

Fruitful Partnerships:

How State Government and Community-Based Organizations Reach California's Most Vulnerable Communities



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Introduction

The Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications (the Office) initiates and executes campaigns related to the State's highest priority public awareness and community outreach efforts focused on Californians facing the greatest social and health inequities.

In 2023, the Office made grants to 121 community-based organizations (CBOs) to serve as campaign partners and “trusted messengers.” In addition to funding, the Office supported CBO engagement through a set of comprehensive activities including monitoring and research; coordination; media engagement; and materials development.

At a Glance: The Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications

- Supports micro-targeted public education communication campaigns to address issues disproportionately affecting vulnerable, traditionally bypassed Californians
- Crafts culturally responsive and equitable outreach strategies with partners
- Coordinates a trusted messenger ecosystem to support engagement
- Flags mis/disinformation and works with trusted messengers to counter it
- Provides ongoing monitoring of key data trends to inform strategic decision making and maintain accountability
- Promotes collective action through meetings, workshops, and information sharing
- Coordinates with other State offices and private sector actors to leverage resources and expand impact
- Incorporates the lessons learned from recent statewide public education campaigns into current and future efforts to effectively reach and engage Californians
- Removes barriers to entry that many small CBOs face when attempting to partner with the state

This triple-tested model¹ of State-CBO outreach collaboration offers a cost-effective blueprint for encouraging vulnerable and historically under-served Californians to take actions that keep them safe and healthy. Examples of such actions include getting vaccinated against COVID-19, conserving water, or taking protective measures in times of extreme heat.

Final reports were submitted in June 2024 by CBOs that received grant funding from the Office between April 2023 and June 2024. This brief provides a review of these submissions which offer valuable insights into how State government and CBOs can create cost-effective, highly efficient partnerships to save lives, reduce vulnerability, and address equity gaps.

¹ A state-funded trusted messenger network was first tested in the 2020 Census, renewed for the VA58 campaign, and continued with the 2023 Trusted Messenger Network run by the Office.

Outreach and Engagement Overview

CBO's were selected to be part of the network by analyzing their coverage of vulnerable communities.² The funded CBOs had the required cultural and linguistic knowledge to communicate effectively as well as a demonstrated history of local engagement. CBOs built trust with Californians by partnering with local entities— schools, businesses, faith groups, and other CBOs to “spread the word.” They organized well-attended events, created in-language social media, and used such highly personalized communication tactics as door-to-door visits, phone banking, and in-person conversations at high-traffic sites.

At a Glance: A Partial List of Resources Provided to CBOs by the Office

- Geographical and demographic data needed for CBOs to refine audience targeting
- A digital library of materials and printed materials to augment their outreach efforts
- A digital data collection tool (CORD) that enabled them to efficiently monitor and report their outreach efforts
- Technical assistance through statewide and regional meetings providing training and support on coordination, data use, CORD, and best practices for successful engagement strategies
- Regional staff support for real time strategizing and outreach planning, thought partnership, providing innovative solutions to address barriers, and leveraging of regional resources
- Subject matter expertise from state agencies to ensure information accuracy
- Trainings, convenings, and peer learning labs

Outreach and engagement strategies were targeted to specific demographic groups (e.g., low-income households, farmworkers, limited English proficient individuals) and supported by linguistically appropriate and culturally appealing resources. CBOs tailored messaging to ensure cultural relevance.

At a Glance: Quick Facts about the Breadth of Partner Efforts

- CBOs, working alongside their local partners, reached 89 percent of the targeted “vulnerable zip codes.”³
- Services were provided in 42 languages.

² Vulnerable communities were defined for grant purposes to be those that fell within Quartiles 1 and 2 in the Healthy Places Index or in the bottom half of the California Hard-to-Count Index.

³ Ibid.

Outreach Tactics

As part of their final reports, partner CBOs were asked to identify and describe the three tactics they used that had the greatest impact. An analysis of the responses provided by 29 CBOs is presented in Table One. The tactics identified shared an important feature: they were all “high touch, low tech.”

Table One. **The Three “Highest Impact” Outreach Tactics Identified by 29 CBOs**

| Tactic | Count | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. Canvassing | 40 | 46 |
| 2. Outreach at events or high-traffic areas | 16 | 18 |
| 3. Media development (including outreach to influencers) | 15 | 17 |
| 4. Training | 10 | 11 |
| 5. Fostering collaborative relationships | 7 | 8 |
| 6. Phone banking | 5 | 6 |
| 7. Other | 4 | 5 |
| Totals | 87 | 100 |

Importantly, data drawn from the Office’s monitoring and accountability platform, CORD, support this assessment by CBOs. Together, Tables One and Two demonstrate that outreach efforts with a high degree of interpersonal engagement have the greatest impact.

