

A recent New Times article by Nick Confessore, [*How the G.O.P. Lost Its Voters to Donald Trump*](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/28/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-voters.html?emc=eta1&_r=0), featured details of a gathering of seniors from a manufactured home community in Florida with Rep. Ron DeSantis at a Town Hall Meeting to illustrate the rejection of the G.O.P. establishment by mainly white working class voters. That scene is a direct result of organizing performed by MHAction, a special project of the Center for Community Change. The back story involving that event comes out of the mixture of a progressive base-building strategy on economic and social justice issues with white working class families. MHAction’s organizing model uses an innovative online outreach process that relies on social media tools, like Facebook, to identify community leaders. Community leaders then participate in MHAction’s leadership development program involving popular and political education workshops, issue campaign activities and online organizing skill building workshops.

The main aspect of MHAction’s work is to build an active membership base in manufactured home communities. Manufactured home communities (commonly referred to as trailer parks) are predominately made up of white-working class families and seniors that involve homeowners who rent ‘space’ from a common landlord. The manufactured housing sector has been going through a process of consolidation of ownership by corporate landlords for the past two decades. Many of the original mom and pop community owners have aged out and sold their communities to corporate land owners. Many of the largest corporate landlords are privately held or publically traded Real Estate Investment Trusts.

The community leaders from Carriage Cove in Daytona, Florida referenced in the article hail from a community owned by a Chicago-based REIT called Equity Lifestyle Properties, Inc. (ELS), the nation’s largest corporate owner of manufactured housing communities. ELS currently owns 370 communities in 32 states which encompass 140,000 individual home sites. ELS’s Chairman is Sam Zell, a wealthy real-estate investor currently worth $4.5 billion. ELS’s business model is based on maximizing profits for shareholders by aggressively increasing rents while decreasing capital improvements. This predatory equity scheme leaves the economic security of thousands of homeowners across the country in shreds. To make matters worse, Zell has been investing in candidates and PACs that have pushed for privatization and cutbacks to important social programs like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance and Medicare. The anger and confusion that many homeowners from community’s such as Carriage Cove face, combined with a right-wing funded strategy by idealogues like Sam Zell to decimate programs that those same families rely on, has provided our movement a unique opportunity to re-shape the political debate that is currently churning in white-working class communities. Our goal is to transform that opportunity into a stand-alone organization that will become a part of a strong and vibrant progressive ecosystem. Our strategy is designed to achieve scale and geographic reach by combining traditional community organizing leadership development methods with the latest [strategies in online organizing](http://connectivity.cqrollcall.com/3-organizations-that-use-facebook-private-groups-for-advocacy/).

The vast majority of these communities are located in exurban and rural geographies. This makes traditional community organizing methods too expensive and cumbersome. In order to reach homeowners in these communities, MHAction developed an innovative online outreach program through the use of targeted Facebook ads and ‘open’ informational calls where homeowners can dial-in and learn about the work of MHAction. This online outreach program then leads to in-person contact with community leaders to illicit their support and participation with MHAction. For example, a targeted MHAction Facebook ad in Florida popped up on the Facebook feed of [Dale and Kathy Muzzy](http://www.mhaction.org/dale-muzzy-i-am-responsible-for-making-billionaire-sam-zell-rich/), disabled retirees who live in Carriage Cove. That Facebook ad led Dale and Kathy Muzzy to attend a MHAction informational call. Afterwards, Dale reached out directly to MHAction and asked for assistance in holding a local meeting in his community.

Following up on Dale’s outreach to MHAction, I and an already active MHAction leader, [Pam Bournival from Sarasota, FL](http://www.communitychange.org/right-way-wrong-way-make-money/) lined up an in-person visit to Dale’s community. The purpose of the in-person visit centered on sharing with homeowners MHAction’s three-fold strategy: to run corporate accountability campaigns designed to ensure that companies like ELS treat homeowners fairly, boost local and state policy work designed to enact vital protections for manufactured homeowners and operate popular and political education campaigns with homeowners on economic and social just issues, such as the protection and expansion of programs like Social Security. This initial meeting was warmly received by Dale and Kathy Muzzy and ten local community leaders.

That original meeting kicked off the involvement of Dale and Kathy Muzzy and many in the Carriage Cove community to participate in campaigns facilitated by CCC and MHAction. The Carriage Cove community held a book tour talk with Nancy Altman from Social Security Works centered on Social Security expansion issues, participated in protests that led ELS to develop a nation-wide grievance procedure with homeowners, and sent four community leaders in December of 2013 to lobby on Social Security expansion issues in Washington, DC. One of the key moments for the Carriage Cove leadership team during those legislative visits involved pushing the Chief of Staff from Rep. Ron DeSantis’ office to remove DeSantis’ name from a Dear Colleague Letter circulated by [Rep. Reid Ribble calling for cutbacks to Social Security](http://www.aflcio.org/content/download/105831/2804491/file/Ribbleletter.pdf).

That legislative visit triggered a cell-phone call directly to Dale Muzzy from Rep. DeSantis who attempted to explain his position on Social Security cutbacks. Dale suggested that the best way to review the issue, since he could not speak on behalf of everyone in his community, was for DeSantis to hold a Town Hall on the issues. DeSantis obliged and scheduled a Town Hall meeting on senior issues in Port Orange, Florida on January 18th. Dale and Kathy Muzzy and a handful of core leaders in the community turned out 50 seniors and continued to press DeSantis on his positions. See attached photos. DeSantis ended up calling the meeting ‘early’ after realizing he wasn’t going to be able to shift the policy positions of those in attendance. The Carriage Cove community continues to be involved with MHAction to this day.

CCC’s ability to incubate a project like MHAction serves as powerful testimony to the visionary leadership of the Center for Community Change. Only by committing to new and bold strategies will our organizing work create the leaders who will become key voices in the national debates about change in their communities. MHAction’s and CCC’s work also stands in stark juxtaposition to the hateful methods and messages wrapped up in the Trump campaign. Preying on the fears of families in economic pain is a dangerous game to play. One that is fraught with mutual destructive consequences. It not only breaks our county’s political systems, it breaks our country’s soul. CCC’s and MHAction’s strategy involving organizing manufactured home owners is based on the values of care for our neighbors and love of our communities. Taking the path of patience, love and forgiveness may be a difficult road to walk down, but it’s the correct one. It’s the one that will truly fix the issues that all of our communities face.

To find out more about CCC’s innovative manufactured housing project, please visit: [www.mhaction.org](http://www.mhaction.org) Please follow us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MHaction/>

In solidarity,

Deepak

Deepak Bhargava Kevin Borden

CCC Executive Director MHAction Project Lead