ACORN Relies On People Power (continued)

so-called "lifeline rates," aimed at providing enough electricity for minimum residential needs at a cost the poor and elderly can afford, plus a natural gas rate structure that benefits those who conserve energy.

But it is the issue of red-lining — the denial of insurance or home loans on the basis of location — that has garnered the most attention for the organization, due largely to the work of Richard Ratcliff, an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University. He is ACORN's unpaid research coordinator.

It was another such issue that brought ACORN to Missouri: the 1976 campaign to repeal sales taxes on food and medicines. Although ACORN leaders and veterans of the repeal effort differ on whether ACORN's help was needed, the Tax Reform Group — the organization leading the repeal drive — decided to invite ACORN to the state.

Ratcliff, a member of the tax reform group, said that as early as fall 1975, the group was "talking about moving into other areas of organizing. The affiliation with ACORN seemed to make sense."

With ACORN's help, the sales tax repeal got on the ballot, only to lose in the face of potent opposition from government officials — particularly local officials — who depend on the sales tax for revenue. But ACORN stayed, and since then, Ratcliff has been a fixture with the group.

The sales tax on medicines, although not food, finally was repealed this year by the Legislature, and ACORN lists the partial victory among its successes.

Since 1976, however, Ratcliff's greatest efforts have been directed at red-lining, doing studies showing patterns of red-lining by major banks and savings and loan associations. Ratcliff is preparing a study on insurance red-lining, including the impact of a new state law designed to prohibit the practice.

Ratcliff's research has brought him into other disputes. He appeared recently before the Federal Reserve Board in Washington to object to the purchase by Commerce Bancshares Inc. of Kansas City of the Manchester Financial Corp., a holding company that owns three St. Louis banks.

The Manchester-Tower Grove Community Organization, ACORN's first St. Louis venture after the tax effort, objected to the purchase on the basis that neither the Kansas City holding company nor the St. Louis banks had met federal requirements encouraging reinvestment of community funds within a bank's service area.

The Federal Reserve Board didn't bow to ACORN's objections, but it was Ratcliff's research that got them that far — and brought all the publicity that resulted.

Ratcliff is somewhat embarrassed by the publicity he gets, but he is happy he has an outlet for his research, which he does in addition to his academic studies.

"There aren't too many groups around that really make use of such serious research," he said. "ACORN has been willing to take seriously the need to gather evidence to support their claims."

Some ACORN groups here have become involved in their own battles. A Carondelet affiliate has been active in fighting industrial pollution. And a Wellston ACORN group has engaged in a running battle with the Wellston School Board and the administration of the Wellston School District administration.

The Wellston situation is among the hottest of ACORN's issues in the St. Louis area. The district's top administrator, executive general manager Richard B. Fulton, recently was indicted on charges of registering and voting under a false address. And the Wellston ACORN group, which includes at least one former member of the Wellston School Board, has called for Fulton's resignation.

It is not surprising that ACORN was born in the wake of the 1960s, a decade known for rising political consciousness among the poor. With a sense of both the successes and the failures of the past, Rathke set out to organize "a majority constituency of low- and middle-income people."

A dropout from prestigious Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., Rathke, 30, was, from 1968 to 1970, an organizer in Massachusetts for the National Welfare Rights Organization, a group aimed at giving welfare recipients a voice in political decision-making.

But "even in a city like Boston," Rathke says, "only one out of eight citizens was on welfare. No matter how right they were, or how real their issues, they were still a small minority. They didn't have any sort of natural power."

Perhaps feeling that same political impotence, Rathke decided that an alliance was needed — "a majority constituency instead of a special-interest constituency."

Rathke began planning. "We settled on Arkansas for several different reasons." For one, he said, 70 percent of the persons in Arkansas earned less than $7,000 a year. "I felt it was important to organize a majority constituency of low- and moderate-income people, and Arkansas was perfect."

Also, Arkansas had an appealing mix of rural areas and small cities, he said. "We knew we wanted to build a statewide organization, and unlike most states, Arkansas' capital, Little Rock, is both its largest city and located in the center of the state."

The welfare rights organization gave Rathke his start, providing $1,000 and continuing his $8,000 a year salary for the first six months. On that note ACORN — the "A" then stood for Arkansas — was born. The issues in Arkansas were familiar, including neighborhood protection, tax and health issues and government reform.

The Arkansas organization was a success. It boasts about 4,300 families as dues-paying members in more than 100 affiliated groups statewide.

In 1975, ACORN decided to expand, moving first to South Dakota, and then to Texas, Lousiana, Missouri and Tennessee. The list now includes Florida, Oklahoma, Michigan, Iowa, Colorado, Nevada and Pennsylvania. Later this month, it will open an office in Arizona.

ACORN's $1 million budget is financed by a variety of sources, including federal grants, church groups and members' dues. This year's budget includes a $467,000 grant from the National Grants Program of ACTION, a federal program. The money is being used to pay 80 to 100 VISTA volunteers to work as organizers. The budget also includes about $200,000 from the Roman Catholic U.S. Conference of Bishops.

In addition, the Missouri chapter of ACORN recently was awarded $50,000 by the Catholic organization. Monsignor John A. Shocklee, executive director of the St. Louis Archdiocese's Commission on Human Rights, said such grants are given to community groups "with a particular focus on racially changing areas."

"We don't want to put strings attached to it," Shocklee said. "They're pretty much an advocacy group, and at times, they step on people's toes. I don't know how you avoid it."

But Shocklee said that organizations like ACORN are useful tools.

"Their idea is that you have to get organized if you're going to get anything done," he said. "If the poor stay disorganized, they're going to stay poor, too."

The time is now.
Together is how.