

Youth Making a Healthier Mendocino County

Sometimes the strongest advocates for change in a community are the people who can see its challenges with fresh eyes.

“When the kids realize what’s happening to the health of our community, they just become so passionate about it. When they see something that isn’t fair, they want to do something about it right away,” says California Convergence member Tina Tyler-O’Shea of the Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency.

Tina and her colleagues have been working hard to involve youth across a number of their initiatives, including better access to healthy foods, promoting alternatives to sugary drinks, improving school wellness policies and working to make apartment buildings across the county smoke-free.

Their work has already paid off in multiple areas. Katherine Frengler, a Program Specialist at the Health and Human Services Agency, worked closely with a number of students to educate administrators about federal guidelines on wellness policies and make practical changes in the schools—providing healthier alternatives on the morning coffee cart and creating a new fundraiser to replace the traditional Valentine’s Day candygrams, for example.

One of the biggest successes so far involved students speaking at a Fort Bragg City Council meeting in support of new city employee wellness guidelines. Pablo Narez, a senior at Fort Bragg High School, spoke movingly of his own history with unhealthy foods.



“The city had healthy eating guidelines, but when we looked at it, we found out a lot of the foods on there just weren’t very good—diet sodas and processed foods,” says Narez. “So I told them about my own history. Growing up my parents owned a Mexican grocery, and I was always drinking sodas. My parents say my first word was Coca, for Coca Cola. When I got older, I realized that wasn’t good for me, so I started drinking juice—but a lot of them are just sugar water with a little bit of fruit. Now I drink water—and encourage other people to, too.”

After the students’ testimony, the City Council voted to make changes to the guidelines that they had suggested, and students have started work on other areas to improve access to healthy food.

“One of our students was interested in the idea of a food cart downtown that would let



people buy fruits and vegetables on their way home from work, says Colleen Schenk, who is part of the CA4Health Program. “But when she researched it, she discovered that the application for a food cart is the same as the one to open a restaurant—21 pages long, and only in English! We presented our concern to the Director of Environmental Health for the county, and he said he’d look into it—he’s a former restaurant owner, so he was very sympathetic to our concerns about how difficult the process is.”

All of the youth involved in the Agency’s programs have come together for training from California Convergence, learning how to become more effective advocates for health. At the last meeting, elected officials from the county were on hand to offer feedback on the students’ presentations and provide encouragement.

“The biggest benefit from being part of California Convergence is just seeing how others are doing this work—involving youth in setting priorities, getting out into the community to change

behavior and change policy. That’s when we see the biggest impact, when the community is involved in setting priorities,” says Tyler-O’Shea.

California Convergence is a network of people who are passionate about creating healthier communities. Across the state, our members are working together to determine shared priorities, identify resources and connect with people and organizations that can help us fight for—and win—lasting change. The California Convergence Coordinating Office is a project of the Public Health Institute.

CALIFORNIA CONVERGENCE

californiaconvergence.org

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