

## Chinese Progressive Connects Tobacco with Housing Conditions

## Site Profile

Beyond the ornate Dragon Gate that marks the entrance to San Francisco's historic Chinatown, some 15,000 people live in a 12-square-block area, one of the most densely populated in the country.

The residents, mostly lower-income immigrants from China, live primarily in single-room-occupancy hotels and crowded apartment buildings, where housing, health and fire-code violations have been rampant.

The Chinese Progressive Association is a membership organization that has been fighting to improve living and working conditions in Chinatown for some three decades. It organized matching funds from its grassroots funding sources including individual donors and small businesses. It also received grants from the California Endowment and the Van Loben Sels/RembeRock Foundation. The presence of unrestricted matching funds enabled it to pay for some activities, such as lobbying, that could not be supported with its RWJF grant.

The association joined PATH in 2003 with a plan to combat secondhand smoke by getting the city to stiffen its building codes in residential hotels and apartment buildings. The issue had come to light in a 2001 survey of living conditions in the neighborhood.

Some 53 percent of tenants living in single-room-occupancy hotels in Chinatown said that people smoked in the common areas of their buildings. Nearly 80 percent said they occasionally or frequently smelled secondhand smoke in their buildings. With their living quarters often poorly ventilated, cigarette smoke could easily drift from the common areas into their rooms.

The Chinese Progressive Association already had a strong track record in tobacco control. The group had launched Chinese Power Against Tobacco in the mid-1990s to engage young people in initiatives against the tobacco industry and won a series of victories, including the removal of tobacco billboards first from Chinatown and then from the entire city. In 1999, Chinese Power convinced the City of San Francisco to designate

\$1 million annually from the Master Settlement Agreement<sup>1</sup> for tobacco use prevention programs.

The PATH initiative allowed the Chinese Progressive Association to place tobacco issues within the larger context of promoting healthier living conditions for Chinatown residents.

"We integrated tobacco control into the work we were already doing," said Chinese Progressive's executive director Gordon Mar, who managed the PATH project. "It did integrate very well with our broader agenda. It's an effective way to work, taking issues to our constituency in a way that was organic. They could see the connection between this issue and other environmental health issues."

The Chinese Progressive Association started its PATH project on the streets, with volunteers going door to door to educate residents. Then, beginning in October 2004, the agency fielded another survey to update its information about living conditions. The new survey found some improvement in tenants' perception of secondhand smoke but little change in other health hazards in the neighborhood.

The association produced a report, Substandard Housing Conditions in San Francisco Chinatown: Health Impacts on Low-Income Immigrant Tenants, about substandard housing conditions in San Francisco's Chinatown that garnered extensive media coverage among both mainstream and Chinese press. It was a potent strategy for getting the attention of city regulators as well.

Both the building inspection and the public health departments in San Francisco have some responsibility for code enforcement in rental housing. Mar found an ally in Rajiv Bhatia, M.D., director of occupational and environmental health for the health department. Together, they crafted legislation to modify the San Francisco Health Code as it relates to environmental health conditions in multi-unit housing.

The bill, which would have barred smoking in common areas of apartment buildings, was introduced to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in January 2006, but quickly encountered opposition. "There were obstacles having to do with which city agency is in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Master Settlement Agreement (MSA): An agreement signed in November 1998 by the attorneys general in 46 states and five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry. The agreement resolved lawsuits filed by the attorneys general against the tobacco industry and provided funds to the states to compensate them for taxpayer money spent on health care for patients and family members with tobacco-related diseases. Among many other provisions, the MSA required an end to tobacco billboard advertising and the use of cartoon characters to sell cigarettes, and required tobacco companies to make many of their internal documents available to the public. The tobacco companies also agreed not to target youth in the advertising, marketing and promotion of their products. The agreement also called for the creation of a foundation—the American Legacy Foundation—to counter tobacco use.

charge of this," Mar said. "The tenant rights advocates were concerned, too, that it would lead to unfair eviction of tenants. There was a lack of understanding of the issues."

Mar is hopeful that the bill will eventually be reintroduced and pass. The legislative process takes time, he says, and offers a lesson to anyone doing tobacco advocacy work. "You have to be patient," he said, "and just keep plugging away."