Building Healthy Communities

health happens here

The Changing of Fresno: A profile of collaboration, community and culture coming together to improve neighborhoods

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About This Series

A primary tenet of the Building Healthy Communities initiative is that place matters, i.e. where one lives determines how one fares in health, safety and well-being. The 14 communities that are a part of Building Healthy Communities have long histories dealing with policies that have institutionalized class, race and ethnic disparities in education, health and human services, and local government planning decisions. "Health Happens Here" is both a guiding principle and a rallying cry for BHC sites addressing these entrenched disparities.

In this case study series, we explore successes, opportunities, challenges and transitions experienced "in place" as communities endeavor to create and sustain healthy communities for children and families.

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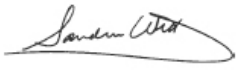

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Background

Building Healthy Communities (BHC) is a 10-year, $1 billion program of The California Endowment (TCE). Fourteen communities across the state are working to create places where children are healthy, safe and ready to learn. BHC is focused on prevention and strategies aimed at changing community institutions, policies and systems. In BHC, a focus on systems change requires work across sectors with multiple stakeholders. Through this cross-sector collaboration and with youth and resident engagement, BHC sites seek to improve neighborhood safety, unhealthy environmental conditions, access to healthy foods, education, housing, employment opportunities and more.

All BHC sites began with a planning process. During that time, sites were responsible for multiple, complex tasks. They were to work with an initial host organization (fiscal agent) selected by the Foundation that would provide guidance during planning. The host organization would remain neutral and select an independent facilitator to support all planning efforts. After forming an initial steering committee and workgroups, they created governance and decision making structures.

Local leadership worked with TCE Program Managers, who were embedded in each site to assist with rolling out the process and enable the connection with local systems leaders and policy makers. To determine priorities and strategies, each site created a Logic Model and Implementation Plan focused on 10 initiative-wide, predetermined outcomes. The Logic Model included targeted strategies to change four systems that impact the well-being of children, youth and families: Health, Human Services, Education, and Community Environments. Finally, each site formed a "Hub" to serve as the central table through which implementation efforts would be coordinated.

BHC sites have experienced a number of important successes, even in the early years However, every initiative comes with timelines, deliverable and structures that can be challenging for communities, and BHC is no different.

BHC finds its roots in large scale, complex, community change initiatives, so any narrative has to acknowledge that complexity and include the many perspectives that reflect it. The

multiple perspectives in these case studies are those of institutional leaders, residents, organizers, facilitators and TCE staff.

Read more about Building Healthy Communities at www.calendow.org.

Place: Central/SE/West Fresno (Fresno BHC)

The area designated as Fresno BHC is home to a diverse population of 70,000 residents that includes Hmong, Cambodian, and Lao refugees, a considerable Latino population including indigenous peoples from the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, and a long established African American community. The place is home to a number of strong community based organizations that serve these constituencies and have a history of collaboration. Fresno is the largest city in California's Central Valley; its economy is primarily driven by agriculture and manufacturing. In recent years, Fresno has attracted statewide attention as the first city in California to employ a powerful scenario planning and impact assessment tool called "Rapid Fire" that can assess community concerns such as air quality, water and transportation, and offer accessible and comprehensible data to the community.

As a result of the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) planning process culminating in spring 2010, Fresno BHC prioritized five outcomes, among them Outcome 4, which identifies health-promoting land use, transportation and community development as its goal. To achieve this outcome, Fresno BHC developed a specific strategy to educate and empower local residents and organizations to participate in policy development around zoning and General Plan issues. In creating this strategy, the community not only recognized how the built environment affects health, but also carefully identified a number of opportunities and assets at play on the Fresno landscape that could aid in successful implementation. Three of these opportunities were: (1) the City of Fresno's planning agenda that included investment in the Downtown Neighborhood Community Plan concurrent with BHC planning, and the General Plan update following soon after; (2) a group of community based organizations with strong relationships and growing constituencies among Fresno's diverse population; and (3) the need for community organizing training to build the capacity of these constituencies to advocate for long term policy and systems change.

