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Advocating for Environmental Changes to Increase Access to Parks: Engaging Promotoras *and Youth Leaders*

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Access to physical activity opportunities are limited in underserved communities. Community-based programs can increase promotoras *and youth leaders' capacity to advocate for built environmental changes.* Promotoras *and youth leaders were trained on walkability assessment, park audits, and advocacy. The youth and* promotoras *from one church located adjacent to a park implemented a community survey, conducted walk audits, and engaged in consciousness-raising activities about environmental factors that affect communities. They also mobilized community members to advocate for a nearby park. Advocacy tactics included attending and making presentations at the City Council, planning meetings, organizing health fairs, and speaking to community members. The following changes were made at the park: removed overgrown plants, relocated storage container, increased park security (i.e., lighting, fencing), improved safety (i.e., covered sewer drain, sand lot removed), enhanced amenities (i.e., drinking fountain, bathroom, benches, tables), improved pedestrian safety in park (i.e., leveled the old and added new walking paths), and improved children's play area (i.e., new play equipment, fencing). The current program highlights factors that contributed to park changes and challenges in increasing access to parks. Furthermore, the current study notes steps that other programs can take to make environmental changes.*

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INTRODUCTION

Access to parks is associated with many individual, social, economic, and environmental benefits (Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007). Parks offer a low-cost resource to enable active living. Park features facilitate different types of activities. For example, fields lend themselves to actions whereas other park features, such as picnic tables, facilitate social interactions and cohesion. Recent studies have found racial disparities in access to parks and recreation facilities, and ethnic minority communities have less access to safe parks with amenities (Wolch, Wilson, & Fehrenbach, 2005). Thus, advocating for increased access to safe parks may be an important first step for achieving higher levels of physical activity and improved health outcomes in minority communities. The current study describes a social and physical environmental intervention that advocated for the improvement of a neighborhood park.

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BACKGROUND

Several programs have successfully involved community leaders like *promotoras* (Spanish-speaking lay health advisors) in advocating for improved environments through one-on-one contacts (Kegler, Stern, Whitecrow-Ollis, & Malcoe, 2003). Other programs have involved community leaders at the policy level to advocate for improved communities (Cheadle et al., 2001; Ferrell, 2002; Meister & Guernsey de Zapien, 2005). *Promotoras* are in an excellent position to advocate for improved environments in underserved communities because they build on the strengths of communities and promote health through their social networks (Eng, Parker, & Harlan, 1997; Ramos, May, & Ramos, 2001). *Promotoras* can also mentor youth who can also be powerful change agents for the improvement of communities. Previous reports show the successful involvement of youth leaders in health promotion efforts with other youth (Elder et al., 2002) and as participants in the revitalization of communities (McKoy, Kobler, & Buss, 2005; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004).

There has been a modest amount of research describing the process of involving community leaders in increasing access to parks and improving the built environment. Making environmental changes can be significantly challenging necessitating the involvement of stakeholders, community members, and leaders (Kelly, Hoehner, Baker, Ramirez, & Brownson, 2006; Wang & Brownell, 2005). Community and university partnerships have the capacity and resources to help reduce health disparities. Each organization brings forth a set of skills and expertise that can influence positive changes in communities. Creative approaches are required to engage communities, institutions, and leaders in discussion on how to address these disparities. For example, faculty at universities can help guide the development of an evaluation plan of a community-based program, while community partners can shape the development and implementation of health promotion programs.

The current program was informed by a community organizing model, Locality Development. This model of community practice is based on the belief that to influence change, the larger community should be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program. Locality development encourages civic engagement to increase the capacity of a community (Rothman, 1968). Using this framework, the goals of the current article are to (a) describe the steps that university-based researchers, their community partners, *promotoras*, and youth underwent to improve a community park and (b) note the factors that contributed to the successes and challenges encountered while trying to make park improvements. Describing the steps that community leaders can take in advocating for community level changes can inform future programs that aim to make community-level changes.

