

## Advancing Racial Justice in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties

**F**or years, Yadira Fregoso had been aware of the significant—and growing—needs of her community of Antioch. The sprawling city in East Contra Costa County has undergone many changes since she and her husband, Leopoldo, moved there in 1995. Over the years she’s seen spikes in gun violence, the targeting of undocumented friends and fellow parishioners for detention and deportation, and the steady dwindling of resources for public schools.

“I’ve known there are problems, but I never knew what to do about them,” says Yadira. An invitation from an organizer in October 2019 to help design an immigration forum changed all that. After planning that first forum, Yadira began attending regular meetings of the local organizing committee at her church, Most Holy Rosary. Now, she and her family count themselves among the 60,000 families that are part of Faith in Action East Bay (FIA East Bay).

Throughout Alameda and Contra Costa counties, clergy and community leaders recount similar stories of transformation through their involvement with FIA East Bay. They talk about the shifts they have seen in themselves and others and about how organizing has provided a vehicle for creating community, inspiring hope, developing leadership skills, and building power to make change.

### A New Voice for Alameda and Contra Costa Counties

In January 2020, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), with its 48-plus year history of bringing hope and change to Oakland, formally became FIA East Bay. The new organization builds on the collective work of four PICO organizations in the East Bay: Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action, Congregations Organizing for Renewal, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, and OCO. The birth of FIA East Bay is about more than just a mere name change or consolidation of aligned efforts. It reflects a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of residents of the two sprawling counties and of the pressing need for an organization equipped to con-



# FAITH IN ACTION

## EAST BAY

### Vision



We envision a racially just community where all children and families Belong, exercise power to shape public decisions, and have equal access to excellent public schools, affordable housing, good job opportunities, quality healthcare, and safe, clean, and vibrant neighborhoods.

### Goals



Leaders and staff of FIA East Bay have identified four priority goals for 2020-2022:

- **Leadership Involvement and Development:** 500 new and existing leaders.
- **Complete Census Count** in all nine communities in which FIA East Bay is organizing. This would generate \$17 billion over 10 years for Alameda County and \$11.4 billion over 10 years for Contra Costa County.
- **Passage of Schools and Communities First** ballot initiative, which would generate \$553 million annually for Alameda County and \$348 million annually for Contra Costa County.
- **Develop analysis and build power** to influence how newly won funds are spent in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.
- **Engage 1,000 leaders and members** of their communities in Belong Circles.

### Core Strategies



FIA East Bay has identified three interrelated and mutually supporting strategies to advance racial and economic justice in Alameda and Contra Costa counties:

- Belong Circles to deepen relationships and build inclusive communities.
- Training and issue-based organizing to develop clergy and community leaders.
- Integrated voter engagement and census outreach to build power and increase resources for historically marginalized communities in East Bay cities, counties, and school districts.

front inequities at both the local and the regional level.

“We are scaling up the level of our capacity to build power in the East Bay,” explains Executive Director Dr. George Cummings. “Our mission is fundamentally about building power to bring about change, and in order to bring about the kind of change that we want in California, we need a lot bigger capacity for building power, and that is made possible by regionalizing.”

The decision to create a new, regionally focused organization was made after three years of intentional relationship building and organizing across Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The resulting organizational vision, goals, and core strategies (see box, this page) were shaped by clergy and community leaders in partnership with FIA East Bay staff. Through a series of one-to-one conversations, congregation and school-based meetings,



**In all, more than 200 clergy and community leaders from 22 congregations, 27 schools, and 11 cities participated in the process.**

and regional trainings, new and long-time leaders from throughout the region coalesced around priority issues, developed a collective analysis, and forged relationships across race, language, geography, and faith traditions. Leveraging both their own policy expertise, as well as that of PICO California staff and partner organizations, staff of FIA East Bay engaged leaders in developing a collective power analysis and understanding of the key issues facing families in the region. In all, more than 200 clergy and community leaders from 22 congregations, 27 schools, and 11 cities participated in the process.

