

GET MOVING KERN AND GREENFIELD WALKING GROUP

Latino parents get things moving in rural Kern County

What do a walking group and an Obesity Prevention Task Force have in common? Everything for *Greenfield Walking Group*, an active group of Latino parents who identify barriers to safe physical activity and discuss community solutions as they walk through their rural neighborhood in Kern County, California.

When *Get Moving Kern*, a coalition of organizations focused on healthy eating and active living, were chosen as the community partner for The California Endowment’s Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) in October 2006, they were required to set up a task force to work with the local health department that would include residents. “I didn’t just want to set up a task force of organizations and then ask a few residents to come be a part of our group after an agenda had already been set. I really wanted to start with a coalition of residents. So, I



COMMUNITY RESIDENTS PREPARE TO CONDUCT A WALKABILITY ASSESSMENT

QUICK FACTS

LOCATION Bakersfield, CA

POLICY JURISDICTION

■ Local □ State □ Federal

POLICY ORIENTATION

■ Policy □ Poised □ Education

APPROACH

■ Environmental/Institutional □ Services/Programs

EQUITY FOCUS Strong

ISSUE AREAS . . . Nutrition and Physical Activity

POLICY DOMAINS

- Bikeability/Walkability
- Food Access/Anti-Hunger
- School/Afterschool/Childcare Nutrition

WEBSITE www.getmovingkern.org

looked around at what was already happening in our community and I found a group of parents who first met at a nutrition class and had decided that a good way to keep in touch was to start walking together. “When I asked if they would be interested in making healthy changes not only for themselves, but for their entire community, they were open to it,” says Jennifer Lopez, Healthy Living Outreach Facilitator for *Get Moving Kern*.

Out of that initial conversation, two walking group leaders stepped up to meet the challenge of leading a resident task force. They decided to call themselves the *Greenfield Walking Group*. They began inviting more residents to join them to discuss what kind of policies or changes to their environment would make it easier



PARENTS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS OUT ON A WALKABILITY ASSESSMENT

to eat healthy and be active. The most frustrating barriers they faced were all of the obstacles they had to overcome as they just tried to walk and talk in their local park. Aggressive stray dogs harassed the group. The group had to avoid stepping on hypodermic needles. And as they walked they were frightened of being mowed down by unyielding motorists.

The group decided to conduct a walkability assessment of the park with help from California Walks and invited city staff and other organizations who could support their efforts. “Everyone had a horror story about the park. The walkability assessment gave them an opportunity to share their stories with the people who could help them develop solutions,” remarked Lopez. After the walking portion of the assessment, participants broke up into small groups and mapped out where they had encountered barriers to walking and playing in the park with their families. The maps highlighted places with rampant graffiti, where street lights and park lights had been shot out, and where a speed limit sign had been knocked down. Walkers also pinpointed locations where they had encountered a flasher; witnessed an attempted kidnapping, evidence of sexual activity, open air drug use, gang recruitment, and a drive-by shooting.

Conducting the walkability assessment in conjunction with city staff provided *Greenfield Walking Group* with the opportunity to share the steps they had already taken to improve the walking environment and

to learn how they could do more. Relationship-building was crucial. It helped the residents get to know the people they would need to call on from animal control, graffiti abatement, parks and recreation, law enforcement, and public works in order to maintain park improvements.

Greenfield Walking Group members also partnered with their local school district and identified a need for afterschool physical activity opportunities for children in kindergarten to third grade. The group sat down with school district administrators and afterschool staff and what emerged was the adoption of new policies to increase opportunities for healthy eating and active living throughout the district. Nevertheless, Lopez is keenly aware that getting policies adopted is only the first part. “We’re going to have to work hard to make sure things are implemented and sustained.”

Lopez feels that things seem to be coming together so quickly for the *Greenfield Walking Group* because the families are at the center of identifying the problems and their solutions. “It is a power shift for us as professionals in the field to consider these neighbors as the true experts of their communities, but if we can respect that, the motivation for change is powerful on all fronts,” advises Lopez.

Now groups throughout the county and the region are calling on the parents in the *Greenfield Walking Group* to get their input and feedback. For example, as the Kern Council of Governments works



HYPODERMIC NEEDLES WERE ONE OF MANY BARRIERS THAT DISCOURAGED PARENTS AND FAMILIES FROM USING THE PARK



TOGETHER PARENTS OF THE GREENFIELD WALKING GROUP DISCUSS PRIORITIES FOR IMPROVING WALKABILITY

through its process to discuss the master plan for the San Joaquin Valley, as well as their county general plan for transportation and transit, they have held special sessions with the *Greenfield Walking Group* to get their input into the process. The group now provides technical assistance to residents and organizations throughout Kern County on how to transform their communities. California Walks shares the experience of the *Greenfield Walking Group* as the advocacy group conducts walkability assessments throughout the state.

In addition to the group's proactive and prevention-focused activities, the group also wrestles with issues like poor air quality and health insurance which affect their quality of life. "Many of the residents already have diabetes and their children struggle with

asthma," says Lopez. "No matter how committed they are, they cannot come outside to walk on bad air days (Bakersfield has some of the worst air quality in the nation) and so there are some basic unmet needs for those with diabetes and no health insurance." As a result, group members have also made their voices heard on statewide legislation that could improve air quality, make health care affordable, and require restaurants to post nutrition information on menus.

To celebrate their one-year anniversary the *Greenfield Walking Group* held a celebration in their local park and was joined by Bakersfield Mayor Harvey Hall, the Superintendent of Greenfield Schools, and the Head of the Kern County Health Department. "This highlights a real success in bringing together residents, the health department, city government, and schools to work together, not just at this event, but to make real long term change in Kern," says Lopez. An example of that change will be the creation of a walking path along the most treacherous part of the park, to make it easier for parents to walk and push strollers.

Says Lopez, "We think other community residents can benefit from knowing that we started out as a group of parents who decided to walk together and now we're making change happen in our community." To inspire other communities, they decided to develop a *fotonovela* depicting members of the *Greenfield Walking Group* and the Mayor of Bakersfield working together to improve community health. They are distributing the *fotonovela* to health departments in communities throughout the Central Valley.