

Campaign seeks to enlist voters in support of social change: COPA sets agenda for host of issues including housing, immigration

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PAJARO - Tony Cardoso didn't think there was much point to voting. After all, what could his one vote do?

Then he learned about an organization of 24 religious, education and nonprofit groups working together to solve economic and social justice issues.

The coalition, known as Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action, or COPA, launched a campaign Monday to push for affordable housing, health care access, public safety, economic and educational opportunity, and immigration reform.

Through the Stand Up and Take Charge signature drive, COPA aims to enlist 30,000 registered voters in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties in support of its agenda. While the nonpartisan group won't endorse anyone, it plans to host forums to hold candidates in June and November elections accountable.

Cardoso has signed on. But first, 39 years after emigrating from the Azores as a 13-year-old, Cardoso became a citizen so he could cast a ballot.

"I'm tired of staying on the sidelines," said Cardoso, a Monterey County teacher. "When we are united - we're talking about 30,000 voters - I think we'll have power.

That's the idea behind the campaign, said Alfred Diaz-Infante, head of CHISPA, a Salinas-based nonprofit housing developer. People often feel powerless, he said. But when they come together and start talking, they realize they are facing many of the issues.

"We want to bring back people's politicalness to the forefront," he said.

Diaz-Infante, for example, wants governments to look in their own backyards when contracting public works projects. By hiring locally on a recent project, CHISPA created 155 jobs for residents of Salinas and surrounding communities.

Other COPA leaders pointed to achievements of the nearly 10-year-old organization. The group successfully lobbied for creation of the Live Oak Family Resource Center and against a wage cut for home health workers.

Cindy Rubin of Temple Beth El in Aptos said COPA wants to see permit and regulatory reform to make it easier for businesses to set up shop, as well as education opportunities so that local people can get jobs in the growing regional fields of marine biology and eco-tourism.

"Business interests are community interests," said Kurt Gollnick of Schied Vineyards.

The launch occurred at the home of Alfredo and Rosario Melendez. The couple nearly lost their modest house, when, despite the fact that Alfredo, a landscaper, and Rosario, a home health care worker, continued to work, their income dropped, and they couldn't afford the more than \$3,000 mortgage payment.

After unsuccessfully trying to modify the loan in 2009, Rosario Melendez turned to COPA. The organization has assisted 50 families facing foreclosure, and with its help, the Melendez family was able to get the bank to agree in January to cut their payment by more than half.

"We're just focusing on what families are facing," said Vivienne Moore of St. Angela's Catholic Church in Pacific Grove. "We know we can create a constituency."

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