



Technical Advisory Group

Community Coalition for
Environmental Justice

The Duwamish Tribe

Environmental Coalition of
South Seattle

Georgetown Community
Council

IM-A-PAL Foundation

People For Puget Sound
program, Washington
Environmental Council

Puget Soundkeeper
Alliance

South Park Neighborhood
Association

Washington Toxics
Coalition

Waste Action Project

*Working to ensure a Duwamish
River Cleanup that is accepted
by and benefits the community
and protects fish, wildlife, and
human health.*

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

A report for the Group Health Foundation

The Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition/Technical Advisory Group, or DRCC/TAG, is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization involved in all aspects of the cleanup of the Duwamish River, working to ensure that the cleanup meets community standards by restoring environmental health and protecting the fishers and families who use the river, as well as reflecting the priorities, values and will of the people who live and work in the region. The organization was founded in 2001 by community, neighborhood, environmental, tribal, and small business organizations that came together to serve as EPA's Community Advisory Group. These organizations continue to guide and shape the work of DRCC/TAG as the Advisory Council. Our mission is to ensure a Duwamish River cleanup that is accepted by and benefits the community and protects fish, wildlife and human health. DRCC/TAG focuses on engaging and building community capacity, leadership, and power in the areas of environmental and community health. We collaborate with community groups, individuals, agencies, and organizations to implement effective, meaningful, and culturally-sensitive engagement and educational programming about the Superfund cleanup and other community priorities. This includes guided river tours, educational forums, habitat-restoration events, river festivals, youth programs, and neighborhood activities designed to link people to the river.

The residents of zip code 98108, home to the Duwamish Valley neighborhoods of South Park and Georgetown, are exposed to multiple environmental and social justice concerns and include a high percentage of susceptible or vulnerable populations. In addition, they do not have access to and influence on decision makers that shape the future of their communities as other, more affluent communities in the region do.

Within this community, the population is 42% foreign-born, 40% Latino, and more than 70% non-white minorities, including Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, African American, and Native American. 71.7% of those in zip code 98108 are below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line, the highest percentage of any health reporting area in King County (American Community Survey, 2008-2012). In the neighborhoods of South Park and Georgetown, life expectancy is a full eight years shorter than the City of Seattle and King County averages, and a full 13 years shorter when compared to high-income, predominantly white neighborhoods in Seattle ("Health Impact Assessment and Policy Recommendations", University of Washington, Just Health Action and DRCC/TAG, 2013). In addition, these communities are exposed to environmental health concerns and inequities, including proximity to the Lower Duwamish Waterway Superfund site (one of the most toxic hazardous waste sites in the nation), approximately only 40 square feet of accessible green space per resident versus the average 387 square feet per resident within Seattle City limits, and air pollution from a disproportionate number of polluting industries as well as surrounding major highways.

How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

DRCC/TAG recognizes the critical importance of grassroots leaders in our community. These leaders are often parents, elders, fluent in languages other

than English, low-income, and/or a product of deep roots and community networks. In order to engage communities that are typically beyond the reach of mainstream organizations, DRCC/TAG depends on hiring from within the community and then using these initial relationships to delve further into more isolated enclaves. We employ 5 full- or part-time employees, 4 of whom live within the community. These staff members sit on as many different boards, committees, teams and social groups as possible, and post and monitor frequently on social media. In this way, networks are built and strengthened, and community members gain faith in staff members. We also believe strongly in compensating community members for their time and input. When we propose projects to funders we include stipends for community members as frequently as possible. In this way we are respectful of the time and knowledge our neighbors put into working with us. As residents who experience the types of environmental and social justice issues that DRCC works to eradicate, as well as the repercussions of systemic racism, our community members quite frequently have the solutions to these issues—it is in our best interest to tap the experts and to make it worth their while to contribute to our goals. The concept that low-income and marginalized communities are expected to volunteer their time to ensure social justice is one that DRCC is opposed to. Members of our community deserve compensation for addressing issues, just as City, Port and County officials do. Another avenue we have taken to engage communities is through our Community Health Advocates (CHA) program, also known as Promotores. Through a partnership with Public Health Seattle King County (PHSKC), DRCC has helped develop the Promotores, three distinct groups representing the three main non-English speaking communities in the Duwamish Valley--Spanish, Vietnamese, and Cambodian. These groups meet, learn about environmental issues facing community members (especially as they relate to the Duwamish and subsistence fishing), collaborate with PHSKC on institutional controls and other messaging, and disseminate their knowledge back into their communities. This method empowers the community to learn and educate from within.

How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?

It is part of DRCC's vision to support and uplift rather than lead. We strive to engage our community and conduct constant outreach to ascertain what are the concerns and priorities of residents. By making a concerted effort to employ community members, we can depend on our team to relay a select proportion of community issues. This was a very conscious approach and has involved hiring candidates with relatively minimal experience and then working very closely to bring them up to speed. This simple tactic has exponentially increased our day-to-day understanding of the community. We also strive to have representation on as many, and as widely varied bodies, committees, task forces, etc., among the community as possible. For example, members of our staff are also members of the Georgetown People of Color; Georgetown Community Council; Friends of Georgetown History, South Park Neighborhood Association; Friends of Duwamish Waterway Park; Concord Elementary School PTA; Greening Concord Steering Committee; South Park Public Safety Task Force, etc. DRCC also manages a program known as the Community Action Team (CAT). This group is self-nominating and meets quarterly in order to keep apprised of Superfund cleanup events and to discuss community priorities.

As well, our long-running Duwamish Valley Youth Corps (DVYC) provides us with constant input from local youth. Many are eager to learn about challenges facing the Valley and what can be done. Their opinions and concerns direct our focus to a great extent, particularly in terms of conversations with local policy-makers as we advance the goals of the community at large.

