



Benton County, OR

▲ Community Example from Chapter 1 of “Lessons for Leaders:”
Lessons in Community Capacity Building

Community Background

Benton County has a mixture of rural agricultural land, small towns and a college town, Corvallis, which is home to Oregon State University. While the campus, nearby neighborhoods and downtown have healthy food and places to be active, South Corvallis and much of rural Benton County lack the same infrastructure. These areas also have the highest percentages of low-income residents and Latino immigrants.

Community Action

Benton County Health Department (BCHD) was the lead agency for the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* initiative, known as “*Creciendo en Salud*” (CeS), which translates as “growing in health.” CeS emphasized systems and built environment changes to improve access to healthy food and safe opportunities for physical activity. In 2009, it established a partnership to include county and municipal government agencies, nonprofit organizations and academic partners with technical expertise related to these food systems and built environments. The partners strongly believed in the value that resident engagement could bring to the initiative, particularly from low-income and Latino residents.

While CeS initially held quarterly partnership meetings, they found it more productive to form nimble subcommittees in areas of greatest commitment: active transportation, healthy food security, and community empowerment and capacity. CeS’s commitment to addressing disparities evolved into the Health Equity Alliance, which generated additional funding for equity strategies throughout a three-county region. Additionally, the BCHD’s bilingual/bicultural

Health Navigator program, initially a clinical “promotoras” model, grew into a much broader approach with county-funded Navigators who provide leadership training and advocacy opportunities for the community’s most disenfranchised residents. CeS has also helped BCHD staff expand their relationships and skills as respected and effective conveners. Now they often facilitate community meetings among elected officials, professionals, advocates and non-English-speaking residents.

The partners strongly believed in the value that resident engagement could bring to the initiative, particularly from low-income and Latino residents.

The initiative’s inclusive multicultural approach led to appointments of BCHD staff for Corvallis City Council’s Public Participation Task Force. This group is revising the city’s current processes and structures into a more effective, inclusive and efficient community engagement program. CeS’s techniques to engage low-income community members in city government processes are recognized locally as an ongoing success. CeS also bridged city and county government bureaucracies by helping Corvallis Parks and Recreation restructure and simplify its Family Assistance Program, which now reaches more low-income families. Taking the next step, Parks and Recreation also employs bilingual staff to minimize language barriers for low-income immigrants who most need access to recreation opportunities offered by the city.