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YOUTH ADVOCACY: A MODEL FOR OBESITY PREVENTION BY ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AND SAFETY IN CHULA VISTA, CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION

In communities where violence is an issue, ensuring a sense of public safety can be critical to the success of policy and environmental change strategies to improve health. A neglected or poorly designed built environment may signal violence or the potential for violence, reinforcing a situation in which people are afraid to use local parks, streets and sidewalks, for example. Violence is a significant barrier to physical activity and to “getting out” in general and therefore to combating obesity and improving public health. This case study looks at Preventing Violence-Healthy Eating Active Living (PV-HEAL), an innovative initiative funded by the national Convergence Partnership that supports obesity prevention within a violence-prevention framework in six sites across the nation: Detroit, West Oakland, Chula Vista, Philadelphia, Denver and Louisville¹. In addition to recognizing connections between violence, environmental conditions and health, a notable feature of PV-HEAL is a requirement to engage youth in identifying and implementing solutions.

Youth-led advocacy can be a powerful tool for creating sustainable policy and environmental change, as well as inspiring behavior changes among young people. Fourteen year old Joe Bear Ortiz – a member of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Youth Advisory Board – summed it up in this way, “Because the problem of childhood obesity is about our generation, we need to be able to speak up for ourselves instead of having adults make the decisions about how our lives will be run. We need to find solutions for ourselves that will work for us”.² A number of organizations are focusing on youth engagement and advocacy as cornerstones in their strategies to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, including the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG), Youth Activism Against Obesity and their We’re Fed Up social media campaign, The San Diego Childhood Obesity Initiative and their Youth Engagement and Action for Health (YEAH!) project, California’s Statewide Youth Board on Obesity Prevention, The National Convergence Partnership’s PV-HEAL initiative and many more. This case study looks at one of these efforts - the implementation of PV-HEAL in Chula Vista, California – and focuses on how violence prevention, obesity prevention and youth leadership and advocacy were integrated to successfully catalyze environmental change.

THE CLIMATE

Chula Vista, California is the second-largest city in San Diego county, located a 10 minute drive north of the U.S.-Mexico border at Tijuana. Chula Vista is divided by the 805 Freeway into eastern and western sections with western Chula Vista being comparatively more socioeconomically disadvantaged than the city's eastern side. Census data show that Chula Vista is ethnically diverse, has high levels of poverty and

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is home to a large proportion of children and youth³. The region also has comparatively poor health outcomes. Chula Vista is situated within California Assembly District 79, which has one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the state. According to a 2001 report by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (which utilized the results of the California Physical Fitness Test), 36 percent of students in the district are overweight. Latino children, who constitute 69 percent of those tested, have a higher than average incidence of obesity⁴. As a consequence, the district has a diabetes-related death rate well above the rate for California as a whole⁵.

PV-HEAL efforts were focused in western Chula Vista, where the negative health impacts of the built environment are compounded by violence related to the presence of urban gangs and other socially marginalized groups including transients, homeless people and youth surviving on the streets. A lack of safe and inviting public and outdoor spaces in west Chula Vista creates a situation in which residents feel discouraged from engaging in health-promoting activities, such as going outside for a walk or a bike ride or traveling to nearby locations for food, including healthy food. Dana Richardson, Senior Director of Advocacy & Community Health for Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP) says that issues of safety fundamentally limit the way people behave. “Pedestrians are not a priority here,” he says. “There is limited infrastructure to support walking, we don't have green spaces.” Underscoring this point, Richardson points out that in the past quarter century, only one park has been built in the western Chula Vista community. Gang-related graffiti marking the built environment also promotes the community's fear of certain places. “Tagging is a symbol of violence and territory,” says Richardson. Regarding a local park, he says, “You don't want to go there. We've known since we were teenagers that that's gang territory.”

Twenty-year-old Ariel McCann, one of PV-HEAL's youth participants, says that poor community design in western Chula Vista inhibits the kind of social interaction necessary for residents to build a stronger community. “If we have an environment that supports happiness, culture and diversity, it's going to support health because people are going to want to be out and make connections and exchange ideas about better eating for example. We have been looking into local farms and farmers' markets, but in west Chula Vista most people don't know their neighbors. If we have no connections in the community there is no room to even spark this idea.”

POLITICAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC WILL

When PV-HEAL grants were awarded in January 2010, public health advocates in Chula Vista already had half a decade of experience working on environmental policy change strategies as part of Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC), a statewide initiative funded by The California Endowment. HEAC was a comprehensive effort to build a community-wide approach to obesity and included addressing issues of infrastructure. Partially based on feedback from HEAC participants, the Convergence

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Partnership recognized a need to explore the nexus between obesity work and violence. Dana Richardson says. “These communities were coming back from meetings organized by HEAC’s funder stating that you can’t get to obesity prevention when people are scared to go out and walk or play and where there are significant and bona-fide public safety concerns.” Bolstering this exploration was a report by Prevention Institute, funded by Kaiser Permanente that concluded that significant violence in communities affects spending and other behavioral patterns and prevents the location of businesses. This in turn has a negative impact on access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Richardson says that HEAC was a multi-sector effort from the start and included the county public health department, a violence prevention partner, an obesity-prevention partner, as well as the local police department, food access partners, walkability partners and the City of Chula Vista Redevelopment Agency. “But the kicker was that HEAC didn’t explicitly require us to demonstrate that young people were at the table,” Richardson says. Resistant to the idea at first, Richardson became convinced of the importance of youth involvement after witnessing a successful HEAC-led park revitalization project in which one of his colleagues made a point of giving youth a leading role. “Her efforts demonstrated that when young people are involved, you can move mountains,” he says. “I stood corrected, and it changed my perspective on how we approach this business.”

Richardson and his team of youth chose to focus Chula Vista’s PV-HEAL grant on six specific sites, which, according to available data, had significant public safety issues. These included a neighborhood apartment complex, two community parks—Lauderbauch and Harborside – and three trolley stations. They also came up with a project to paint eight municipally owned utility boxes that were in close proximity to these key sites and which had been targets for tagging. First, Richardson and project leaders guided youth participants through the process of assessing these sites. “We wrote down what we saw,” says youth leader Ariel McCann. “What could be a positive change and how we were feeling.” The youth also used photography and video to support their observations. Tagging and graffiti were among the negative aspects McCann recorded. “These are symbols of forced ownership, someone taking over an area,” she says. “A lot of times it’s directly linked to gangs.” Cigarette butts, empty alcohol containers, broken lights and tall bushes were other visual cues that contributed to the youth feeling unsafe and unwelcome. “But we also focused on the positive,” McCann says. “So when there were children playing in parks we noted that and how it made us feel more welcome.” Twenty-two-year-old youth leader Sandra Aguilar, who also participated in PV-HEAL’s efforts, said that she noticed a seating area in one of the trolley stations. “I really liked that because it makes it a community spot and promotes having fun outside and maybe it could have been painted or somehow made more attractive.”

McCann says she frequently observed homeless people on sites her team assessed, a population that she says can be intimidating to her community. But she resists the oversimplified idea that simply ridding public spaces of “undesirables” is the right solution. “There are other parks where there are homeless populations,” she says. “But the community still comes out because there are other features

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in that park [that attract them]. McCann cites public art, for example, which she says the youth were especially excited about incorporating as part of PV-HEAL. This figured into the decision to paint the utility boxes, a project that also became an opportunity to reflect local cultural values and create a more interactive environment. The youth addressed this community need by painting pre-Colombian designs on the utility boxes, which Richardson says have become symbols of community pride.

Youth leaders McCann and Aguilar both say that seeing their ideas developed and implemented to improve their communities was a redefining experience. “Seeing how the assessments came to this point of action and that the end results were all ours, we felt empowered not only for the project, but in general to do whatever we want to do in life.” Aguilar says participating in PV-HEAL taught her that she can speak up, make change and find people who are willing to help. “I loved this project because it gave me a sense of power – it gave power to my voice. I had been using the trolleys forever to get to school and went through a lot of experiences when I would stop there and did not feel safe. I wanted to do something about that, and when I became part of this project, I learned not be afraid to share my creativity or ideas, because people might like it or be thinking the same thing.”

IMPLICATIONS

IMPLICATION #1: Reducing violence and promoting health are compatible goals. Combining leadership opportunities for youth with efforts to improve the built environment in the communities where they live can be an effective strategy for achieving both.

Building walkable neighborhoods, creating community gathering places and showcasing public art can increase access to physical activity opportunities, sources of healthy food and beneficial social interaction. What many communities recognize firsthand is that it can also make spaces feel safer and improve actual safety by making places less conducive to violence-related behaviors. In addition to producing a positive end result, the act of shaping one's environment is itself empowering because it involves decision-making that has a public impact felt on a daily basis. As youth leader McCann says, “It’s not just about making a park look better, but about who is involved in the process.” Providing youth with leadership roles around a process of environmental change elevates their voices in which concrete benefits are being generated for the larger community. In other words, PV-HEAL's youth leadership component isn't superficial—the voices, opinions and decisions of the youth involved actually matter because they have led to potentially lasting benefits.

