

Case History: Pacoima Beautiful

- **Describe the impacted community (population, neighborhood, general statistics, history, etc).**

Pacoima, California. (northeast San Fernando Valley, City of Los Angeles) 100,000 residents, 83% Latino, 8% African American, low income.

- **What are/were the problems affecting the community?**

Pacoima residents are impacted by the effects of pollution from both mobile and stationary sources. The community is surrounded by three freeways, bisected by a railroad line, has a small plane airport within its borders and is subject to fugitive dust from numerous toxic release sites, including landfills, primarily from the adjacent community of Sun Valley. Residents, many of whom live across the street or adjacent to conflicting land uses and businesses, have historically not been aware of the potential impacts of these uses on their health and on the health of their children.

- **What partnerships were formed to address the problems and challenges?**

The community began to come together around environmental health issues in 1999. Pacoima Beautiful, in partnership with four California State University faculty members, focused on reducing lead poisoning and other in home environmental hazards. Partnerships grew over the years to include local health agencies, other neighborhood organizations, and regulatory agencies.

- **What were the major challenges the community faced or faces in overcoming the problems?**

One of the greatest challenges has been getting businesses to voluntarily become interested or involved in environmental health issues. Few business owners are invested in the Pacoima community in any way let alone caring about neighboring residents.

For a long time, the majority of the residents were not interested in learning about environmental issues- most of the problems cannot be seen or touched and there was little patience for the intangible. That changed when residents learned about the potential impacts of pollution and various land uses on their health and that of their children. An additional challenge is that in a community of 100,000 people it is hard to reach all who need information.

Another challenge was that elected officials were unaware of the possible link between health and the environment. There was little or no focus on cause and effect.

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- **How did the community overcome the challenges? If the community wasn't able to address the challenges, what were the impacts on the project? How did the project move forward?**

Education and information were and are the key to addressing the challenges.

Finding a few business champions is proving essential. The former President of the Chamber of Commerce has seen the value of addressing both health and economics and he has taken upon himself to convince others of the link. However, the process is very slow.

Elected officials were convinced when they heard from knowledgeable residents. The most knowledgeable group of residents are the youth in the community. One hundred thirty participate yearly, through Pacoima Beautiful, in environmental learning activities including community based participatory research. The youth share what they learn with their parents, other community members and elected officials. The elected officials are now supportive.

As a result of the voice of the youth being heard, all elected officials are addressing environmental health issues in their work.

The adult residents are now willing to learn and become involved but at a slower pace. The project is moving forward and is gaining momentum.

- **What tools or methods did the community use that are transferable to other communities facing similar issues?**

Research. Residents are encouraged and supported by Pacoima Beautiful staff to research the environmental issues that concern them. We build partnerships with residents, public officials, university faculty and other community organizations around research topics and stress the value of learning together. Through this process we all become "community researchers."

Education. We provide educational opportunities such as workshops, community tours, presentations and meetings for residents, from ages 14 up, and public officials, to help raise awareness about local environmental issues. We invite partners from various agencies and organizations to share their knowledge with all stakeholders.

Leadership Development. We provide opportunities for residents to develop leadership and communication skills such as public speaking and presentation skills in order to share what they learn with other residents and public officials in a knowledgeable and respectful way. Public officials appreciate this approach, they are not yelled at, but can participate in meaningful dialogues that often result in positive change.

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Organizing. Through various organizing techniques, such as door to door outreach and presentations at schools, we reach out to bring together residents who don't usually participate in public processes.

Pacoima Beautiful has had the benefit of two major grants from EPA that has given the work credibility and has resulted in support from several other sources.

• **What were the major successes in the eyes of the community?**

1. Created the only sustainable environmental health organization in the San Fernando Valley
2. Achieved our goals of hiring and retaining residents to staff the organization.
3. Provided tools to thousands of residents on how to actively reduce or prevent environmental health hazards in their homes.
4. Educated elected officials and other public officials on the need to include environmental health concerns in land use decisions in the community
5. Through the youth program, more than 500 youth in the community have built their leadership and job skills while addressing the community's environmental concerns.
6. Assisted more than 150 low income residents in Los Angeles in applying for grants from the City of Los Angeles to replace windows and doors containing lead in paint. Of those , 67 families are from Pacoima. The Pacoima families received grants totally \$850,000 thereby preventing more than 275 children from being exposed to lead poisoning.

Community Leader Bio Sketch: Marlene Grossman is the Executive Director of Pacoima Beautiful, a non-profit organization focusing on Environmental Justice and Environmental Health in the northeast San Fernando Valley community of Pacoima. Marlene co-founded the organization in 1996. Ms. Grossman has degrees in education, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning from UCLA Marlene is currently a member of the Executive Committee of Pacoima Partners, active in the Healthy Homes Collaborative, and a member of the San Vicente Design Review Board. She has served on the boards of TreePeople, Coro Southern California and is a former appointee to the Los Angeles City Board of Zoning Appeal.

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