California’s Central Valley
Addressing Disparity in a Region of Abundance—Creating Healthy Communities through Community Leadership Development

BY GENOVEVA ISLAS-HOOKER

In communities where agriculture is the main industry, it can be very difficult to change policies that might affect the existing food system. But in Tulare County, California, where there are literally more cows than people, a local school district banned flavored milk from the school menu. Participants in an innovative community leadership development program began organizing and discussing how they could work to improve the school menu. They formed relationships with the district food service director. They gained seats on the school wellness committee and one of the participants ran for a school board vacancy and won. So when the school wellness committee introduced the policy, it was supported by the food service director and approved by the school board.

The Central Valley of California is the state’s fruit and vegetable basket, but ironically, many of the people who live and work there have a staple diet of cheap, unhealthful food. The reasons are varied. Most farm-working families have limited financial resources and live in rural areas, small towns, or unincorporated communities. Many of these communities were established originally as migrant farm labor towns with temporary housing. It is not unusual for these communities to have failing infrastructure, limited amenities, and dilapidated water and sewer systems. Few of these communities have full-service grocery stores, making access to healthy foods a challenge and necessitating travel to larger communities for shopping.

Although circumstances often seem desperate with no light at the end of the tunnel, some of these communities are organizing and creating their own lights. It is an undeniable truth that members of these communities have to be the drivers of their own solutions, which doesn’t mean that they don’t need help. People are experts on their own environments and capable of championing their own causes, but in many cases they have adapted to these environments, and it takes some outside help for them to imagine new and different environments. This is the goal of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP)—helping residents imagine and create healthier communities.

Building Leadership

In 2010, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded CCROPP to create a leadership development curriculum. That curriculum, titled Powerful People: Building Leadership for Healthy Communities, was completed in 2013. What we were able to accomplish through this curriculum was the successful training of almost 200 community residents to be agents of change in their communities. Most participants were not individuals with histories of civic engagement. Mostly people with limited incomes and educational achievements, they came from a mix of rural unincorporated communities, small towns, and urban neighborhoods of the valley. Many of the participants were new immigrants, and most worked in farm labor. All were parents, and all had an interest in wanting to make their communities healthier for their children—that was the common thread.

The goal of the curriculum, which the participants themselves helped design, was to teach about the cycle of advocacy and how to engage in it. We targeted future trainers who may be working with similar communities with the focus on creating healthier...
communities. The final curriculum has twelve modules; each module contains a session overview, an outline for delivering the session, accompanying presentation, in-class and out-of-class assignments, and session evaluations. The complete package was presented in English and Spanish.

“In never thought I would be speaking in front of one of the largest school districts in the state of California,” said Susana Cruz, a graduate of the leadership program. An immigrant from the Oaxaca region of Mexico, like many others she moved to Fresno in search of opportunity. As someone with limited education, she wanted her children to have every opportunity that she did not, so she started attending parent meetings to learn how to become more involved. One of the projects that she and other participants in the program chose to address was the lack of safe places for her children to play in their neighborhoods. Unlocking the school gate seemed like a solution, but could they actually do it? Susana was timid at first. She considered the request to unlock the school to be slightly audacious, but she began meeting and talking with other parents, then to the school principal, and eventually made a formal presentation to the Fresno Unified School District. Susana Cruz today stands as a champion for her community in helping to establish the first-ever joint-use agreement in the history of the school district.

As a result of the leadership development efforts, some of the participants joined school wellness committees and other governing boards and commissions within their cities. In a few cases previous participants have become elected school board members. Many have been sought after as assets to informing healthy community efforts in similar communities. In Stockton, Ceres, and Merced, participants in the program have become leading advocates for creating safe routes to school in their neighborhoods and communities. Stockton participants have also implemented a walking school bus program at two elementary schools, Van Buren and Hamilton. Plans are under way to implement this project in other district schools.

In Ceres, participants have also worked in tandem with the school to organize a walking school bus to increase the safety of children walking to school. These efforts led Ceres to receive a Safe Routes to School Non-Infrastructure Outreach and Education Grant to be implemented in five targeted elementary schools this year. Merced has one of the highest pedestrian fatalities in the Central Valley. Participants in Merced conducted assessments, which clearly revealed physical activity challenges and a strong community interest to prioritize pedestrian safety.

In Bakersfield’s Greenfield neighborhood, participants have successfully transformed their local park to afford new opportunities for physical activity for the entire community. Local program participants have developed relationships with the parks and recreation department, the city’s mayor, county public health department, and other key local government officials to transform the park into a place where families walk, run, dance, and play sports. In addition, program participants have advocated improvements in lighting to enhance safety and have also begun to organize and mobilize the community to take part in the beautification of the park, including ongoing cleanups and regular Zumba classes.

In all communities where the leadership program was implemented, there has been work on some aspect of improving healthy food access, such as healthy corner-store conversion projects, establishment of farmers’ markets, school farm stands, or farm-to-institution policies. Fresno and Ceres participants have led the way in the establishment of multiple school farm stands in elementary schools and continue to expand into other neighboring school districts. Merced was instrumental in establishing Electronic Benefit Transfer acceptance at a flea market and developed a ten-step guide to using the program at produce markets. Leaders from Stockton have worked to increase access to fruits and vegetables at a local corner store.
These are just some examples of the community-led efforts that are transforming communities in Central California.

Recommendations/Conclusions
CCROP aspired to have more community residents become involved in decision making in their communities. We succeeded in cultivating advocates for healthy communities, but there were many other collateral benefits from the program that were unplanned. For instance, entrepreneurial opportunities presented themselves as some of the participants suggested that they could become the meeting caterers or even child care providers; this allowed for some economic benefits for the families we were engaging. With boosted self-confidence, several of the participants went on to complete some formal education while others obtained gainful employment. The role modeling of civic engagement was a powerful influence on their own families and children, helping to diffuse the information and shaping future advocates.

Every program working to create healthy communities should incorporate some aspect of leadership development in its efforts or partner with programs having that expertise. Investing in community leadership is a vital legacy of healthy communities and the promotion of equity.

Genoveva Islas-Hooker is director of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program.