

Environmental Justice

The Problem

For some years, the San Francisco Bay Area Air Quality Management District (Air District) struggled with maintaining positive, productive relationships with Bay Area environmental justice communities. (Environmental justice communities are defined as communities dealing with environmental issues while facing socio-economic issues. They are often low-income communities of color.) The relationship between the District and these communities was characterized by a high level of mistrust on both sides. These communities were concerned about air quality issues (from chemical plants, diesel emissions, particulate matter pollution, etc.) and felt the Air District did not provide adequate response to their concerns. Though the Air District held public hearings in these communities, the hearings were often highly contentious, did not help solve issues, and further damaged the already broken relationship.

The Air District told Community Focus that it wanted to develop a better relationship with these communities, to improve two-way communication and to better understand ways the District could be helpful. The Air District was interested in using the “resource team” model that Community Focus had developed for its “Spare the Air” public outreach campaign, working with community members to develop local programs to address problems.

What We Did

Community Focus conducted stakeholder interviews in the communities identified by the Air District. We listened carefully to concerns, and held meetings to ascertain the level of interest in participating on a resource team. Eventually we developed resource teams in two areas: North Richmond and East Palo Alto. North Richmond is a complex community which includes low income African-American neighborhoods as well as newer Latino and Laotian immigrant communities. It is bordered by the Chevron refinery, the General Chemical plant, and major highways. East Palo Alto, once the largest African-American community on the San Francisco Peninsula, today, like North Richmond, possesses a multi-ethnic population that includes a larger number of Latinos and Pacific Islanders. The air quality concerns stem from two main sources: University Avenue – East Palo Alto’s main thoroughfare and its neighboring streets – which carry large amounts of traffic to and from the Dumbarton Bridge; and the Romco Environmental Technologies Corporation facility, a Part B permitted hazardous waste management facility.

Why We Chose this Process

For these two communities, we chose the “resource team” process primarily because of its success with the Air District’s Spare the Air program. By creating a partnership between the Air District and the community that required all participants to take responsibility for developing and implementing projects, not only would there be concrete results coming out of the teams, but as a result of working together as partners, the relationship between the District and the community would improve as well.

The resource team process is four-fold: 1) identify a problem and bring community stakeholders together to form a resource team; 2) work with the resource team to investigate the problem and chose and plan projects to address the problem; 3) support the resource team project by gathering resources and facilitating project implementation and 4) achieve results, with community members having both input and involvement in solutions. Community Focus uses a combination of facilitation techniques and community organizing skills to create and sustain the resource teams.

Results/Outcomes

North Richmond Environmental Justice Resource Team

- Developed a monthly Report to the Community that reports on closed notices of violation by businesses in Contra Costa County
- Conducted an “Environmental Justice Summit” for the community that brought together various environmental justice organizations and discussed primary issues and movement in environmental justice
- In cooperation with Richmond Sanitary Services, hosted a roundtable luncheon around retrofit issues for local companies using diesel engine vehicles
- Worked with administration at Laidlaw Education Services (the largest private contractor of school transportation services in the country) and the Air District. This resulted in Laidlaw applying for funding from the Air District to retrofit school bus engines, thereby reducing diesel emissions

East Palo Alto Environmental Justice Resource Team

- Developed and implemented a methodology for monitoring air quality. Working with the Air District and a consultant, three air monitors were placed in East Palo Alto to collect never-before-gathered data on particulate matter pollution
- Presented a Community Workshop on Air Quality – for two years running

Lessons Learned

1. **Proceed slowly.**

Although the teams took a relatively short time to get to the point where they were implementing projects, the relationship-building with the Air District has been a slower process. The communities that we were working with had been dealing with environmental injustice for many years. Enough time had passed to build up a strong distrust of government agencies that have promised things in the past but have not delivered. Rushing in to “help” without taking the time to rebuild trust may damage more than repair relationships.

2. **Follow the lead of community-based organizations.**

It’s hard for an outside organization like the Air District (or even Community Focus) to get “in” to the community to connect with community members. The best way to do that is to work through community-based organizations. We began by asking the community-based organizations for advice on how to gain access and, if possible, worked under their umbrella to do so. We engaged known community leaders (including Air District board members) in the outreach process and, as much as possible, tried to involve other lesser-known community members as well – going beyond the “usual suspects.” Also, we did not limit our outreach to organizations and individuals who have already been involved with air quality issues. Air quality is a problem that affects everybody, so we tried to reach out to organizations that may have a different focus (e.g., faith institutions, youth organizations, community development organizations) but that might see a connection between their interest and air quality.

3. **Don’t create a new structure if it’s not needed.**

When Community Focus helped the Air District convene the Spare the Air resource teams in 1991, we started them from scratch. At that time, there was nothing in place to address air quality (much less implement Spare the Air-related solutions) at the community level. The situation is different regarding environmental justice issues. The communities we worked in were all highly organized around environmental justice issues and had community-driven initiatives in place to address these issues. We found it would be most efficient and most helpful if we plugged in to existing structures instead of starting something brand-new.

4. **Listen to community concerns and feedback.**

The people in these communities had something to say to the Air District, and wanted the District to hear them. So listening was very important. Listening had to happen agency-wide, so that not only Air District communications department was listening, but also the decision-makers at the District. Of course, listening did not mean the District had to do everything that everybody wanted it to do. It did mean that the District needed to consider what was said and come to the discussion with a problem-solving attitude and a willingness to work toward joint solutions.

5. **Be honest and clear about what you can do – and about what you can't do.**
We recommended that the District staff try to identify “open” issues within District policy – where there was room for change, and where community input could make a difference – and then let community members know about it. At the same time, we encouraged the District not to be afraid to be honest about its limitations as an agency.
6. **Let the community decide what it wants to work on.**
An important component of the resource team philosophy is that the projects should be selected by the resource team members themselves. Since the projects are implemented by resource team members, the members (including the Air District, which is also a resource team member) need to agree about what to work on. This is especially important when trying to build trust.
7. **Never stop organizing.**
Developing resource teams in underserved communities takes more support – not only are we dealing with participants that are low on resources, they are also stretched for time and energy. We needed to spend more time than usual on our recruiting efforts, and that recruiting is a never-ending process.
8. **A neutral third party allows both the community and the Air District to be participants in the process.**
By acting as the neutral third party, Community Focus allows community members and the Air District to sit at the table as peers and fellow participants on the resource team. Community Focus is able to help translate between different organizational cultures and navigate these differences.

In Closing

Working on the Environmental Justice Resource Team project has given us a new appreciation for the strengths and determination within communities to work hard to improve their quality of life ... even under difficult and strained circumstances. It also further strengthens our mission to encourage government agencies to engage the community, even when years of mistrust stand in the way.