

**El Centro de la Raza  
Lessons Learned from Community Engagement:  
Beacon Hill Air & Noise Pollution Project**

**Mission Statement**

As an organization grounded in the Latino community of Washington State, it is the mission of El Centro de la Raza (The Center for People of All Races) to build the Beloved Community through unifying all racial and economic sectors; to organize, empower, and defend the basic human rights of our most vulnerable and marginalized populations; and to bring critical consciousness, justice, dignity, and equity to all the peoples of the world.

**Project Summary**

El Centro de la Raza has been collaborating with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to implement the Beacon Hill Air and Noise Health Impact Project to educate, empower and mobilize Beacon Hill residents on air and noise pollution through community engagement and advocacy work. More information about the project can be found at:

<http://www.elcentrodelaraza.org/ejbeaconhillseattle/>

**The Beacon Hill Neighborhood**



Beacon Hill is surrounded by air and noise pollution from vehicular sources such as I-90 (120,000 vehicles a day), I-5 (200,000 vehicles a day), Rainier Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King Way. Air pollution overhead from airplanes flying in and out of Sea-Tac Airport, King County International and Boeing Air Field.

Beacon Hill has 35,000 residents, the largest population among Seattle neighborhoods. It is 6 miles long and 1-2 miles across. The neighborhood is comprised of 80% people of color, 44% immigrants, and 36% limited English speaking. One in five residents are low-income. Beacon Hill residents and workers have been concerned with the health and environmental impacts of these emissions. Our work towards health equity in Beacon Hill has involved providing a multi-lingual and multi-cultural space where community members can voice their concerns and collectively determine how to advocate for a better future.

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

We realized that in order to full engage with our community and maintain their trust, we needed to make our project culturally and linguistically accessible for the diverse population that the Beacon Hill community contains. To do this, we built in our budget funding for diverse staff to form bilingual teams speaking a total of 5 different languages (Chinese, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese). Our goal was to engage 50 community members in each language group. Each team had a translator, bilingual Community Outreach and Recruitment Coordinator

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(CORC), and 1-2 bilingual meeting facilitators. Our CORCs were often local community members themselves, who knew the culture and were able to be our advisors, co-planners, and co-implementers for the community education, engagement, and mobilization process.

### **Engaging the Community**

#### **A. Conducting Outreach**

Our outreach process included posters, email notices and social media notices to the community. We placed the poster at 50 outdoor and indoor sites in Beacon Hill; posted notices on social media, and emailed information to nonprofits in the community. Before publicizing our project, we convened a meeting with our graphic designer and CORCs in order to get input on the most effective way to communicate our project. Our CORCs contributed the following:

- They were reluctant to include photographs or graphics of people, which may be stereotypical.
- There were no easy words to capture “air and noise pollution health impacts.” The word “Alert” became the common word used in order to catch the attention of community members.
- In addition, the group recommended that we capitalize on the common concern of asthma to capture the attention of the community.
- Although we originally proposed a 2 hour meeting, it became clear that this was not realistic for the community given their full busy lives. The community meeting was reframed from their perspective as to “What is in it for them?” The 2 hour training was replaced with 30 minute session of sharing information and gathering ideas for the Community Action Plan.

As a result, our graphic designer created a poster that had an eye-catching color scheme of yellow for caution and green for danger. The poster can be viewed here:

<https://1drv.ms/b/s!AsxiHr7uaVr-lCc9kAN5GIgehgx1>

Most importantly, CORCs conducted outreach efforts to ethnic community service providers, churches, low and affordable housing coordinators, and family institutions.

#### **B. Convening Community Meetings**

Through our intensive and multifaceted outreach, we met our participation goals during our 24 community meetings in 5 ethnic languages and English. To share information on air and noise pollution in Beacon Hill, we created and translated a facilitator guide, presentation slides, and a pre- and post-meeting questionnaire. We had helpers to assist those with limited English skills to complete these surveys. We provided food during the meetings and offered childcare when requested in order to eliminate those barriers to participation.

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After hearing input and feedback, we adapted our community meeting format and location to be effective with specific ethnic communities. Changes included:

- Changing the Somali community meetings to a one-on-one sharing of information and soliciting input to the Community Action Plan at community gatherings at New Holly and Health Fairs at the park.
- Changing the Chinese meeting locations to family homes in order to take advantage of relational reference credibility.
- Added Cantonese and Mandarin language capacity after learning that our targeted Taishanese Chinese language speakers were mostly elderly and homebound.
- Added Vietnamese outreach and a meeting in Tukwila, where the Vietnamese community regularly gathers.

