



Reaching Urban Communities



Photo: El Concilio California's young canvassers speaking Tagalog and Spanish knock on doors to engage with community members around extreme heat in Stockton.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) based in California's cities use their deep understanding of urban social structures to reach densely populated communities with information and resources. CBOs are intentionally staffed with trusted messengers who reside in the community and speak their language. Staff are trained to provide COVID-19, extreme heat, and water conservation information in spaces where people gather and in ways which are accessible to their community members. As an additional step to build trust, CBOs address historic injustices particularly faced by communities of color in cities. CBOs are serving growing numbers of people because of their outreach efforts.

Using the US Census Bureau definition of urban as an area having a minimum population of 5,000 people, California is considered the most urban state with 94.2% of its population living in an urban area. California cities are among the most culturally and ethnically diverse in the United States. Their distinct features (including density and proximity to industrial activity) influence health and environmental equity within their populations. Complex and evolving challenges within cities requires collaboration across nonprofit, academic, and public sectors.

Action Brief

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This **Action Brief** is a product of the series "**Trusted Messenger Learning Labs: From Discovery to Action.**" It is based on the session held on February 29, 2024, and features excerpts from a discussion with Diana Alfaro, MPH (Associate Executive Director, Central City Neighborhood Partners), David A. Harris (President & CEO, Urban Strategies Council), and Mojgan Sami, PhD, MA (Assistant Professor of Health Equity, California State University Fullerton).

The Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications, housed within the Office of Planning and Research, initiates and executes campaigns related to the state's highest priority public awareness and community outreach efforts. The intent of a single state entity coordinating California's most important campaigns is so that the state can realize more inclusive and effective outcomes while preventing equity gaps in statewide outreach.

For More Information:
info.ocpsc@opr.ca.gov

What Partners are Saying and Doing

What does advancing equity mean in urban communities?

Mojgan Sami: As a society, we are not good at focusing on the root causes of urban inequality, which has plagued us for many centuries. How do we address systems of dominance and cultural narratives of racism, poverty, ableism, sexism, and how they contribute to the health outcomes or the social determinants of health? Too often, our efforts at trying to bridge health disparities and income inequalities is providing resources as the final solution. I challenge us to go beyond that. We must engage in intersectional organizing to address the needs of the 21st century. Which are not unlike the needs of social justice and equity from the past. We add to that the risks of climate change and severe weather events we are experiencing across the board in California.

David Harris: We must provide opportunities for transformative engagement in urban communities. If you care about the trees, you should also care about the people who live within those trees. A perfect example would be the discussion in Oakland right now around the removal of the I-80 corridor. Many of us know how transportation planning decimated and displaced communities. Now there's discussion about revisiting that decision and maybe even tearing that highway down. But the residents of West Oakland who lost their homes, businesses, have never been really consulted on how to redevelop that space.

Diana Alfaro: In Los Angeles, the community we serve is in Westlake and Downtown LA areas that are high density with high immigrant populations. A lot of these individuals seek basic needs. They're concerned with paying rent and childcare. At the same time, they can be fearful of government and want to stay hidden. Understanding these complexities is vital when we strategize to educate the community on priority issues and their rights.

What's worked for you in reaching urban communities?

Diana Alfaro: It's important to have community members as part of your team. We have community health workers who speak the language and liven the community. They help elevate their community's voices. Some residents don't have Internet at home and need someone to schedule appointments for them. They come to our organization, and we walk you through it on the phone to get them tested and vaccinated. A lot of times, youths are the ones filling out important paperwork for their parents. We make sure they're heard too. Those are the tactics. Also, understanding the community and demographics. Data is very helpful in showing the disparities.

David Harris: One thing we've done with our young people who are trusted messengers is train them on a set of core skills around research and analysis. We have them go out and interview people. They learn how to develop surveys. And then we train on specific topics like water conservation, excessive heat, mental health, issues. If they have these core competencies, they can spread that information to their families and communities, and it opens opportunities for them.

Mojgan Sami: I have to make data accessible. I don't begin and end with my data in my lab or in the ivory tower. I'm always in contact with communities. If a community needs something and can't get access to it. I use my positionality to have it. I feel we can only do this in partnership. By connecting a university partner with a community member who is culturally competent, we can uplift voices from the community and show what is really happening.