



Building Community and Improving Health in Low-Income Las Vegas Neighborhoods

Launching a public health intervention, focusing on multiple determinants of health

SUMMARY

From 2010 to 2012, a team of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, [School of Public Health](#), worked to build community and improve overall health in very low-income neighborhoods in Las Vegas by providing mini-grants and technical assistance to grass roots community organizations.

Key Results

- Through mini-grants and technical assistance, the project team helped nine grassroots community organizations conduct projects to build social capital and civic engagement in very low-income Las Vegas neighborhoods. Projects included:
 - Arts, sports, and mentoring programs for at-risk youth
 - Building coalitions of community leaders and small business owners
 - Training volunteers to survey households regarding health and other needs

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this project through a grant of \$351,359.

CONTEXT

Ward 5 of Las Vegas, with a population of approximately 100,000 people, is a very low-income neighborhood that has some of the worst rates of disease and disability, unemployment, and high school graduation in the country. At the time RWJF was considering funding this grant:

- 15 percent of the residents were unemployed.
- 21 percent lived below the poverty line.

- 50 percent of the residents did not speak English.
- More than half of the adolescents entering high school did not graduate.

Traditional public health interventions focus on a single disease, and attempt to modify a single risk factor—increasing physical activity to reduce the incidence of heart disease, for example. But in low-income communities like Ward 5, residents are at risk for multiple health problems, many of which stem from the socioeconomic conditions in which they live and work.

As the [RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America](#) put it:

Where we live, work, learn and play dramatically affects the health of all Americans—for better or for worse. The sometimes toxic relationship between how we live our lives and the economic, social and physical environments that surround us has resulted in some of America's most persistent health problems. At the same time, improving conditions in our homes, schools, workplaces and communities can help create greater opportunities for healthy lives.

This project adopted an alternative approach of empowering the community to build social capital and civic engagement. The intent was to work upstream by addressing the multiple social determinants of health.

RWJF's Interest in This Area

RWJF program staff thought that the project broke new ground in that it proposed to improve community health not through a series of well-defined public health interventions focused on particular diseases or behaviors, but rather by empowering community residents to choose interventions that work on upstream social determinants of health. It was also consistent with the conclusions of the [RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America](#).

THE PROJECT

A team of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, [School of Public Health](#) proposed a broad-based intervention to promote public health in Ward 5 of Las Vegas. They planned to assemble a partnership among the local community, a major hotel–casino, a health insurance company, consultants, and academia. The intervention would aim to address underlying social determinants of health, rather than a specific disease or health behavior.

The team intended to conduct a process evaluation of the intervention and produce several products, including:

- An assessment of the impact of the community-engagement process on the social capital of the community
- A resource guide tailored to community priorities
- A report on the preventive health needs of Ward 5 residents

Unanticipated Setbacks

After considerable preparatory work, the partnership fell apart. Field work convinced the research team that the project would be more successful if it also included Ward 3, which is the true cultural heart of the Latino community in Las Vegas. The proposed expansion of the project ran into resistance from community leaders and elected officials.

At the same time, both the casino–hotel (Harrah’s) and the insurance company (CIGNA) withdrew from the project because of the economic downturn. The team was thus forced to pare down the project, and was unable to complete the planned products in the time remaining.

Subsequently, the team conferred with experts across the country about these difficulties. In a report to RWJF, they explained:

Everyone we talked to immediately recognized the problem. They all, it seemed, had experienced the same difficulties. They all suggested that a major part of the problem stemmed from the dramatic demographic shifts going on in the country resulting in a mismatch between the community leaders and the communities they now represented. One person referred to this as a “new immigrant” versus the “old guard” syndrome.

The experts agreed that this problem was rarely discussed. Project Director S. Leonard Syme, PhD, organized a symposium at Berkeley in April 2011 entitled “What Can Researchers Do When Community Partnerships Fall Apart? Understanding the Renegotiation of Power and Population Change” to discuss the issue.¹ A video of the colloquium is available [online](#).

Reconfiguring the Project

In the face of these setbacks, the team reconfigured its project, using minigrants and technical assistance to grassroots community organizations in Wards 3 and 5 to build

¹ RWJF funds were not used.

social capital and civic engagement and improve overall health. The minigrants were targeted at groups that dealt directly with neighborhood residents and had the potential to grow. Technical assistance consisted chiefly in helping organizations align their projects with their overall missions and goals. “The premise was that you’ve got to let the community guide you,” said RWJF’s Chief Technology and Information Officer, Steve J. Downs, SM, who served as the program officer for this project. “You can’t go in there with the solution. You’ve got to give the community control. And in this case there was no cohesive community.”

