



## Watsonville and Pajaro Valley, CA

▲ Community Example from Chapter 2 of “Lessons for Leaders:”  
*Lessons in Communication*

### Community Background

In the City of Watsonville, nearly one-fifth of families live below the poverty line and more than 80 percent of the population is Hispanic or Latino with relatively higher health risks. To overcome these challenges, the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* (HKHC) partnership looked to the community’s youth to spark meaningful change. Jóvenes SANOS is a youth leadership and advocacy group that operates with support from the United Way of Santa Cruz County, the lead agency for the HKHC project.

### Community Action

Jóvenes SANOS utilizes grassroots approaches with youth driving the change agenda. The group’s comprehensive model prepares youth through training and skill-building activities, and supports them in addressing community issues in realtime. Several healthy policy changes have resulted, thanks to youth leadership. These include the adoption of the Greater Watsonville Master Bike Plan, which makes the community eligible for state funding for prioritized improvements within the plan; the City of Watsonville’s Healthy Eating Options ordinance; and the policy for Healthy Food and Beverage Options at Santa Cruz Metro Facilities. The Healthy Food and Beverage Options policy is notable for its innovation and has been promoted nationally as a new, promising model.

In addition, Jóvenes SANOS is now a nationally recognized youth- and community-based constituency for change. The group was a key factor in the selection of Santa Cruz County as an inaugural Robert Wood Johnson Foundation *Roadmaps to Health Prize* winner. “Jóvenes SANOS is unique as it is rare to see youth involved in the community on so many levels, particularly proposing and implementing policy,” noted Kymberly Lacrosse, project coordinator for the HKHC partnership in Watsonville-Pajaro Valley. In this way, youth in the community positively affect adults and leaders.

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The future continues to look bright and promising, and not just for the City of Watsonville. Several of the Jóvenes SANOS graduates became the first to attend college from their families and continue to engage in meaningful advocacy for health and equity. Although youth graduate and move on, the culture has changed to ensure that emerging youth leaders continue the work in Watsonville. Jóvenes SANOS member Julian Alcantar said, “I’ve been part of Jóvenes SANOS for five years now. I joined because my sister and my cousin had both been part of Jóvenes SANOS back in 2007. They once talked to me about it and told me how it felt good to be part of a positive change in our community. Even though our goal is about being healthy, I haven’t only learned about nutrition. I mean, yeah, I’ve lost 20 pounds...but I have also learned other stuff that can be helpful in my daily life from public speaking skills to policy advocacy and being a good role model and leader.”