

CASE STUDY

Establishing Relationships with Environmental Justice Communities: CEHTP and the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project

A major principle of Environmental Justice (EJ) that should be adopted by state and national tracking programs is the principle of meaningful participation, involvement, and representation. Time, effort, skill, and commitment are all necessary for successful initial and continued engagement of EJ communities. This case study describes how the California Environmental Health Tracking Program (CEHTP) engaged the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (WOEIP), a community-based organization from the neighborhood of West Oakland, in the Alameda County Pilot Project stakeholder advisory process. The case study will focus on the process for initiating a relationship with an EJ community. The steps for facilitating a meaningful participatory stakeholder process and conducting community-relevant data analysis, dissemination, and capacity-building are also important; however, they will not be described here.

West Oakland: An Environmental Justice Community

The community of West Oakland resides in the city of Oakland, California. A community rich in history, ethnic diversity, and community activism, West Oakland also lays claim to a number of industrial facilities and hazardous waste sites, as well as a boundary that includes three freeways and the Port of Oakland. Major concerns among community residents include pollution, education, safety, employment, and health care/health status. The community's disproportionate impact by environmental hazards and disease is underscored by the frequency with which the community is studied by academic and government researchers.

Wariness of Researchers

Residents of West Oakland have expressed wariness towards researchers requesting cooperation by the community to participate in a research study. Echoing the concern and experiences of other impacted communities, a major complaint in West Oakland is that researchers enter the community to conduct studies, but rarely return the results to the community. Furthermore, it is even less likely that researchers will engage the community in a truly participatory fashion, ignoring community goals and expertise in the development or implementation of project activities. The community is left without any immediate benefit while researchers benefit professionally and financially (i.e. increased standing within professional circles and improved opportunities for personal promotion or project funding) from work derived from the community's disproportionately impacted health status.

For researchers representing government entities, the community's distrust is compounded by cases of unethical government research (e.g. Tuskegee Syphilis Study) and, more broadly, a national history of government-sponsored racism and oppression (e.g. displacement of native people, slavery, internment, racial segregation).

Given this backdrop, a community's distrust and hesitation to engage with researchers is commonsense. Therefore, it is an ethical responsibility of both government and academic researchers to make explicit and demonstrable efforts to ensure that participation is meaningful.

CEHTP and the Alameda County Pilot Project

The Alameda County Pilot Project serves to demonstrate components of a tracking program by examining birth outcomes, asthma, and traffic pollution in Alameda County. A priority for the project was to establish and facilitate a participatory stakeholder process through which communities, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies would be involved in guiding project activities. A major principle of participation is the development of partnerships with stakeholders to plan and collaborate on

projects with common goals through a process of shared decision-making, efforts, and resources. Aside from CEHTP's ethical responsibility to facilitate participation with the community, rationale for this process includes:

- Individuals and organizations that are more knowledgeable and connected to efforts can better offer their expertise.
- Individuals and organizations that are involved in a process want a stake in the outcome and will become advocates of the effort.
- Early collaboration saves time and avoids wasted effort.
- Mutual understanding and appreciation leads to effective working relationships.

Community participation is an ideal methodology for supporting tracking efforts because an inclusive approach is critical for identifying factors that influence collection and use of environmental health data, garnering community support, creating effective working relationships, and generating successful projects.

Because the scope of the project was largely determined during the grant application process, CEHTP recognized that the project could be community-responsive, but would not be community-driven (since the community was not directly involved in designing the project). Therefore, it was important to contact and engage communities in a participatory process as soon as possible.

Introduction to the Community Through a Trusted Intermediary

With West Oakland's status as one of the most impacted communities in the county, CEHTP felt it was essential to have West Oakland community participation on the project. Understanding that the community might be wary of yet another set of researchers asking for involvement, CEHTP decided to ask a non-governmental organization with experience working with both the community and CEHTP to facilitate an introduction.

The Pacific Institute (PI) had worked previously with West Oakland residents in a participatory process to research and report on the status of community-relevant environmental indicators for the neighborhood. From this effort developed the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (WOEIP), a committee of representatives from a number of West Oakland community groups involved in the process. PI continued its collaboration and good relationship with WOEIP, both groups working together to update the indicators report and commence a community-led diesel truck count study.

Engaging WOEIP in the Alameda County Pilot Project was a logical choice for a number of reasons. In addition to being trusted residents and leaders in the community, WOEIP members were actively engaged in using information for action, were familiar with environmental health issues in their community, and would be able to guide the project in a way that would meet the needs of their community. Furthermore, CEHTP had already entered a relationship with PI, providing partial funding and technical assistance for the truck county study, which would in turn inform the pilot project. This relationship was an important bridge to identifying and establishing contact with WOEIP. When asked, PI was willing to coordinate and facilitate the first meeting between CEHTP and WOEIP.