RESULTS

The project team cited the following results in reports to RWJF and in an interview for this report:

- **Through minigrants and technical assistance, the project team helped nine grassroots community organizations conduct projects to build social capital and civic engagement in very low-income Las Vegas neighborhoods.** The grants ranged from \$1,500 to \$15,000. The organizations and their projects were:

- *The Beat Coffee House:* The owners of a cultural, political, and socially active coffee house in downtown Las Vegas had a vision to create a coalition of small business owners. They brought together 11 small business representatives who found they shared a vision for a better Los Vegas: to build bridges that could connect them to one another and start working as a group to improve the community they care about. The participants represented concierge and lifestyle management, health and nutrition coaching, graphic design, Internet-based business, an architecture firm, a flower shop, and a state assembly woman. They have had additional meetings to start to implement their vision.
- *Casa de Luz,* a small Las Vegas church, conducted the ARTreach program consisting of four three-month long workshops with 15 to 20 kids in each to expose youth from impoverished neighborhoods to new ways of expressing their emotions—from acrobatics to poetry—and encourage them to explore and develop artistic talents.

Briana Mackey thinks the poetry workshop at ARTreach connected most deeply with the children. “It brought out the most feeling and emotional expression. We really saw so much growth in all the kids.... For me, that was one of the most compelling things we’ve done.”

See Briana Mackey’s story.

- *The Latin Chamber of Commerce Community Foundation* trained 20 community residents in Rapid Community Assessment—to conduct a survey of community households regarding household characteristics, health needs, and community resources and priorities. They surveyed 156 households, a 52 percent response rate, which is a high rate according to the project leaders. But the more important result was that the participants “learned a lot about the diversity, disparities and needs of the people living in their community,” according to Maite Salazar and Rene Cantu, PhD, of the Latin Chamber Community Foundation.
- *Latino United Network* hosted three meetings for more than two dozen Latino citizen leaders to craft an agenda for developing leadership skills and addressing concerns of the Latino community. They agreed they wanted to keep meeting as an organized group to work around issues such as learning English, building relationships with their government representatives, asserting their rights with their employers, and developing their own leadership skills.

See Maria Castillo-Couch’s story.

- *A Nu Beginning* began developing its Ambassadors Program—designed to reach out and provide alternatives to youth at risk of criminal activity—by training 20 volunteers. The ambassadors come from the community and will work closely with the Metro Police Department. The training focused on preparing the ambassadors for street outreach by teaching them about safety, developing a protocol for being effective and sensitive to the needs of the young people, and introducing them to the services available to endangered youth and families. The director of the Metro Police Gang Unit took the group on a tour of the police headquarters and introduced them to gang unit detectives.
- *Power of One* hosted two field trips—the first for members of a new community football team, ages 7 to 12. The kids needed to meet certain criteria to be part of the team: good behavior, stewardship, and academic accomplishment. Most of the kids had never left the Sherman Gardens neighborhood, which is a housing project in West Las Vegas. The football team went to Adventure Dome, an amusement park located in Circus Circus. Twenty-two 7–12 year olds, eight 13–17 year olds, and 14 parents of the football players made the trip. The second field trip was to the Tonopah Community Garden, and was run in collaboration with Home Depot. The children painted blocks to decorate the bare concrete walls surrounding the garden. Three 7–12 year olds and 12 13–17 year olds, and four parents took part.
- *Second Baptist Church*, which runs the Step UP! mentoring program, hosted a meeting with other mentoring programs in the community to explore ways to network and share resources. Ten people attended. The report on this project states: “The idea to bring people together to start exploring ways to share

resources and support one another is something that has never been done in this community. [Project leader] Brother Thrower wants the groups to take ownership and participate in working groups to further develop a networking website that will allow the groups in West Las Vegas to connect.”

- *Tonopah Community Garden*, the first community garden to exist in Las Vegas, hosted four workshops for youth and adults on these topics: “Turning Trash into Treasure” to encourage participants to re-purpose and re-use recycled items; “Pumpkin Carving,” in which youth and adults who had never carved a pumpkin before did so for Halloween; “Making Holiday Centerpieces,” in which adults re-purposed unwanted items; and “Helahy Holiday,” which a volunteer health coach demonstrated how to make flavorful and healthy holiday meals using fruits and vegetables from the garden. Six to 11 people attended each workshop.
- *Valley View Community Cares* holds an annual SWEETS conference (Supportive Women Education Empowering Training Sisters) for at-risk female teenagers. For the project, SWEETS selected a group of 15 motivated at-risk girls ages 16 to 19 to participate in four-week internships in Las Vegas agencies and businesses such as city hall, the Metro Police Department, a recreation center, a day-care center and a local radio station. Each teen had a sponsor from the host organization to ensure the internship was a career-exploration experience. After the program, six of the teens were hired for summer positions at their host organizations.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Take care to identify and work with community leaders who are actually perceived as leaders by the people who live in the community.** There is a growing disconnect between many communities and those designated to lead them. In this case, this problem, entirely unanticipated, led to a complete redesign of the project and the inability to complete the planned products. (Project Directors/Syme and Wang; Co-Project Director/Susana M. Morales Konishi, MA)
2. **Tailoring a project to the unique needs of the community requires flexibility.** What worked well in one block in West Las Vegas, for example, would not work in the adjacent block in East Las Vegas. (Co-Project Director/Morales Konishi)
3. **Using a Problem Tree—a large tree drawn on a white board—can be an inspirational and transformative experience for community residents.** The Rapid Community Assessment project had participants identify problems on post-its, which were put on the branches of the tree, and then to think about root causes. “They learned that while there are many difficult problems, most could be traced back to a few root causes... most of [which] have workable solutions.” (Project Directors at Latin Chamber Community Foundation/Salazar and Cantu)

AFTERWARD

The project ended with the close of the grant.

