

Know Justice, Know Peace: A Transformation & Justice Community Collective
Project Summary and Future Aspirations

Critical Action & Social Advocacy (CASA) Pitzer¹ is a community center and an academic program that advances critical analysis and community partnerships around pressing issues in the inland tri-county area of San Bernardino, Riverside and Los Angeles. CASA connects local residents, organizers, activists, artists, and nonprofits with Pitzer faculty and students for long-term collaborative partnerships. CASA's community-based participatory-action research projects are collaboratively done with a number of core community partners, on issues such as incarceration, immigration, environment, education, labor, and art.²

The issue of centering wellness in social justice work was raised as a response to observing many students and organizers within our community partner organizations experiencing burnout symptoms such as stress, exhaustion, physical and mental health problems, and interpersonal tensions inside organizations. Community workshops and one-on-one conversations revealed that the staff of these organizations sought more support and guidance about how to actualize healing, wellbeing, and live their justice values in their daily operations, policies, programs and organizational culture. Given the climate perpetrated by white supremacy and capitalism, the sense of urgency, scarcity, hyper-productivity and subsequent health consequences cited among community organizers, the call for radical healing is amplified more than ever as systems-impacted organizers are harmed by systems of oppression and the emotional trauma of their work. Centering wellness in social justice work is both a timeless *and* an urgent issue. Our project aims to explore and critically reflect on this issue, secure resources and training to address it, and provide models to support other justice organizations and movements to be more trauma and healing-informed.

Here is a [timeline](#) and [graphic](#) about our work on this effort and below is a summary of the issues our initial research and reflections identified as primary needs and assets of the organization staff. Based on this research we have provided guidance in this [training](#), and consultations for students and the staff of the organizations that would support them as individuals, organizations and movements to integrate healing justice and transformative movement organizing theory and practice in organizational development, culture, daily operations, strategic plans and policy. These interventions are embodied and affective, liberatory and imaginative, politically sophisticated and strategic, something that speaks to students and community organizers on the frontlines of a variety of justice movements and makes space to collaboratively generate the solutions to the complex challenges faced. The bi-weekly training series took place February-September, 2021, with participating organizations, our CASA research team, and consultants from the fields of healing justice and transformative organizing. Fall 2021-Spring 2022 included consultations with each organization to support and adapt their experience into organizational development and the creation of a practitioner's manual of the entire project, to be released summer 2022. Future

¹ CASA is an academic program and community center of Pitzer College. Pitzer is a small, liberal arts private college on the outskirts of Los Angeles county that aims to produce engaged, socially responsible citizens of the world through an academically rigorous, interdisciplinary liberal arts education emphasizing social justice, intercultural understanding, and environmental sensitivity. The CASA research team advancing this project includes a mix of teachers, community organizers, healing practitioners, and students: Tessa Hicks Peterson, Hala Khouri, Scarlett Duarte, Keely Nguyen, Dalia Paris-Saper, C. Vanessa Reyes, Therese-Julia Uy, Susie Ortiz & Cindy Gaytan.

² Community partner organizations involved in this particular effort include: [Huerta del Valle](#), (urban farms and food justice collective); [Starting Over, Inc.](#), (transitional housing for/by formerly incarcerated people); [IEIYC](#), (youth-centered immigrant justice community group).

aspirations include extending the manual and additional workshops to more organizations, crafting more courses on these topics for Pitzer students, and publishing an anthology on these topics with leading experts in the field.

Know Justice, Know Peace: The Transformation & Justice Community Collective Research Findings Summary

Overview

This document summarizes the findings of our initial research and reflection phase with six local, justice-oriented organizations (Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice, Inland Empire Immigrant Youth Collective, Youth Mentoring Action Network, Starting Over, Inc., Huerta del Valle and Warehouse Working Resource Center). Based on 25 survey responses, 6 focus group conversations and 6 follow-up interviews with the staff and executive directors of the organizations, we organized thematically the assets, needs, and desires shared, as we understood them. We share here what we have learned thus far, in hopes of eliciting feedback and recommendations on the process, goals, and outcomes of this project.

What we have learned

1. Staff and directors of organizations are dedicated changemakers in their communities, acting on injustice, and building supportive and caring structures. Individuals have a deep love and passion for the work and traditions of community care, all of which are affirmed in a myriad of ways.

❖ **Organizations Enact Justice Values:** Organizations are rooted in community, have a clear analysis of injustice and employ intentional strategies to disrupt harmful structures and build coalitions for change. They also work to reimagine how their nonprofit can envision and often embody the possibilities of a future brought about by their movements, while dismantling the status quo.

❖ **Organizations as Sites of Community:** Participants describe their own organization as more than a workplace where people do their individual tasks. The work is often collaborative, supporting a sense of community among co-workers. Attending actions, sharing food, and organizing together are all ways each organization functions as a community. The care, love, and support that the staff members give to one another is apparent in their relationships and in how they spoke together in focus groups. Even when challenging topics came up, they advocated for their communities with a sense of unity in the work. Many noted how much they appreciated talking about these topics together in the focus groups, which were facilitated as listening circles.

❖ **Cultural Practice of Community and Collectivity:** In many traditions of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), taking care of each other (through mutual aid, shared labor, spiritual or embodied practices, etc) and putting others before oneself is central to collectivist cultures. Some staff recognize that they are first responders to the community and choose to work even though they have the option to take off on vacation and use their mental health days. This is an asset of community strength and power, and at the same time, a reason many may find themselves feeling guilty when allocating time for self-care and wellbeing practices. Shifting from viewing self-care as a selfish act to seeing it as a community asset could encourage institutionalizing wellbeing activities that cultivate resilience and joy within organizational policy and culture. Practicing regular forms of both collective and individual care within the workplace amplifies our capacity to give more to each other, the organization, and the community.

