POWER BUILDING IN LONG BEACH

A Building Healthy Communities Long Beach Case Study
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In Health and Well-Being, Place Matters.

People often think of healthcare access when they think of what’s needed to keep someone healthy. The truth is, your zip code is more important to your health because with it comes access to resources needed to make healthy choices. In Long Beach, residents can expect to live longer if they live in East Long Beach, an area with more green space and better air quality, among other factors. In West Long Beach, residents can see the shipping containers at the Port of Long Beach from their bedroom window and smell diesel exhaust from the 710 freeway. Auto body shops line main thoroughfares and parks are few and far between. Not surprisingly, the life expectancy is significantly lower compared to other areas in the city.

Rates of diseases that are otherwise preventable in communities of color are due, in large part, to environmental injustice brought on by structural racism, defined as the totality of ways in which societies

“Equity in health implies that ideally everyone should have a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential and, more pragmatically, that no one should be disadvantaged from achieving this potential, if it can be avoided.”

WHITEHEAD, 1990
foster racial discrimination, through mutually reinforcing inequitable systems (e.g., housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, criminal justice, etc.) that in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources \(^{(1)}\). These resources include, but are not limited to, access to healthy food, quality schools, safe housing, and open space. Continued disinvestment in these communities of color result in failing infrastructure and blight, further contributing to poor mental and physical health among residents in these communities. This results in more chronic conditions and higher mortality in low income communities and communities of color, leading to significant gaps in health status between rich and poor, and between racial/ethnic minorities and non-Hispanic Whites.

Communities of color, such as Boyle Heights, South Los Angeles, and Central/West Long Beach, are a lasting legacy of redlining. Initiated in 1934 by the Federal Housing Administration, redlining is the legal practice which involved marking maps with red lines to delineate neighborhoods where mortgages were denied to marginalized, racialized groups to steer them away from white neighborhoods \(^{(2)}\). Redlining is but one example of structural racism against black and brown communities. Any account of structural racism in the U.S., however, must include the treatment of Indigenous groups in North America, including the Tongva people, who inhabited the Los Angeles Basin and the Southern Channel Islands up to the late 1700s, after which forced relocation, enslavement, and loss of land to American settlers led to the eventual collapse of the Tongva way of life \(^{(3)}\). Legal systems of oppression began during these forced relocations of Indigenous people throughout the U.S. and continue today in the policies that put communities of color at greater risk of disease and disability.

**WHY CENTRAL/WEST LONG BEACH?**

Long Beach (LB) is the fifth largest city in Los Angeles County, California with a population of approximately 465,000. Selection of BHC sites was based on data from the 2009 California Health Interview Survey, which found the following disparities in Central/West LB:

- 45% of adults were obese compared to 21% of adults in both Los Angeles County and California
- Nearly twice as many adults reported fair/poor health (37%) compared to adults in the county (18%) and state (16%)
- 57% of households in Central/West Long Beach were low income compared to 44% in Los Angeles County
- Fewer parents in Central/West Long Beach report that their neighbors get along and can be trusted in comparison with state estimates
Place matters in health and well-being, and strategies to improve health outcomes are moving beyond traditional public health approaches that focus on changing individual level factors to place-based initiatives aimed at changing systems. This approach is centered on the recognition that neighborhood disinvestment is rooted in structural racism and perpetuated with the power imbalance that exists between residents and decision makers. To restore this balance, residents must be empowered to take an active role in decision making and a key strategy is to build residents’ capacity to analyze information and to develop skills to effectively advocate for change. Power building leads to better health outcomes by providing residents with the necessary skills to improve the social conditions that are at the root of health disparities.

Building Healthy Communities: Long Beach

Increasing resident power is the cornerstone of Building Healthy Communities (BHC), a groundbreaking 10-year, $1 billion place-based initiative funded by The California Endowment (TCE) designed to transform 14 communities across California with significant health inequities into healthy and safe communities where all residents have the opportunity to thrive regardless of their zip code. Doing so requires reversing the historical impact of racial and economic discrimination on communities of color and changing the narrative about what health equity looks like. TCE’s selection of Long Beach as one of the 14 sites focuses on neighborhoods in Central and West Long Beach, though the work of the collaborative has always gone beyond those boundaries. Launched in 2010, BHC Long Beach has since grown to a collaborative of more than 50 partner organizations working together to improve community health. BHC’s Theory of Change is about increasing social and political power to change policy and systems in order to create healthy environments to improve health. This transformation occurs through five drivers of change, one of which is building resident power.