BRIANA MACKEY

ARTreach: Encouraging Expression in Las Vegas' Naked City Neighborhood

At first glance, the Naked City neighborhood of Las Vegas may seem like ground too barren to raise a crop of poets. In the vacant lots, the dry wind blows trash around. The houses are ramshackle, with screen doors hanging askew. Most of the windows are barred, and some are pocked with bullet holes. The walls are tagged with graffiti, much of it gang-related. When drug deals go bad, gunshots echo on the streets at night.

The city has tried to rename the neighborhood a couple times—Meadows Village, Northern Strip, Gateway District—but as a descriptor, the name Naked City has been hard to shake.

Of the roughly 3,700 people who call this neighborhood home, half are foreign-born immigrants, and a third do not speak English well or at all. A third of the residents live below the poverty line. Fewer than half the children who enter high school will graduate.

“These kids have some very rough lives,” says Briana Mackey, who works at Casa de Luz, a small church doing missionary work in the neighborhood. “Hunger and poverty are all over the place. Many of them are drawn into gangs. And there’s also sexual abuse, broken families.”

It was against these odds that Mackey and her co-worker Laura Chapel put a radical idea to the test: the belief that art can help people transcend their circumstances and provide them with hope for a better tomorrow. They developed a program called ARTreach to expose youth from the neighborhood to new ways of expressing their emotions and encourage them to explore and develop new talents.

To date, ARTreach has sponsored four workshops, each about three months long, with 15 to 20 kids in each. Cirque, modeled after Cirque du Soleil, focused on acrobatics. Stomp was all about choreographed body percussion. In one workshop, students learned how to draw. In another, they wrote and performed their own poetry.

For each workshop, Mackey brought in mentors to work with the youth. For the poetry workshop “we had a lead artist mentor who is a local slam master, and is very well

connected in that community in Las Vegas,” Mackey said. “He also brought in poets... All of the kids had the opportunity to work with somebody they might be able to relate to.”

Mackey thinks the poetry workshop connected most deeply with the children. “It brought out the most feeling and emotional expression. We really saw so much growth in all the kids, from the start of the workshop to the end. For me, that was one of the most compelling things we’ve done.”

“They learned that their feelings actually matter, and that being vulnerable and sharing those things with other people was a way to connect more meaningfully.”

The poetry workshop ended with the young poets performing their poems for an audience of nearly 100 family members and friends—brave, young voices giving shape to a chaotic world. A videographer recorded the event.

Some of the youth also worked with the videographer to record their performances outdoors in the neighborhood. In one video, posted on YouTube, a young girl clutches a chain link fence. Behind her, you can see a vacant lot, a sidewalk leading to where a house once stood, a wind-whipped bush with white blossoms. Her poem is about fire, the way it can both hurt and heal. The voice of the young girl—the notes on the YouTube page say her name is Hope—rises clear, strong, and cadenced in the desert air.

MARIA CASTILLO-COUCH

Latino United Network in Wards 3 and 5 in Las Vegas

For most of her volunteer service in neighborhoods throughout the city of Las Vegas metropolitan area, Maria Castillo-Couch, PhD, has encountered a Hispanic population in need who often do not know very much about local agencies or about accessing services. This lack of knowledge has done much to augment their suffering.

“These people are in need of assistance from many local services, and it’s sad, many of them don’t even know what’s available and even how to get started,” she says. “They come from places where humbleness is the norm, and governments are corrupt and nonresponsive. They don’t even know they have rights or know they can speak about them.”

But for some groups, she says, “You have to throw your assumptions about what these folks know out the window.” This is particularly the case in Wards 3 and 5 in Las Vegas—the heart of the Latino community in the city.

In 2012, Castillo-Couch and a collaborator, Alonso Flores, decided to address these challenges by identifying Latino leaders in these neighborhoods and bringing them together around their common concerns and aspirations. Flores is an adviser to the IME (Institute for Mexicans Abroad), a national organization working to advance the interests of Mexican citizens in foreign countries, such as the United States.

Some 32 people showed up for the first meeting. “It opened up a huge population that I had never reached before,” Castillo-Couch recalls. “They were from Bolivia, Chile, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Paraguay. But it was a surprise to us. We didn’t expect it. And these groups don’t often connect with each other. Each country has its own culture and food and music. Each group remains focused on its own citizens, creating a barrier among the groups.”

Castillo-Couch and Flores polled the participants at the meeting and found that, despite these barriers, they all agreed that they wanted to keep meeting as an organized group to work around issues such as learning English, building relationships with their government representatives, asserting their rights with their employers, and developing their own leadership skills. The group, now called the United Latino Network, has continued meeting to create an agenda for the future.

“So far, it’s just a beginning,” says Castillo-Couch. “But the people in the communities look at these people as leaders, and there’s huge potential to reach out to them.”

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