From that deep work, FIA East Bay has identified four core issues that are the focus of its organizing: K-12 education equity, immigrant rights, affordable housing, and community safety. Through



deep congregation- and school-based organizing and leadership development, FIA East Bay supports and engages youth and adult community leaders in key power centers where low-income communities of color live, worship, attend school, and work. In these and other, more affluent, areas of the two counties, FIA East Bay convenes and organizes values-aligned clergy to build relationships, develop a shared analysis across denominations, and put their faith into action by organizing to address systemic inequities (see sidebar, page 5). Through its aligned efforts, FIA East Bay is organizing in all five supervisorial districts in both Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

Working through congregations and schools, FIA East Bay is utilizing three interrelated and mutually supporting strategies to advance its vision of a more inclusive and just East Bay: Belong Circles to deepen relationships and build inclusive communities; training and issue-based organizing to develop clergy and community leaders; and integrated voter engagement and census outreach to build power and increase resources for East Bay communities that are marginalized based on race, immigration status, language, income, or by having been caught up in the criminal justice system.

The following pages provide an overview of the vision and work of FIA East Bay and serve as an introduction to the diverse clergy, community leaders, and staff who together are creating and enacting a vision of an inclusive and just future for the residents of Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

### **Belong Circles: Expanding the Circle of Concern**

Belong Circles anchor the relational and organizing work of FIA East Bay. Across the two counties, 625 clergy and community leaders participate in more than 60 Belong Circles, based in congregations, schools, and neighborhoods. The model, which



## **FAITH IN ACTION** **By the Numbers** EAST BAY

18 cities



81 congregations



30 schools in 3 districts



More than  
**100**  
clergy  
leaders

**340**  
core lay  
leaders

60,000 families  
connected to schools  
and congregations





Florence Davis, a resident of Richmond, first heard about Belong Circles while attending a Sunday service at The Way in Berkeley. An invitation was issued to attend the Belong Symposium, a training that launched the statewide effort. Florence recalls how the two-day training and the underlying focus of the Belong Circles offered a powerful strategy to combat the division and discord she saw—and continues to see—in her community and in the country.

“It feels like everyone wants to divide,” says Florence. “It was the first time I was with thousands of other people who, like me, thought it was sad that we are so divided on Sunday mornings.”



With the help of a FIA East Bay organizer, she started and led a Belong Circle with a group of neighbors from Richmond to, as she describes it, “build empathy for each other’s perspective” across religion, race, class, and ethnicity.

Participating in a Belong Circle deepened Florence’s understanding of what it means to live every day in fear of detention or deportation, as members of the Belong Circle shared their daily reality. She also experienced for the first time the challenge and isolation that occurs when you don’t speak or understand the dominant language. She was one of just a few English speakers in the Belong Circle, which was conducted entirely in Spanish with English translation. “Those of us who could only speak English and typically are privileged from a language perspective had to wait for someone to translate,” says Florence. “It was a good awakening for me personally.” Since that first Belong Circle with neighbors, Florence has gone on to conduct a training at The Way with Pastor Michael McBride. In February of 2020, the congregation launched Belong Circles with leaders of all of its ministries.

has been adopted by all PICO organizations in California, grew out of OCO’s violence-reduction work and community-building strategies that included intentional bridging across race, class, and immigration status, as well as between law enforcement and community members.

When Belong Circles are first formed, members explore a six-session curriculum inspired by the work of John A. Powell, Director of the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California Berkeley. Their work together is focused on relationship building, storytelling, naming and repairing harms across race, class, gender, and language, and taking individual and collective prophetic action to make change.

“Belonging has to do with being able to share our stories and to understand that we have really common experiences that bring us together,” says Dr. Cummings. Belong Circles are the structure through which FIA East Bay builds inclusive communities, and—like local organizing committees (LOCs) in the PICO organizing model—they are the congregation- or school-based “home” of organizing and power-building efforts.

## Developing Leaders to Advance Justice

Leadership development represents FIA East Bay's second core strategy to advance racial and economic justice in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Community leaders are supported and developed through one-on-one guidance from organizers, the opportunity to take on increasingly complex leadership roles, and through trainings on issues that help them transfer their personal pain or anger into productive civic action. Rather than simply relying on paid staff to guide the work, leaders develop and guide the implementation of strategy through a shared leadership model that is rooted in deep relationships and a culture of mutual accountability.