Residents gain the knowledge and skills needed to play an integral role in decision making through direct involvement with BHC Long Beach and/or indirect involvement via their work with BHC Long Beach partner organizations. According to the Resident Power Survey conducted by the CSULB Center for Health Equity Research, the evaluation team for BHC Long Beach, residents spend an average of 5 hours a week on BHC Long Beach activities, including workshops and training programs designed to increase knowledge of various aspects of the decision-making process. Residents then gain skills through their involvement on campaigns and other advocacy work with BHC Long Beach or with a partner organization. These power-building activities include, but are not limited to, asserting their vision for a healthier community, identifying solutions to address community needs, reaching to other residents about community issues, speaking at City Council meetings against harmful projects, and visiting legislators at the State Capitol to advocate for funding to support specific programs. This case study examines power building within BHC Long Beach and describes the strategies that partners have undertaken to engage and empower Long Beach residents. However, to appreciate the significance of these efforts, it is important to understand what makes Long Beach unique.
Located at the southern tip of Los Angeles County, 25 miles from Downtown Los Angeles, Long Beach is the 7th largest city in the state with an estimated population of over 450,000. Uniquely positioned on the Pacific Coast, Long Beach is home to the 2nd busiest shipping port in the U.S. Eight million shipping containers pass through the Port of Long Beach each year and travel on 100 miles of railroad track or via the 710 corridor delivering goods to the rest of the country.

Downtown Long Beach is home to the Queen Mary Hotel, Aquarium of the Pacific, a recently modernized City Center, and the Long Beach Grand Prix - a few of the attractions that bring approximately 6 million tourists from all over the world and generate over $300 million in overall economic benefit. Seventy-five proposed or in-construction projects are set to bring even more economic benefit to the city. This includes a $195 million Broadway Block project and Shoreline Gateway, the city’s tallest tower that will hold 315 “ultra-luxury” apartments.

With these developments, Long Beach is geared to become a premier west coast tourist destination and the epitome of Southern California living. But not all residents benefit from these changes and communities of color in Central, West, and North Long Beach continue to be disproportionately burdened by air pollution, substandard housing, and failing infrastructure.

Disinvestment in these communities result in limited access to the things needed for optimal
physical and mental health, things such as clean air and open space to exercise, and fresh fruits and vegetables to maintain a healthy diet.

Long Beach is the 5th most diverse city in the U.S. based on the U.S. News diversity index (8). Approximately 51% of the population identifies as non-Hispanic White, 43% as Hispanic/Latino, 13% as Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 13% as African American/Black (9). Long Beach is a large city and coupled with this diversity are big differences in socio-demographic characteristics across different parts of the city.

Seventy-two percent of residents in Central Long Beach speak a language other than English at home, compared to only 22% in East Long Beach. Eleven percent of Central Long Beach residents 25 years old and over have a Bachelor's degree, compared to 48% of residents in East Long Beach, and 11% of residents in Central Long Beach are unemployed, compared to only 6% in East Long Beach. Not surprisingly, 32% of Central Long Beach residents live below the poverty level, compared to 12% in East Long Beach and 19.1% citywide (10). These differences contribute to poor health outcomes and result in disproportionate rates of disease within communities of color.

Failing infrastructure and lack of economic opportunities contribute to poor mental health among Central/West Long Beach residents. And for some residents, these stressors further exacerbate existing mental health conditions that stem from previous and current trauma. Cambodian refugees, for example, are among the most traumatized people in the U.S. due to the Khmer Rouge. More than 40 years later, Cambodians in Long Beach still experience debilitating mental illness, such as post-trauma stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Micro aggressions, overt racism, and fear of deportation plague Black and Latino residents, and further adding to this daily trauma is the over policing that is commonplace in Central/West Long Beach.

‘Disinvestment in these communities result in limited access to the things needed for optimal physical and mental health, things such as clean air and open space to exercise, and fresh fruits and vegetables to maintain a healthy diet.’
Health Outcomes

Low-income communities and communities of color experience disproportionate rates of disease and disability. Nowhere is this more evident than in Central/West Long Beach, where 45% of adults are obese compared to 21% of adults in both Los Angeles County and California, and nearly twice as many adults in the same area report fair/poor health (37%) compared to adults in the county (18%) and state (16%) (11).