Youth leadership in such a context may help prevent violence specifically by enabling young people to participate in a meaningful way, experience social integration rather than isolation, understand complex issues that affect them daily, envision possible career paths and build their perspective with the support of mentors. PV-HEAL youth leaders demonstrate viable alternatives to violence and serve as models for

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both their peers and the community-at-large. By involving at-risk youth says McCann, the goal was not just to better the environment, but to provide an alternative to negative activity. “We all kind of grew up through this project,” he says. “If we found a group of taggers in school, having them go through an art project and paint these boxes is a better remedy to the problem [than juvenile detention or community service].” By implementing a culturally sensitive transformation of the built environment, the youth also encouraged a sense of local identity and pride that possibly helped discourage violence-related behavior on a broader scale. As evidence, Richardson cites the utility boxes, which have remained untagged since they were painted. “I think it's because the art truly represents the people. The kids are like, 'this is what we did, this is us, don't mess it up.' When we were making the boxes, people in the community expressed their gratitude toward our group and said thanks for putting this up, people loved it.”

IMPLICATION #2: In communities where violence is an issue, policy and environmental change may seem abstract or prove ineffective unless it is presented and implemented within a violence-prevention framework.

While proper infrastructure investments and design improvements may lead to a greater sense of safety and a reduction in violence, community buy-in may be difficult if efforts are not explicitly framed in terms of violence-prevention. “When we ask people, what do you value more, public health or safety, everyone values safety,” Richardson says. “People think about it all the time. It’s a topic everyone understands.”

IMPLICATION #3: Involving youth may increase the possibility for the long-term sustainability of policy and environmental change, public health and violence-prevention efforts.

Young people bring a unique perspective that is missed when only adults are at the table. Furthermore, they often have the energy, creativity and drive to ensure the places they will inherit are healthy and safe. Youth also have significant influence over the attitudes, behaviors and actions of their peers. Haile Thomas , another member of the AHG Youth Advisory Board, says it best, “It is important that I have a voice because a lot of the time youth can better influence and motivate other youth to make changes or do better with eating healthy and staying active. I also think it’s important because we are being affected by the choices, policies and decisions made by adults. It is important that we are given opportunities to help in the fight against the problems that affect us.”⁶ These are just some of the reasons why involving youth in improving their communities from the outset is an important component of addressing the childhood obesity epidemic and may increase the chances that work begun will be sustained for generations to come. “To be truly sustainable in this work,” Richardson says. “You have to pass it on to other people who can keep it up. These days, projects change, funding stops, so we have to

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reinvent how we approach this work and it's all about facilitating leadership. Youth can go beyond where paid advocates can go. We as project staff are only going to get so far.”

CONCLUSION

Obesity-prevention leaders are clearly recognizing how violence influences public health by limiting access to community environments and how youth can play a critical role in improving the safety and vibrancy of their neighborhoods. This case study illustrates the natural logic of incorporating youth leadership and advocacy into obesity-prevention efforts in contexts comparable to western Chula Vista, and provides a model of youth inclusion to funders and advocates on the ground looking to ensure the effectiveness of interventions in communities where violence is a major concern.

Watch this [video](#) to see the youth leaders of the PV-HEAL initiative in Chula Vista in action!

¹ To learn more about the National Convergence Partnership and its efforts in the field visit their website: www.convergencepartnership.org

² Alliance for a Healthier Generation Empower Me project. <http://www.healthiergeneration.org/teens.aspx?id=3377>

³ San Diego Association of Governments, Chula Vista Population and Housing Estimates (2010), Profile Warehouse, <http://profilewarehouse.sandag.org/>

⁴ California Center for Public Health Advocacy, CCPHA State Fact Sheet: “Percentage of Overweight and Unfit Children by Assembly District.” http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=7&ved=0CEUQFjAG&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.publichealthadvocacy.org%2Fpolicy_briefs%2Fstudy_documents%2FRates_All_Districts_1.pdf&rct=j&q=CCPHA%20percentage%20of%20overweight%20and%20unfit%20children%20by%20assembly%20district&ei=ssWMTrv2MqStiQfY673mBw&usg=AFQjCNEZ0xO6-nG7vt69_BgSO7vAkuUfnA&cad=rja

⁵ California Center for Public Health Advocacy, Fact Sheet: “Diabetes-Related Death Rates and the Prevalence of Overweight & Unfit Children By Assembly District,” http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/policy_briefs/study_documents/Diabetes_Assembly_Districts.pdf

⁶ Alliance for a Healthier Generation 2011-2012 Youth Advisory Board. <http://www.healthiergeneration.org/teens.aspx?id=4294967509>