For example, over the course of a year, Yadira Fregoso went from co-planning an immigration forum to speaking to members of her congregation at Sunday Mass, to leading a team of volunteer petition signature gatherers. "I thought I was just signing up to help with the forum," recalls Yadira, still amazed that her original "yes" would result in such a profound change in her life—and that of her family.

Yadira's journey is one that her organizer, Emma Paulino, traveled more than 25 years ago when concern about the quality of education her children were receiving prompted her to become an OCO leader. Today, she is FIA East Bay's Director of Organizing. Immigration forums, she notes, both provide access to much needed services and—for leaders like Yadira and many others—are a vehicle to empower the community.

"We give people the opportunity to feel like they can do something, regardless of their job or position," says Emma. "Everybody has a role in our organization."

## Cultivating Clergy Leadership

Clergy play an integral role in FIA East Bay's organizing model. Their leadership and voice elevate the moral and faith dimensions of racial and economic injustices confronting low-income communities and communities of color. Through their coming together across faith traditions, clergy leaders model for their congregations—and for the broader society—the value of interfaith dialog, understanding, and action. And, through their own engagement, clergy open doors for members of their congregation to get involved in organizing—harnessing their individual and collective power to make change.

Father Jesus Nieto, pastor of Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church in Union City, has been involved in faith-based organizing for 19 of his 25 years as a priest—for 14 years through OCO and for the last five years in his current parish. With other Catholic clergy and FIA East Bay staff, Fr. Nieto has been working with the Diocese of Oakland to build connections to engage Catholic parishes throughout Alameda and Contra Costa counties in organizing. This emerging partnership builds on more than four decades of work between East Bay PICO organizations and the Diocese. Under the leadership of Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ, FIA East Bay has been invited to partner with local pastors to establish organizing efforts throughout the region.

Clergy cohorts are the structure through which FIA East Bay organizes clergy across faith traditions and cities to build relationships, learn about pressing regional issues, and create a shared vision for action. Since 2019, for example, the Contra Costa County Clergy Caucus (C5), which includes more than 20 clergy leaders from throughout Contra Costa County, has been meeting with the support and leadership of Brian Woodson, Director of Clergy Development for FIA East Bay and Pastor and Founder of the Bay Area Christian Connection.

Servant BK, as he is widely known, has led clergy leaders through a curriculum with three distinctive elements: encounter, or learning about the root cause of inequities in their community; disruption, or confronting complicity in perpetuating injustices; and reimagining, or exploring solutions together. Experts provide both historical context and root-cause analysis of pressing issues facing Contra Costa families, including the



housing crisis, the scapegoating of migrants, and the proliferation of gun violence. Personal testimony shared by men and women from Contra Costa communities ground the discussions in the life experience of those directly impacted. "We want to take clergy leaders out of their comfort zone...To challenge existing patterns of behavior as an impetus to explore new ways of thinking and acting," says Servant BK.

Reverend Kristin Schmidt and her husband, Reverend Christian Schmidt, are co-pastors of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, located in Kensington. They were invited to join the Contra Costa cohort by a colleague in Walnut Creek. "C5 has helped [us] to get acquainted with the issues that really matter in Contra Costa County," explains Rev. Kristin, "and to broaden our focus and attention beyond our own congregation."

The cohort has also provided a connection to the broader work of FIA East Bay and created opportunities for the values-aligned Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley to both support and organize alongside diverse congregations and leaders throughout the county. This includes supporting a student-led press conference on the Schools and Communities First ballot initiative and gathering signatures for the initiative after Sunday service.

It's the commitment to action that has given the organization its staying power and positions it well to support clergy and congregations as they put their faith into action. "This is what serious work looks like," says FIA East Bay Board Co-Chair Reverend Jim Hopkins. "It's more than preaching, parading, and praying. It's about challenging existing narratives and being a vehicle for change," he adds. "That has been our strength—to take work on in a serious way." ●



Reflecting on his development as a leader, Sam notes, "I'd always been involved [in local issues], but my involvement typically meant railing against the people in office. I didn't know how to push the city government to do things and I never thought about what they needed to do their job well. That shift was really powerful."