Dr. Tony Iton of The California Endowment attributes these disparities to structural racialization, or the cumulative, race-based inequalities that result from the ways in which institutions operate to exclude communities of color from resources and opportunities. Discriminatory land use practices in Central/West Long Beach mean adult and youth residents have less green space and are more exposed to environmental toxins from nearby oil refineries and a high number of polluting businesses, such as auto repair shops. While Long Beach touts its status as being home to the 2nd busiest shipping port in the nation, its most vulnerable residents are exposed to diesel particulate matter from trucks and trains that transport containers from the Port of Long Beach through the city 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Central/West Long Beach residents also live less than 10 miles from the Southeast Resource Recovery Facility, or SERRF, one of only two incinerators in the state (12). SERRF processes an average of 1,290 tons of solid waste each day and in August 2018, the Long Beach City Council voted unanimously to allocate city funding for equipment maintenance and to allow the facility to continue burning waste until June 2024.

Limited economic opportunities lead to high rates of unemployment in communities of color. Compared to the state’s unemployment rate of 7.1%, 10.5% of Central Long Beach residents age 20-64 years are unemployed. Taking advantage of this vulnerability are predatory lenders that exist in higher numbers in Central/West Long Beach compared to other areas of the city. Combined, these social and health inequities mean that the average life expectancy for residents in Central/West Long Beach is 6 years shorter compared to residents in more affluent, majority white areas of the city, such as East Long Beach (76.7 years vs. 82.8 years).
Resident leaders and community organizers describe power building in Long Beach as multi-leveled, where residents learn skills to advocate at various levels of government. This multi-level approach is not skill-based or hierarchical in nature, but it is used to inform resident engagement and campaign strategies, as each issue requires working with a specific decision-making body. The Sidewalk Project is highlighted as an example of power building at the local level. Led by members of a walking club comprised mostly of Filipino elders, the hyper local campaign included a petition, letter writing, and mail-in post cards urging city council to complete the construction of a sidewalk at a local park in West Long Beach.

Other issues require residents to work at the regional and state level. These campaigns provide residents with opportunities to gain a higher skill set through formal trainings that are held over several days. Residents involved in this level of power building have a better understanding of how decision making at the regional and state level can impact the availability of resources for specific communities, such as culturally-informed mental health services for the Cambodian community, as is highlighted in the story on the Cambodian Advocacy Leadership Institute, or CALI. Residents involved in the institute learned about the decision-making process and public speaking, and used these skills during legislative visits at the state capital.

At the outermost level of power-building, residents work on cross-cultural issues with global implications. At East Yards Communities for Environmental Justice, residents fight for the right to breathe clean air and doing so requires advocacy at multiple levels of government. A multi-level approach to power building builds residents’ capacity to work with varying levels of government, from the Long Beach City Council to update the Climate Action Plan to the Environmental Protection Agency to speak out against projects that would increase goods movement in and out of the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, resulting in increased air pollution and ambient noise in surrounding communities of color.
LOCAL: The Sidewalk Project

Organized by the Filipino Migrant Center (FMC), a Walking Club meets every Saturday morning to have a light breakfast and walk several loops around a local park in West Long Beach. The Club is comprised of mostly Filipino elders who have been meeting since 2014 to socialize, discuss current events, and get some exercise. However, an incomplete section of a walking path forces group members to either step up onto the curb or continue their walk on the road, placing themselves at risk of getting hit by passing cars.

The Walking Club was concerned about safety, particularly for older members who had difficulty stepping onto the curb and for other park-goers, such as young mothers with baby strollers. The group began to talk about the issue in earnest after a member’s visiting brother stepped up onto the curb to avoid a passing car and fell, injuring his hand.

The group had to advocate at the city council level and in 2018, members gathered 150 signatures on a petition urging the city to finish the walking path. For many group members, collecting signatures was their first experience in advocacy work. This was easy for those who have previously held careers in customer service, but for others who may be a little more reserved, asking community members for their address and signature was daunting. To prepare, members participated in role-playing exercises before or after their weekly morning walks. With the help of FMC Community Organizer, Alex Montances, members were trained on how to approach people to ask for their signature on the petition.

When the city failed to act, Walking Club members brainstormed additional strategies. The Sidewalk Project launched in February 2019 and included postcards mailed directly to the council member to renew pressure, in addition to social media posts by FMC and letters of support by other organizations.

