



Voices for Change: A Social Action Campaign to Restore the Health and Safety of Residents of the Westside of San Bernardino County, California

Jeanne Silberstein, M.P.H., R.D.

County of San Bernardino Department of Public Health

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INTRODUCTION

Voices for Change (V4C) is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) collaboration including multigenerational communities of color and project partners (health department, elected leaders, policy-makers, community/faith-based organizations and educators) that seeks to put its findings into action. V4C engages participants through Photovoice (photography and prose), providing opportunities for individual and group data gathering, reflection, dialogue and social action regarding neighborhood assets and issues, which are shared in both community and town hall meetings. This group is collaboratively developing social action plans to address identified topics for improving the quality of life.

POLICY/PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

A hallmark of CBPR is its focus on translating research findings into action that can lead to new or improved health-promoting programs, practices and policies. Among the leading policy/practice questions and policy/practice options that are being discussed:

- What are the pathways through which Photovoice can help link place-based work and changes in broader health-promoting policies or systems?
- What similar or different pathways can lead to health-promoting practices in health departments, community-based organizations and other settings?
- What is the value added in terms of policy outcomes when policy-makers' help is sought with implementation of project recommendations as they are directly involved in Photovoice processes rather than having them be contacted after the fact?
- What factors contribute to the sustainability of policy and practice changes to which a Photovoice project has contributed?

KEY LESSONS

- ***The role of the group facilitator is a key component to implementing a successful group.***

The role of the facilitator is critical for building group cohesion, promoting critical thinking and group dialogue, and shepherding the social action process. Successful facilitation incorporates the skills of working with diverse communities, facilitating group discussion while not actively participating in that discussion, understanding the importance of each participant's contributions, and appreciating the goals of community-based participatory research, empowerment and Photovoice.

- ***Photovoice (photographs and written stories) is a unique and creative nontraditional way of engaging diverse groups of people in critical thinking.***

Originally a series of training of trainers, Photovoice workshops were held with people recognized in the community as leaders and with public health department staff. This group then invited community members to participate in Voices for Change, which incorporated Photovoice into its approach to CBPR. We then engaged our project partners (public health department director and health officer, elected officials, policy-makers, community/faith-based organizations and educators) to participate in a modified approach to Photovoice in which participants chose to write about a photograph that was taken by a community member. As a result, the concerns to be addressed were those identified by the community. This is a fresh, engaging and creative way of establishing a common ground for dialogue among a diverse group of community members, the public health department, elected officials, policy-makers, community/faith-based organizations and educators.

- ***Despite differences within and among groups, similar themes surfaced across the diverse groups of participants.***

As the middle school, high school, adult Spanish-speaking and adult English-speaking groups became more invested in the process and moved from individual to group data collection, reflection and dialogue, many participants were surprised to learn that others thought similarly. Despite their diversity in age (middle and high school students, adults), race/ethnicity (African American, Latino), culture, language, (English-speaking, Spanish-speaking residents) economic status and power (community members, elected officials and policy-makers), all were equally concerned about the condition of the community neighborhoods. The across-groups issues that surfaced included the following: gangs, liquor stores, violence and crime, school dropouts, drug activities, graffiti, unhealthy food, neighborhood blight and pedestrian safety.

- ***Multiple solutions, which became clear after there was a consensus on priorities and the development of a community-owned action plan, surfaced across the groups.***

The collective solutions generated were as diverse as the groups but were seen as ways to mediate some of the issues raised. The list of solutions posed across all groups included the following: increasing parenting skills and parental involvement through classes; providing job training, tutoring, mentoring and classes to develop computer skills; providing programs for adults and seniors; increasing community policing and volunteerism; seeking grants to fund prevention programs; creating a viable community center where programs could be offered; improving neighborhood beautification and pedestrian-safe walkways; building more playgrounds and parks; and creating innovative and diverse partnerships to implement solutions. Consensus within the community occurred when the community groups realized that a place where some of these services could be offered was a local community center/park that is currently underutilized and underfunded. The adult groups are drafting an action plan around making this community center more viable, sustainable and responsive to community needs.

- ***Trust the process.***

The social action-planning piece of Photovoice, which is in progress, will move the group and the group facilitators further into uncharted territory, which can feel disconcerting. Trusting the community and community partners and maintaining the integrity of the facilitated process are necessary for success.

- ***There is a greater potential for sustainability when there is collaboration among the community and community leaders and policy-makers.***

Throughout the process, community members and project partners gain a shared awareness and understanding about community issues and concerns. Through the action-planning process, shared ownership over the mitigation of issues is based on mutual understanding by all parties and understanding of roles and responsibilities. The policy-makers and elected officials can count on an activated community to move the process forward.

KEY PEOPLE

Project Staff

San Bernardino County Department of Public Health Nutrition Program:
351 Mountain View Avenue, Room 104
San Bernardino, CA 92415-0010
(909) 387-6320
www.sbcounty.gov/eatwell/

Jeanne Silberstein, M.P.H., R.D.
jsilberstein@dph.sbcounty.gov

Teslyn Henry-King, M.P.H., R.D.
themy-king@dph.sbcounty.gov

Elisa Guichard, M.P.H., R.D.
eguichard@dph.sbcounty.gov

Bronica Martindale, B.A.
bmartindale@dph.sbcounty.gov

Consultant

Nance Wilson, Ph.D.
(510) 339-3424
nance.wilson@gmail.com

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