

## Transforming a Park in South Los Angeles

# Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment

Martin Luther King Park in south Los Angeles was once the epicenter of violence in a violent neighborhood—a place where sightings of blood and bodies were all too familiar. But it was also a potential community jewel, and community activists were determined to bring back its shine.

When project staff from the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment conducted a local survey, they learned that most residents went out of their way to avoid Martin Luther King Park. "The park was a deficit. People were afraid to go there," said Joanne Kim, MPH, the community coalition's chief operating officer. "But we knew that if we could infuse the park with activities, offer programs to kids that included healthy foods, and get people to use the park to exercise, it could instead become a huge asset."

The coalition managed to do just that, with a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) grant<sup>1</sup> through its national program, *Communities Creating Healthy Environments: Improving Access to Healthy Foods and Safe Places to Play in Communities of Color* (CCHE). The three-year grant began in 2010.

#### RESPONDING TO LOCAL NEEDS

The Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment, launched in 1990, was in response to the crack cocaine epidemic devastating south Los Angeles. Working with Black and Latino residents, organizers focus on action campaigns that promote safer neighborhoods, quality schools, a stronger safety net, and economic development. They advocated for a moratorium on fast-food restaurants, which the Los Angeles City Council imposed in 2008, and helped to establish the city's only park that is fully accessible to disabled children.

Prior to receiving the CCHE award, the coalition had studied some 20 neighborhoods in south Los Angeles to identify those with both the need and the capacity to change. "We went through a very elaborate process to choose the neighborhoods, including mapping

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and reviewing quantitative data. We looked at obesity levels and heart disease; at neighborhood assets, such as community organizations; and at deficits, such as the number of liquor stores," explained Kim, who directs the CCHE project site.

For all its woes, the Martin Luther King Park neighborhood presented a unique opportunity. A number of "problem" businesses operated nearby—two liquor stores, two motels, and a recycling center. But, says Kim, "the potential for change was great because we knew that what was going on in those problem businesses was spilling out into the park. And we had a track record of knowing how to clean up or close down problem alcohol outlets."

Through a "conditional use" process, the Los Angeles City Council can impose certain conditions on new or existing liquor stores that are designated a community nuisance. The coalition organized its members to navigate their way through the nuisance designation process for one of the liquor stores. Staff and volunteers attended block club meetings, went door-to-door talking to residents, and took photos and videos to document their complaints. They also won support from law enforcement and local churches and found coalition members willing to speak out at public hearings. When the city seemed to be procrastinating, they staged a protest and called on the Mayor to intervene.

Ultimately, the City Council imposed 26 safety-related conditions on the store, including the requirement for a security guard. Residents are still pushing the city to clean up other problem businesses, but meanwhile they have breathed new life into the park. It became one of the 2010 sites for the city's anti-gang initiative, known as "Summer Night Lights," which provides funding for youth-focused recreational and arts activities. Residents also joined together to beautify the park through clean-ups and plantings, and convinced the city to remove black mold that had rendered its recreation center unusable.

With all of that underway, coalition members began knocking on doors again, this time to broaden the constituency that cares about the park. "You can put programming in but if people have a longstanding, historical fear of the park, they still won't come out to use it," Kim warns. "If you don't do the community organizing, these changes are not sustainable."

### LASTING CHANGE

Residents also had to be persuaded that the improvements will endure. "By the second year, people began to feel that this could be something permanent," said Kim. The recreation center now offers ballet, tutoring, and martial arts, and kids are flocking to the baseball court, soccer field, and playground, fueling a sense of optimism. "It is still a relatively small program. Our goal is to get more people out of their houses and doing more to build up the culture of having a vibrant park and community."

Meanwhile, assumptions have clearly been altered. In fact, the younger residents tend to take the park for granted now, not recalling how thoroughly it has been transformed. "The kids will say 'I don't know why my mom told me not to go there.' Unless you know the story of the 'before,' all you will see is a beautiful, functional park."

For more information about the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment, go to its website.

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