

### **The Power Building Long Game: Lake County Build a Generation**

There is a growing consensus in public health that addressing equity issues is a necessary part of reducing the prevalence of our most burdensome challenges, like chronic disease. Over the last couple decades, public health recognized that individual behavior change interventions (e.g. public health 1.0) were having little effect on risk factors like physical inactivity because they ignored causally dominant environmental factors (e.g. the social-ecological model). They set out to conceptually and empirically explore how to alter system factors to impact health, which revealed yet another barrier: systems of oppression.

Oppressive factors are pervasive and take many forms, from normative racial biases to entrenched policies that were intentionally designed to benefit powerful white people. Just like environmental factors reduce the effectiveness of individual behavior change efforts, oppression factors can reduce (or even reverse) the benefits of environmental change efforts.

Some built environment interventions in low income communities offer a clear theoretical example. Improvements to a community's walkability are a necessary part of increasing physical activity rates, but these efforts can potentially exacerbate gentrification and displacement.<sup>1</sup> While the neighborhood gets better sidewalks, more trees, and pedestrian bridges, persistent oppressive factors remain. Because of historically racist mortgage lending practices like redlining, few neighborhood residents own their housing. Current economic development policies that favor affluent transplants and a chronic lack of employment opportunities also remain. Meanwhile, landlords notice these built environment improvements and recognize their opportunity to increase the return on their property investments by renovating, attracting wealthier tenants, and raising rent. They may also recognize that their newer, wealthier tenants prefer to live next to people who look and act like them, which incents efforts to make their properties unaffordable for current tenants. Also because of underlying inequities, these tenants may not be able to afford legal representation to contest unjust evictions or the political clout to bring elected leaders to their defense.

Understanding individual-environment-oppression relationships required public health to adopt community-centric operating philosophies, like community-based participatory research (CBPR). These increasingly inclusive partnership approaches brought public health into contact with people and groups who had been working to change oppressive systems for decades. Lake County Build a Generation (LCBAG) is one of these groups. LCBAG has been operating since the 1990's, when the Colorado Department of Public Safety selected several Colorado communities to pioneer the Communities That Care model for preventing youth criminal behavior. Today, LCBAG is supported by Lake County Public Health, but it – not the agency – is the explicit organizing entity for all lake county's community-led health partnerships and initiatives.

LCBAG was the leading entity for public health's community health assessment and improvement plan, and they have produced more in-depth assessments and plans around youth and senior health. These plans and the resulting initiatives were driven by highly inclusive steering committees with community members, students, parents, school officials, local elected leaders, and nonprofit organizations leading along with LCBAG and public health agency staff. This authentic community engagement approach means that their efforts are substantially informed by a wide variety of county residents. This level of participation demonstrates to elected leaders and other powerful interests that their constituents are deeply committed collectively improving their community's health.

Concurrent with this extensive assessment and planning process, LCBAG sought to authentically engage the county's marginalized Latino community. Lake county is home to many recent and established immigrants, mostly from Mexico, who comprise roughly half of the county's total population. They were actively recruited to work in the service industry in the ski resorts of Eagle and Summit counties, and many have found relatively affordable housing in Lake County. But these housing options are often segregated and substandard, including an isolated mobile home park a few miles north of Leadville.<sup>2</sup> Key informant interviewees indicated that many of the units in this park are unhealthy environments, and the park being owned by an out of state company has limited official government options for remediation.<sup>3</sup> The same interviewees also lamented a lack of clear enforcement options to protect tenants, including children, in some older Leadville buildings with known lead issues. These housing issues, language barriers and cultural segregation,<sup>4</sup> geographic isolation, and long (and often dangerous) commutes to low-wage jobs,<sup>5</sup> combine with community-wide systemic factors like food access to perpetuate deep health inequities that are unique to this population.

Though they have dedicated advocates and allies in LCBAG, this community needs its own source of power to bring about healthful and equitable changes. LCBAG's promotora program, Proyecto Promotora, is a step in this direction. This pilot program, which ran for 9-months in 2016, used CBPR methods to study this community's access to outdoor exercise and recreation opportunities. The resulting data will inform outdoor programming and facility improvements that help promote higher physical activity rates. Another potential impact will be increased trust between public health (LCBAG) and this community, as well as increased collective efficacy from seeing how their input and leadership can bring about change. This success could lead to increased participation in and leadership of wider community health efforts, including safe and affordable housing.

A major barrier to this effort is the high rate of undocumented immigrants living in this community.<sup>3</sup> Worrying about yourself or your family members being arrested and deported can understandably limit willingness to participate in public advocacy. Should it continue, the promotora program could cultivate leaders who can both listen to their constituents who fear public exposure and relay those concerns to municipal leaders (or become those leaders).

### **Importance for Local HiAP**

While roughly half of Lake County's population are established or recent Mexican immigrants, it's elected and executive leadership does not include members of that community.<sup>6,3</sup> This imbalance will likely hamper progress on improving health outcomes. This is not to say that it will completely impede progress, but without addressing this massive power imbalance and cultural segregation, structural improvements run a greater risk of exacerbating inequities. If the only way that county leaders interact with this community is through law enforcement or health related surveys, they will not be able to competently represent that community or understand their needs.

## Conclusion

LCBAG's promotora and other CBPR-based approaches should encourage more civic engagement, while simultaneously targeting specific health outcomes. Community health partnerships in areas with similar cultural segregation can learn from LCBAG's power-building approach.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chum, A. (2015). The impact of gentrification on residential evictions. *Urban Geography*, 1-16.

<sup>2</sup> Hiemstra, N. (2010). Immigrant "illegality" as neoliberal governmentality in leadville, colorado. *Antipode*, 42(1), 74. 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00732.x

<sup>3</sup> Key Informant Interviewee. (2017). Health in All Policies at the Local Level. Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials. Conducted in August, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Hiemstra, N. (2008). Spatial disjunctures in the New West: Latino immigration to Leadville, Colorado. In R. C. Jones (Ed.), *Immigrants outside megalopolis* (pp.89-114). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

<sup>5</sup> Klick, M. T. (2015). Immigration, community integration and public health in Colorado's Rocky Mountains: An overview and its governance. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 10(3), 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> Lake County Government Website. <http://lakecountyco.com/directory#Commissioner>. Accessed 3/12/2018