

## ***CRD 440—West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition Winter 2007***

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### Introduction

Our group took on a challenging yet ultimately rewarding role for the CRD 440 course. We chose to assist a local community group known as the West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition (WSYRC) in their efforts to obtain a REACH grant from the Sierra Health Foundation. The grant requirements include a community profile and a proposed implementation plan. Upon completion of these tasks, the Foundation will grant three years of funding to the Coalition.

The Community Action Planning Grants (a.k.a. REACH grants) funded through the Sierra Health Foundation are meant to focus on youth aged 10-15 and specifically address transition periods during these ages. Shortly after being chosen by the Foundation, the Coalition decided to focus their effort on finding ways to make the youth of West Sacramento feel safer in their community. By consistently engaging youth as partners in this process, the Coalition hoped to gain an accurate reflection of the youth voice and experience in the West Sacramento.

### Beginnings: Scope of Work & Getting to Know the Coalition

As a group, we struggled to come up with our preliminary ‘scope of work’. We felt ill equipped to determine how we might contribute without first consulting with the Coalition. We knew that we wanted to support and assist the WSYRC in whatever capacity necessary, but it was not until we met with the two coordinators of the Coalition, Karen Larsen and Judy Thornhill, that we were able to start envisioning goals for our group.

Our entry to the Coalition seemed less than timely. At the tail-end of the first “planning phase,” the WSYRC was less than four weeks from a deliverable due date. For months they had been collecting qualitative data from youth ages 10-17 via school-based focus groups (23 total), and were required to use participatory methods to analyze data and produce their “Community Profile.” Their “Implementation Plan,” a community-devised description of what they were going to do to address this data, was due only four weeks later. With two deliverables due to Sierra Health Foundation’s REACH Team within two months, and much to do in between, the Coalition was pressed for time and help. During our first meeting with Karen, it became clear that, at that moment, we would be most useful helping with the data analysis. From that point forward, we operated on a weekly basis—taking on new responsibilities as they presented themselves, discussed below. Looking back, we were able to get involved with many different aspects of the Coalition over the course of the quarter.

- Attended WSYRC Coalition meetings
- Attended & participated in SacTown Heroes youth group meetings
- Assisted with WSYRC Focus Group data analysis
- Assisted with Focus Group youth participatory data analysis
- Assisted with Focus Group data meta-analysis, including bringing in new community members not previously represented in Coalition activities
- Assisted with the development of the WSYRC Community Profile
- Led two Sac Town Heroes visioning sessions
- Helped establish SacTown Heroes governance structure
- Based on requests from the SacTown Heroes Coordinator and youth members, created Youth Capacity Building Toolkit full of trainings, exercises and resources for the group to continue developing and growing
- Attended one Sierra Health Foundation REACH Training

In the next section, we will discuss the details of these activities, including our contributions in each category.

## What We Did

### **Coalition Meetings**

Members of our group regularly attended WSYRC meetings throughout the quarter. Typically, Coalition meetings are held bimonthly, but their frequency increased as deadlines for grant deliverables approached. Attendance at these meetings by community and coalition members varied, but provided a good sampling of organizations and individuals working with youth in West Sacramento. Coalition members included educators (e.g. counselors, board members, a former principal); agencies such as the County Library, the CommuniCare health clinic and the Collings Teen Center; the juvenile justice system, various local businesses and, of course, local youth. Youth engagement is organized via the SacTown Heroes group, a youth leadership association organized specifically for the REACH project but that operates separately from the larger Coalition with their own meetings and activities. In Coalition meetings, youth are given the opportunity to ask questions, provide input and make announcements about their activities with data analysis and the SacTown Heroes. They are often involved in minor details of the meeting, such as set-up, agenda writing, and organizing the (very fun!) ice-breakers.

These meetings are an important check-in for the various Coalition members; especially those who were less involved in the daily activities associated with completing the grant. As new (and temporary) members of the Coalition, we 440 students acted mostly as observers although our role in the broader scheme was made clear. For us, these meetings were an excellent way to network with other stakeholders and observe the inner-workings of a highly-diverse network.

### **Sac Town Heroes Youth Group Meetings**

Members of our group also attended the weekly SacTown Heroes meetings, held at the Collings Teen Center. SacTown Heroes is comprised of approximately 12 local youth

ages 10-17, and their leader, Judy Thornhill. The SacTown Heroes work toward building youth responsibility and leadership, and increasing engagement in the community. They played an incredibly important role in the early stages of the grant process. The youth led focus groups, recorded data, and played a role in analyzing some of the data, as well. At the meetings themselves, the youth are highly engaged.

