

## **Best Practices for Engaging the Spanish-speaking Community in Environmental Health, Environmental Justice and Environmental Quality Issues**

In May 2004 EPA awarded Groundwork Denver (GWD) a grant to identify, train and assist monolingual Spanish speaking residents of the North Denver and Commerce City in the use of the Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) Model. The CPS Model represents a systematic, community-based approach for stakeholders to achieve lasting solutions to local environmental and/or public health issues or concerns. The model includes seven elements: 1) Issue Identification and Strategic Goal Setting, 2) Community Capacity Building and Leadership Development, 3) Consensus Building and Dispute Resolution, 4) Multi-stakeholder Partnership and Leveraging Resources, 5) Constructive Engagement by Relevant Stakeholders, 6) Sound Management and Implementation, and 7) Evaluation, Lessons Learned, and Replication of Best Practices.

GWD recognized that Denver's Latino residents whose first or only language is Spanish are very underrepresented in civic, governmental, and environmental processes for various reasons including distrust of government agencies, long work hours, and linguistic, cultural and educational barriers. These residents had been very difficult to engage with regards to environmental issues even though they experience negative environmental effects more than the population as a whole. The mostly Latino residents of North Denver and Commerce City live in a heavily industrialized area with nearly 500 regulated facilities and three Superfund sites. This part of Denver is also a major transportation corridor with over 10,000 trucks passing through or idling in truck stops and nearby industrial facilities. Old, often substandard housing, results in a pocket of high prevalence of lead poisoning as well as numerous indoor air quality issues.

GWD chose to use a health promoter, or *promotora*, model as its core method for reaching this population. Commonly employed in Mexico and other Latin American countries, these visits involve traveling lay health workers who canvass neighborhoods, house to house, to address health concerns. These visits were used to engage and educate the residents about environmental health issues as a first step towards building community capacity and a community voice to develop a community vision for addressing environmental issues. Through this process, community leaders were identified and trained. These leaders have subsequently formed their own groups working towards solving problems in the community of particular interest to them. For example, Padres Latinos de Commerce City (PLCC) recently planned and held a health fair for the community that covered issues of lead poisoning, nutrition, and car and bike safety.

GWD also conducted Photovoice projects in the North Denver area. Used throughout the world with marginalized communities, Photovoice has proved to be an effective tool for engagement using photography as a medium. The Photovoice process enables people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns; to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs; and to engage policy makers.

This guide outlines 'Best Practices' with regards to engaging the mono-lingual Spanish-speaking communities in solving environmental problems. It draws on the experience of GWD through the EPA CPS grant program as well as interviews at the local and national level with various organizations that GWD connected with during the CPS program.

### **Tapping into what matters....**

In any community organizing, it is imperative to "engage people where they are at, not where you want them to be." To that end, understanding that environmental concerns may not be on the list of priorities

for the Latino population is paramount. It is especially challenging to engage newly arrived immigrants for whom finding gainful employment is often an all-encompassing priority.

Approaching an environmental program from the perspective of justice and equal access to basic needs immediately makes the issues more relevant to people's lives. Whenever possible, try

to link issues. Make the environmental aspect of

your program an extension of a more pressing issue such as education, park space, soccer fields, urban redevelopment or air and water quality. Most importantly, underline that your environmental program focuses on the health and well-being of families and children. Engaging women with children is a great strategy because mothers always want to improve the lives of their children. As a consequence, focusing on safe spaces where their children can play, water quality in the neighborhood, street safety and clean-up, and air pollution strikes a chord. Immigrants bring with them the same concerns as your average American – livable communities where their children are safe and healthy. Engagement becomes easier if the environmental program is framed keeping this in mind.

***Make the environmental aspect of your program an extension of a more pressing issue.***

## **Education as first step**

Not only are environmental issues lower on the priority list, but this population often lags behind in terms of information about these issues and/or access to that information. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, only one in three Latinos who speak only Spanish go online and for many new immigrants, reading levels are low even in Spanish. Residents often not only lack knowledge about a particular issue but do not know where to get information about an issue even if they are interested. For example, people might be willing to participate in a recycling program but do not know how to obtain a bin. Others might lack information about how their children's health can be impacted by environmental factors in the home and do not know who to contact if they have concerns.