Table Two. **Outreach Tactics and Metrics (drawn from CORD reporting)**

| Tactic | Attempted Interactions | Completed Interactions | Conversion Rate ⁴ (%) |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Door-to-door interactive canvassing | 1,798,356 | 929,994 | 52 |
| Phone banking | 4,013,448 | 776,536 | 19 |
| Outreach at events or high-traffic areas | 5,296,720 | 3,860,406 | 73 |
| Training, workshops, or meetings | 507,812 | 467,462 | 92 |

⁴ Conversion rate is defined as completed interactions divided by attempted interactions. Conversion rate helps to understand the amount of time it takes to have a successful interaction.

Key Findings

1 A strong local presence and a web of diverse partnerships with local entities are critical features of successful outreach campaigns.

“We engaged communities at ethnic markets and cultural events and collaborated with various community agencies.” Lao Family Community Development Inc.

“We leveraged our network of 27 facilities, community events, citizenship clinics, and a large membership base to reach diverse communities across LA County.” Young Men’s Christian Association of Greater Los Angeles (YMCA)

2 Effective outreach strategies are tailored to specific demographics and adapted to changing community needs as detected through close monitoring of current data.

“We used the Community Health Worker (CHW) Model, a community helpline in multiple Asian languages, and partnered with community-based organizations to enhance digital literacy and address disaster preparedness.”
Asian Health Services

3 The availability of materials in multiple languages is a critical resource that enables CBOs to reach diverse, vulnerable, and traditionally bypassed audiences with culturally relevant and appealing messaging.

“We provided outreach materials in multiple languages, including Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Mixteco, ensuring effective communication with diverse communities.”
Butte Environmental Council Inc.

4 Human centered-design and systematic efforts to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers are essential to equitable and effective outreach campaigns. In-language materials are necessary but not sufficient for reaching the most vulnerable Californians. CBOs employed diverse tactics to reach target audiences including engagement of bilingual staff, intentional cultivation of cultural competency, and enlistment of trusted community members.

“We employed multilingual staff and volunteers fluent in over 13 languages, provided cultural sensitivity training, and conducted outreach activities in familiar and accessible locations.” Center for Empowering Refugees & Immigrants (CERI)

5 In-person engagement through outreach at events or high-traffic areas and door-to-door canvassing are especially effective tactics for reaching California’s most vulnerable residents.

“Our strategy included leveraging social media and digital platforms to reach broader audiences, particularly younger populations, by creating engaging and relevant content.”
Youth Speaks

6 Effective engagement contributes to equity in important ways. It increases knowledge about how to overcome everyday health threats; it contributes to local empowerment; it expands access to training and skills development opportunities; and it reduces disparity through increased access to resources.

“The project provided resources and support to diverse populations, including those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and abilities, contributing to a more equitable society.” Antelope Valley Partners for Health

Policy Implications

1. **There is great value in having a comprehensive office that can initiate and execute campaigns related to the State's highest priority public awareness and community outreach efforts.** The Office's contributions to CBO efficacy extend well beyond its grantmaking. It also:

- Collected, analyzed, and distributed the data that grounded targeting and messaging
- Developed and distributed in-language media for CBO use
- Provided research to combat mis- and dis-information along with culturally competent messaging
- Coordinated and collaborated with other State offices
- Generated support from private sector actors
- Helped CBOs coordinate activities that leveraged their resources

Coordination among CBOs augmented their outreach capacity, reduced duplication of efforts, and enhanced message impact through synergistic message reinforcement. The model of collective action introduced by the Office in each of its ten service regions generated cost-effective collaboration, ambitious plans, and was a cornerstone of the program's effectiveness.

The final reports submitted by grantees strongly underscore the value of the State's investment in creating the Office. The Office's unique, in-depth knowledge of CBOs—developed during the Vaccinate ALL 58 and Census 2020 Campaigns—enabled it to make sound choices in selecting grantees. These two initiatives also built the Office's foundational experience and provided the tested model for public outreach that is now used by the Office.