Many of DRCC's underlying goals stem from the Duwamish Valley Vision, whose creation was facilitated by DRCC in anticipation of the Superfund cleanup options (called the Draft Feasibility Study), in order to evaluate the cleanup options in the context of the community's future vision for the river.

The Duwamish Vision is an ongoing, comprehensive, community-based project, engaging people who live, work and visit the Duwamish Valley through workshops, mapping and interviews. The project has compiled over 500 diverse community ideas, concerns, and visions into a comprehensive 'future map,' which includes transportation, housing, recreation, economic development, and habitat restoration. Key elements of the Duwamish Vision include:

- Increasing living wage jobs through the cleanup via partnerships with local businesses, schools, governments, and training programs;
- Advancing a new ‘green’ economy with living-wage jobs and economic development through the proposed Duwamish cleanup and restoration;
- Removing toxic chemicals from the Duwamish River and ensuring a risk-free place to fish and play;
- Reducing ongoing sources of pollution through green infrastructure, natural drainage and ‘green streets;’
- Increasing equitable and affordable housing for a wide spectrum of incomes;
- Creating and stewarding new fish and wildlife habitat restoration sites;
- Enhancing healthy recreation and eco-tourism opportunities;
- Planning for sustainable, thriving, vibrant riverfront neighborhoods.

By using the Duwamish Vision as a mapping tool and informing its elements with current and constant input from today’s residents, DRCC is able to confidently proceed with the knowledge that we are supporting the will of the community.

How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?

We constantly seek representation from people of color, non-native English speakers, youth, elders, and other traditionally marginalized populations. We try as much as possible to elevate these diverse views into positions of power and influence—in this way we are relieved of some of the pressure to seek out diverse voices. If they are already at the helm and leading us, we can rest assured that we are upholding leaders and activists who know whereof they speak. Because 4 of our 5 employees are people of color themselves, we feel confident that our organization is able to make itself accessible to other people of color. We believe that policy-makers must be exposed to lesser-heard voices as well. For example, for the DVYC we try with each cohort to gain access to a meeting, audience or workshop that involves City or County government. By building that bridge between community members and officials, we support relationships that in turn can lead to perceptive and case-sensitive policy. This also engages community members and gives them experience and confidence in making their voices heard and in advocating for themselves. We offer interpretation and translation in the major languages of the Duwamish Valley in all publications and events. We are deliberate in our campaigns for the City, County and Port to offer the same services. We also support these organizations in hiring representatives from the community. These are ways we attempt to combat systemic racism—by pushing for transparency, representation, communications, and by keeping conversations about systematic inequities always at the forefront.

What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

Our surest path to success is listening to our community. In the case of our Community Steward program we heard several things: we have under-employed mothers and youth in the community, some without legal documentation, who need flexible work to support their families. We heard that community members want to work to keep our neighborhoods clean and healthy. We heard that they want to learn about the difference between native and invasive species, and how to carefully remove invasive species. We heard that they wanted to host community events including refreshments and welcoming children and elders, and that they wanted the means to do outreach in languages beyond English. We heard that the community at large is concerned by garbage in our neighborhoods and want more opportunities to meet and work together. By making ourselves available at all levels of our community gathering spaces and discussions, we heard that these were needs to be met and we were able to write a series of proposals funding this type of activity.

Our staff was really able to dive into this project because we, ourselves, are reflected by these desires. Several of us have children whom we were welcome to bring to these community clean-ups. We were able to reach out with our personal and volunteer social media platforms to draw in additional

participants. By making a commitment to hire staff who reflect residents of the Duwamish Valley we are aligning ourselves with residents.

What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps? We know that we can learn as much from setbacks as we can from successes, so please don't hold back! (If you are concerned about sharing challenges publicly, just let us know and we will omit your response to this question from the version we share publicly.)

One challenge we ran into was the expectation that once we hired community members, they would be viewed as our peers when they attempted to make connections within the greater community. For example, at one point some of our Community Stewards needed resources from the City. After discussion among program participants and managers, it was decided that the Stewards themselves would reach out to City departments to request support. We were disappointed to realize that departments and individuals whom we consider our allies were unresponsive to community members. We found that it was critical to the process for DRCC to make the introduction and pave the way for the request. This is not a surprising development but really highlights the disadvantage that “unconnected” people and groups are placed at when working within a larger network of organizations. We are putting thought into how to streamline this method of action in order to guarantee access for residents.

Another challenge we face is the more general issue of capacity. As a small organization we struggle with supporting the number of hours and dollars needed to address all aspects of the community. Although we are cognizant of additional needs, potential projects and community factions, we simply do not have the manpower to meet them all.

What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

We see every day the confidence our Community Stewards have in their organization skills, their teaching skills, the pride they have in their community and that they are instilling in their own neighbors. Our community is better kept, safer, and more neighborly. We believe this method of compensated peer-to-peer engagement is the key to a grassroots revolution of community members who see and understand their right to a clean and safe environment and are determined to achieve those rights.

We are also seeing a sea change in the way local government is viewing communities like ours. Through working very collaboratively with the City, the County, the Port, and the community, it is becoming clear that community members must be at the forefront of every decision that will impact them. It is becoming more commonplace and therefore more systemic to provide space for the community to be given space to discuss priorities with these entities and to develop action plans BEFORE any changes are made. We are all seeing daily that a more informed community results in a more equitable process.

As community members become more informed and empowered, they are able to advocate and act more strongly in their own best interest. This leads to resilience, strength, and a more equitable path forward.