Building Cross-Cultural Alliances for Policy Change

In April 2012, the Fresno City Council voted to adopt "Alternative A," which became the

chosen "modeling" alternative for the City's 2035 General Plan. Alternative A limits growth to specific zones, focuses on the downtown area as the community core, thereby limiting sprawl and disinvestment, and develops "complete neighborhoods" where residents can walk or bike to healthy food, parks, jobs, entertainment, and health care. This was no easy win for the provision's advocates considering opposition from developers who were historically used to having their way in General Plan provisions and more than a little surprised to encounter such a high level of community engagement.

This case study, the result of interviews and focus groups with community leaders, City officials, Foundation staff, and residents involved in the passage of Alternative A, examines what happened between spring of 2010 and 2012 to make this win possible. What was TCE's role? What did the community based organizations (CBOs) and their constituencies do? How did they work together? How important was community organizing in this effort, what was the role of the City, and what are the lessons that can be applied again in Fresno and in other communities working—sometimes against all odds—to advocate for policies that lead to healthy communities?

Formation of the Outcome 4 Workgroup

BHC is a systems change initiative, but which systems and how they get changed varies from site to site. In Fresno, TCE's Program Manager is Regional Manager for the Central Valley. Politically savvy as well as having deep roots and long term relationships in the community, the Regional Manager saw the connection between the will of the community as demonstrated through the planning process and the planning landscape. Willing to take a risk and implement a different funding model, the Regional Manager brought together four local agencies serving the Hmong, African American, and faith-based English, Spanish and Mixteco speaking communities. Eventually there would be two more organizations, whose job it was to bridge the local government and community and provide training in community organizing, including further outreach to the Spanish-speaking community around the General Plan. The original four all would have the same workplan, budget, deliverables and outcomes, and they would have to work together to meet those deliverables. While these organizations were accountable to the Foundation for all grant expenses and progress, they also had to report to the community via the Hub, the Central

Table in BHC communities for all activities attached to the Logic Model, and to the BHC collaborative, a larger body comprising all grantees, organizations and residents involved in BHC. The Outcome 4 Workgroup was formed.

Community Based Organizations: Leadership and Organizing Model

In focus groups and interviews, leaders of the six community based organizations that eventually comprised the Outcome 4 workgroup said repeatedly that passage of Alternative A would not have been possible without the pre-existing, long term relationships that leadership brought to the table. Executive Directors had worked together before on projects and grants, served on each other's boards, had similar goals, and understood each other's capacities. Established and rooted in the BHC place, these leaders also had professional relationships across the broader community, including with City staff. If organizational leaders hadn't already been invested in one another, were not able to see the mutual benefits of working together, they are certain that they would not have been successful.

Additionally, these agencies employ a model of service delivery that views its client base as a constituency and identifies community organizing as a priority. This approach not only honors culture and considers it a major asset, but also: (1) adapts community organizing models to identify and train community leaders; and (2) includes civic engagement as a component of regular agency services, such as parenting classes, community violence prevention, and ESL citizenship classes. What they had not done before the formation of the Outcome 4 workgroup was use these tools to build a cross-cultural alliance. In their collaborative work on the General Plan update, CBO leaders and their staff figured out how to work across culture and language divides, empower residents to conduct surveys, create a values statement and policy agenda, launch a media campaign, and mobilize people to show up and participate in Planning Commission and City Council sessions.

They set up a structure to meet weekly and started with what they knew collectively, which was how to organize and advocate for residents. They relied on the shared strategic wisdom of long term leaders and committed to supporting each other against the backlash they anticipated from developers. They decided together to "address the shared hunger to end the sadness" and make Fresno a city that passed policies that demonstrated care for all its residents – people of color, poor people, immigrants and refugees included.

Cross Cultural Mobilization

Three specific organizing challenges confronted the Outcome 4 group: (1) how to mobilize a constituency that spoke four different languages with life experiences from different parts of the world; (2) how to craft messages that could overcome cultural norms that did not include speaking up to authority or cultural histories that led to deep distrust of those in charge; and (3) how to learn and navigate their way through the complex subject matter of land use and planning.