METHODS

University and Community Partners

Caminando con Fe (Walking with Faith) was a university–faith-based partnership that targeted individual and environmental (e.g., built environment) correlates of physical activity. The participating church is Catholic in denomination and is located approximately 6 miles from the U.S.–Mexico border. The church has approximately 1,200 registered members (more than 50% were Latinos), two Spanish speaking services, and a program that offers free meals and clothing. Adjacent to the church is the park (3.9 acres) that became the target of change. Several community agencies participated in the current program. *Health Eating and Active Communities* (HEAC) is a coalition that promotes healthy, active environments through policy and environmental changes. *WalkSanDiego* (WSD), a nonprofit organization aimed at increasing walkability in neighborhoods, trained the adult *promotoras* and youth leaders on walkability assessment, led walk and park assessments with both *promotoras* and youth leaders, liaised with city staff and officials, and assisted with the park reopening event. *Network for a Healthy California* is a statewide movement of local, state, and national partners collectively working toward improving the health status of low-income Californians through increased fruit and vegetable consumption and daily physical activity. *Network for a Healthy California* assisted with organizing the reopening of the park by involving the media (English/Spanish). The process that led to park improvements described in the current article lasted approximately 12 months.

Setting

San Diego has a diverse population of approximately 3.1 million of which 23% are Latino and 32% are children younger than 18 years. In San Diego County, close to 58% of all Latinos are overweight or obese (California Pan-Ethnic Health Network [CPEHN], 2003). There are numerous physical environmental barriers to walking and engaging in physical activity in San Diego. Pedestrian injuries and fatalities have increased almost 10% since 1994. The current rate of fatal pedestrian injuries is

22.5%, which makes San Diego the third most dangerous place to walk in the nation behind New York and Miami (Ernst, 2004). The City of Chula Vista (32,572 acres), located in the southern region of San Diego County where the current project took place, has a population of 227,723, of which 50% are Latino. The City of Chula Vista operates under a council-manager form of government and it is geographically divided into east and west by a freeway. The west side of the city has more families living under the poverty level (mean income $29,535 vs. $49,235 in the east), it is more densely populated (12.2 persons per acre vs. 5.5 per acre in the east), and has fewer parks (17 parks vs. 36 in the east) compared with the east side of the city (Ryan & Throgmorton, 2003). The parks on the west side are in dilapidated conditions.

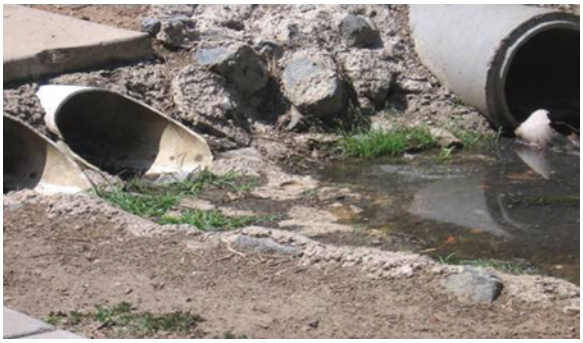

FIGURE 1 Open Drainage in the Park
NOTE: This was the open drainage that community members noted to be a health hazard in the park. Also, several community members stated that they were concerned that their children would fall and get injured. Thus, they advocated for additional city funds to cover the drainage.

Promotoras *and Youth Leader Recruitment and Training*

The university partner (San Diego State University) received a grant from the National Institute of Health to pilot test a multilevel intervention aimed at increasing physical activity among churchgoing Latinas. The staff from the university asked the church leaders to identify two women who had leadership qualities and were committed to the faith ministry. The staff involved two other *promotoras* who had experience advocating for environmental changes in a previous project to serve as "mentors" for the novice *promotoras*. These "mentor" *promotoras* advocated for the improvement of a park in a prior program (*Aventuras para niños*) and successfully attained more than $400,000 from city funds to renovate a community park. All *promotoras* were trained on the benefits of physical activity, advocacy, developing physical activity programs in the church, and motivating people to make health behavior changes. The *promotoras* from HEAC recruited five Latino youth leaders (9th to 12th grade) from local high schools to participate in a community-based project and complete their school community service requirements. The university trained the *promotoras* on the benefits of physical activity and how to begin physical activity programs. WSD trained the *promotoras* and youth on walkability assessment, park audits, and advocacy. The group identified the park adjacent to the church as an ideal target because it was in need of improvements.

