

Developing a Public Health Community Engagement Academy

Overview:

An innovative community engagement program resulted in community members working to improve the health of their communities through built environment and systems' change.

Challenge:

The United States faces a growing budgetary crisis with escalating health care costs and epidemic rates of obesity and diabetes especially for low income communities. These communities experience the poorest health outcomes. They are the most disenfranchised and historically have been left out of the governmental planning and land use decision making process, adding to a cycle of poverty, marginalization, and poor health outcomes.

Innovative Solution:

Civic engagement trainings with a health focus offered by health departments present an innovative method for empowering residents with the tools and information necessary to get engaged in these processes and ultimately work to improve their community's health outcomes. In 2014 the Monterey County Health Department (MCHD) developed and began offering enLACE (Leadership and Civic Engagement academy), which provides residents the opportunity to learn about the social determinants of health and their relationship to the overall health of their community, the basics of government, and how to effectively engage with their electeds and government staff. Through an eight-module course, offered to people where they are at and in their preferred language, participants become more civically connected and are empowered to take active roles in their community.

Originality:

Health Departments have only recently begun to implement Health in All Policies (HiAP) to improve the community health by connecting health, sustainability, and equity considerations with decision-making across sectors and policy areas. However, to be effective in their HiAP work, Health Departments need to support the empowerment of community members so that they can effectively engage in their jurisdiction's governance processes. We are unaware of any health department pairing

HiAP with a community engagement strategy that trains community members in the basics of civic engagement.

Cost Effectiveness:

Costs include one full time staff at \$117,000/year and meeting supplies at \$1,000/cohort. It is early to quantify savings, but participants have received small grants for community improvement-related projects and give back through volunteer hours on boards and commissions.

Results:

Eight enLACE cohorts have been conducted in English and Spanish in low income neighborhoods throughout Monterey County. Eighty-nine percent of participants entered the program believing they could make a difference in their community. Despite their beliefs, only 48% initially reported knowing how to participate in the local school system and only 22% in local government. Participants demonstrated their greatest learning around how to participate in local government systems, a 67% increase; this was followed by a 50% increase in knowing how to participate in their local school system and a 25% increase in their school involvement over the eight-week program. EnLACE participants engaged in small community projects and continued to be civically engaged and supported after graduation. Cohorts have applied for and received small community grants or organized themselves to begin exercise classes, bring in professional guest speakers and launch walking groups. They also organized beach cleanups and in-home smoke alarm installations, planted trees in a neighborhood park, and partnered with a local artist to host a small community event. Several graduates joined community advocacy groups and applied to be members of city commissions and attended and spoke at city council meetings for the first time in their lives. As one participant said “I am now part of the School Site Council at my children’s school. It was in the enLACE session on the school district that I learned about this opportunity.” This model can be adapted and used for diverse communities to create the foundation for community members to empower themselves and create healthier places to live.

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Optional Submission:

Health Equity Award video <https://youtu.be/cKcKqGmQi5w> (Posted through MCHD’s YouTube Channel)