Vaccinate ALL 58 Model: The impact of this model can be seen by examining what the Vaccinate ALL 58 Campaign achieved. It contributed to the administration of 86 million vaccinations, with 85 percent of the state's residents receiving at least one dose of the vaccine. For the most vulnerable age group, adults above 65, this rate was 95 percent.

Only 14 states, among them California, fall within the CDC's highest tier of vaccine coverage, measured by the number of vaccinations administered per 100,000 population. When performance on this coverage metric is compared for the ten states with 10 million or more residents, California ranks second. The state that places first, New York, is a less diverse state, both demographically and linguistically, with half California's population, one-third its geographic area, and a much earlier onset of the virus (which, in turn, built earlier awareness of the dangers it posed).

In comparing California to COVID-19 vaccination rates achieved by other states, it's also important to take note of the number of languages spoken in California homes by residents aged five and above—over 200. Within this age cohort, 43 percent (nearly 19 million people) have a native tongue other than English. Considering the state's size, coverage, and diversity, its success in achieving vaccine equity through the campaign model used by the Office merits significant recognition.

- 2. Partnerships between the State and CBOs are an important tool for reducing disparity and building community resilience.** Public policy should encourage and support collaborations between the State, CBOs, and local institutions (e.g., schools, businesses, faith groups) to enhance outreach efforts. Policies that incentivize long-term relationships between State agencies and CBOs will contribute to trust-building and greater community resilience in the face of shocks and stresses. Policies that encourage such partnerships lead to a more efficient use of public funds while building greater awareness among Californians of government services.
- 3. Partnerships between the State and CBOs contribute to greater government efficiency.** State government is better positioned than CBOs to perform several of the functions that are critical to equitable, high-impact outreach and engagement. Conversely, CBOs enjoy important comparative advantages in engaging with vulnerable Californians that the State cannot match.

The State's resources enable it to gather and analyze highly granular data, which is critical for targeting underserved Californians and communicating effectively with them. Additionally, State offices are generally better equipped than CBOs to manage the vendor relationships and research needed to develop high quality in-language campaign collateral.

High quality in-language materials that reflect a deep understanding of prevalent mis- and dis-information and related research are essential campaign resources. For many CBOs, production of such materials would represent a significant challenge.

In contrast, CBOs are unparalleled in their ability to engage directly and deeply with community members as trusted messengers. They have the cultural competence, relationships, situational awareness, and history needed to significantly enhance community well-being and curtail mis/dis information spreading through communities they serve. CBOs are better positioned than State actors to distribute media products and support people as they take the actions that are promoted through messaging.

When CBOs and State actors each remain in their respective lanes of excellence, the well-being of historically marginalized communities is optimized, and disparity is reduced. State-CBO partnerships facilitate this optimization cost-effectively.

Conclusion

A virtuous, cost-effective, symbiotic relationship exists between the Office and its CBO partners. With support from the Office, CBOs reach vulnerable, historically underserved groups using tactics that combine interpersonal engagement with well-researched, attractively produced, and culturally competent supporting materials (collateral). This “intervention cocktail” could not be implemented by most CBOs without support from the Office. Nor could the Office implement these tactics without CBO engagement. But by forging a CBO-State partnership, both parties are able to communicate priority messages to vulnerable Californians in ways that can be understood and acted upon by them.

In short, the Office optimizes a set of relationships that the State needs to have in place to achieve key policy goals related to government efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and equity. Were these behavior-changing relationships (as captured by the conversion rate data in Table Two and the CDC data) not in place, it is likely that the State would incur higher costs than the value of its investments in the Office.

Illustratively, the State would have needed to allocate more resources to respond to elevated COVID-19 infection rates if anti-vaccination beliefs stemming from mis- or disinformation had not been challenged by trusted messengers. Similarly, if heat stroke incidence were to soar, new investments in the State's health infrastructure might be needed. Recent campaigns conducted by partner CBOs with support from the Office reduced the likelihood of these scenarios.

In summary, the Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communication has created a diverse web of relationships with other State agencies, CBOs, professional groups, and private philanthropy. The resultant network is making important information accessible to vulnerable Californians who have been historically bypassed and deemed “hard to reach.”

Author Biography

Beryl Levinger is Chief Learning Officer at Root Change, a pro-equity social change organization that strengthens civil society and promotes community resilience. Her career includes senior positions in major international organizations and academic institutions. She draws on experiences gained from working in more than 90 countries. A winner of numerous international awards, Beryl has been a leader in rethinking how organizations can leverage learning and promote equity. She is a graduate of Cornell and the University of Alabama (MA and Ph.D.).