*Community wide survey (*n = *1,200)*. To better understand the wider community's perception of the park, the *promotoras* and youth developed and implemented a community survey. For approximately 3 days, the *promotoras* and youth asked community members who were walking around the block near the park about their awareness of the park, reasons for attending or not attending the park, and additional amenities they would like to see in the park. This anonymous survey was intended to be implemented one time to inform the advocacy efforts of youth and *promotoras*.

*Postintervention survey (*n = *97)*. As part of the university's efforts to understand the impact of environmental and park changes on church members' physical activity and intention to use the park, a follow-up survey was administered. Participants who completed this survey were part of a study aimed at promoting physical activity in church going adult Latinas who attended church services at least two times a month. Logistic regressions were conducted to examine the association between being aware of new park features and intention to use the park.

RESULTS

Enviornmental Targets

The *promotoras* involved other church members in walk and park audits to identify environmental barriers to physical activity. The group noted several problems, but prioritized the lack of bathrooms, the dilapidated fence and overgrown plants that separated the church and the park, the absence of drinking fountains, and the open sewage drain (Figures 1 and 2).

During the administration of the community-wide survey, it became apparent that many community members did not know that there was a park adjacent to the

FIGURE 2 Dilapidated Fence Separating Church and Park
NOTE: This was the dilapidated fence that separated church and park. Many park visitors indicated that they did not feel safe for their children to play near the fence as they feared the fence would fall down. The fence also obstructed visibility allowing the many park visitors to engage in illicit activities. The corners of the fence had holes allowing the homeless people to cross over to the church property and engage in illicit behaviors. The removal of the fence would allow more visibility of activities in the park and would allow access for the police.

FIGURE 3 City Council Meeting
NOTE: One of the lead *promotoras* advocating for park improvements in front of the City Council and staff. The *promotora* is presenting a picture of a problem identified by community members (the bush that obstructed visibility into the park) and offered solutions to this problem (removal of the bush).

church. The community survey results ($n = 121$) indicated that only 20% of those surveyed visited the park during the week (22% on the weekend). Lack of the following amenities was reported as inhibiting park use by community members: trash bins (73%), bathrooms (67%), recycling bins (67%), water fountains (60%), and lighting (58%). The majority (80%) of surveyed participants stated that the presence of homeless people in the park discouraged them from using the park. These findings corroborated the youths' and *promotoras*' observations and complemented the report that included pictures they prepared and presented at the City Council.

Coincidently, the City of Chula Vista had planned to make improvements to the target park, including installing a new bathroom, adding a fence around the children's play area and Boys and Girls club located on site, removing the sand from the play area, installing new ground and play equipment, and adding some lighting. This plan was a topic of discussion in one of the City Council meetings. Because this park renovation plan did not address some of the problems identified in the park audits, the *promotoras* and youth presented their concerns along with solutions at this City Council meeting (Figure 3). In response to their concerns, city staff (i.e., police, public works, engineering, landscape architecture) and council members agreed to meet with the *promotoras* and youth at the park

FIGURE 4 Meeting at the Park
NOTE: In response to the advocacy efforts of the *promotoras* and youth leaders, the city leaders requested a meeting at the park to see firsthand the problems and discuss mutually agreed on solutions.

to discuss in more detail their concerns (Figure 4). Table 1 highlights the concerns and solutions to these concerns.