The campaign gathered over 100 postcards from supporters and over a dozen support letters from Long Beach organizations that share the same vision of keeping the community safe.
By June 2019, the group was able to secure a meeting with their council member, during which members spoke in a unified voice about their concerns over pedestrian safety and the need to complete the walking path. The meeting ended with a promise to begin construction in fiscal year 2020. After several delays due to COVID-19, the walking path was completed in July 2020, a successful end to 3 years of community organizing and advocacy.

Now that walking group members have organizing and advocacy experience under their belts, they are moving on to their next campaign — pushing for speed bumps to prevent street racing and installing a crosswalk so older adults have an easier time accessing a popular Filipino market.

Walking Club members want to do more than meet weekly for breakfast and exercise. They want to become an organization that focuses on multi-generational health-related projects, which will allow them to work side by side with young FMC interns. This allows older adults to learn skills from the younger generation, such as use of social media for outreach, and with their experience on the Sidewalk Project, older adults also have skills to share with the younger generation.

“I learned to be more vocal and I got rid of the shyness. When I was working, I didn’t even know my neighborhood. Get in the car, go to work, come back and get in the house. I didn’t even know my next door neighbor. Now I’m more sociable than before. I tried to avoid joining the Walking Club, but now I’m one of the more active members. That has really improved myself personally and socially.”

ESTER BELANGA
How Power is Built

Power building in Long Beach happens both in formal and informal spaces, such as at local parks and in living rooms. Community organizers engage residents when they can and where residents feel most comfortable, even if it means holding an impromptu meeting in an auntie’s living room to develop campaign strategies. Within these formal and informal spaces are relationship-building activities to promote trust, opportunities for residents to share their story and feel empowered while doing so, activities to gain leadership skills, and opportunities to work with other groups, all the while developing an organizing ethos. Long Beach community organizers agree that these five areas need to be present in order for power building to occur, for it to be strengthened, and for it to be sustained over time.
REGIONAL: Building Power in a Traumatized Community

Over 2 million Cambodians were killed, tortured, or starved to death during the Khmer Rouge Genocide 40 years ago. A study of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach documented an average of 15 different types of major trauma experienced during the genocide, such as exposure to bombings and combat; slave labor; starvation; separation from family members and kidnapping; brain-washing; being terrorized, including living under a constant threat of death; witnessing atrocities; murder of family members and friends; and other forms of torture (13).

Although two decades have passed since their resettlement in the U.S., the Cambodian population continues to have high rates of psychiatric disorders associated with trauma; 62% met the DMS-IV diagnosis criteria for PTSD and 51% met diagnostic criteria for major depression (14). If left unaddressed, experiences of extreme trauma can result in patterns of emotional distress, poor sleep, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and other health-compromising behaviors, which can lead to severe mental illness and chronic disease.

In fact, a study found that Cambodians had higher blood pressure and higher total blood cholesterol than the general U.S. population and Cambodians in the same study also had significantly higher rates of diabetes, even after adjusting for age and gender (15).

Despite having poor mental and physical health, Cambodians remain disconnected from government-sponsored and mainstream service programs due to barriers such as limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with the U.S. health care system. Despite these barriers, linguistically and culturally competent mental health providers are limited. With these barriers in mind, Cambodian-serving organizations have joined forces as the Cambodian Advocacy Collaborative (CAC) to advocate at the state level for more resources for the Cambodian community.
Galvanizing the Younger Generation: Vanndearlyn Vong

Vanndearlyn Vong joined CALI when she was just 16 years old while volunteering for the Khmer Parent Association (KPA). In 2019, Vanndearlyn was the youngest delegate to represent Democrats in the 70th Assembly District. Now, at age 21, she is the field coordinator for a local city council campaign.

**How did you become involved in advocacy?**
I was volunteering for KPA [Khmer Parent Association] at the time and Ms. Chan Hopson brought up the opportunity to join CALI [Cambodian Advocacy Leadership Institute] to me and my mom. I joined because it fit my school schedule, really. I didn’t have any experience in organizing and advocacy before this. I was on the student council, but didn’t advocate for anything in particular.