2. Despite individual and organizational intention to focus more on wellbeing and healing, many voiced challenges or a lack of knowledge and tools when it came to the implementation of tangible practices or policies within organizations, generally due to the following factors:

❖ **Emotional Weight of Work:** Community work is full of heart and love, and many enter this type of work because they see opportunity for greater change in the community that they are part of. The people leading these organizations are often systems-impacted themselves, now fighting against the same systems of oppression that caused them harm. As such, there is a significant emotional weight of this work, because it is often connected to one's own personal, familial, and ancestral trauma. Sixty-four percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with that statement "the work I do can bring up past negative experiences or traumas." Many feel they do not have the time, energy, or tools to process the emotional toll this work can take.

❖ **Work and Life as Interconnected:** Given how intertwined this work is with the lived experience of the staff, it is difficult to separate work from home life. The issues they fight in their community (ex. deportations, incarceration, working conditions, food scarcity, etc.) are experienced as nonstop assaults and many feel the organizations can't afford to slow down, thus they work around the clock for justice. This sense of urgency acts as a powerful driving force for action; this kind of work is fueled by urgency, love, and desire for immediate change. This urgency can also be a major stressor and the reason staff feel the work is not conducive to wellbeing. Due to the fast-paced nature of organizations, it can be rare to find a time to take care of the emotional, physical and spiritual tax of trauma. Such nonstop dedication is an incredible testament to the resiliency of staff, as well as a challenge towards setting boundaries for time to restore and heal from the immensity of the work.

❖ **Oppressive Structural Norms:** Despite the intention of care and support that the organizations espouse, many staff members shared the challenge of running an organization without being influenced by capitalist, white supremacist and ableist notions (such as hyperproductivity, competition, isolation, low wages, and one's worth being based on levels of achievement and externally imposed, normative outcomes). Even within organizations that explicitly aim to disrupt some of these deleterious effects, the tendency to "go, go, go" can often replicate the very structures they are working against. Recognizing the restrictive legal and financial structures of nonprofits makes it difficult to implement alternative or anti-capitalist changes to work environment, culture, and policy. Participants voiced the need to ensure staff are well enough to continue the battle amidst existing urgency and find alternate practices that can disrupt some of these norms, where they are able.

3. Individuals voiced their own ideas of how to establish and strengthen wellbeing in their organization as well as possible alternative practices that can disrupt harmful structural norms.

❖ **Structural Shift in Organization:** Among participants across all organizations, there was a voiced need for larger structural shifts in the organizations that would institutionalize their justice values into their actual organizational practices, culture, and environment. Participants voiced a combination of *implementing* liberatory values into existing structures and *rejecting* normative, white supremacist operations, with the goal of creating new organizational structures, policies, and procedures to aptly reflect the abolitionist and justice values of organizations. Participants suggested (or are already enacting) a number of possible structures to implement, such as:

- Reclaiming traditional management and meeting structures, like a "woke" version of Robert's Rules of Order to be more community and justice oriented and accurately reflect their values
- Being trained or coached on trauma- and healing-informed approaches, including mindfulness/ grounding practices; racial justice workshops; communication and community-building activities; and restorative justice practices; then integrating such practices into group circles among the staff
- Weekly "Self-Care" stipends for staff (to use however they feel best nurtures them)
- Monthly Mental Health/Self-Care day off for staff (while collective healing practices are important, some mentioned that often just giving staff members time off work will have a larger impact in terms of decreasing burnout and increasing resiliency).
- Creating a Directors' Network for the purpose of connecting and sharing the personal and work experiences of those in leadership roles as a way to build community, learn from each other's ideas in operations, processes, challenges, and successes
- Intentional search for grants and foundations that will fund community building, retreats, and staff wellbeing

➤ Building connections with other 501c3 organizations practicing restorative justice who have successfully found their way through limited resources and nonprofit restrictions.

❖ **Community Building:** Organizational leadership want to implement and incentivize staff healing and wellness structures focusing on time off, rest, and collective joy. Interpersonal connection and group bonding is important for individuals to feel comfortable engaging in activities designed for collective stress-reduction and healing. Key ideas included retreats solely focused on rest and fun bonding among leaders - through food, drink, music, activities, and games. Spaces cultivating joy and connection are necessary to build trust, support, and strong communication, which will help when stress, trauma, or harder conversations and dynamics emerge in the work. This is another way to maintain organizational care in the face of urgent and heavy work.

❖ **Guidance for Trauma-Informed Healing Practices:** Individuals expressed wanting more guidance on how to integrate wellness and trauma-informed practices into their organizations and daily lives in *sustainable* and *accessible* ways. People liked the idea of a third-party presence to facilitate these kinds of conversations. Learning about the impact of trauma, how to self-regulate in triggering moments, and sustain presence and resilience in the face of vicarious trauma is critical in this line of social justice work. Successfully negotiating trauma personally and at work requires specific knowledge, tools and healing-informed practices, especially those that are culturally responsive. Accessible healing practices might include various forms, such as meditation, drama, poetry, music, movement, art, council, communal cooking and eating, etc. Listening circles can be useful and validating for many, but trauma can potentially be furthered without strong facilitation or follow up. Staff members should not be expected to be therapists for each other, rather should have tools to navigate their own triggers and also be a support system or potential referral of resources for other staff or community members. Beyond acquiring trauma and healing-informed knowledge and tools, guidance will be useful in navigating boundaries that differentiate when emotional processing among staff is appropriate and when it is not, and exploring how to provide support for the emotional impact of the work while staying on target in the organizational scope of work. Navigating such boundaries, learning relevant tools, and gaining skills for personal use and to integrate into organizational programming and practice, were often cited as areas of interest for staff members across organizations.