

**THE VALUE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: COMMUNITY DRIVEN CHANGE
IN THE CENTRAL CALIFORNIA REGIONAL OBESITY PREVENTION PROGRAM**

INTRODUCTION

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) was founded in 2005 with the mission of combating obesity and improving health in California’s San Joaquin Valley or “Central Valley.” CCROPP is among a growing number of programs in the nation that use a policy and environmental change approach to help their constituents gain access to healthy food and safe spaces for engaging in physical activity. An important component of CCROPP’s work is its leadership training program, in which local residents are prepared to take on leadership roles within their communities. CCROPP partners view leadership development as essential to the longevity of their work, and therefore to achieving environmental and policy change. Committed local leaders are needed to sustain efforts across funding cycles and through changing economic and political conditions. This case study examines how, in concrete terms, leadership training has helped to advance CCROPP’s policy and environmental change goals, and the implications for obesity prevention efforts in contexts similar to the Central Valley.

THE CLIMATE

CCROPP evolved out of recognition by public health directors that successful obesity prevention in the Central Valley would require regional-level intervention. Prior to the formation of CCROPP, the eight counties that comprise the Central Valley were working largely in isolation from one another. Their rural, dispersed nature together with significant poverty and other social factors constrained what they could accomplish on their own. Since these counties shared many of the same public health challenges and could clearly benefit from common approaches, pooling resources by working regionally made strategic sense. Cross-sector partnerships combined with an expanded geographic scope have also enabled communities in the San Joaquin Valley to speak with a collective voice. This coalescence around a strong regional identity has helped garner the Central Valley a place at the table among key decision-makers, with promising implications for improving health outcomes in this part of California.

Within this regional framework, CCROPP’s Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities leadership training program is designed to help people in poor rural and urban communities of color in the Central Valley develop the skills they need in order to participate in the policymaking process and improve their environments to support health. The program is premised on the philosophy that communities themselves must ultimately drive organizing and advocacy efforts if they are to be sustained and successful.

John Capitman, director of the Central Valley Health Policy Institute, says that for most residents living in the communities where CCROPP works, there is no precedent for civic engagement. These residents, many of whom are low-paid immigrants who have not been in the United States for very long, are unfamiliar with how local, state, and federal political systems work, and they lack the benefit of a local tradition of coming together to improve the quality of life. They also face other barriers to engagement such as language, poverty, and undocumented status. “We just don’t have institutions that give people an explanation and a rationale for the conditions in which they find themselves,” says Capitman. At the same



time, Central Valley residents suffer disproportionately from overweight, obesity, and other health conditions connected to environmental circumstances, so it is especially urgent to mobilize people around issues of health policy and land use.

Greater insight into the potential benefits of investing in local leadership training is especially important right now. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has set a 2015 deadline for reversing the obesity epidemic. The current economic climate adds further uncertainty to the availability of long-term resources dedicated to obesity prevention and health promotion. Without local leaders who are rooted in the community, invested in the work, and have the skills to continue it when conditions change, important obesity prevention efforts may languish or cease altogether.

POLITICAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC WILL

CCROPP launched its first leadership training in July of 2009, a series of 12 sessions over the course of a year. Sabina Gonzalez-Eraña, CCROPP community building specialist and Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities coordinator, currently facilitates the trainings. Trainings are based in communities where CCROPP local partners already have an established relationship and authentic connection to community residents. “The point is to go to communities where there are groups of folks who are already taking up leadership roles and doing things to improve their communities,” says Gonzalez-Eraña. For instance, in the rural unincorporated community of Fairmead, located in Madera County, participants were drawn from Fairmead Community and Friends, a local community group dedicated to addressing social justice and quality of life conditions. The group is in the process of incorporating into a nonprofit, and had already been working on bringing basic utilities to Fairmead, including an improved water system. They became engaged in addressing obesity issues while working with CCROPP community lead Cristina Gomez-Vidal Diaz, who serves as an advisor to the group.

CCROPP’s leadership training curriculum is taught in both English and Spanish, and emphasizes experiential over academic learning. Each group of trainees starts by identifying a policy issue and selecting a project they want to work on relating either to access to healthy food, or access to places to be active. For example, Susana Cruz, a Fresno County resident, worked on a project to unlock the school gates at John Burroughs Elementary School, to provide residents access to safe green space for physical activity. Together with two other mothers, she met with superintendent of schools Michael Hansen. Speaking through an interpreter Cruz says, “The superintendent agreed to unlock the school gates right there at that meeting because of the commitment of the parents.” Susan Elizabeth, CCROPP community lead and organizer with Capacity Builders, Inc., says “In the process of working that through [participants] learn about how schools work, what you have to do to ask them to change, and how you move through that policy change process that results in environmental change.” By involving residents in demystifying how institutions and political systems work, who the key decision-makers are on a given issue, and how to engage them, CCROPP’s leadership training program prepares residents to advocate for the changes they prioritize in their communities.

During training sessions, participants discuss the political climate within the community, existing resources and probable sources of opposition to and support for their project. They develop media advocacy strategies, learn how to organize meetings, gather relevant data, create talking points and prepare for meetings with elected officials. In between class sessions, participants engage in hands-on activities, such as knocking on doors and interviewing neighbors about a project’s relevance, hosting a community meeting about priority issues or figuring out who local representatives are. Training facilitator Sabina Gonzalez-Eraña says the curriculum is designed to help participants strengthen their self-image as people who can gather evidence and build their case in the best way possible.

