

“[The Collaborative] provided a model for how to work on environmental justice issues on a regional level and how to better integrate organizing efforts on EJ in a way that can push for policymaking.” —Policymaker

of [the Collaborative] show that it is time to mainstream the marginal: academic-community collaboratives that emphasize secondary data analysis in their CBPR approach can be powerful agents for policy change without compromising the standards of rigorous scientific research.”

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Case Study #5:

**Addressing food insecurity in San Francisco’s Bayview Hunters Point:
The Literacy for Environmental Justice Partnership**



In low-income, inner-city neighborhoods such as San Francisco’s Bayview Hunters Point, high rates of obesity and food insecurity, or limited or uncertain access to nutritionally safe and adequate foods (1), often are intimately interconnected. Many such neighborhoods have experienced “supermarket flight,” with large, full-service grocery stores moving out to more profitable locations. Together with transportation barriers, this phenomenon often leaves residents dependent

“The [LEJ partnership] decided on a voluntary policy because there are a lot of economic issues involved. They didn’t want to go into the neighborhood and say, ‘We’re another group telling you what you should be doing.’” —Academic Partner

on fast-food outlets or small corner stores that are well stocked with liquor, tobacco, and processed foods heavy in salt, sugar, and fat, but offer little in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables (2, 3).

The Partnership: In 2002, a CBPR partnership linked a nonprofit youth empowerment and environmental justice education organization, Literacy for Environmental Justice (LEJ), with health educators at the San Francisco Department of Public Health and with an outside evaluator to address the food insecurity problem. Local high school youth, mostly from underserved racial/ethnic communities, worked five to 10 hours per week as paid LEJ interns studying and addressing the problem. Using the health department’s five-step Community Action Model (CAM), health educators taught the youth critical thinking and research skills for understanding the root causes of problems, identifying contributing factors, gathering data, evaluating action-oriented change strategies, and developing policy solutions (4).

Because the health department’s Tobacco Free Project funded the LEJ partnership, its work had to be related to smoking. But the partners readily found connections between the community’s concerns with food insecurity and the problem of tobacco. For example, the youth soon learned that Philip Morris/Altria was the parent company of Kraft and Nabisco and was at that time the second-largest food conglomerate in the world (5). The partnership also benefited from the earlier work of other city agencies looking at the retail food environment and of a group of community elders who, in the early 1990s, began meeting to discuss their concern about the disproportionate sales of alcohol and tobacco in the local stores, which attracted loitering and vandalism. The proposed approach—providing incentives to stores that became “good neighbors” by offering healthier, fresh foods and reducing alcohol and tobacco advertising while promoting community safety—caught the attention of a charismatic local supervisor, who also had a long-standing interest in food insecurity in her community.

Research Methods: The research component of

the partnership’s work attempted to address several key questions: What was the reality of current access (or lack of access) to healthy foods in the neighborhood? Would increased access at the local stores translate into more residents shopping locally? Would local merchants consider making changes to increase their stock of healthy foods? What incentives would encourage this to happen?

With training by the evaluator and health department staff, the LEJ youth developed and conducted an initial community survey of 130 residents, asking about their needs and desires in relation to local markets, health and nutrition behaviors and habits, and what it would take to get them to shop locally instead of outside the community. The youth also used store-shelf diagramming to determine how much space in local stores was devoted to processed foods and to tobacco, liquor, and other products. The youth conducted in-depth interviews with merchants at five local stores and utilized Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping to display the location of corner stores, supermarkets, transportation routes, and relevant community demographics (6, 7).

LEJ worked with a student at UC Berkeley’s School of Business to conduct a study of the economic feasibility for local stores of increasing their stocking of healthier foods, and of the potential economic incentive mechanisms available through the city and related programs. Finally, and because much local policy work involves being able to show what’s worked in other communities, they collaborated with the local supervisor, Sophie Maxwell, to study related policies in different cities.

Findings: Store-shelf diagramming in 11 corner stores revealed that on average, close to 40 percent of shelf space went to processed foods, 26 percent to tobacco and alcohol, 17 percent to sodas and other beverages, and just two to five percent to fresh fruits and vegetables (6–8). The partnership’s GIS mapping showed that it took residents (many of whom lacked reliable cars) approximately one hour and three bus transfers to get to the closest supermarket. Interviews with merchants and community surveys added

“[A lesson for other youth partnerships is] not being intimidated by people in suits...You are the one dealing with it every day in the community in which you are a part.” —Community Member

other important information, including the fact that residents were favorable to increasing access to healthy foods and decreasing the availability of alcohol and tobacco advertising at the local stores (4, 6–8). Interviews with several merchants revealed that they were interested in the possibility of joining a “good neighbor” program if they could receive incentives that would make such changes economically feasible.

