

A Bottom-Up Approach to Social Change: Improving Models of Advocacy to Foster Community Organizing

I was first introduced to the Asian Outreach Center's (AOC) legacy of supporting Greater Boston's Asian American grassroots organizing last summer. Since 1972, the AOC has played a pivotal role in amplifying Boston's Asian communities' organizing efforts. From representing Chinatown residents in the historic fight against displacement, to protecting the rights of workers, tenants, immigrants, and voters, the AOC uses a community lawyering model (CLM) to combine direct legal services and advocacy strategies to support community organizing and build power with Greater Boston's Asian American communities. It is this unique community lawyering model that uplifts and centers the voices of the most marginalized communities in leading the fight for social change, that has spearheaded decades of success in protecting Asian American communities' against structural forms of oppression.

Building upon my experience as an AOC intern, this project seeks to understand the ways in which the AOC applies the CLM to develop legal tactics and tools that support movement building and grassroots organizing. Research into this model of community and legal advocacy offers the opportunity to expand a legal framework that forwards community organizing through a bottom-up approach of social change. Through Participatory Action Research (PAR), I hope to expand the opportunities of community lawyering-based advocacy in creating structural change and building community power. Applying ethnographic methodologies to Participatory Action Research, this research will analyze AOC's CLM approach and its impact in Asian immigrant communities. To understand the AOC's CLM, I will collect data and analyze the AOC's model through direct participation and observations of their Undocumented Immigrants and Southeast Asian Deportation project. In the first summer, the project will focus on conducting needs assessment with various immigrant groups in Greater Boston's Asian communities. Through providing legal services to immigrant clients, the project's findings will identify the needs of these communities' subpopulations and subsequently formulate the methods and strategies necessary to unify immigrant communities around the identified issues. In directly observing and engaging in AOC's projects, I will take field notes to assess the AOC's CLM in addressing community needs and fostering community engagement and civic participation. Additionally, the AOC and I will conduct interviews with community members on how the AOC's work can further impact their community. I will also conduct a literature review on different community organizing models and Asian American activism to understand AOC's CLM in the context of local and national immigrant rights movements.

In the second summer, this project will focus on implementing the proposed strategies to meet the needs of Asian immigrant and undocumented communities. I will continue to participate, observe, and take field notes to evaluate the implementation and impact of AOC's CLM in action. This research project will not only support AOC's capacity in developing an outcome to meet the needs of Asian communities, but will expand the impact of community lawyering in supporting grassroots community organizing. Moreover, this research project is critical to understanding how the AOC's model of advocacy can further foster collaboration in other historically disempowered communities to build grassroots organizing and political engagement.