One City Council member met with community partners and *promotoras* to discuss ways to address problems

TABLE 1
Concerns and Solutions

	Concern/Problem	*Solution*
Physical environment	• No bathroom in the park	The city provided funds for construction of a bathroom at Lauderbach Park.
	• Old children's playground. • Only one picnic bench, not enough trash cans or recycling bins, dead grass throughout the park, no water fountain in the park	New playground and new rubberized ground was installed in children's play area, additional picnic benches, trash cans, a new water fountain were provided. New grass was installed in park.
	• Entrance to the park was not visible to the residents who lived in the neighborhood	Overgrown shrubbery was trimmed, and new sign was installed at entrance of park.
	• Overgrown bushes in the back of the park • Overgrown bushes and dilapidated fence between park and church; fence served as a hiding spot for illegal activities such as drug use, prostitution, and vandalism	Bushes: CPTED[a] recommendations suggested that bushes be trimmed to a clearance of 2 feet or below and trees to a clearance of 6 feet or above so as not to disrupt critical areas of natural surveillance or create ambush points. Fence: CPTED recommendations suggested that fence be removed to allow transparency for surveillance and create a sense of community between the church and park.
	• Low lighting throughout the park	Dim light throughout the park was replace with lighting appropriate for park use based on CPTED recommendations, to improve the perception of safety in the park.
	• Graffiti, vandalism throughout the park, primarily in the back area next to the church	Graffiti was painted over. CPTED strategies alleviated the problem with vandalism.
Social environment	• Fear of homeless approaching children in the playground and in the park • Presence of homeless in the park	A CPTED recommendation suggested a fence installed around the children's playground to delineate between children's space and other park users. Fence allowed transparency for surveillance. Park was closed for 6 months for renovation, which forced homeless to find another place.
	• Lack of residents using the park	In addition to the changes mentioned, a small walking path was added around the park, which served to increase park users who wanted to use the walking path.

a. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is based on the premise that the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear of crime and incidence of crime and to an improvement in quality-of-life behavior.

in the park. During the meeting, the council member helped generate ideas on how to make the park more appealing by bringing more positive activities to the park, such as showing movies. The City Council member also brainstormed with the *promotoras* ways in which the community could also raise resources to make changes in the park. He also agreed to write a letter to the church leadership encouraging them to remove the fence that separated the park and church. The fence obstructed visibility into the park, making it difficult to detect illicit activity and limited access for police. Following the City Council meeting, the *promotoras* and youth leaders reported in their weekly meetings feeling more confident speaking to city leaders and advocating for community improvements. The *promotoras* and youth noted that, because city leaders listened and engaged in discussions about the importance of improving the park, they felt more empowered.

The church leaders agreed to the removal of the fence and the city leaders agreed to finance the removal of the fence and overgrown plants. The fence did not deter the homeless from engaging in illicit activity on the church property because the holes allowed access between the park and church property. However, many church members were resistant to this action because the fence gave the illusion of protecting them from illicit activity in the park. During this time, the *promotoras* and community partners met with the Recreation Department to increase recreation programs in the park. The meetings were also attended by university staff and WSD. At these meetings, the *promotoras* and youth leaders were encouraged to identify long-term goals.

As a result of the advocacy efforts of *promotoras*, youth, and partners, many additional improvements were made to the park and a new relationship was formed between the city and the church. The following changes were made at the park: removed overgrown plants, relocated storage container, increased park security (i.e., lighting, fencing), improved safety (i.e., covered sewer drain, sand lot removed), enhanced amenities (i.e., drinking fountain, bathroom, benches, tables), improved pedestrian safety in park (i.e., leveled the old and added new walking paths), and improved children's play area (i.e., new play equipment, fencing).

The park was reinaugurated in September 2008. Youth, *promotoras*, and partners worked with City Council, city staff, and various community organizations (health clinics, etc.) on the park reopening phase to promote park use, including a dedication by the mayor and speeches by youth and *promotora* representatives. In recognition for their advocacy efforts, the *promotoras* and youth leaders were the recipients of the Golden Footprint Award in 2009 sponsored by WSD.