Potlucks Bridge Across Divides

Community building does not come with a 100% guarantee of success, even in community change initiatives. Its outcomes are difficult to measure and can seem light or frivolous next to providing food and shelter or advocating for specific policy changes. However, the experience in Fresno clearly demonstrated the value of this strategy. In this case what was funded was a series of ongoing community potlucks, a simple first step, but an historic moment that brought people from four cultures together for the first time in a sustained way. Every community building practitioner knows the value of food. In the words of a Hmong resident: "When we come together over food, I can sit across from you and see your face. I will remember your face. I will know you next time." Or those of a Latino woman: "We live together so we need to learn each other's cultures. This is what

happened at the potlucks as we shared food." Witnessing this approach from the beginning of the effort, TCE's Regional Manager admits to wondering when the real work would start, but as potlucks became the welcome ritual to share culture, talents, hopes and intentions, the Regional Manager became a believer.

Organizing Strategies to Raise Voices

African Americans have a history of civic engagement in the West Fresno community and still field a number of active resident leadership groups. In spite of their efforts, community members have felt the burden of disinvestment as year after year of sprawl took development dollars to the north. They watched homes being torn down and waited for a shopping mall that never materialized. Many residents felt betrayed, neglected parties on the end of broken promises for services and quality of life improvements. Fresno's indigenous population, on the other hand, had not been politically active. Their lives in Oaxaca did not include speaking up to the local authorities and, to this point, the group had remained quiet on local issues. A fear of authority is part of the Hmong experience as well. Their history as a people includes living under a communist regime and having family members recruited by the American CIA to fight against it. One Hmong resident described the feeling of members of their community as so afraid they were like "chickens caught in a Bamboo trap."

So what could organizers do and say to encourage residents to raise their collective voices? Clearly residents needed to trust the organizers and the institutions they represented. One way trust was established was through the introduction of advocacy activities at programs community members were already attending. A resident who attended parenting classes at a community organization described the relationship building process as a "trust chain." She had a friend who went to parenting classes. She accepted her trusted friend's invitation and attended; once there, another friend was going to the Outcome 4 potluck. Though planning meetings were nowhere in her sights, she found herself studying a planning map over great food. A Hmong resident described his version of the trust chain: "When I meet you face to face, I will learn your talents and respect you and work with you." Organizers prepared residents for all potlucks and planning meetings, recognizing the importance of preparation when people step

out of their comfort zones. Message crafting, another effective organizing strategy, was apparent in all resident focus groups. Despite differences in cultural experience, residents raised two points repeatedly: (1) They were doing this work for the next generation, for their children; and (2) they were stronger together than apart.

Time and again, residents expressed that they were engaged in this work to make their community better for their children, who "would be the light" according to one Hmong elder. This sentiment was echoed by another Hmong leader, who said: "One hand is not strong enough like 10 times" and validated by an African American Pastor who remarked: "My voice becomes a megaphone, not a whisper in the wind." Studies in social capital speak to an initial breakdown of trust across groups in climates of increasing diversity. The same research, however, also suggests that such a breakdown can be mitigated by intentional strategies to build trust across the same groups. Identifying common concerns, hopes and dreams is just such a strategy. This hope for the future did not mean work could be put off. "Paying it forward" meant that even without immediate results, their children would eventually benefit from today's labor. Through this shared hope, a group of skeptical people, their mistrust justified from past experience, was transformed into a powerful collective.

Multi-Lingual Popular Education

One city councilmember recalled his astonishment in hearing people talk about planning issues in grocery stores. Similar to conversations about the weather, land use and planning became a topic of casual conversation as well as public discourse. The TCE Regional Manager admits to concern that the complexity combined with the dryness of a city planning process might put success out of reach, but the Outcome 4 workgroup leaders were savvy. They quickly established a level playing field. Everyone from leadership to staff to residents had to learn about planning together. They dubbed this process "coming from a shared ignorance," and it worked.

