

# Photovoice Orientation Manual



*Image Credit: communityblueprint.com*

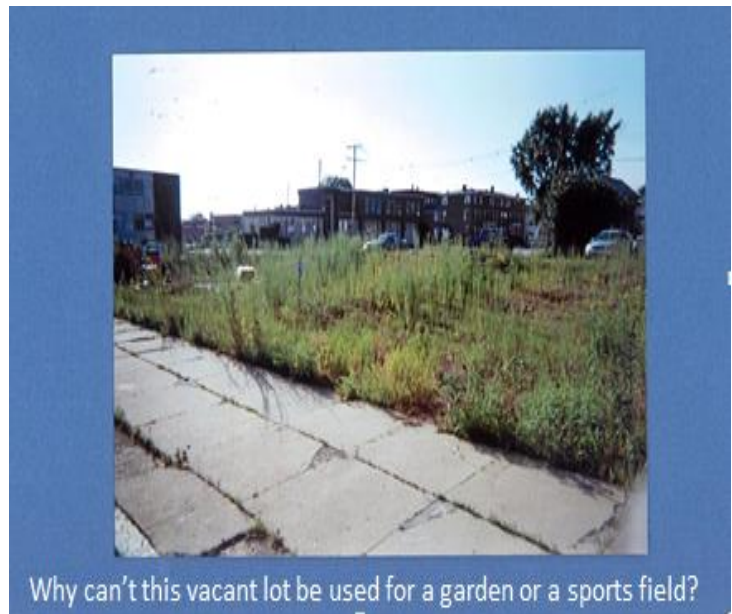


## PhotoVoice Staff Orientation Manual

### What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a process in which people use video and/or photo images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences and share them with others. The pictures can then be used, usually with captions composed by the photographers, to bring the realities of the photographers' lives home to the public and policy makers and to spur change.

Much of the theoretical background of current programs comes from the work of Caroline Wang. In 1992, Wang and her colleague Mary Ann Burns gave cameras to a group of rural village women in Yunnan Province in China, who documented their lives and environment for an entire year. Groups of women gathered at regular intervals to view and discuss the pictures they took. At the end of the project, the group hosted an exhibition of their photographs, and used it to raise the consciousness of the general public and of policy makers about their needs. The women had gained a voice, greater self-respect, and a sense of increased control over their lives. Wang, now a professor at the University of Michigan, became a founding mother of Photovoice.

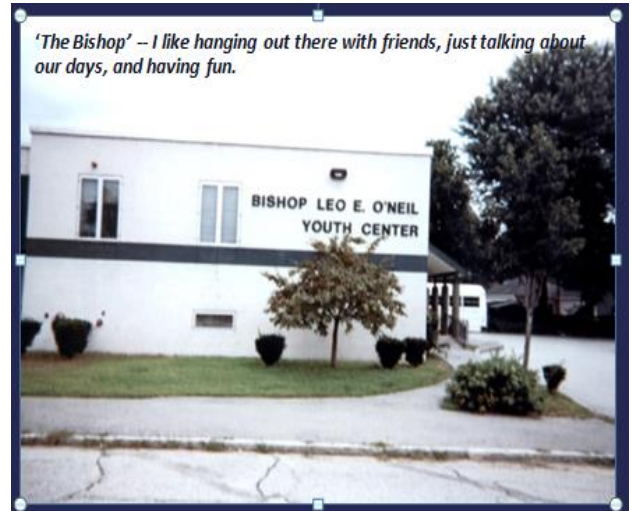


### Wang defines five key concepts for Photovoice:

- *Images teach.*
- *Pictures can influence policy.*
- *Community members ought to participate in creating and defining the images that shape healthful public policy.*
- *The process requires that from the outset planners bring policy makers and other influential people to the table to serve as an audience.*
- *Photovoice emphasizes individual and community action.*

### Photovoice has three main goals:

- To help those who are often unheard gain a voice, enabling them to record and reflect on their experiences and their communities' conditions, both positive and negative.
- To encourage critical consciousness. Through choosing, discussing, and reflecting on the subjects of their photographs, the photographers can come to a clearer understanding of their circumstances and the economic, social, psychological, and political forces that shape them.
- To bring about change that will improve conditions and enhance lives by reaching and influencing policy makers.



