

# Community-based Research within the Santa Ana River Watershed



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## **Acknowledgements**

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I would like to thank my advisors, Drs. Connie McGuire and Victoria Lowerson Bredow, for their guidance and teachings. I would also like to thank my fellow intern, Paulina Mejia, for supporting me throughout my internship.

## **Executive Summary**

As a Community Water intern at the UC Irvine Newkirk Center for Science & Society, I conducted community-based research throughout the Santa Ana River Watershed as part of a larger project with the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) and the Disadvantaged Communities Involvement Program (DCI). Our project focused on conducting a strengths and needs assessment in disadvantaged communities (DACs) to understand water issues. A disadvantaged community is defined as a community with a median household income of less than 80% of the statewide average, while a severely disadvantaged community is defined as a community with a median household income of less than 60% of the statewide average. The primary goal of our project was to engage with disadvantaged communities to understand water quality concerns as well as increase the representation of communities that have historically been excluded in decision-making processes. Through organized community listening sessions, our team gathered input from community members about the strengths and needs of their community which would later be used to help direct government funds for future local water-related projects.

## **Project Objectives**

The goal of this project was to meet with community members who lived in disadvantaged communities throughout the Santa Ana Watershed to discuss local water issues and bring them into the larger conversation about our human right to safe and drinkable water. This project had two parts: the first part entailed conducting community listening sessions and the second part entailed returning to the communities to answer questions and receive more valuable feedback. We hoped that these conversations would help inform water agencies, policymakers, and public officials about the needs of the community, as well as improve relationships between the community and city water managers. The concerns raised during the conversations would be used to inform the city about what steps need to be taken to tackle the issues. This allowed communities to be more involved in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

Creating safe spaces for people to voice their concerns about water quality issues was important to our team. Our team led community listening sessions, which are organized meetings designed to bring community members together to talk about water-related issues, in 12 communities. These sessions were lead by Dr. Lowerson Bredow and Dr. McGuire and often took place during regularly scheduled community meetings. The listening sessions were designed to answer four main questions: 1) What do you like about your community? 2) What are some opportunities for improvement in your community? 3) What issues would you like to see addressed? and 4) What water-related concerns do you have? These questions helped us uncover patterns of strengths and needs of disadvantaged communities. They helped us identify common problems, opportunities, and obstacles as well as help us explore effective ways to address the problems. The second phase of the project allowed us to maintain connections with communities and answer any questions that came up regarding their water agencies during the Listening Sessions.

As a Public Policy major, I love connecting with communities and understanding the issues that matter most to them. This internship helped me achieve my original goals and also helped me create new ones. I set out to also learn how to develop deep and lasting relationships with communities. Through listening sessions, I discovered how to maintain relationships with communities to which we hoped to return. After each listening session, our team would follow up with the organization with whom we met and send them reminders about our future meetings. We established a level of trust and maintained regular contact with the communities, which allowed us to be invited back and to hear from community members once again. Overall, this internship encouraged me to pursue a career that entails representing and supporting disadvantaged communities.

My original project tasks comprised of community outreach and research. I am grateful to have gained experience with community engagement because this is a valuable skill that I will need for my future career in public policy. Initially, I was responsible for researching and locating community groups in the Santa Ana River Watershed that would be potential partners and sites for community listening sessions. I scheduled phone meetings with our team and the community organizations with whom we hoped to collaborate. During the phone call meetings, I took copious notes and uploaded them to our shared drive so that my team members could review what we talked about during our meeting. I learned how to take detailed notes and lead phone calls during our all-team meetings. Additionally, I was responsible for connecting with water agencies so that our team can share our project and build relationships with them and the community they serve. Lastly, I also supported the community listening sessions by creating flyers advertising the listening sessions and inputting data after each completed listening session.

## **Project Approach**

My advisors, while working in collaboration with SAWPA, designed and led the project. They designed the community engagement strategy and created milestones and deliverables for the project. They framed the engagement and education components and outlined the objectives of the study.

To successfully locate nonprofits in the Santa Ana River Watershed, I researched local organizations and agencies on the internet. I called organizations and obtained email addresses of individuals to whom I could reach out. My team created excel sheets that helped us keep track of our progress. With the help of the other Newkirk Community Water intern,, I update one of our main spreadsheets that listed each organization, the contact information for the organization, and notes for the organization. This spreadsheet helped me stay organized and track our progress. I researched potential sites for listening sessions and continuously added to the list. I also used my contacts as potential sites to conduct listening sessions. Researching these organizations was an intense process, but one that helped move our project along so that we could conduct our community-based research. Our team primarily researched organizations and agencies in San Bernardino County, Riverside County, and Orange County. I was responsible for researching

Riverside County, and the other Community Water Intern Paulina was responsible for Orange County and San Bernardino County. I identified nonprofit organizations and agencies who currently work with disadvantaged communities in these two counties since they already have pre-existing relationships with community members, local advocates, and elected officials. This made it easier for our team to bring together individuals to discuss water-related issues and collect data that would be important to our study. I kept track of what agencies I found and contacted in the excel sheet so that our team could track our progress with our outreach and engagement.

