



Engaging Communities in Changing Nutrition and Physical Activity Environments

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Overview

The California Endowment's Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) program and Central California Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) have shifted the obesity prevention focus away from individual behavior change towards policy change and community action. The programs' strategies focus on changing food and physical activity environments, in order to make healthy lifestyles a more viable option for children and their families in multiple sectors (schools, after school, neighborhoods and work sites). Community engagement is a cornerstone of the HEAC and CCROPP model of changing nutrition and physical activity environments.

This brief discusses how HEAC and CCROPP are engaging communities and presents promising practices for community engagement demonstrated by grantee achievements. The findings are drawn from community resident and parent focus groups, stakeholder surveys and grantee case studies. Lessons learned that may be useful for similar initiatives conclude the brief, focusing on the importance of community engagement for sustainability over the long run.

Definition of Community Engagement

There are nearly as many definitions of community mobilization today as there are communities and organizations using it as a strategy.^{i,ii}

We always sought common ground with decision makers, trying to find out what they wanted and how we could help provide that. Saving money by involving neighbors in park vigilance and maintenance was a powerful piece of common ground.

- Kern CCROPP

Community engagement has many synonyms including community mobilization, community-based social change, and community organizing. The *purpose* for the engagement is central to examining the concept within different contexts.

Community engagement occurs in a variety of settings that differ in characteristics such as ethnicity, income, culture, and history of community engagement. Community members may be engaged at the grassroots level to inform and influence institutions in the community such as the school board, city council, business community, or other governmental agencies. Community members also partner with governmental institutions to change nutrition and physical activity environments. For example, community members may identify locations of greatest need and partner with the public health department to jointly influence traffic planning in a community to allow for greater walkability.

In communities where a tradition of community engagement has taken root, local elected officials may look to community members for guidance on many issues. Residents in these

i USAID/ACCESS. (Feb 2007). Demystifying Community Mobilization.

ii CDC. (1997). Community Engagement: Definitions and Organizing Concepts from the Literature. <http://www.cdc.gov/phppo/pce/part1.htm>

communities have built relationships with governmental agency staff such as directors of parks and recreation departments, representatives from redevelopment agencies, or school district staff. In other communities, channels of communication may not be open due to factors such as racism, language barriers, the size of the community, residents' fear of engaging civically due to immigration status, lack of local government in unincorporated areas, or lack of familiarity with advocacy opportunities. Despite these impediments, residents have been successful in creating opportunities for engagement and advocacy by making difficult political contexts more hospitable to their work.

In HEAC and CCROPP, using the Spectrum of Prevention framework as a guide,ⁱⁱⁱ community engagement has been the process employed to achieve results by strengthening individuals, providing community education, fostering coalitions and networks, changing organizational practices, and influencing policy across multiple sectors. "The Community" has included community members, community-based organizations, public institutions, and businesses. For the efforts of HEAC and CCROPP to be sustainable in the long run, community residents, including parents and youth, need to be engaged early and consistently in identifying opportunities, planning, and leading change. Successful engagement requires understanding the environment (context), leadership, and establishing strategic priorities *by* the community.

Community Members Leading Change

The development and support of local, authentic leadership was key to engaging and building community momentum for environmental and policy change. In HEAC and CCROPP, authentic leadership refers to grassroots, locally grounded leaders whose experience and contributions flow from the local context of their lives and work. These leaders shape local strategies for improvements in food and physical activity environments and their influence extends to the regional and state levels.

STRONG LOCAL LEADERSHIP LINKED WITH LOCAL INSTITUTIONS DEEPENED REACH

Community residents, community-based organizations and public institutions worked together collaboratively to lead change. Through these linkages, community residents were able to deepen their work. Essential institutional partners included local public health departments, planning departments and Departments of Parks and Recreation. Community change agents provided the vision for institutional leadership. In turn, the institutions provided resources needed to achieve the goals of community residents. The partners identified shared interests and agendas.

Parent leaders at Manzanita Elementary school are spearheading policy change. One very active parent is passionate about spreading the word about the Oakland Unified School District wellness policy and worked with district school personnel and the Alameda County Department of Public Health to inform staff and other parents about creating a healthier environment for children.

- **Oakland HEAC**

ⁱⁱⁱ The Spectrum of Prevention. The Community Wellness & Prevention Program, Contra Costa Health Services. <http://cchealth.org/topics/prevention/spectrum.php>.

The youth have the ear of elected officials and are talking to faith-based and other organizations.

Their voice is genuine and breaks down the problem. They are actually the kids that are affected and it provides an authentic voice and opens doors.

- Santa Ana HEAC

In Stanislaus County, parents act as “bus drivers” and walk the children to school with support and buy in from parents, teachers and school officials.

