

# SOUTH LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

## Community Coalition reduces violence and crime by closing neighborhood liquor stores

**S**outh Los Angeles has an African American cultural tradition marked by rich culinary, artistic, musical, and architectural achievements. Today, South LA is predominantly Latino. In the late 1980's, the area's struggles with crime and violence intensified during the crack cocaine epidemic. Crisis levels of homicide became a catalyst for community activists and leaders to search for tangible ways to halt the substance abuse and violence that were tearing apart the community.

A newly formed group, the South LA Community Coalition, led a campaign to target liquor stores that detracted from community well-being and created public nuisances.

Based on a large survey of residents, the group focused its efforts on identifying alcohol vendors with high rates of alcohol- and drug-related violence in and around their businesses, and seeking closure of these community-unfriendly establishments. Community Coalition efforts to thwart violence and reduce substance abuse in an area oversaturated with alcohol outlets have achieved success by using a community-driven approach to reduce the number of neighborhood businesses that represent a threat to the health and well-being of local residents.

### THE PLACE

The Community Coalition focuses its efforts in South LA, an area bounded by the Interstate 10 Freeway to the north, Highway 105 to the south, and between Alameda and La Brea Avenues to the east and west, respectively. The 820,000 residents (in an area that is approximately 71.3 square miles) are about 65% Latino



SOUTH LOS ANGELES RESIDENTS PROTEST LIQUOR STORES.

and 35% African American. With a median annual income of \$21,000, the area is beset with a poverty rate that is two times higher than that of Los Angeles County and three times higher than the national average. Prior to the Coalition's work, the area had over 700 liquor stores—more than the entire state of Rhode Island (population 1,048,319; area 1,045 square miles) or Pennsylvania (population 12,281,054; area 44,820 square miles). Poverty, gang violence, drug trafficking, and other substance abuse-related issues are among their most pressing and persistent problems.

## THE PROJECT

The initial force behind the Community Coalition came when a single individual decided to step up and make change. It was 1990 and Karen Bass, a long-time civil rights activist, was working as a physician's assistant at LA's County General Hospital. When Bass realized she was spending her days and nights sewing up bullet wounds, she got fed up and decided something had to be done. She saw a battle brewing in the community and began to investigate. Violence and crack cocaine addiction had risen to crisis levels in South LA, which sparked Bass to mobilize her activist friends and colleagues.

After a conference on the impact of crack in African American communities brought more people together, Bass's initial group expanded to about a dozen people. The Coalition began to deal with substance abuse in South LA to look for possible solutions. The group went straight to community residents for advice.

Using a door-to-door survey of nearly 30,000 residents, the Community Coalition asked community members what they thought should be done to reduce drug- and alcohol-related crime and violence. Much to the Coalition's surprise, respondents overwhelmingly recommended reducing the number of liquor stores in the community. As interim Executive Director Marqueece Harris-Dawson explained, "We were surprised. The staff fully expected the issues to be around drug houses or gang-related violence. We wouldn't even have looked at liquor stores if we didn't do a resident survey."

The group decided to take advantage of Los Angeles County's conditional use permits for liquor stores, to seek closures of nuisance establishments. Based on neighborhood dialogues and evidence of crime and illicit behavior, they quickly identified 24 liquor stores as primary targets, then launched a grassroots/direct advocacy campaign to get decision makers to act in favor of the Coalition. They distributed flyers, talked to people door-to-door, researched the liquor store industry, and held

neighborhood meetings. They approached liquor store owners to let them know about community complaints and asked them to clean up or close stores that had high levels of crime, violence or vice associated with them.

Getting recognition and support was not easy. When residents and coalition members did not get attention and response from key leaders, they sent a petition with 30,000 signatures to Mayor Bradley, protested in front of council members' homes, passed out flyers to liquor store owners and their neighbors, and communicated their dissatisfaction to distributors or involved third parties, such as churches. According to Harris-Dawson, "When people refused to meet with us, we had to get really creative." In certain cases, coalition members decided to distribute flyers and educational materials in the neighborhoods of liquor store owners' homes to expose store owner negligence.

Then in 1992, every single one of the 24 liquor stores slated for presentation to the planning committee for revocation of permits was burned down in the LA riots. Dawson hypothesized that these liquor stores were "a ripe target during the riots because the element that pursued that kind of negative activity was already there at those stores." One of the stores the Coalition was pursuing, Tom's Liquor at Florence and Normandie Streets, was where Reginald Denny was dragged from his big rig truck by several people and beaten, nearly to death, on April 29, 1992.

Though the fires might have been the end to the Coalition's campaign, the city's response to the destruction of businesses was the Rebuild LA Campaign, which aimed to fast-track rebuilding by removing bureaucratic barriers. "All you had to do was prove you had previously run a business in the area," Harris-Dawson explained.

The Community Coalition shifted gears to focus on discouraging the city from pursuing fast-track redevelopment for liquor stores. "That approach is okay with churches, schools, and housing, but not with liquor stores," says Dawson.

Today, the Community Coalition has 3,500 dues-paying mem-

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bers advocating for the closure of liquor stores that are public nuisances. Because closing a liquor store is a lengthy process, which can span anywhere from three to five years and sometimes longer, keeping Coalition volunteers engaged for that length of time has been a challenge. “There are a lot of hoops to jump through. And it doesn’t matter what happens during that time, someone can get shot in front of a store, but we still have to go through the same process,” said Harris-Dawson. The process is further complicated by alcohol industry lawyers working on behalf of storeowners to prolong the process, to stretch it out, and to “starve out” the community in hopes of derailing momentum and in an effort to maintain sales, he said. However, changes have been made and the coalition continues to push forward.