An important feature of CCROPP’s leadership training program is its emphasis on both education and community organizing. Participants learn how to navigate systems that influence their health, but also

how to change the rules and policies that govern these systems. That said, Gonzalez-Eraña stresses the importance of staying realistic about the scope of the program and what can be accomplished by way of actual change in a short time period. The program centers on working with small groups and on specific, doable projects so that emerging leaders can develop a track record of wins that they can then use to demonstrate and continue building their capacity to change their environments.

OUTCOMES

CCROPP launched its leadership training program in 2009, producing its first round of graduates in May of 2010. Community leads and training participants involved in this initial year of the program identified six key overlapping ways in which the program supported community change:

- Knowledge about obesity and how to prevent it.
- Community building and organizing skills and experience.
- Knowledge of how institutions and political systems work, and how to navigate them in the context of organizing for policy change.
- Communication and media skills and experience.
- Self-confidence and a sense of community morale.
- The ability to participate in the local planning process.

[For more detail on these outcomes, see [Addendum](#).]

Participants obtained critical knowledge and skills that helped them make progress in accomplishing the specific goals they had identified for their communities; and in Fresno County, they were actually able to attain their objective, establishing a community-school joint use agreement. The program has a number of implications.

IMPLICATIONS

In contexts comparable to the Central Valley, leadership development can be a crucial part of policy and environmental change efforts. CCROPP's experience thus far suggests that leadership training may be integral to achieving environmental policy change in communities like those in the Central Valley for several key reasons. First, leadership training appears to increase the chances that efforts will be sustained over the long-term by ensuring that skilled local leaders will be in place after nonprofit and other advocates have moved on. CCROPP community lead and organizer Susan Elizabeth says, "The sustainability of change at the community level is dependent on residents themselves eventually being able to do the work that [paid organizers and nonprofit advocates] are currently helping them to do. We are going to go away inevitably and they have to be equipped to go on." In addition, Elizabeth says, "Without [leadership training] the changes that we need to make are simply not going to happen quickly enough because we don't have resources or time. But if we can empower people in communities to do this work, there is hope."

Leadership training also supports long-term sustainability by helping to ensure that CCROPP's work is driven by people rooted in communities directly affected by the issues. When residents are able to define problems and solutions, they are more likely to be invested in the work and motivated to see it through over the long haul. In under-resourced communities like those in the Central Valley where residents have had little or no voice in the political process and no place at the negotiating table, this represents a fundamental shift in the status quo.

Leadership development both supports and is itself environmental change. The Central Valley experience illustrates concrete ways in which leadership training supported specific environmental change goals around healthy eating and physical activity; but it also shows how investing in local leadership

development, and specifically building of the capacity of local communities to organize, helps create an environment that supports the kind of work CCROPP is trying to do. Training participants to take on roles within individual projects such as joint use or school gardens, and in the process, potentially to experience a deeper identity transformation, empowers them to engage more broadly in the political process over the long-term. In disinvested communities like those in the Central Valley, this is a significant shift in the social environment.

The success of leadership development efforts is connected to the overall context in which such efforts are implemented. CCROPP's leadership training program operates organically in the context of a larger regional effort featuring several key components that influence the program's success.¹ For example, in addition to developing leadership among local residents, CCROPP is dedicated to educating local elected officials throughout the region about the conditions that local residents need in order to lead healthier lives. As part of this commitment, CCROPP, in partnership with the Local Government Commission, organized a series of dinners to better inform elected officials about the impact of local policies on enhancing access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity. Genoveva Islas-Hooker, regional program coordinator for CCROPP, says the dinner series allowed elected officials to learn more about what they could do locally to address the obesity epidemic, and led them to understand that residents are assets in helping to find solutions and to move change forward.

CONCLUSION

Changing the environmental conditions to address obesity and sustaining that change will require ongoing work that extends beyond current funding and political cycles. Local leaders can play a key role in driving and sustaining that change. This case study can help guide local advocates who are interested in integrating leadership training into their obesity-prevention work, but who may not have a clear road map of what such a program might look like. It can also provide insights into how leadership development might be framed as environmental change, so that the potential benefits of such work can be more effectively communicated to funders and decision-makers in a position to offer support.

A closer look at CCROPP's work can also help policymakers and funders understand how leadership development, more than just a dispensable extra, functions as a vital pillar of obesity-prevention work, possibly even making the difference in whether or not a given initiative succeeds. Leadership development therefore may help ensure the longevity of positive changes that shorter-term public health investments set into motion. Finally, in contexts such as the Central Valley, leadership development also promotes equity by imparting skills to low-income communities and people of color historically disempowered from participating in the planning process, and by helping to level the playing field for such communities with respect to social and political capital. By positioning leadership development as a foundation for sustainable environmental change, advocates, policymakers, and funders can work together more effectively to reverse the obesity epidemic by 2015.

¹ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity. "The Value of Regional-Level Work: A Case Study of Community Engagement, Environmental Policy Change, And the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP)." Case Study, forthcoming summer 2011.