In addition to food originating from the country of Laos, the Mexican state of Jalisco, or the American South, organizers from the CBOs used a mix of popular education methods at potlucks to methodically begin the learning process. At an early gathering

everyone learned to say "Yes We Can" in Spanish, Mixteco, Hmong and English. Advancing further, they all learned a half dozen planning terms in all four languages. As the potlucks continued, organizers developed creative and culturally competent methods such as mapping activities, role plays, and group dialogue to support ongoing learning and relationship building. Maps of homelands went up on the wall at one meeting. Immigrants could go up to the maps and show where they were from. They also learned that people migrated in groups to sections of Fresno, forming their current communities. Later, organizers brought in a planning map of Alternative A, moving residents from the concept of their map and their homelands to land use in Fresno. A map is a map. Not scary, not boring, but alive and digestible.

Leadership in All Corners

Throughout the learning process, individual assets and leadership were mobilized to fortify the growing, collective knowledge base. A West Fresno pastor, born and raised in the community, returned home after a few years' absence and immediately applied his professional experience to the group's advocacy efforts. Skilled in title and escrow work, this community leader combed through the General Plan chapter by chapter and "translated" it for his community. A Latina youth started coming to potlucks with her mother, found her voice, and became the face of the next generation everyone was working for. She gave testimony at a large meeting attended by Building Healthy Community partners and city staff: "I need parks, a clean community. Our utility bills are too high." A Hmong clan leader, one of the first, and few, Hmong organizers in the United States trained in PICO organizing, brought his knowledge from previous campaigns to the work of the General Plan. PICO is an organizing model that brings people together based on values and relationships rather than issues alone. The model offers intensive leadership training and includes meetings with public officials and policy experts to understand how things work and who really has the power to make changes.

Community Voice and Values Come to City Hall

In August 2011, organizers and resident leaders from the Outcome 4 Workgroup began conducting "one on one" interviews among residents. Organizers adapted the PICO organizing model to suit their specific communities. In West Fresno, organizers had to overcome mistrust and skepticism from African Americans that anything to do with the City would amount to more than words or tokenism. Didn't it take twenty years for them to get a shopping mall? Being successful with Hmong elders required both experience and expertise. The Hmong organizer knew that if interviews with Caucasians took 20 minutes, those with Hmong elders took longer and would require more than one. It was all a matter of respect. Organizers working with indigenous peoples stressed how important it was to listen to every detail, especially when the conversation had to be translated from English to Spanish to Mixteco and back again. When completed, over 850 interviews had been conducted, documented, distilled into nine community priorities. The results were shared back to the community at a very successful Action Meeting in mid-October. Over 350 community members, the Mayor, Council members and City staff were in attendance.

Between October and the General Plan hearings in April, organizers and residents attended research meetings with City Council and staff to learn about Alternative A, which the City was proposing. They compared that alternative to the community's identified priorities and decided to support it. Once the decision was made to advocate for Alternative A, the group wove the community's priorities into a "values platform," making a strategic judgment that policy makers might be able to argue with issues but not with values. The value of health equity, for example, was apparent in many of the ideas put forth. The planning concept of "complete neighborhoods" was translated to "supporting those in poverty through the creation of neighborhoods that cared for all people of Fresno." Public transportation was linked to jobs, and increased density to the availability

of healthy food. In this way, they tied values to over 100 different planning suggestions.

A broad media campaign to print and broadcast outlets, including ethnic media, culminated in a press conference on April 5, 2012. After laying out their vision, residents and Outcome 4 partner organizations moved into City Hall to give testimony in support of Alternative A, the provision that would support their values agenda. Though this was not the first time the group attended meetings with City officials or planning staff, this particular meeting was epic in the history of civic engagement in Fresno. The council meeting lasted seven hours. Over 300 residents crammed into chambers, and the council heard testimony in support of Alternative A from over 80 residents in multiple languages. A decision was not reached that evening. Instead the vote was postponed two weeks. On April 19, the council voted 5-2 to pass the provision supported by residents, agriculture, public health agencies and progressive organizations. By everyone's account, including City staff, the huge outpouring from the community was crucial to this success. The dedicated numbers that lined council chambers leveraged the work done by City planners, creating fertile ground for a growing grassroots movement.