Our members took on a greater role at these meetings toward the end of the quarter. We did a two-part visioning exercise with the youth, developed a ‘resource library’ and created a governance structure for their organization (see below for more information on these activities).

### **WSYRC Focus Group Data Analysis**

In order to complete the community profile, the Coalition had to collect data to accurately reflect how youth feel about safety in West Sacramento. Data was gathered through a series of focus groups, the majority of which were held at the local schools (each school had two focus groups). Other specific groups in West Sacramento were targeted, including a group in juvenile hall and one at a drug and alcohol treatment program. The youth leaders from the Sac Town Heroes often led these focus groups and recorded the data.

Our group jumped right into the process of data analysis. We received a number of packets containing data from focus groups as well as a series of categories and questions intended to guide analysis. Working alone and in pairs, we went through the packets and completed the provided questions. As we finished the packets, we rotated them among ourselves in order to obtain a variety of perspectives. Each packet was to be looked at by three different sets of eyes to ensure thorough analysis. When it came to crunch time, Karen called an all-day group analysis session to finish the data packets. A number of us attended the meeting in the morning. In this way, the Coalition was able to finish the initial analysis of the data.

### **Focus Group Youth Participatory Data Analysis**

We became involved in this project hoping that participatory analysis would be a big part of the data analysis. Due to time constraints, this was not possible. One youth participatory analysis session was held where adults teamed up with youth to analyze pictures drawn by focus group participants. It was a good experience to work along side the youth. As their adult counterparts, we engaged in conversation with the youth about the content of the drawings and the themes that emerged.

### **Focus Group Data Meta-Analysis**

After months of conducting youth focus groups, and several iterations of data analysis, a variety of themes emerged as features of the youth’s daily experience in their neighborhoods, schools, and community activities. Since the age range of the youth involved in the focus group survey process ranged from ten to seventeen, Coalition members distinguished the data in three groups according to elementary, middle and high school grade levels. Through meta-analysis ‘major themes’ were drawn out of the data for the profile.

Themes that emerged in each group are as follows:

**High School:**

1. Racism/stereotyping and alienation: identity has already been forged by HS
2. Police are abusive: profiling, harassing
3. Violence, drugs, gangs: prevalent on streets, public places and schools
4. School is both positive and negative, somewhat less central; transitions are scary
5. Want and need more safe, fun spaces and activities:
  - Fun, safe places to hang out with friends
  - Affordable, entertaining
  - Sports
6. Want more positive/safe interactions with adults/peers/mentors:
  - Desire structure and connection (to leaders, mentors and mentoring)
  - Want to be involved, heard, respected – that they matter
  - Have ideas and solutions (for schools, youth facilities, programs and activities)

**Middle School:**

1. Stereotyping/labeling/racism
  - Gang members and wanna-be's
  - Violence
2. Police profiling (gang colors, latino neighborhoods)
3. School is both positive and negative, but a big part of life:
  - Negative place, unsafe and unsecure, staff not caring, disengaged
  - Safe and positive, school doesn't deserve a bad reputation
  - Transitions are scary
4. Want and need more safe, fun spaces and activities:
  - Being involved means less opportunities for trouble
  - Parks and recreation programs: need more
  - Parks are unsafe (loiterers, drugs, unsupervised)
  - Sports are popular (organized)
  - More activities for younger teens
5. Want more positive relationships with adults: structure and supervision

**Elementary School:**

1. Feel more supported by extended family and immediate community
  - having fun being young
  - glad they are not teenager
2. Stereotyping not much of an issue
  - older kids are threatening, name calling
3. Schools are a focus for life
  - safe and positive for the most part
  - some feel isolated
  - transition is scary; want support for transition
4. Structured activities are safe, want more of them
  - More organized after school sports
5. Want more activities and safe places for younger youth
  - Swimming, basketball, skating
6. Unsupervised places are not safe: parks, river, streets, skate park

The meta-analysis was completed very effectively in one meeting with Coalition members and other members of the community (including community residents and LULAC members who were contacts first of the 2006 CRD 440 team, the Velezes). The major themes from each group were written on individual cards. These cards were then placed on a sticky wall and further categorized. As we saw the themes come together it was useful to hear some of the stories behind them. Community members shared their experiences with youth in the community, safety issues and problems with the police. This process was clearly a team effort. The three prominent themes derived from the exercise can be described in terms of ‘Violence, drugs, gangs’; ‘Relationship between school authorities and youth’; and ‘Fun, safe community spaces and activities’. YRC focused on these themes to inform the Community Profile.

