



Central Valley, CA

▲ Community Example from Chapter 3 of “Lessons for Leaders:”
Lessons in Community Engagement for Equity

Community Background

The 240-mile-long San Joaquin Valley is a major agricultural region encompassing eight counties in central California. Although people from across the country have enjoyed the produce grown there, residents are often unable to enjoy the very food they see all around them. Many are migrant workers who make it possible for others to eat such food. People in the Valley have among the lowest per capita income, highest rate of poverty and lowest educational attainment in the state, contributing to pronounced rates of overweight and obesity, particularly among youth. Engaging the new immigrant population is complicated. Their vulnerability, caused by failed immigration policies, inhibits their ability to advocate for change. In addition, many new immigrants come from politically volatile countries with different local government structures and need assistance navigating new civic engagement structures.

Community Action

To address these issues, the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program formed a partnership of eight community-based organizations and partners to build the capacity of community residents as advocates for improving local food and physical activity environments. The partnership developed a 12-module community leadership curriculum, “Powerful People: Building Leadership for Healthy Communities,” to help residents become change agents. It is culturally, linguistically and literacy-level appropriate for low-income communities of color. Trainings were conducted in the predominate language for the group, generally Spanish or English, and held in local community facilities with necessary supports, such as child care. Trainers were women who grew up in the Valley and

understood the challenges residents face. They trained 127 residents from across all eight counties.

Graduates learned about the effects of community design and policy on individual choices for eating healthier and being physically active. They learned skills needed to become advocates and leaders for change. In between classes, participants put lessons into action by photographing their challenges, talking to elected officials, practicing presentation skills and more. Graduates worked on self-identified projects that would improve access to healthy foods/beverages or physical activity opportunities in their respective communities, and achieved personal and community transformations as a result.

For example, many graduates assumed community leadership roles, such as serving as members of their school district wellness committee, joining citywide and countywide advisory boards, providing technical assistance to other communities, and advising local and state elected officials. To improve opportunities for active living, leaders advocated for Safe Routes to School in Stockton, Ceres and Merced, resulting in improved pedestrian and bicycling access around two schools and additional funding for more improvements. They increased access to physical activity spaces through joint use agreements in Fresno, Fairmead and Stockton, and park improvements in the neighborhood of Greenfield. Graduates also improved healthy food access in all communities, including school farm stands in Fresno and Ceres, EBT acceptance at flea markets in Merced, increased access to produce at a corner store in Stockton and community gardens in Pixley.

Project Director Genoveva Islas said, “We have a ways to go. But with our region-wide network of strong community leaders, I see vast potential for improvement in the health of all people in the Valley.”