Organizations have to be willing to dedicate additional time to the education and capacity-building aspect of their program when working with this population. This is a slow and incremental process that involves informing people about an issue, making it relevant to their lives, building their confidence and finally convincing them to act.

## **Communication Skills and a Spirit of Collaboration**

Engaging people on an issue is about relationship building and relationship building is about communication skills. The way we talk and listen to people as well as our demeanor and sensitivity goes a long way in terms of gaining trust and breaking down barriers. People are more prone to participate when you have a relationship with them. Like most people, Latinos respond to those who convey intention, a respectful approach and a strong commitment to the community. It will be the relationship-building which will engage this population initially, not necessarily the issue.

***Listen to residents' concerns.***

***Tap into people's value systems.***

***Build relationships.***

With that attitude in mind, implementers of a program have to be willing to go to churches, schools, and door-to-door to disseminate information. The grassroots approach is the most effective way to educate this population. Instead of selling the community an idea, organizations must go into the relationship making an honest and open attempt to listen to residents' concerns.

Once again, the women and child-centered strategy works well. Identifying one or two women in the community who are known, respected, and passionate about an issue in their neighborhood can be a catalyst for your program. Gaining their trust can then open the door to the rest of the community.

Most important in this relationship dynamic is an understanding that this community has a lot to offer. Needless to say the “we know better approach” or “let us implement this project for you” is not effective and only serves to discourage collaboration and further alienate this community. Instead, “What skills can we exchange to make this a mutually beneficial relationship?” or “how can we work together to make a difference?” sets up a collaborative dynamic where cross-cultural learning and skills-sharing will enrich a program.

Just as issues related to the health and well-being of their children engages this community, so does actually involving their children in a project. Holding health events that are geared towards children, or nutrition and healthy lifestyles classes that bring women and their children together to talk about health and environmental concerns are examples of successful approaches. Or, for example, hiring youth to run a garden project and farmer’s market can effect behavioral changes in the youth that can transfer to the parents.

Ultimately, people want to be involved in something meaningful where their contribution is valued and makes a concrete difference. Rather than hearing about big, vague ideas, people need something tangible to do. Start with small projects where results can be measured. Neighborhood clean-up days or tree-planting initiatives can be effective because people are willing to do things when, at the end of the day, they feel like they have accomplished something.

## **Providing Incentives in Organizing**

The issue of providing incentives to engage people is a difficult one. On the one hand, especially for those newly arrived, earning a living wage is their main concern. Therefore, any monetary benefit will encourage more participation. Stipends given to the youth are an extra motivation. However, some caution that offering incentives at the beginning actually makes it difficult to encourage participation later if there was no reward attached to it. Whatever the approach, at least the offer of free food at informational or educational meetings is courteous and encourages community building.

## **Cultural Intricacies**

Once a potential program has been identified through outreach and education, it is then not enough to just hire a Spanish speaker and translate a few brochures. Language is only one component of a multitude of barriers that prevent this population from participating regularly in neighborhood or citywide projects. It is very important that the residents be able to identify with the program, either through its staff or through the nature of what is being accomplished. It is better to have the implementers of a program match the culture and language of the constituency you are trying to engage. In order for organizations to ultimately be effective and inclusive, it is important that the constituents being served continue to be represented within the staff of the organization.

***It is not enough to just hire a Spanish speaker and translate a few brochures.***

Having some link to Latino culture while immigrants are putting roots down in a new home assuages the sense of alienation and isolation people often feel in these communities. A cultural connection could be established in a tree-planting initiative, for example, by pulling traditions from the community and making it a symbolic event with cultural dancers and a ceremonial blessing of the ground. At a community health fair for children in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood, organizations can offer Mexican food and have piñatas to make residents feel comfortable.

## **Building Trust as Key to Engagement**

Gaining the trust of the mono-lingual Spanish-speaking community before engaging them in any program can never be overemphasized. This is undoubtedly the most important aspect of a program's success. This trust comes through one-on-one interactions, door-to-door work like the *Promotora* program and through word of mouth. It also comes through a continuous and visible presence in the community and is a relationship that builds over time. It is then regularly cultivated by consistent, transparent and culturally sensitive staff.