### **WSYRC Community Profile**

One member of our group worked with John Bonner (of CommuniCare) to help complete the Community Profile. This group member compiled quotes, stories, and comments regarding youth participation in the Coalition assessment and engagement process. In a closed session, she interviewed youth to capture their thoughts, impressions and expectations. She also gleaned insights from survey questions aimed at obtaining perspectives from UC Davis group members, other Coalition members, and youth. This information was gathered together into a document that represented the UC Davis group’s contribution to the Youth Resource Center West Sacramento Community Profile.

The following is an excerpt:

As West Sacramento community members, and as active participants in Sactown Heroes, young people played an integral role in the collection and analysis of data for the West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition. In the community’s elementary, middle and high schools, as well as in other venues, youth members led focus group sessions with their peers. They launched coalition meetings by leading ice-breaker activities; they asked questions and offered insights about concerns that a youth perspective keenly recognizes. Engaging the youth endowed the assessment process with a rich vantage point from a segment of the community that is typically overlooked.

“A lot of youth don’t do things for their community...for us to do things for our community it’s kind of hard because we don’t know exactly what to do. Sometimes adults want to take over the whole thing and do it for them, but sometimes it’s not always good for youth. So it’s good for us to have input on it. Most of the time they do, but sometimes they don’t. Sometimes they forget that they were kids too.”

Student, 17, River City High

### **Sac Town Heroes Visioning Sessions**

After a discussion with Judy, it was decided that the Sac Town Heroes would benefit from a visioning session. The goal was to give the group a clear sense of purpose, a set of goals and some ideas for ‘next steps’ that could guide them forward. The timing seemed right, as the entire Coalition was moving toward the implementation phase.

We applied the collective goal setting activity known as ‘Cardstorming’ to the teens in Sac Town Heroes. However, before the cardstorming activity, Judy wanted to discuss concerns she had about the youth being disruptive during Coalition meetings. This turned into a productive discussion about some of the needs and concerns of the youth. They identified several reasons why some of them left early or were disruptive:

- Vocabulary adults use not easily understood
- Long time to be sitting down (especially for teen with ADHD)
- Teens outnumbered 3 to 1
- A lot of the adults they feel they can’t relate too, i.e. police volunteers and administrators
- Adults dominate the conversation

They also provided some suggestions. These included having more ice-breakers, allowing youth to lead the meetings, asking the adults next to them what something means, and not being afraid to raise your hand when you have a question.

After this very fruitful conversation, our group members led a ‘cardstorming’ visioning exercise. The concept of a ‘vision’ proved to be somewhat difficult to teach the youth, and as a result the initial responses did not match our expectations. Rather than visualize what an ‘improved’ community would look like, the responses focused on the problems they wished would go away (“no gangs, no trash, no graffiti, no drugs”). We questioned them further about what that meant and did get some rich responses, but it was too little to be able to complete the activity. Upon further questioning, we got more concrete responses such as “street-sweeping machine, a park for all ages, an indoor/outdoor sports complex, and a park with a basketball court”.

The second workshop followed up on these initial attempts by drawing connections between the Sac Town Heroes visions and those of the bigger coalition. The group broke down the big themes to more practical tasks and activities, and the provide youth were encouraged to attend the city council meeting for our CRD 440 class presentation in order that they might express their own thoughts on the matter of youth participation and leadership in the community.

### **Sac Town Heroes Governance Structure**

Judy’s vision for the Sac Town Heroes is that they eventually organize and facilitate their own meetings. She would like to begin by allowing them to take on particular roles to increase their leadership. Together with Judy, we came up with some meaningful "positions" that the youth can take on and try out:

- Co-facilitator: works with Judy to set meeting agendas and helps run meetings
- Meeting Minder: calls and emails members to remind them of meetings, keeps track of who can and does attend
- Taskmaster: keeps track of time and makes sure the group stays on task during meetings
- Note-taker: takes notes at meetings, types them up and emails them to the group
- Hosts/hostesses: help set up and clean up meetings
- Alternates (two per meeting): people who are willing to step in to fill a role if the designated person is not available.