- Stanislaus CCROPP

In HEAC and CCROPP, the local leadership model was most successful in geographic areas with their own local governmental structures that facilitate high level institutional (school district, health department) and governmental buy-in.

LOCAL LEADERSHIP BROADENED ITS INFLUENCE THROUGH COUNTY, REGIONAL AND STATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Linking local leaders with county, regional and statewide advocates bolstered policy development at the local level. Local leaders have connected to the broader movement underway in California to create healthy eating and physical activity environments. Local policies pursued “on the ground” by community residents such as joint use policies are also invigorating and accelerating policy development at the state level.

YOUTH LEADERS ACCELERATED POLICY CHANGE

Grantees have cultivated a cadre of youth leaders by building youth capacity for understanding policy, conducting research, presenting data and ideas to policy makers, and formulating policy solutions from a youth perspective. Youth leaders have successfully advocated for environmental change and local decision makers and business leaders have heard and acted upon the youth voice.

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY RESIDENTS ADVOCATED FOR IMPROVED NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENTS

The HEAC and CCROPP sites have engaged community residents in defining priorities and advocating for policy change with local policymakers and government officials. Parents and community residents have taken direct action in schools and neighborhoods to change nutrition and physical activity environments through school wellness councils, conducting walkability assessments, and formation of neighborhood watch groups that advocate for park improvements.

This leadership has been essential for successfully setting strategic priorities that strengthen individuals, provide community education, foster coalitions and networks, change organizational practices, and influencing policy.

Setting Strategic Priorities

COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAVE DEFINED AND PRIORITIZED GRANTEE INTERVENTIONS.

In order to understand community residents’ needs, the HEAC and CCROPP sites have listened to their concerns and built their capacity and confidence to pursue environmental and policy change efforts. Community residents have defined and prioritized the grantees’ work. As a result, the work the HEAC and CCROPP sites

are engaged in deeply resonates with the community residents, who in turn have become the ones driving change.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS WERE ENGAGED IN DOCUMENTING PROBLEMS AND DEFINING SOLUTIONS.

Data can prepare community residents for engagement and provide them with the tools and information they need to be effective advocates. Communities may need support obtaining and demystifying difficult-to-understand or hard-to-access data and support collecting, analyzing and reporting their own data. Those who are most affected by what data could reveal about living conditions and health disparities need to be closely involved in framing, gathering, and interpreting the data. Rather than existing in a vacuum, data becomes purposeful because of the community's interest in the data and use of the data as an advocacy tool.

Data from a variety of sources can be effective in defining and raising awareness about a particular problem. Participatory assessments conducted and presented by community residents, particularly youth, can be very compelling to policymakers and public officials helping them to act on local policy.

- The Merced CCROPP site received a planning grant from USDA to conduct assessments of local food environments which community members carried out.
- In the Shasta HEAC site, residents took pictures and made presentations to the Park and Recreation director regarding Anderson River Park.
- In the Madera CCROPP site, community residents conducted a variety of assessments including a walkability audit, followed by presentation to the City Council. Youth conducted the photo voice component of the Communities of Excellence (CX3) neighborhood assessment.
- HEAC South LA residents identified the high concentration of fast food restaurants in their neighborhood and presented data to a City Council member who then introduced a fast food moratorium.

EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY TRAINING WAS INTEGRATED INTO PRACTICE.

Residents of the HEAC and CCROPP intervention communities identified a variety of factors that engage community residents to advocate for improvements in their community.

Many of the HEAC grantees provide education, training and other types of support to community members to enhance their skills and capacity. Training is an essential ingredient for the development of community advocates. For example, community members' knowledge of how systems work and how they can be influenced is important

I just have to keep listening and trying to understand what is going on and what is important to people and how they operate in the world so that I can work *with* them not for them.

-CCROPP Coordinator

Training is very purposeful, it always happens right before an opportunity for advocacy, e.g. going to city council to present findings from an audit.

- Baldwin Park HEAC

for effective engagement with those systems. Building community resident capacity prepares them to speak to, engage and influence local elected officials, business leaders, and school officials.

- The Stanislaus CCROPP program is training community member “block leaders” on neighborhood organizing, step-by-step methods to developing successful neighborhoods and arranging tours of city hall, police and fire departments to give an inside track on City issues and activities.
- The Chula Vista, Santa Ana, Baldwin Park, and South Los Angeles HEAC sites engage promotoras in raising community awareness of child obesity and as advocates.

SELF-EFFICACY INCREASED OWNERSHIP OF THE ISSUES AND A FEELING OF PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT.