Barriers to gaining this trust are many, especially when promoting an environmental agenda. Too often, environmental organizations have not only dictated the agenda for the Latino community but have pointed the finger at immigrants as one of the causes of environmental degradation. Consequently, Latinos often approach an environmental organization with a barrier of skepticism and distrust.

***Trust comes from a visible presence in the community and culturally sensitive staff.***

In addition, staff should be knowledgeable about where people are from and why they came to this country as well as be sensitive to their status in the U.S. Undocumented status is an especially important reality to recognize in any organizing work. Fear of the government, authority figures or any unknown person plays out significantly in an immigrant's day to day reality. Therefore, participation if it involves public recognition or public action can be a very threatening prospect. Even if immigrants are documented they may have been raised by undocumented parents where civic engagement was never a way of life. Any environmental program with this community must involve assurances that there is very little risk in getting involved or that they will receive adequate support if their participation poses a risk to their status. Assuaging this fear is therefore crucial to any program. This makes cultivating relationships all the more necessary.

Ideally, an organization has its offices in the community where it wishes to organize. Even if the offices aren't in the neighborhood, people want 'officials' from the organization to make an effort to get to know the local leadership and residents in the community and take the time to understand who they are. Residents need to see the commitment of the entire organization. This presence is essential in averting any suspicion, fear or confusion as to what the organization's role is within the community.

***The primary purpose should be to build new relationships and in effect, build community.***

For any program to be effective, it has to be long-term. Engaging the mono-lingual Spanish-speaking population is complex and something that happens gradually over time. Furthermore, if you approach any project from the perspective of deliverables and just getting the job done, people will be less willing to participate. The primary purpose should be to build new relationships and in effect, build community. It is these relationships built on trust and mutual respect that will be the key in ensuring the continued viability and success of a program.

## **Outreach methods and community resources**

The most effective way to engage and educate this community about environmental issues is through word-of-mouth. Although flyers and brochures are good as a reminder, no community organization should use this as their main method of outreach. When flyers are used, they should indicate that the event is in Spanish and if possible, have pictures of the organizers and their names to show that they are Latino. There are also additional allies and resources that can help get the message across.

In most cities with a large Latino population, there are many Spanish-language and bilingual newspapers in which to advertise. Many of the radio stations run public service announcements sponsored by La Red

Hispana (Hispanic Communications Network), a Spanish language communications company that produces culturally-relevant programming on health care, science and technology, financial literacy, home ownership, and a range of other topics ([www.hcnmedia.com](http://www.hcnmedia.com)). Spanish-language television channels are also ways in which people hear about issues going on in their communities. Like the radio and flyers, however, if this information and education is not followed up by personal contact, there is a decreasing likelihood that information alone will encourage this population to act.

If possible, organizations need to do their outreach for a program through an already established network at churches, schools, nonprofits, or through ESL classes, parent groups, soccer leagues etc. Partnering with social, cultural and community organizations that have existing long-term relationships with the Spanish-speaking community is also helpful in order to build trust and lend legitimacy to any program. The level of trust that people already have with an existing organization or network can then be transferred to your organization.

Many Latinos feel connected to their community through their children's schools. In fact, this is most often where they find out about what is going on in their community. Flyers can be sent home through the children or parent groups can be contacted. Because it's coming from the school, it immediately becomes more relevant.

Churches are effective venues for outreach as well. As an institution, the Catholic Church holds a lot of sway with the Spanish-speaking population; especially those that are more recently arrived. Forums can be conducted after services or flyers handed out before or after mass.

Whenever possible, piggybacking on another event which parents/residents will already be attending (e.g. open house at a school, parent/teacher interviews, church services) is best. This reinforces the idea of a program concerned about the welfare of their children but also takes into account the limited time that people have.

If organizations are looking for other good places to hand out flyers and start initial conversations with people, the grocery stores and flea markets in predominantly Latino neighborhoods are usually prime spots with heavy traffic.

## **The Promotora model – An effective strategy for engagement**

### ***Why the Promotora model?***

Because of its cultural relevance and direct contact approach, the *Promotora* model has been touted by various organizations and individuals as one of the most effective ways in which to engage the Spanish-speaking community. Relative to trainings, events and community meetings, it is a more reliable method of conveying information and ensuring implementation of any environmental health and environmental quality program.