City of Fresno: Ready and Able Community Partner

Enhanced Engagement and Cutting Edge Tools

In the City of Fresno's Planning Department, work on the 2035 General Plan update started in summer 2009. Once funds were allocated from a U.S. Department of Energy grant for the General Plan Update, the update focused on two strands: updating planning tools and engaging the community. According to the Assistant Director of Planning and Development, the City invested in cutting edge data and mapping tools that not only advanced the work of the department but also produced an array of digestible data that the community had never seen before and could understand. The City dedicated two years

of technical staff time to updating their GIS systems to prepare for the accurate use of planning and assessment models like I-PLACE3S developed by Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG), and Rapid Fire which was ultimately used in the General Plan alternatives analyses. The Assistant Director was clear about the difference this made in community education, saying that "place-making," having a model that embeds people in their neighborhoods changes the conversation and makes planning accessible to residents.

The Planning Department designed their charrettes (community planning meetings) so that residents could be active participants rather than passive listeners. Enhanced community engagement meant a commitment on the part of the City to hear from residents, not just developers. To this end, the department's Assistant Director conducted 100 meetings personally (including meeting with Foundation staff), and the department conducted nearly 60 more workshops and other public meetings —all to ensure diversity of interests and opinions. With respect for and experience in community organizing, the Assistant Director knew that the community needed good information in order to make decisions on their neighborhoods, and that education, both in the community and with City staff, had to be intensive and ongoing. Internally, City management and planning staff held several in depth, practical, and honest discussions with city council members on what it would mean to make the changes that Alternative A included. The reality was the City would not be fiscally sustainable in the future if this wasn't done right.

Though engagement with builders and developers was a key part of the City's outreach program, it is clear from interviews with multiple city officials that the emphasis in this General Plan process was on broad-based community engagement, and that one of the changes sought was addressing generations of inertia that protected home builders and developers and sustained the ingrained trend of Fresno's sprawl development. What Alternative A actually does is change the growth ratio from 99% on the edge (continued "sprawl" or new suburban growth) to 45% in the middle (reinvestment in existing neighborhoods) and 55% on the edge, a major departure but not one that cuts off new development.

Surprised and Pleased

"In 40 years of government service, this was the most exciting meeting I've ever participated in." Thus spoke Fresno's City Manager regarding the City Council meeting where over 80 residents, many of them wearing headphones for translation and big A's around their necks, testified. In addition to surprise at the standing room only crowd that overflowed council chambers and stayed until the very end of the meeting, one official commented on the depth of preparation and political savvy on the part of the residents. They had specific information, and the testimony seemed to be choreographed so that each presentation held another piece of the argument, keeping repetition to a minimum to build a strong case for adoption of Alternative A. In this way, the official observed, the community presented itself as a "political force." One council member praised the effort put forth by the community organizations in preparing their constituencies, identifying the moment as the resurgence of the "lost art of community organizing." Another remarked that they were used to seeing young professionals engaged, but this diverse group included all ages and crossed traditional divides. Clearly, developers were not prepared for this community outpouring. In the two weeks between the first City Council meeting and the second meeting, some unsuccessfully launched a campaign to try to discredit the effort, calling it naïve and expensive. The political force demonstrated by residents, however, inspired a few developers to eventually support the value of adopting Alternative A.

Impact of the Win

When implemented, residents are hopeful that Alternative A will bring more services to areas of previous disinvestment and create complete neighborhoods where residents can work and play safely, enjoy green space, attract business and services, obtain healthy food, walk or take public transportation, and breathe clean air. Additionally, residents hope to be able to make their neighborhoods a place where they can honor and celebrate their individual cultures.