**What did you gain from CALI?**
My training with CALI gave me a very strong, very concrete foundation for what advocacy is and also gave me a strong foundation in terms of the skills I would need to continue doing advocacy work, like speaking with others – just public speaking. That was very big for me as a youth. My involvement with CALI, I see it very much as a launching pad for what I’ve been able to do afterward. I’ve tried to immerse myself in opportunities, like an internship with an assembly member. From there, I’ve interned with then city council member Lena Gonzalez and then I joined my first campaign for Roberto Uranga’s re-election. I just kept going and going, really just trying to learn anything I could. Like new skills or new understanding of how things work. In terms of the training, it definitely, 100% helped build my capacity and I feel like I’ve been applying what they’ve taught me ever since.

**How has your participation in CALI changed your understanding of the problems you see in your community?**
Prior to CALI, I was very much aware of what the issues were, especially of the ones that were relevant in my life, but since CALI, I now have a much better understanding of the Long Beach political landscape and of how things work in terms of organizations and officials, and how to activate people and get them involved, so that they join the effort to keep pushing for better.
How has community involvement benefitted you personally or professionally? In other words, what keeps you engaged?

At the forefront, it’s a lot of emotional satisfaction and fulfillment to know that, “Hey, I can help other people who come from similar situations that I’ve endured and I can either help them get access to resources or help make it better.”

BHCLB’s Resident Leadership Pathway

Smaller campaigns such as the Sidewalk Project provide opportunities for residents to work on issues at the local level, while gaining experience in organizing and advocacy. However, changing systems at the regional, state, and national level requires more knowledge and skills than can be gained through experience alone. BHCLB created the Resident Leadership Pathway to provide a more structured approach to leadership development. Within these formal spaces, residents gain knowledge of decision-making processes at different levels of the government, and the skills to influence these processes.

The People’s Planning School is a neighborhood-specific leadership training program designed for residents new to community change work. It is a free program designed for residents to learn critical city-planning tools and skills to improve the physical environment of their neighborhood and organize their neighbors for change. Each interactive class is centered on topics including active transportation, environmental health, violence prevention, healthy and affordable housing, food access, among other topics. The BHCLB Parent Committee is another example of leadership training for those new to advocacy. This parent-led committee is supported by diverse community organizations working to lift up parent voice for the success of all students. Together, members build community, work on issues to improve local schools, and develop leadership skills to advocate for equitable resources for all schools.

‘Power building leads to better health outcomes by providing residents with the necessary skills to improve the social conditions that are at the root of health disparities.’

Once residents are ready to move to the next stage of leadership development, the Long Beach Rising! Leadership Training Program offers a comprehensive civic engagement program for communities historically marginalized from political processes. A collaborative project of BHCLB, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, Long Beach Coalition for Good Jobs and a Healthy Community, and various community partners, the Long Beach Rising! Leadership Training Program includes training on community organizing, alliance building, civic-engagement strategies, power and political analysis, and strategy building to achieve justice.

The Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute welcomes resident leaders who want to take a more active role in the decision-making process. Institute participants learn about the role of local boards and commissions and how they can effectively serve on these bodies to advocate on behalf of communities that have been marginalized from the decision-making process. Participants engage in opportunities for learning, networking, placement preparation, and technical support and mentoring. Commissioners from Long Beach and other surrounding cities help facilitate sessions and/or share knowledge and experiences of their time serving in this role. Since 2010, 37 seats have been occupied by BHCLB-affiliated community leaders who have contributed to positive changes in the city.
In addition to the training programs described above, BHCLB partner organizations provide topic-specific training programs, such as the Housing Long Beach workshop on renters’ rights. In the workshop, residents gain the necessary skills to advocate for affordable and quality housing, and just cause evictions. The Latinos in Action leadership training aims to increase parent involvement in schools, and the East Yards Communities for Environmental Justice Fighting for Life Academy trains residents to advocate for the right to breathe clean air, among other environmental justice issues. A survey conducted by the CSULB Center for Health Equity Research found that over 60% of residents who attended BHCLB-affiliated trainings reported increased community involvement following the training program.

