2015-2018 Strategic Plan

Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project
BACKGROUND

Founded in 1994, Real Change is the only nonprofit in the Seattle area to combine independent media, cross-class organizing and a low-barrier employment program for people who are homeless or economically vulnerable. Real Change informs, engages, and creates relationships across difference to build and support a broad movement for economic, social, and racial justice through three interrelated programs:

Real Change Newspaper won 26 professional news awards in 2015 from the Washington Press Association and the Society of Professional Journalists. Our activist weekly newspaper is produced by four staff and dozens of volunteers, and is informed by a homeless and formerly homeless editorial committee. Recently, Real Change stepped into the digital frontier with the launch of Android and iPhone apps to provide cashless vendor payment for a digital newspaper.

Our Vendor Program provides opportunity to approximately 800 homeless and very low-income people who earn more than a million dollars annually through sales of the newspaper. Vendors begin immediately after a ninety-minute orientation that includes agreement to the code of conduct, sales training, and an invitation to involvement in various program activities. Additional opportunities include advanced sales trainings, elected vendor leadership positions, speakers bureau, and paid internships.

Real Change Advocacy leverages the relationships that exist between vendors and readers to defend the survival needs and civil rights of the most poor and build a cross-class movement for economic justice. Our vendor-led organizing mobilizes public support for legislative objectives, organizes and attends events and protest encampments, and brings vendor testimony to City Hall, County Council, and Olympia.

Real Change was awarded the International Network of Street Papers 2015 “Best Campaign” award for OutsideIN, a highly visual pressure campaign to increase resources for unsheltered homeless people.
METHODOLOGY

The 2015-2018 strategic plan was the result of a collaborative process between staff and board that interviewed key stakeholders such as donors, readers, advocacy allies, and vendors to gather information, assess strengths and weaknesses, set key goals, and plan for continued relevance, growth, and success. The strategic plan was developed over 2014 through the following phases:

I. Preparation. Setting timeline, developing leadership team, and identifying a facilitator.
II. Self-assessment. Conducting a SWOT analysis and a review of organizational values and mission.
III. Data Collection. Stakeholder interviews and focus groups, environmental scan, dissemination of results.
IV. Analysis and Dissemination. Synthesis of data and review by strategic planning leadership team.
V. Setting Goals. Retreat in July with all staff and board to select top priority goals.
VI. Workplan Development. Cross-departmental teams identify action steps, responsibility, and budget needs for each goal in the plan.

Staff and board worked in cross-departmental teams to construct detailed work plans for each goal and objective. These are reviewed and updated on a quarterly basis and are available upon request. The board approved the final strategic plan at their January 2015 monthly meeting.

Vendors purchase their papers for 60 cents and sell them for the $2 cover price plus tips. Real Change readers put more than a million dollars directly into the pockets of vendors annually.
MISSION, VISION, VALUES

As part of our 2015-2018 Strategic Plan, Real Change amended our mission to more explicitly commit to a racial equity agenda. We also clarified our purpose with a new vision statement, and reviewed and amended the values that guide our work daily.

MISSION

Our mission is to provide opportunity and a voice for homeless and low-income people while taking action for economic, social and racial justice.

VISION

We envision a just, caring and inclusive community, where people are no longer marginalized by racism and classism and have the means to live with dignity.

OUR VALUES

Courage
Telling the truth and taking risks

Community
Promoting healthy relationships across differences

Creativity
Pushing beyond the obvious to promote change

Compassion
Treating everyone with respect and accepting them as they are

Integrity
Doing what we say and taking responsibility for our mistakes
GOALS & OBJECTIVES

GOAL 1: Increase the number of people who read and buy the paper

Objectives:

1.) Double website traffic by the end of 2015 and increase the number of print readers by 15% by 2017

We will introduce a new website with differentiated content within the first half of 2015. We will also hire a Communications Specialist to expand our social media presence. Rather than simply replicating our print content on line, our website will offer new multi-media content. In conjunction with an expanded social media presence, we will be much more strategic about driving print readers to our digital media, and vice versa.

2.) Increase digital sales to 10% of total circulation by the end of 2015 and then by 5% annually.

A newly released smartphone app will allow customers to purchase digital copies of the paper starting in April of 2015. This exciting innovation will deliver news to younger readers in a medium that is aligned with their buying and reading behavior. And it will address the increasing problem cited by our vendors that many people simply no longer carry cash.

3.) Increase the number of active vendors by 10% each year and increase vendor activity in under-represented markets, including South Seattle and East King County

Our number of active vendors has been relatively constant the last two years and we have relied on word of mouth for recruitment. In the coming years, we will reach out more proactively to new populations that have not typically sold the paper such as young adults in transition and immigrant communities. We will also strengthen our presence in under-represented markets by going out to those communities to do on-site outreach and orientations.

