

Communities Organizing for Better Water Project

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Summary

The Communities Organizing for Better Water Project was designed to shed light on the issue of poor water quality within disadvantaged communities in Santa Ana. The project stemmed from a community assessment where residents across Orange County were asked in a survey about their biggest environmental concerns. The largest concern for residents was water quality. In the beginning stage of the project, I was in charge of doing research on water quality issues that have been plaguing the community. I found it contradicting that the Orange County Water District boasts many awards on their page for their accomplishments with water projects, yet the assessment results showed attitudes of uncertainty and wariness about the source of water for many people in disadvantaged communities. To better understand the reasons as to why water quality was such a big concern for OC residents, we decided to implement PhotoVoice elements for further research. The goal was to collect photographs and picture captions of water-related issues in the home environments, and the images would be taken by participants living in the affected communities.

The next step of the project was to map out areas of outreach within disadvantaged communities in Santa Ana. I had to locate areas where I would do cold outreach and convince people to take photographs of water issues in their homes. The incentive provided for participating was a VISA gift card. This process of cold outreach took many months and we ended with less than 10 participants. The participants who submitted photos were then invited to an informational meeting where we were going to discuss the water-quality issues within their home as well as the next steps for the project. Ideally, the photos were going to be placed in a gallery for other people including local government leaders and people who have experienced

similar water quality issues to view the evidence of the issues existing in the community.

Unfortunately, none of the participants attended the meeting, and we were unable to reach out with the participants to discuss the gallery idea.

From the outreach section of the project, I was able to learn a lot about some of the issues that the community faced. Many of the people I spoke to had been dealing with water quality issues such as poor-tasting water (reports of strong chlorine tastes and foul smells coming from the water), corroded plumbing, and visible sediment in their water. For the plumbing issue that people faced, most of the individuals I spoke to were tenants who were afraid of bringing up the issue to their landlords. Many individuals who had their plumbing in poor conditions would end up purchasing gallons of water or water bottles, essentially paying for what should be a free utility. Another water-related issue that came up from talking to participants was the issue of access to water. High school students I spoke to mentioned that their school had few water fountains available, that the water fountains were in poor condition, and that there was a lead issue with the fountains the previous year at their school. This left the students with no reliable access to water in their school areas. I noticed the issue of access to water when I was doing outreach in parks. I visited every single park near a disadvantaged community in Santa Ana, and none of the water fountains were working. The sad irony is that when I did outreach in dog parks in the area, all the water fountains were in perfect condition.

I believe that with more time, a larger staff, and better outreach coordination, the end goal of the informational meetings and the gallery showcase would have been possible. It was very difficult to do outreach because for the most part I was alone, and hearing the testimonies of individuals who were oppressed by their landlords was emotionally painful. While the

participants who submitted photos agreed to showcase the images, it still felt exploitative to be using their experiences for a project goal that provided no immediate support or help for the situations that they were living in. For future projects that similarly rely on showcasing the lived experiences of other people, I would recommend prior gathering of resources to assist the participants (tenant unions, legal support, or at the bare minimum: water).