The first "win" Sam was part of making happen involved securing a stop sign near Manzanita SEED to address a serious concern about pedestrian safety around the school. Each morning, as he would drop his son, Rafael, off at school, Sam would be reminded of the hard-fought victory and its impact. "I would think, 'that is my stop sign,'" recalls Sam. "It was a symbol of how hard change is to achieve and how meaningful it



can be when you achieve it; that stop sign made a difference for that neighborhood and the kids."

Over the years, he has organized alongside students, parents, educators, and colleagues to increase funding for Oakland schools and to make sure it was equitably distributed; leveraged the development of the district's Local Control and Accountability Plan process to secure 10 new positions to engage families and students in shared decision-making and significant resources for positive school climate and culture; and supported the work of students and families to create a dual-language immersion middle school in 2017. Families continue to organize to secure their vision of a multilingual pathway from preschool through high school.

Although Sam Davis' life experience is quite different from Yadira's, he, too, didn't expect to become a leader with FIA East Bay. But he now serves as a member of the board representing the Kehilla Synagogue in Oakland. Over his 14 years as a leader—first with OCO and now with FIA East Bay—Sam has both witnessed and benefited from the organization's commitment to leadership development. Sam was introduced to OCO while an adult education teacher at Manzanita SEED Elementary School in Oakland. When the funding for the program was at risk, he saw how immigrant parents who relied on the adult education classes led the effort to save the program—and how those leadership skills transferred to other issues of concern.

Often—though not always—leaders begin by working on a local issue. Many go on to lead work on regional, state, and even national issues. More recently, for example, Sam was part of an FIA East Bay team that participated in a successful campaign to push the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department to cancel its contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement to house undocumented migrants. A culminating protest in June of 2018 drew 4000 people to the facility. A short time later, after months and months of protests and pressure, the contract was ended.

For Sam, a middle class white male with U.S. citizenship, his work to support his undocumented sisters and brothers is a way he and others similarly situated can "use our privilege to do our

## Core Issues at a Glance



### Violence Reduction

Ongoing organizing and leadership to support Oakland's Ceasefire Initiative, a comprehensive strategy that has reduced gun violence in the city by 52 percent since 2012. The successful Oakland work became the model for what is now Faith in Action's national Live Free campaign, working in 15 states and 30 cities to end gun violence and stop mass incarceration. FIA East Bay is currently organizing to have the Ceasefire strategy adopted in Contra Costa County cities.



### Education Equity

FIA East Bay builds on the experience and success of Oakland Community Organization's long history of education organizing. This includes playing a lead role in the coalition effort to write and pass Measure N, which generated more than \$120 million dollars for high school transformation through Linked Learning. Since the passage of Measure N in 2014, graduation rates for African American and Latinx students in OUSD have increased from 58.4% to 76.3% and from 54.4% to 61.3%, respectively.



### Immigrant Rights

Building on more than a decade of work to advance immigrant rights, FIA East Bay organizes both to stop the targeting of immigrants and to support their ability to live and work in the region. A key element of this work is to organize forums that connect immigrants to needed services. More than 2100 people participated in immigration forums organized in eight congregations in Alameda and Contra Costa counties in 2019. Free legal guidance on immigration matters saved families approximately \$200,000.



### Housing Justice

In Union City and Fremont, FIA East Bay is focused on ensuring access to safe and affordable housing for low-income individuals and families. In a survey of 500 Union City residents, 44% of families with children under six years old said they are not confident that they will be able to afford to live in the city in the next 2-5 years.

part." He also sees the deep connection between the plight of those migrating to the U.S. for safety and economic opportunity and his own family's efforts to flee the Nazis as Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939. Although his grandparents and mother made it to England, other members of his family were killed by the Nazis in Auschwitz. Sam has shared his family's story with members of his congregation and in other venues to underscore the heroism of migrants from Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere who are taking great risks to build a better life for their families.

Although Sam began organizing through his son's school, his concern for undocumented migrants led him to join the organizing ministry in his synagogue, which had prioritized immigration issues for its work. "I was not very in touch with Judaism, but the organizing drew me deeper into my connection to Judaism. For me, it has been a beautiful, beautiful process. I am very grateful to OCO for that."