In order to achieve these goals, it's important to understand that Photovoice entails much more than just handing people cameras and sending them out to take pictures or video. It involves:

- Learning the basics of camera use and discussing safe and ethical documentary practices
- Meeting in a facilitated group to show and discuss the images photographers have taken
- Stating opinions and feelings in a safe and supportive environment
- Sharing captioned photographs with community policy makers

### Why should you use Photovoice?

There are a number of reasons why Photovoice can be a particularly powerful way to approach empowerment and advocacy.

1. *The rewards of taking photographs are immediate.*
2. *Photography is fun and creative*
3. *Taking photographs can change participants' perceptions about their social and physical environment.*
4. *Basic photography is easy to learn and accessible to almost everyone.*
5. *"A picture is worth a thousand words."*
6. *Images can be understood regardless of language, culture, or other factors.*
7. *Policy makers have a better understanding of the realities in the community.*
8. *Pictures create a clear record of what exists at a particular point in time.*
9. *Photography provides a means for empowerment.*

### What makes Photovoice successful?

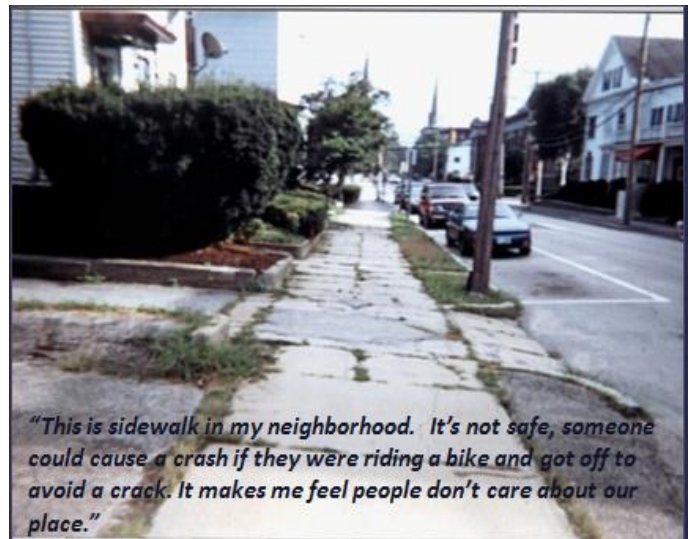
Photovoice projects can take many different forms and work with people from many different backgrounds and circumstances. Some general guidelines can help make these projects a success.

1. **Orientation.** Participants should be trained in the basic techniques of documentary photography and the use of the equipment. They should also receive some grounding in photographic ethics and in keeping themselves safe while photographing.

Staff of the sponsoring organization needs training in the same areas as the participants, and in anticipating and handling situations that might arise from the process. Photographs can have an emotional as well as a documentary and aesthetic content, both for those who take them and for others in the group. Staff must be prepared to protect both the emotional and physical health of participants and the integrity of the project.

2. **Support.** Participants must have the chance to show and discuss their photos. They need a safe and supportive environment in which they can learn a new skill and gain confidence in their ability to express opinions and ideas.

3. **Action.** Action can mean a number of things, from a show of photos within the organization, to presentations to policy makers, to use of the photos for research and assessment of community conditions. Participants should have the chance to see their photos used in a positive and significant way.



### Components of a PhotoVoice Project

1. **Recruit participants and staff/volunteers/researchers.**

- Explain the purpose of the project
- Ask participants to sign a release stating that they keep the copyrights to any photos they take, and that they understand the conditions of the project, will return cameras, and will allow their photos to be part of an exhibition with the option of remaining anonymous.

2. **Clarify roles.**

- The facilitator's role is to work with participants on technical issues, to help them learn how to express themselves on film, and to facilitate groups where pictures are shown and discussed.
- The participant's role is to respect the goals of the project, their fellow photographers and staff working on the project, and potential subjects to be captured on film. Signing the appropriate forms, and making a commitment to the PhotoVoice process are also their responsibility.