The CSULB center for Health Equity Research developed the Leadership Development Survey to find out how useful the training programs in the BHCLB Resident Leadership Pathway were to those who participated in them. The online survey was administered between December 2019 and February 2020. Below are some noteworthy findings from 75 resident leaders who took part in the survey.
Resident power is a key driver of change, but does involvement in BHC Long Beach contribute to leadership development? To answer this question, CHER developed the Resident Power Survey in collaboration with BHC Long Beach staff and partners as part of the evaluation of the initiative. The survey was administered in 2013, 2015, and 2018 to residents involved in BHC Long Beach directly by working on one of its many campaigns, or indirectly through their involvement with a partner organization. Surveys were available in three languages: English, Spanish, and Khmer. A total of 420 surveys were collected across three waves of data collection.
Campaign Involvement among Residents in BHCLB (n=189)

- 77% Know how to contact Long Beach government agency leaders
- 68% Know how to contact LBUSD leaders
- 74% Know how to contact Long Beach elected officials

Changes in Leadership and Organizing Skills among Residents in BHCLB (n=420)

- I have a better understanding of the impact of local government decisions: 79.5%
- I am able to get information related to issues that are important to me and/or my community: 86.3%
- I am able to get information that is relevant to decisions or policies that impact me &/or my community: 78.1%
- My skills in collecting, organizing, and analyzing information have improved: 89.3%
- I can figure out when a decision or policy benefits my community: 85.5%
- I am able to organize a group to work towards community change: 74.8%
- I am comfortable making public presentations on community issues: 76.7%
- I am comfortable making public presentations on community issues: 76.7%
GLOBAL: Fighting for Environmental Justice

Founded in 2001 by a group of community residents in Commerce/East Los Angeles concerned with the increasing environmental health impacts of industrial pollution, today East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (EYCEJ) fights for more than just air quality. Its mission is to work towards a safe and healthy environment for communities that are disproportionately suffering the negative impacts of industrial pollution. EYCEJ promotes full and authentic community participation in decision making and utilizes research-based information, workshops and trainings to empower residents to engage in policy making on issues with global implications.

While its work started on local issues, EYCEJ now works on issues that reach far and wide. Its leadership and organizing training program, Fighting for Life Academy, raises awareness of the impacts of polluting entities on local communities, as well as their cumulative impacts on climate change, and for that residents often find themselves advocating at the federal level with the Environmental Protection Agency. The academy is designed to build community leaders to fight against harmful projects and to demand a better environment for all residents regardless of their zip code. Participants learn about different community issues over a series of six workshops, and come away equipped with the knowledge and skills to advocate for changes they want to see for future generations.

With EYCEJ, residents work on cross-cultural issues that affect all residents. Within the Oil & Gas Subcommittee, residents learn about fossil fuel and its immediate and long-term impacts. Skill-building activities organized by residents, such as bike toxic tours, are designed to document and report incidents in order to continue educating the community and to hold companies and regulating agencies accountable. While the Oil & Gas Subcommittee was formed to explore legal action against the Phillips 66 Refinery, the group has since expanded its efforts to include other facilities. The subcommittee recognizes that doing this is the only way to achieve its goal of transitioning to a cleaner and more sustainable way of powering communities.

With community residents at the helm, EYCEJ has
had some major wins over the years. Residents fought back when Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railway proposed to build the Southern California International Gateway (SCIG) railyard near residential communities, schools, day care centers, senior centers, and churches. In May 2013, EYCEJ members and allies attended the LA City Council meeting, where many community residents who live directly next to the proposed site testified in opposition to the project. After city council voted in favor of SCIG, EYCEJ moved forward with litigation and won multiple lawsuits that have since delayed the project.

In 2015, after years of residents and EYCEJ staff engaging with Air Quality Management District to implement regulation to clean up Exide Technologies, the Department of Justice announced the permanent shutdown of the battery recycling plant. This put an end to over 30 years of emitting unacceptably high levels of lead and arsenic emissions in surrounding predominantly low-income Latino communities. But the fight is not over and residents continue to demand cleanup of all properties and communities directly impacted by Exide, an area that encompasses 10,000+ residential properties and over 110,000 residents in East LA, Boyle Heights, Commerce, Bell Gardens, Vernon, Cudahy, Maywood, Bell and Huntington Park. About 2,000 residential properties have had contaminated soil removed, but thousands more with lead levels above state limits remain uncleared.

On October 19, 2020, over 150 protesters, many of whom were residents in impacted communities, marched from Boyle Heights to the civic center in Los Angeles to demand accountability after the Department of Justice approved Exide’s bankruptcy plan, which allows the company to walk away from its polluted facility and leave the expensive cleanup to California taxpayers.

EYCEJ continues to empower residents to fight to live in a healthy environment. Through the Fighting for Life Academy and opportunities to put their skills into practice, residents have the knowledge to identify harmful projects and the power to dismantle environmental racism.
Galvanizing the Younger Generation: Taylor Thomas

Taylor Thomas joined as a member at East Yards Communities for Environmental Justice while in college after a friend invited her to a meeting. Ten years later, she is now co-Executive Director and works tirelessly advocating for a healthy environment for all Long Beach residents.