This model involves traveling lay health workers who canvass neighborhoods, house to house, to

address health concerns. It is commonly employed in Latin America and increasingly used in the United States to reach Latino communities. The *Promotora* model directly addresses the key issue in engaging the monolingual Spanish speaking community – building trust. In one-on-one visits, health workers can not only inform residents about environmental health concerns but can hear the concerns and interests of each family. Oftentimes, these visits are less about the information that is conveyed and more about relationship-building. The end result of this process is an established trust between the health worker and the resident. Eventually, this trust and commitment often precedes the health workers' message making it easy to encourage residents to become involved in any initiative they propose. People within the

Latino community are always more predisposed to attend a meeting or an event because someone told them about it, not because they saw a flyer or heard it on the radio.

Although the *Promotora* model is not the most efficient method of outreach with regards to numbers reached and cost, it is important to take a qualitative and not quantitative perspective. Because of the personal contact and focus on their particular needs, residents are more likely to understand the information and make a change in their lives. Therefore, even though the initial investment is larger compared to other methods (e.g. flyers, radio/television announcements), the return on investment in terms of educating the public and subsequent behavioral changes is much higher.

This model works well for the monolingual Spanish-speaking community because the traditional means of disseminating information (e.g. Internet, newspaper, films) are not reaching this population. Latino families, especially stay-at-home mothers, rarely have access to the Internet and rely much more on their informal social networks to receive information. Without personal visits to homes, it is almost impossible to connect with the predominantly isolated monolingual Spanish-speaking women who, because of language, culture and education are rarely visible in the community.

### ***What works? – Best practices and lessons learned within the Promotora model***

#### **Cultural and gender considerations**

It is very important that the residents in the communities targeted somehow identify with the health worker. Therefore, in addition to the health worker being Spanish-speaking, it is equally critical for that person to communicate in a culturally relevant manner. Since outsiders are naturally viewed with suspicion, the worker is ideally a member of the community and mirrors those s/he is serving. Once the first contact has been made and trust established, staff that is not Latino can follow up provided they have the language skills and cultural understanding.

Not only should the model be aware of cultural dynamics but gender dynamics must be considered as well. For home visits done during the day, health workers will most likely encounter a woman at home alone. For these women, opening a door to a man, even if he is Latino, could present both a safety and cultural norm concern. Inviting a man into your home when your husband is not around can be viewed with suspicion by other members of the community. Keeping these dynamics in mind, residents are likely to be most receptive to a middle-aged Spanish-speaking Latina.

In Latino culture, the mother is also the backbone of the family. A large percentage of immigrant mothers are one hundred percent focused on the lives of their children. For this reason, they will often be more receptive and make time for environmental health concerns. However, the men generally make the decisions in the home, and awareness of the cohesiveness of Latino couples is important. When talking to couples, the woman will often look to her husband first for a response and often say nothing, even though in prior conversations with her alone, she was talkative. Therefore, a follow-up visit when the husband is at home might be beneficial to ensure action or implementation.

#### **Combating the fear factor**

The fear factor of being an immigrant needs to be taken into account in any interaction with the Spanish-speaking community. In the *Promotora* model, it is especially important to use existing and trusted social and cultural groups within the community. Outreach to schools, churches and community organizations is essential and time should be spent connecting with those leaders. Official badges and shirts with an identifying logo also help make the health worker look more legitimate and approachable.

#### **Pre-canvassing**

A certain amount of pre-canvassing is also valuable. This is not so much to relay the content of an initiative but comes from the understanding that people need to receive information at least three times before it is absorbed. For example, a mother sees a flyer, then hears something on the radio, and then a

health worker comes to visit and the information. After the health worker visit, the issue becomes pertinent to her and her family.

### **Adaptability**

A willingness on the part of the health worker to be open and receptive to any issues or concerns that come up is paramount to the model. Trying to have a short visit attempting to simply deliver the information will be an unsuccessful interaction and rarely build the type of relationship that you need.

Health workers should also be respectful of residents' schedules. Mornings are usually a preferred time to visit homes as the husband is usually at work and the children are in school. Dinner time is culturally a very important time to spend with family, so evening visits are not recommended.

