

CHANGES

Creating a Healthier Southern California, Step-by-Step

Take a walk through Santa Ana's Madison Park neighborhood on a Saturday and you might think you're just seeing moms at a Zumba class or seniors taking yoga. But what you're really seeing are neighbors "on fire to create change in their community," says California Convergence member Dana Richardson of Community Health Improvement Partners, based in San Diego.

Dana knows, because he just finished advising a cadre of 25 resident leaders, members of the Madison Park Neighborhood Association. The association, which provided the spark that made the exercise classes happen, now has concrete plans to build a community garden that will host gardening and nutrition classes for elementary school children and adults alike. And through the Resident Leadership Academy that Dana

helped facilitate, the residents now have the skills they need to continue creating a healthier community.

Dana connected with the Madison Park residents through his work with the Community Health Action Network for Growth through Equity and Sustainability, aka CHANGES. This regional network was formed in 2011 by University of California Irvine professor Victor Becerra, Dana and others who recognized their mutual interest in addressing the persistent health challenges in underserved Southern California communities.

"Members of the CHANGES network come from all over Orange, San Diego and Riverside counties," explains Victor. "We work in diverse arenas – urban planning, transportation, public health, housing. We work in the public and nonprofit sector and in academia. What we have in common is a desire to create healthier communities through changes in the built environment and through policy changes that ripple upward from communities."

Starting in late 2011, Victor explains, the group met monthly to learn from each other and share resources around three primary





exchange whereby resident leaders from Orange, San Diego and Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties can all learn from each other.

And whether they learn how to bring in Zumba classes, how to advocate for a safe neighborhood park, or how to connect their local efforts to broader regional change, these resident leaders will be learning from each other – because after all, as Dana says, “to empower neighborhoods anywhere in southern California helps facilitate change for everyone.”

activities: disseminating promising practices, influencing the evolving political landscape, and growing the body of research in support of community health improvement efforts. “And overarching all of our work is a belief that it’s essential for resident leaders to become effective advocates for change in their own communities.”

It’s this belief that led the CHANGES collaborative to work with Jose Rea, board president of the Madison Park neighborhood association, to develop the Resident Leadership Academy. “I know from past experience – painful experience – that changes will not be sustainable if there is not resident leadership,” says Dana. “So helping to facilitate the Resident Leadership Academy is one of my contributions to making sure these changes stick around.”

The promising results of CHANGES’ early work – and its resonance with California Convergence’s strategy of building regional alliances for wider impact – led California Convergence to co-write a grant with CHANGES. The grant, from the national Convergence Partnership, will enable CHANGES to further hone and secure long term investments in its strategic vision. Already in the works are efforts to create a regional leadership

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