

Jovenes SANOS

Changing Policy, Changing Lives

It was a vending machine, of all things, that sparked groundbreaking policy change in Watsonville and across Santa Cruz County. That vending machine convinced the members of Jovenes SANOS, a youth leadership and advocacy organization, that something was wrong in their community.

At a meeting several years ago at a local community center, a member of the group got up to get something to eat and returned with a processed snack high in calories and filled with corn syrup. For a youth group focused on health and wellness, it wasn't ideal, but it was all that was available. Jovenes SANOS' members realized that changing the foods that were available in the community could change what people ate—that ensuring that healthier options were available could lead to a healthier community.

Over the next several years, Jovenes SANOS members worked with the community and local government to create a new policy that would require healthy food options in vending machines at Santa Cruz METRO transit centers, the first of its kind in the United States.

As innovative as the policy is, the process used to achieve it is equally impressive: a priority identified by local community members, a campaign led, organized and executed by high school students, and real change grown from the ground up.

"It wasn't easy, but the kids just bring so much to this work. Gaby has grown into a fantastic spokesperson for us, Jose keeps us organized, and Rigoberto has become a tremendous leader



for us, says Kymberly Lacrosse, the director of Jovenes SANOS.

At the same time they were working county-wide with Santa Cruz METRO on the new vending machine policy, the group has also had an impact in Watsonville, winning a policy that encourages new healthy restaurants in the community and offers existing restaurants incentives to offer healthy menu options. Again, the policy was identified and won by the members of Jovenes SANOS themselves, who also evaluate the restaurants on how well they're doing in relation to the new policy.

Jovenes SANOS has been supported in its work through connections with California Convergence, whose regional coordinator, Megan Joseph, works with Lacrosse at United Way of Santa Cruz County. Joseph points to California Convergence's assistance pulling



together local colleagues, regional groups and statewide organizations and policy makers for a regional convening last year as one of the network's biggest impact on their work. "It made us realize that we can do more—we don't have to stay in Watsonville—the kids who lead Jovenes SANOS can have an impact across the whole state."

For Rigoberto Perez, a leader of Jovenes SANOS, the impact of the group—for himself and his community—has already been immense. "Growing up, I struggled with my weight, and now I realize that the fast food places around here were a part of the problem. Working with Jovenes SANOS, I'm bringing that knowledge back to my family, back to the community. You can't make someone become a vegetarian, but you can give them the option to eat healthier."

And just as a vending machine led to important policy changes in Santa Cruz County, it was a bottle of water in another vending machine that made Kymberly Lacrosse realize how things were

changing in her community.

"During our last meeting at the Youth Center here in town, I walked past the vending machines and noticed that they were filled with water," says Lacrosse. "That's not something we pushed for—it's just happening organically."

Jovenes SANOS' work in Watsonville and across Santa Cruz County is a model for other organizations facing similar challenges, and thanks to California Convergence's structure—linking local organizations into regional groups and a statewide network of people who are passionate about creating healthier communities—they have a way of learning directly from their success.

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The California Convergence Coordinating Office is a project of the Public Health Institute