3. **Conduct Training.**

#### Training for participants:

- **Technical training.** This should include use of the camera equipment and the techniques of photography.
- **Training in ethical and safe photography in various situations.** Shooting on the street or throughout, participants may find themselves in unexpected situations. ***What kind of responsibility does carrying a camera confer? What would you not want to be photographed doing? What might be the implications of sharing your photographs publicly?***
- **Setting ground rules.** Emphasizing the collaborative nature of group activity, structuring the group as a mutually supportive team, teaching listening skills.



### Training for staff and/or volunteers:

- **Basic photography, group leadership, ethics and safety.** Staff members should have some skills that allow them to handle emotional reactions that arise for participants as a result of the photos and discussion of them, or as a result of incidents that occur in the course of the project.
- **The structure and the aims of the project.** For a Photovoice project to be successful in helping participants gain a voice, participants have to do both the documentary and the emotional work themselves. That means that staff members must be able to encourage and support participants throughout their involvement without doing things for them.

#### 4. Conduct the PhotoVoice Project

- Determine focus questions
- Take pictures
- Discuss, reflect, and choose images

Participants show their photographs and explain why they took them. They might discuss such topics as whether the scene evoked particular feelings for them, and how they think the pictures might be viewed by others. They can receive feedback from others in the group about how the pictures strike them, whether they bring up ideas or feelings, and whether a photo seems to make its point well.



The group discussion is also an opportunity for each participant, with help from the group, to choose the pictures of hers that can best be used to influence policy makers and the public. If the pictures from the project are meant to bring about change, they have to have a strong effect on those who see them. The goal is to have, at the end of the photography phase, a group of photographs that can be used to make a powerful statement about the chosen issues or conditions.

Part of this choosing process is writing captions for the selected photos. The photographers explain why they chose the subject, the context in which they shot it, the intent of the picture, how it made them feel, its strong connection to the issue, etc.

5. **Exhibit.** At the end of the project, there should be an exhibition of photographs. The participants have produced a body of work: if it's never seen by anyone else, they have only tapped one part of its potential. An exhibition will accomplish several purposes:

- *It will demonstrate that their work is valuable enough to show.*
- *It will provide a window in to conditions, lives, or issues for people.*
- *It can raise public consciousness about the issue, and can lead to change and improvement.*
- *It functions as a celebration of the achievements, learning, and increased consciousness and self-respect of the participants.*



In order to avoid hurt feelings and to acknowledge the work of all participants, each should have the same number of photographs displayed. Each participant's work might be displayed separately, or another organizing principle, such as theme, might be used. Participants should have the option of remaining anonymous. The exhibit may be previewed by friends and family members before being exhibited publicly.

6. **Take action.** The outcome of a PhotoVoice project is an action to improve the community conditions being evaluated. This might entail any of the following:

- *Creation of an action plan involving PhotoVoice participants and others who care in the community.*
- *Meetings with legislators, commissioners, or other policy makers about the issue in question.*
- *A media campaign, featuring some of the participants and their stories, as well as their photographs.*
- *The founding of an initiative to change the conditions that the project focused on.*
- *Participants might become active in other causes or in existing organizations that work for change.*
- *Some participants might be involved as mentors in the next round of the project.*

7. **Evaluate.** Evaluation questions should be clearly identified. Some of the many possible evaluation questions might include:

- *What is the most effective recruitment method for participants? For staff and volunteers?*
- *Did participants gain new skills?*
- *Was the training adequate and effective?*
- *Did the work of participants contribute to a better understanding of the issue for the organization and/or the community?*
- *Did the project lead to changes in conditions in the community?*
- *Were policy makers influenced to bring about change?*

Participants should be part of the evaluation team. The evaluation then becomes, as it should, part of the project itself. Evaluation results can be used to improve the way the organization uses Photovoice, as well as the way project results can be used to bring about change.

***GP RED would like to acknowledge the Community Tool Box, [ctb.ku.edu](http://ctb.ku.edu), for content used in developing this orientation manual.***