4.) Increase the number of “600 Club Vendors” by 25%

Our top selling vendors, those that sell at least 600 papers per month, account for the majority of our sales and build the deepest relationships between vendors and readers. An unintended consequence of our 2013 price increase is that for these vendors, increased earnings can jeopardize eligibility for other income-based benefits, such as health care or housing subsidies. We will address declining sales among high-selling vendors with creative strategies to extend club status to additional vendors.
GOAL 2: Become a model organization working at the intersection of race and class

Objectives:

1.) Implement recommendations of anti-classism committee to increase the representation and voice of vendors and low-income people at Real Change

In 2013 Real Change staff and board completed a retreat on class. We took some initial steps towards becoming more intentionally anti-classist in 2014 and committed to making this work core in our 2015-18 strategic plan. At the heart of this effort is how we elevate the importance and voice of vendors throughout the organization. Our goal is to create structural and cultural changes that value vendor contributions and fosters greater vendor inclusion. Specific strategies include building a paid vendor internship program, increasing vendor volunteer opportunities, broadening vendors’ voice in decision making at Real Change, and creating a Vendor Leadership Committee.

2.) Apply Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) recommendations to progress as an organization that builds racial equity.

In 2014, Real Change made a formal commitment to racial equity. We adopted the framework used by the City of Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) and mapped the organization onto a continuum that assesses progress towards achieving racial equity goals. The assessment tool produced a series of fifteen recommended strategies that would allow us to move along the continuum towards being a more explicitly anti-racist and multi-cultural organization. These recommendations will guide our efforts to be an anti-racist organization. Examples include providing racial equity training for all staff and board, creating and implanting a plan to engage community of color, and naming race and racism in communication materials.

3.) Integrate work on classism and racism, resulting in the development and marketing of a training curriculum by 2017.

In adopting an explicit commitment to racial equity, Real Change is joining a number of other organizations that have made this a commitment. When it comes to becoming a model, we believe our unique value is that our work is at the intersection of race and class. We will develop trainings for staff, board and volunteers that focus on the ways that racism and classism conspire to marginalize poor people and communities of color. This training can eventually be a resource for other nonprofits in the community, and potentially a revenue stream for Real Change.

4.) Ensure that we meeting the following targets for attracting and retaining people who increase Real Change’s class and race diversity.

We will become more intentional about increasing the race and class diversity of board, staff and volunteers at Real Change. Specifically, 50% of new board members will increase RC’s race and class diversity, and 30% of applicants for staff positions and volunteer roles will do the same. We will also direct attention to ensuring that we not only attract, but retain low income people and people of color.
GOAL 3: Mobilize the Real Change Community for Social Action

Objectives:

1.) Develop two legislative allies and formalize relationships with five community allies.

Our relationships with legislative and community allies are at the heart of our work. Recent support of striking grocery workers with the UFCW, threatened public housing tenants with the Tenant’s Union, and homeless activists through WLIHA’s Emerging Advocates program, show the power of formal solidarity. In 2015, we will identify high leverage partnerships within the field of homelessness advocacy and the broader social justice movement to build power through defined allyship agreements.

2.) Engage and mobilize 1,000 readers, vendors and supporters as “RC Allstars” and increase this number by 50% every year.

Real Change has a broad base of readers and supporters. We want to focus on turning them from passive receivers of information to actively engaged members of the community. We will design and create a “RC Allstars” reader mobilization strategy and build a robust communications strategy to launch and implement the campaign. This strategy will feature a greater connection between our advocacy work and our paper, and the more widespread use of our website and social media to tell vendor stories and tie them to opportunities to take action.

3.) Increase the number of Homeless Speakers Bureau members and increasing speaking engagements by 20% annually.

The Homeless Speakers Bureau is a popular program that trains vendors in public speaking and connects them with community groups that seek people with direct experience of homelessness to speak to their constituents. Churches, schools, rotaries and other nonprofits are among the groups who contact Real Change for speakers. The HSB is an excellent educational tool that can grow to deliver even greater benefit to our community and the vendors that participate. We will devote new staff capacity to expanding the program, with more speakers training opportunities and more active solicitation and follow up for speaking engagements.
GOAL 4: Secure Real Change’s Long Term Stability

Objectives:

1.) Increase Real Change’s Operating Reserve by 75% by 2017 and increase the breadth of fundraising sources to absorb the annual costs of implementing the strategic plan.

While Real Change has an ambitious strategic plan that will require a significant investment of resources, we are also committed to increasing our reserves to have at least three months of cash in the bank. Our ability to do this depends on attracting multi-year funding support, increasing our board capacity for fundraising, building institutional relationships that increase sponsorship revenue, increase attention on major donor giving, and instituting a formal bequest program.

2.) Develop an organization-wide plan and processes to ensure leadership continuity in functions and roles.

Real Change is extremely fortunate to have a visionary and passionate Founding Director who has stayed with the organization for twenty years. The Founding Director serves as a co-director, alongside a Managing Director who has complementary skills and strengths. While this dual leadership structure functions exceptionally well right now, Real Change would be vulnerable if there were sudden changes to its current co-executive leadership structure. The Board will take the lead in developing a plan for recruiting and hiring future directors, as well as deepening its commitment to shared leadership throughout all levels of the organization.

IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

Staff and Board will work in cross-departmental teams to implement each of the four goals in this strategic plan. Each work group will track their activities using an online project management program. This will facilitate broad, bottom-up, participation in the process. Work groups for each goal will meet on a monthly basis and will review progress on a quarterly basis. There will also be an organization-wide annual review, which will include as assessment of our outcomes in the current year and an assessment about whether we need to make any adjustments to the following year’s plan. The annual assessment will include a budget review. Questions about this plan may be directed to Alan Preston, Real Change’s Managing Director at alanp@realchangemedia.org.