With regards to the information transmitted, it is important to adapt to residents' level of education in addition to making it relevant to their immediate needs and concerns. As mentioned before, environmental concerns are not going to be high on the priority list for Latino immigrants. However, most immigrant families are very open to learning more about topics related to their well-being and the well-being of their children.

To that end, information that is presented in the *promotora* visits should be geared accordingly and health workers trained adequately. Not only should the health worker be knowledgeable about the environmental health topics, but s/he should have information about other agencies that can effectively address residents' additional concerns.

## **Photovoice – speaking out through photography**

Employed throughout the world, Photovoice is an effective methodology used to give voice to marginalized communities.

According to its founders, Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, "Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community

## **Health worker training**

It is crucial to adequately and thoroughly train the health workers. The training should be formal, structured and not only cover the information being conveyed but also personal safety for the Promotoras. Having a daily meeting with health workers is also important to keep everyone informed, focused and motivated.

## **Tangible Results**

Having an immediate satisfaction component, like providing a new smoke detector for example, is also useful in promoting a program and getting buy-in. Follow-through and tangible results are essential to gaining and keeping the trust of this community. Residents need to see that the health workers are committed to the community through a consistent presence and follow-up, a transparent program and a history working in the community.

The *Promotora* model most thoroughly addresses the obstacles and barriers to engagement encountered with the monolingual Spanish-speaking community. If organization's are willing to invest the time, effort and training into developing such a model, it undoubtedly yields not only satisfactory results but the possibility of identifying and cultivating community leaders, galvanizing civic engagement and effecting significant change with regards to environmental health, environmental justice and environmental quality issues.

through a specific photographic technique. It entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for social action and change, in their own communities."

## **The technique**

Multiple sessions are conducted with an identified group of between 10 to 15 people wherein the group learns about the technical

aspects of taking photos and then engages in a discussion as to the strengths and issues in their community. They are then given cameras in order to take photos reflecting these strengths and concerns. In subsequent sessions, the group discusses and chooses the photos that most accurately convey their message, each telling stories about the photos they have taken and what they mean. Captions are then written for each photo and an exhibit produced that is presented by the group to appropriate policy makers.

### **Tapping into Best Practices**

Photovoice allows communities to tap into what matters in their neighborhoods, encourages discussions of issues in a safe environment, and allows a group to come to a collective vision based on shared experience. It is therefore very conducive to being adapted towards engaging communities on issues of environmental health, environmental justice and environmental quality in their neighborhoods.

Additionally, it employs many of the best practices outlined in this guide when engaging the mono-lingual Spanish speaking community, including working with established networks like churches or schools to identify an appropriate group, making the issues relevant to people's lives since they themselves identify those issues and conducting multiple sessions for trust-building within the group and with the facilitators.

In dealing with a population where speaking out is a primary concern, Photovoice also gives people the ability to have the photos speak for them, preserving their anonymity if needed or giving them something to 'hide behind' if they are fearful or uncomfortable with public speaking. Photovoice provides an effective medium through which to empower individuals because if conducted properly, it allows everyone to participate in the process and present at least one of the photos they have taken.

### **Reflecting the CPS model**

Photovoice employs many of the elements of the CPS model encouraging issue identification, community engagement and leadership development. It employs the participatory approach to discuss the issues of concern and to select the photos that best reflect the group's concerns. It ultimately builds trust and community, providing a platform and safe space in which to discuss issues that may not otherwise be talked about.

In addition, over the course of this process, natural leaders of the group will be identified. Photovoice is a great way to engage this population through a concrete project with tangible results. Involvement of these individuals in subsequent groups committed to environmental health and environmental justice issues can stem from this methodology.

### ***Acknowledgements***

*We would like to acknowledge the support of the Office of Environmental Justice at the Environmental Protection Agency for this project. In addition to the grant support, EPA OEJ provided resources and staff support that made this project a success. Particular gratitude is owed to our grant manager, Delta Valente, for all of her insights and support throughout the process. We would also like to support the EPA Region 8 Office of Environmental Justice for local support of the project. Nancy Reish, EPA Region 8, provided us with invaluable local technical support.*

*We would also like to recognize the former Executive Director and the former Chief Operations Officer of Groundwork Denver, Fernando Pineda-Reyes and Diana Pineda, for their insight into the community and tireless efforts running the Promotora effort and CPS grant project for its first two years.*