## Building Power Through the 2020 Census and Integrated Voter Development

Over its 48-year history, OCO leaders and staff have played important roles in passing critical revenue measures and in providing oversight to ensure that the funds were well spent and aligned with community needs. This work includes voter education and turnout to pass local measures to support schools, public safety, and youth, as well as statewide initiatives to raise revenue and reform California's criminal justice system. As part of a broader coalition to pass Proposition 30, for example, 800 OCO leaders turned out 10,000 low-income voters of color—youth, immigrants, and systems-impacted men and women—to raise much-needed review for schools and vital services.

Building on this experience, FIA East Bay is committed to the power-building strategy of integrated voter engagement, leveraging its congregation- and school-based organizing structure to pass the Schools and Communities First ballot initiative and achieve a complete census count in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Outreach will focus on the communities that are most difficult to reach and engage: low-income families, people of color, formerly incarcerated and immigrant communities, and systems-impacted individuals. In the first phase of the School and

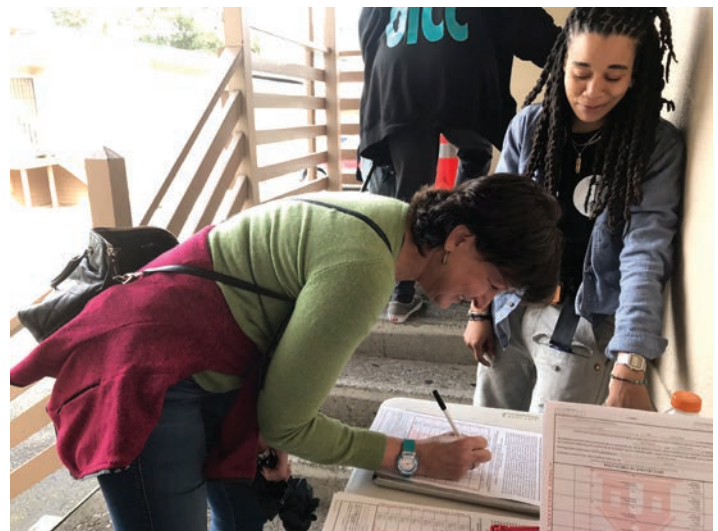


Communities First campaign, FIA East Bay put its civic engagement expertise to work, collecting 5,474 signatures to qualify the initiative for the ballot—the most of any PICO organization in the state.

Vernetta Woods, a leader with FIA East Bay, cast her first ballot in 2016—decades after she reached the legal voting age of 18. Election canvassers and volunteers registering people to vote never came to her Deep East Oakland neighborhood, she explains. And no one ever helped her to make the connection between the disinvestment in her community and the low voter turnout of low-income communities and communities of color.

But through her work with FIA East Bay she deepened her understanding of the root causes of inequities in Oakland and the region. She started registering people to vote, first at Eastmont Mall, which she describes as her “playground” growing up, and then at community colleges, UC Berkeley, and in her neighborhood. She also led a voter-information training in an effort to make sure that formerly incarcerated men and women knew and exercised their voting rights. In all, Vernetta estimates having registered 1000 voters of color—including her family members, who voted together for the first time in 2018. After leading volunteer Get-Out-the-Vote teams for three years, she now runs a 16-member civic engagement team for Oakland Rising, focused on voter education and engagement and census outreach.

In her transformation from a nonvoter to a leader whose work is helping to shift the electorate and bring much-needed resources to her community, Vernetta has developed a deep interest and desire to be a driver of change. “I want to be at the table where decisions are made. I would never have gotten involved if I hadn’t



come in contact with FIA East Bay. If it wasn’t for that, I would still be a little lost and not comprehending why I am not getting so far,” says Vernetta. She now “understands how things work” and is sharing that knowledge and power with her community.

### For a Just and Inclusive East Bay

Vernetta’s journey is not unique. In congregations and community halls from Fremont to Byron, clergy and community leaders with FIA East Bay are building power to advance systemic change for low-income communities and communities of color. Together, they’re re-imagining and working toward a region where opportunity is shared broadly, not rationed to the few, and where every adult and child lives with dignity and in peace. ●