Following the inauguration, the "postintervention" survey was administered to church members ($n = 97$). When asked about the park area, more than 60% participants reported noticing changes in the lighting, the children's area, the bathroom, and green grass area. The total number of environmental changes noticed in the park was significantly associated with intentions to use the park (odds ratio = 1.31; 95% confidence interval = 1.36-1.51, $p < .001$) and using the park for exercise (odds ratio = 1.29; 95% confidence interval = 1.12-1.48, $p < .001$).

Factors That Contributed to Park Changes

There were several factors that contributed to achieving park improvements. These factors are described below:

- *Meeting with community partners,* promotoras*, and youth regularly*. HEAC and San Diego State University coordinated the weekly meetings with the *promotoras* and youth. These meetings provided an opportunity to build the capacity of *promotoras* and youth, assess their progress and challenges, and plan their next steps.
- *Involvement of youth and* promotoras. The *promotoras* had the leadership experience and planning skills to move the program forward. They also helped the youth stay on track without threatening youth ownership. The involvement of the youth was also important in the project. The youth identified and researched problems that directly influenced their lives and had a unique perspective on what motivated their use of the park. For example, several youth indicated that incorporating a climbing wall and a walking path would encourage them use to use the park. The youth also personally benefited from their involvement in the program. At the beginning, several youth did not embrace the importance of walking, but over the course of the project, the youth advocated to other youth on the importance of walking in their community. Also, by interacting with city leaders, the youth learned about various professions, including city engineers and council members and several expressed interest in pursuing these careers. Youth and *promotoras* developed their leadership and strategic skills, gained confidence, and learned more about their community. They both learned how to address social inequalities through community organizing and activism.
- *Support from the church leadership*. The support from the church leadership facilitated the removal of the fence. The church leadership became increasingly supportive of *promotoras*' advocacy efforts when it became clear that the church community was benefiting from program activities, such as the walking program. Also, the involvement of staff in nonprogrammatic efforts strengthened university–church ties. For example, program staff and *promotoras* volunteered to help out in classroom cleanups. The church leadership expressed gratitude for this assistance and made the classrooms more accessible for meetings with community partners.
- *Involving "mentor"* promotoras. Involving "mentor" *promotoras* who had experience advocating for built environmental changes helped build the confidence of less experienced *promotaras*. The "mentor" *promotoras* had worked in another community program where they successfully attained funds from the city to improve a different park. Because advocating for built environmental changes is a new role for *promotoras* who have traditionally promoted

healthy living through one-on-one contact, the "mentor" *promotoras* provided valuable guidance to the more "novice" *promotoras* in making built environmental changes.

- *Collaboration between community organizations (i.e., HEAC, WSD, SDSU, Network for Healthy California).* Collaboration between multiple organizations for one common cause created synergy and allowed for the leveraging of resources needed to advocate for built environmental changes. Each partner brought their own expertise. HEAC had experience in involving youth to advocate for environmental changes whereas WSD provided the expertise in assessing the built environment and guiding community members to make improvements. *Network for a Healthy California* had media outreach experience, which promoted resident attendance and exposure for the park reopening event. SDSU provided resources to support *promotoras*' efforts and guided the evaluation efforts.
- *Support from elected officials.* The support provided by city staff was crucial in giving *promotoras* and youth leaders the confidence to advocate for environmental changes. Many of the City Council representatives spoke Spanish and made themselves readily available for meetings with *promotoras*, community members, and youth. Another way in which they showed their support was by speaking at the inauguration of the park about the importance of parks in communities and recognizing the youth and *promotoras* for their efforts.

