Based Practices	Focus is on a religious faith-based devotion to social justice and key activities may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prayer Circles</li> <li>• Formal church congregations</li> <li>• Faith based teaching from conventional religious text</li> <li>• Clergy play key leadership role</li> <li>• Communal gathering and sharing stories of faith.</li> <li>• Protest and direct action</li> </ul>	Change is the result of faithful action rooted in the idea that a higher authority will lead and guide individual and collective change.	Well-being comes from practicing faith and devotion to a higher authority. Justice is the ultimate expression of faith. Often draws from Liberation Theology, etc.	Homeboy Industries, California Lifelines to Healing & Oakland Community Organization (PICO)
Cultural & Spiritual Practices	Focus is on ancient ways of knowing that promote cultural and spiritual healing via the following key practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural rituals such as African drumming circles, dance, song.</li> <li>• Indigenous practices such as sweat lodges, elder councils, burning sage, cultural value systems</li> <li>• Healing Circles</li> <li>• Honoring Ancestors</li> </ul>	Social and systemic change is the result of re-establishing and reclaiming the links to traditional culture that were systematically disrupted for people of color through the processes of mis-education, forced enslavement and colonialism.	Healing and well-being stems from consistent engagement and practicing cultural and spiritual values. A consciousness rooted in cultural values is itself healing.	CURYJ, Fathers & Families of San Joaquin, Barrios Unidos; MILPA, Determination Men's Circle (Urban Peace Movement & United Roots), and Nat'l Compadres Network, Brotherhood of Elders
Urban Youth Culture & Contemporary Culture	Practices include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hip-hop writing exercises and writing circles</li> <li>• Performance of Music, Dance, Visual Art, and Spoken Word</li> <li>• Incorporating hip-hop into social justice education or into direct action and organizing campaigns.</li> <li>• Community building cultural events</li> </ul>	Hip-hop is a tool that can be used in youth and community organizing campaigns that aim to win social justice outcomes.  Hip-hop can also be used to create well-being through the practices of sharing and self expression and it can reach youth who may be reluctant to access traditional mental health services and systems.	Well-being comes about through creativity, art, and self-expression. Well-being can also be created by using culture as a platform to bring about social justice and social change.	Beats Rhymes & Life, Youth Speaks, Turf Unity Project (United Roots & Urban Peace Movement), RYSE Center, United Playaz, BAY-Peace, Third Eye Movement

<sup>2</sup> Table adapted from Ginwright, S. (2015). *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Teachers and Activists are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*. Routledge Press.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS: A Healing Centered Approach to Social Justice Change**

We have presented numerous examples of how social justice organizers are integrating healing and organizing work to implement more holistic practices that attend to the needs of individuals and communities. Acknowledging harm and developing a vision for well-being are necessary, but without implementation no healing will occur. Thus, this paper calls upon social justice leaders to contemplate the possibility that healing can facilitate the building of a healthier and more sustainable movement, and ultimately more just and equitable communities. We invite practitioners to be open to the radical proposition that *healing centered organizing* can help build the transformation needed to cultivate stronger coalitions across difference when mobilizing for racial and economic justice. Merging healing and organizing is one of the many ways to engage young people and communities of color in transformative change. Drawing from the insights of social justice practitioners who understand the significance of healing centered organizing, **we offer the following key recommendations to help shift the ways in which we imagine and engage in the work of social justice:**

### ***1) Embed and Institutionalize Healing Practices into Social Justice Organizations***

Increase organizational support for the integration of healing practices into the day-to-day work of social justice organizations and collectives. This involves a collective reimagining of our understanding of the core work of social justice organizations to being not only about carrying out our external political and programmatic work but also about attending to the emotional and spiritual well-being of our members, our leaders, and our staff. As an example, some organizations lead weekly healing circles for staff and members to participate in and other organizations weave yoga, meditation, and other contemplative practices into their weekly work plans and organizational calendars. Many youth organizations have begun to include healing practices in their leadership development trainings.

### ***2) Build the Capacity of Social Justice Leaders to Foster Healing***

The day-to-day challenges of engaging in social justice work often leaves its leaders overwhelmed, exhausted, and with little tools to work through these issues without the danger of burn-out. To bring healing centered organizing to scale, **we recommend building the capacity of social justice leaders to do the following:**

- ***Facilitate and be intentional about their own healing and “self-care”*** Leaders are more effective and more likely to stay in the movement over time if they are able to see healing as part of the role of a social justice leader, as opposed to the view that healing is something that is competing with their social justice work or that it is a “hobby.”
- ***Support and help facilitate the healing of others in the movement*** (members, staff, peers, etc.) Train staff and leaders on the need for healing centered organizing and

how to recognize the triggers among youth and organizers, who are carrying trauma, in order to be more responsive to the needs of the members and colleagues with whom they work. This entails focusing on facilitating collective healing spaces and increasing education among practitioners who are working with communities that have been exposed to trauma.

***3) Develop Key Partnerships Between Community Healers and Social Justice Leaders***

Both Community Healers and Community Organizers carry specialized knowledge bases that can serve as valuable assets to build more comprehensive models of community engagement and social change work. In order to foster partnerships between healers and social justice organizers, we must support the current kinship networks that exist among community healers and among organizers and find ways to promote cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary exchanges with the goal of identifying and further developing best practices to create more holistic and comprehensive models of organizing and social change work.

***4) Increase Investment to Sustain Healing Centered Organizing***

Because innovation comes from the margins, it is necessary for activists and youth organizers who are working on systems change to have the capacity and resources needed to build the programs and organizational infrastructure to sustain the people and the organizations doing this work. Additional resources are needed to make space for healing within existing organizational models. Moreover, funding is needed in order to document and grow this emerging field. Advancing the field of community change research allows us to grow our understanding of alternative organizing strategies and help address the gap that exists between systems change and healing.

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