How did you become involved in environmental justice work?
I was born and raised in West Long Beach, and grew up surrounded by railways, oil refineries, two freeways, and the Port of Long Beach. I was diagnosed with asthma at 7 and experienced the impacts growing up, but as a child, I never made the connection that what I experienced, and other residents were experiencing, was a result of the environment. In my early 20s, I went to a meeting at East Yards and they were talking about air quality and pollution, and a light bulb went off in my head. This was happening in my backyard and I had no idea that they were having a negative impact on my quality of life. Since then, I’ve been a part of East Yards because it meant a lot that there was work that I can do to uplift my neighborhood.

Can you describe what you’ve gained from your involvement in East Yards?
I learned a lot. When I became a part of EY, it was a big learning curve for me because I’m learning that these trucks have an actual name and they’re going places and they’re picking up things and they’re emitting things and there’s a name for what they’re emitting, and it does these things to the body. There are all these different agencies and people who are responsible, so it was a lot more complex. It took me a long time to figure out what’s what and what role I play, and to a certain extent, I’m still learning.

What keeps you engaged in environmental justice work?
I care very deeply about my community. There’s the aspect of me wanting to protect myself and my health and well-being, but I want to see everybody in my community have a good life, so whatever I can do to facilitate that, I’m going to do it, especially for folks who are not able to participate in a lot of different spaces where decisions are made that impact them. I’m advocating for other folks who are not aware of what’s going on, but are nevertheless impacted by a lot of different things in our society. I want to leave this world better than how I entered it.
Lessons Learned in Power Building

Resident leaders viewed BHC Long Beach as a convener by encouraging collaboration and the sharing of resources across partner agencies. Through various mechanisms, such as a mini grant program and funding for learning exchanges with other BHC sites, BHC Long Beach provides resources to partner organizations to continue building community capacity centered on the idea of resident power building as a necessary ingredient for change. These community capacity-building activities and their subsequent positive outcomes show that more funders need to support community organizing. Yet, many funders do not see resident power as an outcome in itself and few fund movement building as a standalone project. Community organizing has been a key ingredient in BHC’s success. This demonstrates the need for other funders to fund similar movement-building work.

While the Resident Leadership Pathway was a bold strategy to streamline the power building process, resident leaders who shared their experiences for this case study noted areas for improvement and the steps needed to achieve the goals within the BHC Long Beach community action plan. Most important in resident power building is the need to have an economic justice lens when engaging residents in the work. Fighting for a living wage and for workers’ rights allows residents the ability to maneuver and navigate other issues that they face, and the time to get involved to address these issues. Resident power building in BHC Long Beach is centered on the voices of those most impacted and residents from these communities must have a seat at the table. Accessibility is very important when engaging residents. This means that organizing efforts need to provide language, visual, and physical accommodations to ensure inclusion. Meeting time and location, and childcare needs are additional considerations.

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Leveraging knowledge and resources between organizations is vital to resident power building and resident leaders shared the need for more cross collaboration. However, organizations lack time to work on issues outside of their areas of focus, even when these issues intersect. Cross collaboration builds resident power by creating spaces for residents to engage in cross-cultural issues and to learn from residents from different backgrounds. This not only allows for more empathy and understanding, but it is required for progressive movements to really take shape.

Lastly, resident power building and continual resident engagement takes time and considerable resources, so high levels of financial support are needed to ensure the sustainability and success of long-term initiatives.
This case study was authored by Parichart Sabado (1), with input from Laura D’Anna (1), James Suazo (2), and Gisele Fong (3). Together, they make up the local Learning & Evaluation team for Building Healthy Communities Long Beach. This case study would not be possible without community leaders who participated in focus groups and interviews to provide their thoughts on power building. These individuals include key informants who helped develop an outline for this case story: Jan Victor Andasan, Susana Sngiem, Cindy De La Cruz-Brown, Sevly Snguon, Alex Montances, and Marlene Montanez; and resident leaders who shared their leadership development experience: Mykel Duffey, Hilda Gayton, Taylor Thomas, Vanndearlyn Vong, Chris Covington, Belma Requejo, Ester Belanga, Julis Calacsan, Gretchen Swanson, and Sylvia Betancourt.

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