Initiating contact through a trusted intermediary is a key element to the development of a relationship with the community. An intermediary who has good relationships with both groups can recommend to the community that it might be worthwhile to meet and explore a partnership. The intermediary can act as a moderator and "cultural translator" during through the meeting process.

Developing an agreement

It took several meetings with representatives of CEHTP, WOEIP, and PI before a partnership agreement was developed. It was important that CEHTP and WOEIP get to know each other, learn about each other's work, identify common/complementary goals, and discuss how they wanted to work together. In a few instances, PI played a key role in clarifying miscommunication during the conversations. Because it was important for both parties to develop a clear agreement and provide assurances on each group's contributions to the partnership, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was developed. WOEIP needed assurances that CEHTP would not just be taking time and energy from the community, but would be contributing resources (time and expertise) to the community's goals. CEHTP wanted assurances that program staff would have specified roles working with WOEIP that would fall within the program mandate and staff skill sets.

Key components of the MOU development process included:

- Sharing of goals and objectives
- Identifying activities furthered mutual or complementary goals and utilized appropriate skill sets
- Outlining scope of work for main contributing individuals/staff

WOEIP thought that CEHTP could offer health education expertise in developing environmental health materials for the community and in assisting with planning for a community Healthy Neighborhoods Festival (HNF). This was well within CEHTP's mission to improve community capacity around environmental health issues and to disseminate environmental health information. CEHTP thought that WOEIP could offer community expertise in guiding pilot project activities and responding to the pilot project findings, as well as identifying other key stakeholders for the project. This was responsive to WOEIP's goal to learn more about the environmental health of their community and play an active role in studies that involved their neighborhood.

CEHTP's health educator devoted 25% of her time for 3 months to work with WOEIP and PI to develop a West Oakland Environmental Justice Fact Card; to develop, assemble, and distribute 16 West Oakland Community Environmental Health Resource Binders; and to participate in HNF planning by attending meetings in West Oakland and assisting with specific activities. The pilot project manager also attended HNF planning meetings. WOEIP members assisted CEHTP with identifying, contacting, and recruiting potential members to the pilot project stakeholder advisory group. Two WOEIP members also participated in the AG process and provided informal consultation throughout the project period.

Developing agreements is an important way to clearly define responsibilities and expectations, as well as to provide assurances to both groups. In determining the scope of activities, it is important for the non-community entity to provide resources and accomplish activities prioritized by the community early in the partnership in order further provide assurances of good faith and competence.

Working in a community setting- implementation of partnership activities

While this partnership provided CEHTP with an opportunity to demonstrate good faith and competence to the community, it also provided CEHTP staff with the unique opportunity and privilege of spending time with community members in their own community setting. From this experience, CEHTP staff became familiar with community concerns that included environment, health, poverty, land use, etc.; heard about community histories and perspectives; and learned about how the community wanted to be involved in the project and how they wanted CEHTP to be involved in the community.

Staff behavior that facilitated this opportunity included:

- Actively listening and offering opinions or recommendations only when asked, taking the lead from the community to determine the level of participation they were comfortable with. It is important not to feel the need to provide opinions or corrections on areas of disagreement.
- Being comfortable and open about personal and organizational ignorance and limitations in areas of ability and influence.
- Attempting to learn and understand about the community, but not anticipating or assuming success.

Foremost, it was essential that CEHTP staff understood the privilege of working with the community, valued community expertise, and accepted the limitations of their own professional-training and organizational perspectives. Without this baseline, it would have been impossible for CEHTP staff to begin to learn about, build relationships with, or establish trust with WOEIP and the West Oakland community.

Conclusion

Partnership activities were successfully completed, and WOEIP indicated satisfaction with CEHTP's contributions on the project. The expertise, perspectives, and networks of WOEIP members contributed greatly to the stakeholder recruitment and meeting processes. CEHTP staff furthermore benefited from working in community settings, acquiring insight into relationships, histories, and concerns of the community stakeholders. This partnership resulted in an established and effective working relationship between CEHTP and WOEIP.

The partnership between CEHTP and WOEIP was essential to the development and implementation of a participatory stakeholder advisory process and to the success of the pilot project in its entirety. While there are many potential barriers to developing relationships with Environmental Justice communities, CEHTP's experience working with WOEIP demonstrates that it is both possible and crucial for a tracking program to engage with communities early on. A key element to the success of this process was programmatic support and staff capacity to identify opportunities to partner with the community; to work with communities to identify common goals and engage in mutually beneficial activities; to create community-responsive and participatory program structures; and to support capacity-building and resource-sharing activities with community partners.