



# Community Coalition Starts with Parents

Sonia Manhas

**W**hen Ruth Ponce photographs her two daughters' walk to school, she isn't taking photos for her scrapbook, she's working to create sustainable changes in her children's environment that will help combat obesity. Her photo project is part of a community capacity-building initiative to engage parents at two Portland, Oregon, schools in understanding the social determinants of obesity and developing strategies to reduce their community rates of obesity and chronic disease.

The seeds for the project and its focus on community capacity building began with a conversation in 2006 between Clarendon Elementary School Principal Antonio Lopez and Multnomah County Health Department's Chronic Disease Prevention Program staff about the health status of his students. Data showed that the community was disproportionately affected by chronic diseases and obesity. The conversation led to a broad-based effort to form the Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Coalition, representing parents, teachers, and community partners including Portland State University, the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods Program, Portland Schools Alliance, Portland Parks and Recreation, and the Health Department.

The organizing efforts caught the attention of neighboring James John Elementary School, which shared the vision of a healthy community and had similar school demographics, and the Coalition expanded to include both schools.

The Coalition developed a work plan focused on four key elements: the use of the local elementary schools as the central point for community organization, implementation of the Community Health Worker model to engage with underserved communities, application of community-based

participatory research methodology, and a focus on policy and environmental approaches. Since Hispanics were the largest cultural population served by the schools, the Coalition decided to focus its outreach during the first year on this community.

According to the Oregon Department of Human Services, about 63 percent of the Hispanic community in Oregon are overweight or obese, less than one-third of the Hispanic population meets current physical activity guidelines, and the Hispanic population is less likely than the total Oregon population to have received preventive services such as cholesterol or high blood pressure screenings.

## Building community capacity

The Coalition quickly established the goal of building an engaged, informed, and empowered community of parents who are actively shaping a policy agenda to reduce obesity by addressing community-wide barriers to healthy eating and physical activity. Recognizing that much remains to be learned about what will work to reduce overweight and obesity in specific cultural communities, part of the work of the Coalition has been to create opportunities for the community members themselves to identify solutions that will create sustainable change.

With funding in large part by the Northwest Health Foundation, the Coalition was able to hire two part-time bicultural, bilingual community health workers to bring together local residents and begin a conversation about healthy eating and active living. "We work to get parents to take ownership of their neighborhoods and surroundings. We want to motivate parents to recognize that they hold power to make changes

Photo: Coalition parents photograph their school grounds for a Photovoice research project. (Multnomah Health Department)

in their community and make choices for their families. We want parents not only to pass along healthy eating habits to their children but also to send the message of belonging to a community that they can shape,” said Olivia Quiroz, one of the Coalition’s community health workers.

Early on, parents expressed interest in opportunities to increase their knowledge about nutrition and physical activity as well as in organizing efforts that could address barriers to healthy eating and physical activity in the schools and in their neighborhoods. Parents worked with community health worker Yolanda Morales to identify topics to form a healthy eating workshop series and to hold salsa dance classes at the schools, which became venues not only for education but for recruiting parents into the Coalition.

As more parents became aware of the Coalition’s purpose and the scope of the obesity problem, they identified other activities they wanted to pursue, such as coordinating Walk to School days, revitalizing a community garden, and organizing parent wellness committee meetings.

## Parents in the lead

To support leadership development, the Coalition also set up a Parent Leadership Initiative to create structured opportunities for parents to take lead responsibility for specific Coalition projects and be compensated for their work.

By the start of the Coalition’s second year, a core group of parents from both schools began to play a stronger role in shaping the Coalition’s policy agenda. They formed a research team to lead a Photovoice Research Project, a research methodology that puts cameras in the hands of a group of people to photograph and present to others their concerns and realities. Their goal was to use the critical dialogue about the photographs to develop policy recommendations and then reach decision makers through public showing of the photographs. In addition to the team of parents, key community partners Portland State University, Metro, and Kaiser Permanente helped make the Photovoice Research Project happen.

Over the course of several weeks, the research team used photography to document various aspects of their communities that demonstrated barriers to or opportunities for healthy eating and active living. The team met weekly to share their photographs and discuss what they were learning about their community.

Ruth Ponce, whose daughters attend Clarendon, is a Coalition parent leader who helped coordinate the Photovoice Research Project. Ponce was interested in helping parents use the photographs to create dialogue about the effect of the built environment on the health of their community. She observed that by taking

photos, she and her fellow researchers have started to see their community in new ways. “I am most concerned about safety in my neighborhood. I want my neighborhood to be safe and more visually appealing. Now when I see an empty space, I see an opportunity to start a garden. If we see more appealing community spaces, we will get out and use them for walking and biking,” Ponce said.

The research team presented their findings and recommendations to 30 community partners in March 2008, leading to a prioritization of policy strategies that included promoting safe walking and biking to school, improving the nutrition of school breakfasts, establishing a farmers market, and enhancing safety of areas around schools.

The Coalition’s focus on environmental change rather than individual behavior change is an advantage for the community health workers. As Quiroz said, “Talking about weight and the need to lose weight is a hard conversation. For us, the goal is reframing the message so that it is not about individual blame for poor choices. Our conversations are about understanding how the different layers of our experiences have led us here, whether it’s eating habits we’ve learned from our parents, how safe we feel walking in our neighborhood, how easy and affordable it is for us to buy fresh food, or the bombardment of commercials for junk food.”

Will Multnomah County’s coalition-building model prove effective at cutting obesity rates? Initial indications are promising. Take Ruth Ponce, for example. Her first exposure to the Coalition was attending a healthy-eating workshop. She kept returning to meetings because of the attention paid to her cultural traditions and norms. She quickly went from attending the workshops to taking a lead role in the Coalition’s activities. “By being a part of this, I’ve realized that there are lots of different ways I can serve healthy food to my family. And I’ve noticed that my daughter is trying to eat better since I’ve become involved with the Coalition. She is setting her own limits on eating smaller portions,” Ponce said.

Staff, too, believe the work is effective. “Parents are excited about being advocates and having opportunities to share their concerns,” Quiroz noted. “We are reaching out to many different partners and finding out that we have similar goals for a healthy community.”

Although the Chronic Disease Prevention Program does not expect to see significant health outcomes in the short-term, it recognizes that the process it’s using to create change—especially the focus on community capacity building—will go a long way in ensuring that the community can create an environment that makes healthy choices possible. ■

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### Author

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### Resources

Alliance for a Healthier Generation.  
[www.healthiergeneration.org](http://www.healthiergeneration.org)  
Action for Healthy Kids.  
[www.actionforhealthykids.org](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org)  
Photovoice.  
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