Challenges in Increasing Access to the Park

- *Communication between elected officials, church leadership, and city staff.* The church leadership requested to have the meetings with elected officials in private. Because there was only a verbal agreement, confusion existed on what was agreed on several months later.
- *Church community resisting the removal of the fence.* Some of the church members were not supportive of the removal of the fence. These members feared that the removal of the fence would allow an increase of homeless people living in the park to engage in illicit activity on church property, if the homeless were to return following the park renovation.
- Promotora *and youth attrition.* At the beginning of the program, project staff hired one *promotora* and involved two volunteers to lead the environmental intervention. It became evident that we needed to involve more paid *promotoras* and to involve "mentor" *promotoras* to guide the environmental component when the volunteers did not participate and the lead *promotora* resigned. As a result, the university staff hired a second group of *promotoras* and WSD trained them on walkability and advocacy (more resources were used as a result).

DISCUSSION

Findings from our program provide further evidence that *promotoras* and youth can advocate for resources to improve their neighborhoods and parks. These efforts are particularly needed in racial minorities and economically disadvantaged communities, where there is less access to safe parks compared with affluent and predominantly White communities (Wolch et al., 2005). Targeting the physical environment is one way to improve access to physical activity opportunities and improve a community. Addressing the social environment by strengthening community ties can yield to greater social cohesion and build social capital, which, in turn, is associated with lower crime rates and positive health outcomes (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000).

The current study implemented some steps that can guide other programs that plan to involve community leaders to advocate for better parks. As a first step, *promotoras* and youth can be trained to conduct environmental and park audits. Following their training, the *promotoras* and youth leaders can identify environmental characteristics that they believe inhibit park use in their community. The *promotoras*, youth and many community members can prioritize the environmental aspects that they believe are important to address and identify solutions to these problems. Part of the solution can involve political lobbying for improvements of existing physical activity facilities and resources. Community efforts to help address some of the identified problems should involve ways on how the community plans to contribute to the solution (e.g., park cleanups).

The participation of the larger community in City Council meetings is crucial as it supports the community leaders' efforts and demonstrates to city leaders that the issues presented are important to the community at large. In addition to meeting at the City Council, it is important that the community leaders meet with City Council members and staff on an informal basis to follow up on any agreements made in prior meetings. Informal meetings can further strengthen the relationship between city leaders and the community they serve. Recognizing the efforts of youth leaders and *promotoras* reinforces their actions and empowers their community. A program that seeks to make environmental changes may want to consider involving "mentor" *promotoras* and youth leaders who have experience in advocating for environmental changes to guide the

"novice" *promotoras* and youth. These "mentor" *promotoras* and youth can discuss some of the environmental changes they have facilitated, model advocacy behavior, and support the efforts of the novice *promotoras* and youth.

Emerging programs are targeting the context of communities that engage in low physical activity by influencing norms, providing opportunities for physical activity, strengthening social ties and addressing environmental constraints that limit opportunities for physical activity (Cheadle, et al., 2001; Ferrell, 2002; Meister & Guernsey de Zapien, 2005). Many of the park features (e.g., benches, picnic tables) that the *promotoras* and youth leaders advocated for were with the intention of encouraging families to use the park and interact with the larger community. Strengthening a community's social cohesion and increasing the collective efficacy by intervening for the common good is likely to yield many positive health practices, including physical activity (Lindström, Hanson, & Östergren, 2001). Furthermore, enhancing a community's social capital can lead to the enforcement of policies restricting illicit behaviors in community parks.

There are limitations to the current project that merit noting. The assessment of "intention to use" the park was conducted following park changes, thereby, subject to social desirability. It may be that church members reported greater intention to use the park because they believed that is what the interviewer expected to hear. Future studies may want to examine whether actual park use occurs following park improvements. Furthermore, because the "intention to use the park" survey was administered only to church members, generalizability of study findings is limited. Nevertheless, the strengths outweigh the limitations in that, to our knowledge, this is the first study describing the process of involving *promotoras* and youth in advocating for increased access to safe parks. Moreover, the park changes were the result of a true collaboration between a university, various organizations, and community members to improve access to physical activity opportunities.

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