### **Sac Town Heroes Youth Capacity Toolkit**

One group member created a binder full of resources and tools for the group, based on the results of the visioning session. It includes trainings and instructions on the following topics:

- Communication
- Leadership
- Meetings & Facilitation
- Partnerships
- Developing & Giving Presentations
- Visioning, Community Building & Planning
- Extras (including the digital "PhotoStory 3" program)

### **Sierra Health Foundation Trainings**

Two of our members attended a training provided by the Sierra Health Foundation for the youth. They believe that these trainings will prove to be vital to both Judy and the youth in their quest to strengthen their coalition. The monthly training sessions have taken youth out of their element, as one of them said they have been exposed to “a very nice place”. The youth first expressed feeling uncomfortable in the Sierra Health Foundation’s “nice” facility because they “weren’t use to it,” however; they quickly warmed up to the atmosphere and participated. They have been exposed to other youth outside of their neighborhood. They have also learned new tools and skills such as leadership, communication and decision-making skills.

### What We Learned

Working with the Coalition has been a very fruitful experience for each and every one of our group members. We were able to find different ways to take part in the many activities of the YRC, and so we have a diversity of experiences. Some of us developed great relationships with individuals who work at CommuniCare, others spent the bulk of their time working with the Sac Town Heroes. All of us were able to hone our leadership, planning, or writing skills in some way or another.

The 440 class intends to give Community Development students “real-life” skills training. In that respect, working with the WSYRC was an ideal project. While it was frustrating at times to join a project that was already in progress (and thus be unable to advise on alternate approaches and methods), ultimately we were provided an accurate look into a functioning community development project. As community developers it is our role to support a community and provide informed consultation – not to lead that community without their input. One of the most valuable skills we learned was the ability to adapt to the needs and priorities of the community.

We let the community lead us even when it felt uncomfortable to do so, especially when things felt slightly disorganized and ineffective. We let them tell us what was needed and when. We found that almost always, even though we are the trained “developers,” community members have a better sense of the pressing gaps to be filled. Our most

important insight was that adaptation and flexibility are imperative in community work. Everyone brings something to the table (skills, knowledge, enthusiasm) and the particulars of a community's situation are not always predicted, predictable or static. For this reason, community developers – whether trained consultants like ourselves or active community members – must be able to “punt the ball” when and if necessary.

### Ideas for the Future

First, as a lesson for future CRD 440 students, it would be useful to begin preliminary learning about the site before the quarter begins. In this way, the class can begin work as early in the quarter as possible. Following this, it would be ideal if a CRD student could continue to attend the Coalition meetings to maintain the many relationships that have been created. Part of our presence could mean reaching out to other community members to get them involved in the WSYRC. When we made the effort to try to get LULAC members to come, they were welcomed by the coalition and hopefully will remain involved.

In terms of recommendations for the WSYRC, we want to acknowledge the Coalition's efforts to include the youth members of their community. While youth members of the Coalition are highly vocal at SacTown Heroes meetings, their participation the Coalition meetings is sometimes overpowered by the adults in the room. This is understandable as these weekly or biweekly meetings may be the only chance adult members have the opportunity to interact with each other. But as the project is focused on youth in West Sacramento, the youth's input should be highly valued and sought after. For this reason, we recommend that the coalition actively solicit youth involvement in the coalition meetings, some suggestions for which were already offered by the youth themselves.

Also, we want to acknowledge that the members of the WSYRC are diverse and represent a wide range of programs and interests in West Sacramento. This is vital if the Reach grant is to best serve the community. With serious time constraints and a demanding schedule of deliverables, the community involvement achieved is impressive. But, as always, levels of community involvement can be improved. We recommend that, as the implementation plan is fine-tuned and executed, the WSYRC make every effort to include members of the community outside of the Coalition in their operations and evaluations.

### Conclusion

By including young people in research and data analysis, a more inclusive picture of the community emerges. Many problems in West Sacramento neighborhoods involve youth, including gang violence and injunctions, educational discord and tension with local authorities. The youth bring unique insights to these community issues, and other problems that may be overlooked by adults.

Even as the participatory process demonstrated significant difficulties, it provided a safe place and offered a worthy activity for these young people to learn valuable skills and enrich their own perspectives. The youth honed their proficiencies in note-taking, group



dialogue and self-expression. They were introduced to concepts like ‘leadership’, ‘consensus’, and ‘vision’. And they learned the ideal of ‘community’. The youth we met over the course of this project were smart, inspiring and eager to work for positive change. They are the most vital asset available and thus should be recognized and activated in leadership roles.

In sum, as a group we strove to be a resource and an asset to the WSYRC in the last weeks before their important grant deadline. We know that this grant will bring much needed monetary and human capacity-building resources into the West Sacramento community. It is clear that the WSYRC is an asset in West Sacramento whether or not the 2008 CRD 440 group decides to continue working with them. The Coalition provides access to youth, creates opportunities for engaging youth in community development, is a valuable source of information and remains to be a potential partner for future work in West Sacramento.