

Case Study (from *Breathing Easy from Home to School: Fighting the Environmental Triggers of Childhood Asthma* published by PolicyLink and The California Endowment, p.19-20)

Neighborhood Assessment Teams: Moms Fighting Pollution in Long Beach

Women on the neighborhood assessment team for the Long Beach Alliance for Children with Asthma (LBACA) find themselves in surprising places. They might be standing on the sidewalk counting the number of trucks going through their neighborhoods on the way to the Long Beach port. They might be at the port using a “P-trak” meter to measure particulate matter in the air. Or, as in the case of Martha Cota, they might be providing U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer with material for a hearing on air pollution caused by ships.

Martha joined LBACA’s neighborhood assessment team after she and two of her sons were diagnosed with asthma. She heard about the team from one of LBACA’s community health workers (CHW). LBACA’s CHWs not only educate families about asthma and help them improve their indoor air environment, they also recruit mothers of children with asthma to advocate for better air quality in their neighborhoods.

Martha got involved because she saw first-hand how pollution from the Long Beach port exacerbated her family’s asthma. Long Beach and the surrounding communities are affected by the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles and the related goods movement activity. These neighborhoods lie within the wind corridor most affected by harbor, industry, freeway, and refinery pollutants, and the 710 freeway runs through the heart of these communities carrying more than 47,000 truck trips each weekday to and from the third largest port complex in the world.

According to Martha, windy days are the worst because the diesel fumes from the port’s trucks and ships blow into her neighborhood. Martha’s concerns are real: in 2005, the California Air Resources Board found that the ports and goods movement throughout the state of California caused over 2,400 premature deaths annually, mostly from particulate pollution, and was responsible for 2,000 hospital admissions due to respiratory problems. Supporting data from the 2005 Los Angeles County Health Survey found that almost 20 percent of children in the Long Beach Health District have been diagnosed with asthma, significantly higher than national asthma rates.

LBACA’s neighborhood assessment team—or the A-Team, as it is known—wants to change those statistics. The women gather data and share their findings—along with their personal experiences—to advocate for policies that will reduce air pollution.

Neighborhood assessment teams are trained by LBACA staff in leadership and advocacy skills. They also learn how to gather the data about pollution and truck traffic. These tasks provide helpful information for advocacy, but as important is how participating moms become empowered by this work. “By gathering data, these women find their voice,” says Elina Green, project manager at LBACA. “Once they see the connection between health and pollution, they become advocates and tell their stories about living in a toxic community.”

Members of the A-Team have testified at public hearings and have shared their experiences with port executives and government officials. When Senator Boxer held a local hearing on marine vessel pollution, she discussed Martha’s family in her opening remarks.