Adopting General Plan provisions is only the first step, with many challenges on the horizon before the plan is successfully implemented. However, skills learned from this mobilization process have already produced several small wins for the community. In a high crime area, organized residents prevented the sale of hard liquor at one of their corner stores. In a neighborhood where the school is not within walking distance and many have no cars, residents first secured crosswalk lines on the street around the local elementary school and then met privately with their City Councilmember to get shelters for two previously unprotected bus stops. Residents also went to Public Utility Commission meetings to argue for lower rates and are working to promote farmers markets and safe routes to school. As one Latino mom put it: "I bought a house. I care what's going on around it. Now I have the skills to make a difference." These small wins have been witnessed by city officials as well. One commented that the community has had its pride restored and hopes that this energy will continue to make sure implementation is possible. City officials also see how Fresno can become a model for how local government can work well with communities with regional implications for California's Central Valley. They are hopeful that partners like TCE, Smart Valley Places and Fresno State University's Office of Economic Development can help to unify leadership across sectors and demography and support sustainability and expansion.

Implementing Alternative A

Moving forward, the City is creating a document with chapters on such topics as transportation, open spaces, parks and sustainability. They will hold community workshops to solicit suggestions and policy ideas from the community on each chapter and hope to have a draft plan that includes community input plus environmental documentation and suggestions for revised zoning codes in 2013. After adoption, they hope for a task force of financing experts to help them think through how to pay for Alternative A, especially in light of California's 2011 decision to eliminate redevelopment agencies.

The Outcome 4 Workgroup continues to meet regularly to prepare for the public workshops where each chapter of Alternative A will be vetted. Their work includes dividing up work on the plan, meeting weekly, continuing cross cultural work, including potlucks to keep the alliance strong, and being strategic about organizing residents to promote

sustained engagement and mitigate burnout. TCE recognizes the crucial work of the CBOs and plans to fund the workgroup for an additional 18 months to keep momentum going through implementation.

Government officials and staff, community leaders and residents recognize the political and economic realities of this long term commitment, and all agree that both the City and the community will have to maintain the level of enhanced engagement that made the passing of Alternative A possible. If the community doesn't keep the pressure on, stakeholders warn that political and economic realities could turn back the promising tide.

Lessons Learned

Existing relationships and trust among organizational leaders can be a powerful starting point for a new campaign. The long-term relationships among leaders in community organizations and between these leaders and policy makers provide fertile ground for cross-cultural resident empowerment. There seems to be no substitute for the power of such a network.

When effectively engaged, community members are able to work together in common purpose. Organizing strategies can build the capacity of community members to address complex issues such as land use planning. Employing popular education techniques at potlucks, crafting common messages, and providing accessible data all contribute to increased community capacity.

Building trust takes time and effort (with everyone). Establishing relationships based on common values and aspirations requires time to listen, to learn about one another, and to find common language — among community members, organizational leaders and policy makers.

Local government leaders who are open to new ways can be champions of community efforts. From technological innovation that provides accurate and digestible data to enhanced community engagement, elected officials and staff can help to facilitate informed choices and full community participation.

Decision-makers pay attention to advocates who are clear and well organized. A carefully constructed presentation of a well thought out agenda can make a difference at long and complicated planning meetings.

Funding community building strategies works. Potlucks and other community celebrations are necessary first steps in alliance building that can lead to policy and systems change. Additionally, funders need to continually advocate for ongoing resident participation at decision-making tables. Finally, funders who engage as full partners with the community can help them think strategically and make long term change. Beyond capacity building grants, deliberate investments can support planning processes for systemic change.

Storytelling is an important part of change efforts: It seems fitting to end with the words of Fresno's City Manager. "One failure of public policy is that we never tell the story," he said.

And so we have.

Final Thoughts

The experiences and lessons of case studies illuminate both promising practices and challenges communities experience as they work to create and sustain healthy communities for children and families through systemic change. Although each BHC community is unique and the experiences and lessons learned are specific to Central/SE/West Fresno, there are themes dealing with trust, leadership, collective action, and communication that can be applied to community change initiatives in other places.

Future case studies will continue to chronicle the stories of the 14 BHC communities throughout California as they focus on prevention and changing community norms for better health outcomes.