

A Game Changer for South Sacramento



It was when the lawn chairs started showing up that Phil Bensing knew he had a hit on his hands.

Phil is one of the staff members of Sacramento's Health Education Council (HEC), which helped coordinate a basketball league in South Sacramento's Valley Hi Park, through a Kaiser Permanente HEAL Zone grant. The park had a reputation for violence; in fact, during a walk audit by residents, faith groups and HEC staff to determine what activities would help create a healthier neighborhood, gunshots were fired. The goal of the basketball league was an ambitious one: to increase positive activities in the park and thereby decrease violence.

After the league was formed, the first week or so saw only a handful of spectators, sitting in chairs donated for the occasion by local partners at Valley Hi Covenant Church. Youth from the community played their first game on a court marred with potholes, with trees hanging over the basket. But two weeks later, after calls from league organizers, the city filled the potholes and trimmed the trees.

Attendance steadily grew. "By week four," Phil says, "we had 100 residents out there watching. We had a PA system, jerseys, and neighbors bringing chairs and bar stools over." Volunteers from Bayside of South Sacramento provided

coaches and a security team. Families barbecued nearby and kids climbed on play equipment that had previously sat unused. Soccer and volleyball games sprouted.

For the young players, ages 14 to 18, the league had lasting impacts as well. Phil explains that at first the youth looked down on drinking plain water with strawberries as opposed to high-sugar sports drinks. But by the end of the eight weeks, as a result of healthy beverage education, they would head over to the “hydration station” to request water.

Even the Sacramento Police Captain, initially skeptical that a basketball game would help the neighborhood, told a local TV station that “the park is infused with so much great activity, I now go weekly as a fan.”

Since the league ended, positive activities at the park have continued. Church groups cleaned up

graffiti, ripped up weeds and fixed the volleyball net. Zumba classes and walking groups continue. According to HEC HEAL Zone Program Manager, Shaunda Johnson, another league is in the works and, most importantly, the park is still being used by neighboring families.

It’s this kind of long-term transformation that the Health Education Council – and California Convergence – are aiming for. As noted by Dana Fields Johnson, HEC Program Director, “our participation in California Convergence over the last couple years has really reaffirmed the importance of involving residents in our work and building their skills to create lasting changes in their communities.”

And it’s transformation that can start with a basketball league.



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