When community residents make changes to their own eating and physical activity behaviors, and experience success as advocates, their ownership of the issues increases. As empowered leaders with a high sense of self-efficacy, they drive further changes in the community.

- Greenfield Walking Group (Kern County CCROPP) is a community-led group that is now self sustaining and has been invited by various groups and organizations (including the statewide California Convergence and other community groups).
to share their experiences improving the park, installing a walking path and increasing their physical activity in a safe environment.
- In Chula Vista (HEAC), community residents reclaimed Lauterbach Park by documenting barriers to park usage such as blight and broken equipment, advocated for changes before the city council, formed new partnerships to make improvements to the park, and increased park usage threefold. Community residents built on these successes by “lifting them up”. In Chula Vista, health language is now included in the parks master plan.

Youth from Pixley together with community residents put in a soccer field and arbors at Pixley Park and are advocating to improve walking, biking and stroller accessibility at the park.

- Tulare CCROPP

Challenges to Community Engagement

Low-income community members have competing priorities. In many cases, they are focused on the survival of their families. Many parents work more than one job to feed and house their children. Language barriers present an additional challenge. Therefore, specific strategies are required to encourage, support and retain their interest. The HEAC and CCROPP communities are overcoming these competing priorities and barriers in a variety of ways:

- In Santa Ana, the City Council began translating its meetings into Spanish in response to the lack of language accessibility at public meetings. Language accessibility is perceived as a critical factor in hearing the community's voice.
- The Latinos in Action Project in Cottonwood (Shasta County) found they had to hold meetings at people's houses to reach target audiences. This casual environment has led to both spouses being involved in providing community input to projects. Anti-immigrant sentiment and fear of deportation are additional impediments that must be overcome by community residents in the predominantly Latino HEAC and CCROPP sites. Crime and gang violence contribute further to fear in these communities. In HEAC and CCROPP, community residents are courageously making changes to nutrition and physical activity environments despite these adverse conditions.

We want to have a cadre of moms 'at the ready' when we need advocacy at city council or to send a letter to the governor.

- Santa Ana HEAC

Key Lessons Learned

EDUCATION AND TRAINING ARE ESSENTIAL TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Training increases the capacity of community residents to continue to advocate for changes in their communities.
- The skills and confidence community members acquire can be applied to other community driven efforts.

CONNECTING LOCAL ORGANIZING TO REGIONAL AND STATE POLICY CHANGE EFFORTS CAN SUSTAIN THE WORK OVER TIME.

- State policy bolsters local interventions to change nutrition and physical activity environments.
- Local policy development can inform and shape state level policy development.

RAISING COMMUNITY VOICE LEADS TO CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

- Community voices being heard by local governmental institutions, policy makers, and others in positions of power authenticate changes in institutional policies and practices.
- Community resident advisory committees or community councils can serve as an ongoing source of community input to local governmental institutions and planning commissions.

Community residents are the voice of political will that causes decision makers to make changes.

- Tulare CCROPP

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS KEY TO SUCCESS

- Policy makers respect and listen to the genuine voice of youth. They are living the health disparities that initiatives such as HEAC and CCROPP are addressing.

When community members see results they can build future advocacy activities on these accomplishments.

- Fresno CCROPP

- Youth need incentives and structure to be engaged in policy change. Fun, meaningful activities and opportunities to develop leadership are key.
- Youth enjoy convening with other youth leaders from across the state to share ideas and form a cadre of youth focused on the same issues.
- Visual methodologies such as photo voice are effective and fun tools for engaging youth in describing their nutrition and physical activity environments. Policy makers and other decision-makers respond to visual data.
- The power of youth should not be underestimated.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MUST BE ACTION AND RESULTS ORIENTED

- Community engagement should be action-oriented.
- Seeing results helps keep community residents feel valued and motivated.
- Focus on small, short-term changes that are achievable. Even incremental change or a single success can have far-reaching implications for future work.

Conclusions

Sustainable changes in the nutrition and physical activity environments of communities require authentic community engagement. The lessons learned in HEAC and CCROPP demonstrate that grassroots, local leadership was essential to the successes they have achieved. Bridges have been built between local institutions and state policymakers that have the potential of supporting long term improvements in HEAC and CCROPP communities. These relationships were developed and nurtured by the effective engagement of community members, particularly youth. Innovation and action were hallmarks of successful engagement strategies and those strategies were imagined and implemented *by* community members *for* their own communities.

Community engagement has been the process employed within HEAC and CCROPP to achieve results in several prevention domains: strengthening individuals, providing community education, fostering coalitions and networks, changing organizational practices, and influencing policy. These achievements demonstrate the importance of a multi-sectoral public health approach to prevention that is able to achieve sustainable, long term changes within communities.

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