**C. Maintaining Relationships**

We are now in year 2, the Community Empowerment phase of our 2-year project. In December 2017, we launched the Community Action Plan based on input from the 24 meetings. Through being amendable to feedback and project changes and engaging communities in projects they are interested in undertaking, we have successfully maintained relationships across ethnic groups. Examples:

- Asked communities what the best time for meetings was, and followed a schedule based on their needs.
- Co-developed 6 language brochures on “How to Protect Yourself from Air & Noise Pollution” with the Community Education Action Team.
- We are currently promoting free asthma prevention home education and free supplies for low-income children with asthma living in Beacon Hill.
- We collaborated not only with the American Lung Association, but also with community-based organization like Refugee Women’s Alliance (ReWA) and East African Community Services to conduct outreach.

**2. How have you co-designed and co-created solutions with your communities?**

Through our community meetings, we have gathered input and ideas for the Community Action Plan. The Community Action Plan is our roadmap for solutions to our air and noise pollution health impacts. We have always supported community-driven and community-centered activities and projects. There are many tactics to address air and noise pollution, and we saw our role as providing support and funding for the community to engage in different tactics. Examples of community-designed projects include:

- Partnered with Antioch University provided 8 interns who began work on documenting air and noise pollution activism in Beacon Hill, researching online sources for air and noise pollution data, and developing a tutorial on how to do an air and noise testimonial.

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- Partnered with Western Washington University Professor Troy Abel to engage 10 Franklin High School Environmental Club students to measure air and noise using air beams. We compensated the students with El Centro de la Raza internship stipends from the grant.
- Provided Community Empowerment Grant opportunities up to \$5K to two groups to implement and involve community. Grantees included:
  - Beacon Arts “Blue Sky Trails,” who created murals by stenciling airplanes, noting time, and noting decibel levels at 4 sites. They also tabled so community members could ask questions and learn more.
  - Community Noise Measurement Team will coordinate and support 16 community volunteers to take 24-hour measurements of noise at their home locations, or at other locations as assigned.

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

Many systemic inequities that we addressed stemmed from the fact that communities in general and in particular communities of color are often not considered in research and information sharing. There is a distinct English-only bias when it comes to research and information sharing, which we addressed the latter by providing multi-lingual and culturally appropriate outreach and engagement in order to reach our community members. There is also a bias for statistically significant health data: although Beacon Hill has the highest number of asthma hospitalizations, it does not rise to the level of statistical significant. However, this does not change the fact that the community is deeply concerned and can frame our health status as a precautionary activism

The published air quality data for Beacon Hill shows it does not have bad air, but this is because the monitor is located on the Jefferson Park Golf course, a location that is not representative of the greater Beacon Hill area. We were able to address this inequity through dialogue with the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, who as a result modified their online statement. Their statement now details that exposure to multiple sources of air and noise pollution, among other factors, could lead to established health problems.

The Federal Aviation Administration standard for noise is 60 decibels, which is an annual average of noise measurements. This is well above the Seattle City maximum allowable 45 decibels at night and 55 decibels during the day. Spot measures show decibels from 70 to 80 decibels with flights occurring as frequent as 1.5 to 3 minutes. The project gives the community a voice to talk about their lived experiences, and uses that information to educate and advocate for different environmental policies.

**4. What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful? How has your organization culture and structure changed to allow for authentic community relationship?**

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**Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enables your success.**

Conducting this project through El Centro de la Raza set it up for success in many ways. As an organization focused on social justice, introducing the project to the Board, leadership, and staff was easy because of the common understanding of equity issues and the health problems that communities of color disproportionately face. The credibility of El Centro de la Raza opened doors and made partnering with other grassroots groups and local organizations work smoothly, as well as science partnerships with Seattle King County Public Health, Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, University of Washington, and Western Washington University.

Our strong advocacy and use of the term “Beloved Community” has helped our messaging that we are all together as a Beacon Hill community and neighborhood in this journey to address environmental equity. Exposure to other cultures brought about by this project has strengthened and deepened this advocacy.

**5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles and missteps?**

We have been flexible and resilient in engaging our communities and have reframed our “challenges” of working with so many different communities as the “new normal.”

A fundamental challenge we have in this second year is how to continue reaching out and nurturing our relationships with our ethnic community participants given the limited budget for our CORCs. A significant part of this challenge has been collecting contact information. From our participants, we were able to gather 150 emails from the 467 attendees. The Somali community in particular did not want to list their contact information, given the intimidating environment for immigrants and refugees brought about by the current administration.

Adequate budgeting given the size and scope of our project is also difficult: we must continually look for funding in order to continue this health movement.

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

What gives us hope more than anything is the way that our communities have been engaged and driving this advocacy. In addition to this, the Environmental Protection Agency and our educations/health institutions have actively partnered with us to make visible and document our air and noise pollution. Because of these active partnerships, we have hope that regulatory agencies will recognize health disparities and prompt their own air and noise pollution study. Our policy work has also connected us with elected officials Rep. Adam Smith, Pramila Jayapal, and Rick Larsen, who have introduced, advocated and supported bills to our benefit, as well as the Port of Seattle. With so much support and excitement in the community, we cannot wait to see how our project grows!