SOUTH LA RESIDENTS RALLY TO REBUILD WITHOUT LIQUOR STORES.

## THE PEOPLE

### Diverse Partners Collaborate to Build Healthy Environments

The Community Coalition’s members get involved in campaigns at various times and in a range of capacities, including collecting documentation, attending meetings and hearings, and testifying in favor of liquor license revocation at City Hall. A number of churches, schools, and small businesses are involved with the coalition as well. As Harris-Dawson explained, “We are also very strategic about teaching the process to others. So, when a neighborhood succeeds, they go to another neighborhood and provide training for the next set of people.” Cheryl Grilles, of Loyola Marymount University and the Los Angeles-based IMOYASE Group (an African term meaning: knowledge, understanding and manifestation) provided evaluation services to quantify the effect of each liquor store closure on violence and crime rates.

Despite discomfort on the part of some activists with taking government money, the group eventually decided to get 501(c)3 status as a means to access funds to do substance abuse prevention work.

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Now, the Coalition takes relatively little money from government vis-a-vis its total budget, which is mostly funded by foundations and membership dues.

## THE RESULTS

### Healthy Change in Local Environments

Coalition efforts have met with a good deal of success. In only three years, the Community Coalition prevented the re-opening of the 24 liquor stores it had originally targeted before the 1992 LA riots, and shut down nearly 200 operating liquor stores in South Los Angeles. The IMOYASE Group has documented an average 27% reduction in violent crime/felonies, drug-related felonies or misdemeanors, and vice (e.g., prostitution) within a four block radius of each liquor store that was closed. While he suspects alcohol consumption rates have declined in the area, Dawson concedes, “It is hard to document consumption. We really have no baseline for consumption, but we do believe that less availability is associated with less consumption.”

Existing health research seems to bear that out. Reduced availability of alcohol has been linked

to reduced consumption and a reduction in alcohol-related problems including both intentional and unintentional injuries.<sup>1</sup> Several studies have shown that alcohol outlet densities are strongly correlated with motor vehicle crashes, violent assault, crime, prostitution, illegal drug sales, and driving while intoxicated.<sup>2</sup> According to Ashe, et al., the connection between alcohol availability and sales is sufficiently strong that the World Health Organization concludes, “Reducing the physical availability of alcohol through limitation on the number and placement of outlets will result in reductions in alcohol-related problems.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite these promising health implications, the impact that is perhaps most salient to residents in the short-term is a feeling that the neighborhood is a safer, more pleasant place to be. “People primarily talk about safety and peace after closures occur,” said Harris-Dawson. “And they say things like, ‘Now, I can sleep at night’ or ‘Now, I feel safe walking out in the morning and there is no one urinating in my backyard.’”

## WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

In struggles that involve bureaucracy, persistence is key, Harris-Dawson explained. “You have to talk to the people. You can never skip that step when pursuing an organizing campaign. If people don’t recognize the issue as a problem, they won’t do the work. Follow-through is critical. The system relies on people not following through. Answer every phone call, fill out every form and attend every meeting and hearing. If you don’t, then you’re doomed to failure. Any bureaucracy waits for you to go away and doesn’t make it easy for you to stick around.” Harris-Dawson also advises: “People power is the key. Typically, residents approach the Community Coalition to help work on a closure. We always look for a critical mass—at least six people—who are willing to do the work of filing the case, knocking on doors and bringing attention to the problem. We never say: ‘Here’s a messed up liquor store and override the community consensus process.’”

## LOOKING AHEAD

About 25 of the cases the Community Coalition pursued have yet to be resolved, but the members remain persistent despite the fact that many of the rules are designed to work in favor of businesses. Because of the great deal of red tape to get the system to work for community members, due diligence is needed to keep people’s energy and hopes up around these issues, said Dawson. Perhaps now that founder and executive director Karen Bass is expected to win a state assemblyperson seat in the November 2004 election, the Coalition (and organizations like it) will be granted more power and support from the top.

## PROGRAM CONTACT

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Bonnie RJ et al (eds.) Reducing the Burden of Injury: Advancing Prevention and Treatment. Institute of Medicine. Washington DC. 1999
- 2 Ashe M, Jernigan D, Kline R and Galaz R. Land use planning and the control of alcohol, tobacco, firearms and fast food restaurants. *Am J Pub Health.* 2003; 93: 1404-1408
- 3 Ashe M, Jernigan D, Kline R and Galaz R. Land use planning and the control of alcohol, tobacco, firearms and fast food restaurants. *Am J Pub Health.* 2003; 93: 1404-1408

*This is one in a series of 11 profiles that reveal how improvements to the built environment can positively influence the health of community residents. The examples illustrate how changes to the built environment can be particularly meaningful in communities that have historically lacked important features such as pedestrian infrastructure, services and institutions, or public art. Taken more broadly, the profiles demonstrate how improvements to the built environment have the potential to reduce health disparities.*

*The profiles were written and produced by Prevention Institute. Funding and guidance were provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Environmental Health. It is our hope that these profiles will stimulate and inspire partnerships between community residents and practitioners from multiple fields and sectors to design solutions and take action to improve the built environment for the health and well-being of all.*