Getting to Action: Encouraged by these findings and working closely with Supervisor Sophie Maxwell, the LEJ partnership worked on establishing a Good Neighbor Program (GNP) in the Bayview neighborhood. Four city departments were quickly recruited as program co-sponsors, with the Redevelopment Agency now beginning to provide façade improvements to local stores that agreed to make specific health-promoting changes in their business practices. It is hoped that other concessions, such as discounted loans and energy-efficient appliances, can also be provided eventually.

The partnership developed detailed memorandums of understanding (MOUs), spelling out details such as how much space in the Good Neighbor stores would be devoted to fresh produce. City entities, including the Mayor’s Office on Economic and Workforce Development, the Department of the Environment, and the Redevelopment Agency, joined the health department in contributing staff and resources to manage and sustain the program, with an eye to possible citywide expansion. LEJ continues to take a lead in the program by providing technical assistance and working with youth who help with taste testing and branding at the pilot store, Super Save Market, which became a “Good Neighbor” in December 2003. This pilot store saw an increase in produce sales from five percent to 15 percent, and a decrease in alcohol sales from 25 percent to 15 percent of total sales in the first seven months. Four years later, in 2007, these figures remained strong: Produce sales remained up 12 percent, alcohol and cigarettes down 10 percent, and overall profits up 12 percent (7, 8) compared to their pre-store conversion rates of sale. Based in part on the early success of the pilot store,

other stores were encouraged to become “Good Neighbors.” Finally, LEJ joined other stakeholders in helping to promote a state assembly bill that would establish healthy corner store programs statewide.

Policy Change Outcomes: Successful adoption of the voluntary municipal policy that promotes store conversions in the Bayview neighborhood resulted in four stores becoming “Good Neighbors” between 2004 and 2007; three additional stores converted in 2007. Five new stores will be recruited in 2008–2009 with additional funding from The California Endowment. On a larger scale, and with the support of the LEJ partnership and other groups, state Assemblyman Mark Leno introduced Assembly Bill 2384, supporting the establishment of a statewide “Healthy Food Purchase” pilot program modeled on the GNP and other corner-store conversion programs. The bill was passed and signed into law in 2006, albeit without a budgetary appropriation.

Barriers and Success Factors: Implementation of the Good Neighbor Program has sometimes proved challenging, with one of the early conversion stores recently reporting having trouble selling fresh produce and consequently needing to stock less than when it originally became a Good Neighbor. A special challenge lies in addressing price point; for example, coming up with innovative models to connect stores with local farmers and then providing produce at prices that local residents can afford and will purchase. Turnover among youth members and program staff posed another challenge and led to some incomplete data collection. Yet, the outcomes of this voluntary policy effort appear encouraging, whether measured in store recruitment and compliance, youth empowerment, or program growth and sustainability.

The long-term viability of this effort will depend in part on larger political and economic realities, among them the economic downturn and the fact that the first new supermarket in this neighborhood in over a decade is expected to open in 2010. Taking the work to scale statewide is also proving to be a challenge. Getting a budgetary appropriation by the 2011 deadline that would enable the

enactment of AB 2384 (supporting a statewide pilot program modeled in part on the GNP) does not seem likely in the current fiscal climate. But the bill's sponsors and supporters are continuing the fight while getting their message out nationally: LEJ is an active partner in a new national corner store network and hopes to use the San Francisco experiences to help communities in diverse parts of the country mount similar programs.

Summary Reflections: Literacy for Environmental Justice and its health department and other partners, with strong support from a local supervisor and a willing city government, have achieved an innovative partial solution to a persistent problem, with good potential for sustainability. LEJ youth have been fully engaged in many aspects of the work, utilizing technical assistance and the Community Action Model framework to help structure and formulate their partnership's research and policy strategy. Although the long-term viability of this ambitious effort will depend in large part on forces beyond the control of the partners, subsequent work on the state and national levels appears to hold potential for bringing the "good neighbor" concept to low-income communities on a far larger scale through participation in the Healthy Corner Stores Network and the sharing of a recently developed Good Neighbor Best Practices Kit.

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For Further Reading:

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"Community leaders know about us. We attend a lot of meetings in the community and community leaders know who we are. They know what we do and are in support of what we do." —Community Youth

"I believe the young people are driven by making a difference, by wanting to make a difference, and seeing that they do make a difference in their community, not just in their own lives." —Community Partner