After identifying key organizations that serve DACs, I and the other Community Water intern drafted emails to members of the organizations inviting them to do a phone call. There was usually a lot of emailing back and forth to schedule a date and time that would work for my supervisors and the organization. After finding a date and time that worked for all of us, we would conduct an hour meeting over the phone where I would listen and take notes about what was being discussed. To stay organized, I logged my notes in an excel sheet any time there was progress being made. The goal of the phone call was to hear more about the work of the organization and establish a relationship with them. We worked hard to make connections with community groups to host community listening session at their sites. I also connected with water agencies who provided us with information on community organizations that they had worked with in the past. Their research helped our team identify communities we could work with.

Beyond researching organizations and conducting phone meetings, I also helped design flyers which were used to promote our listening sessions and encourage participation. This allowed me to be creative with my messaging so that people would be excited to attend and get more information during the listening session. We developed flyers in both English and Spanish. Drs Lowerson Bredow and McGuire conducted sessions in various both English and Spanish The goal of the listening sessions was for community members to talk about the strengths and needs of their community and specifically, water-related issues It was a space for members to feel safe and share their experiences. Their experiences were documented as a part of the Community Water Ethnography and would influence future water-related projects. By voicing their concerns, community members were participating in future decision-making processes that would directly impact them. Their engagement was important in shaping future water projects in their community. At the end of each session, the Community Water Interns including myself logged the feedback we received from community members in an excel sheet. The number of people who attended and engaged in the conversation demonstrated to me how important this issue is to so many communities. Seeing the number of questions we received and the amount of positive comments made me proud to be a part of the research team at the Newkirk Center for Science & Society at UC Irvine.



**Community Listening Session**

You're invited! Please help us to plan and host a Listening Session by the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) who would like to hear your thoughts about your community. The purpose of the listening sessions is to learn about the strengths and needs of your community, as well as water-related issues. Your feedback will help to inform the development of water-related projects in the Santa Ana Watershed. Some questions we will talk about during the Listening Session include:

- What do you like about your community?
- What are some opportunities for improvement in your community?
- What issues would you like to see addressed?
- What water-related concerns do you have?

THIS WORK IS FUNDED THROUGH THE PROPOSITION 1 TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FUNDING PROGRAM.

This event is in collaboration with by the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA)




**Conversación Comunitaria**

¡Estás invitado! Únase a nosotros para una sesión de escucha por parte de la Autoridad de Proyectos de la Cuenca de Santa Ana (SAWPA) a quien le gustaría escuchar sus opiniones sobre su comunidad. El propósito de las sesiones de escucha es conocer las fortalezas y necesidades de su comunidad, así como los problemas relacionados con el agua. Sus comentarios ayudarán a informar el desarrollo de proyectos relacionados con el agua en la Cuenca de Santa Ana. Algunas preguntas de las que hablaremos durante la sesión de escucha serán:

- ¿Qué te gusta de tu comunidad?
- ¿Cuáles son algunas oportunidades para mejorar en su comunidad?
- ¿Qué temas le gustaría ver abordados?
- ¿Qué preocupaciones relacionadas con el agua tiene?

ESTE TRABAJO SE FINANCIA A TRAVÉS DEL PROGRAMA DE FINANCIAMIENTO DE ASISTENCIA TÉCNICA DE LA PROPOSICIÓN 1.

Este evento es en colaboración con la Autoridad de Proyectos de la Cuenca de Santa Ana (SAWPA)



Source: Newkirk Center for Science and Society at the University of California, Irvine (September 2019).

## Project Outcomes

Though I was not able to stay for the full duration of the project, my team completed listening sessions in San Bernardino County, Orange County, and Riverside County. My team conducted five (5) listening sessions in San Bernardino County, five (5) listening sessions in Orange County, and two (2) in Riverside County, for a total of 12 completed community listening sessions. The graph below highlights the diverse groups that participated in the listening sessions. We conducted the listening sessions in English, Spanish, and Dari. A total of 171 community members participated in the community listening sessions.

Maintaining contact with agencies via email challenged our team. Some organizations we contacted did not respond to our emails. Nonetheless, each individual who participated helped strengthen the relationships between the community and local agencies. The stories and feedback that participants shared helped create new conversations that focused on the needs of underrepresented individuals. Though the conversations and relationships are still evolving, the listening sessions have proven vital to the progress.

## Conclusions

I leave this internship with skills that will help me in my future career. I learned how to work collaboratively, engage with community organizations, build community partnerships, and conduct community-based research. I improved my communication and leadership skills as well as learned about local issues relating to water quality and community representation. I had the opportunity to connect with local organizations and agencies that serve disadvantaged communities by providing them with a network of support services. I gained insight into the working relationships between the communities, water agencies, and elected officials. Most of all, I learned a lot about the unique nonprofit organizations located within the Santa Ana Watershed that are rooted in the community and serve as spaces for members to share their unique concerns.

Throughout the internship, I learned how important it is to stay organized. When contacting dozens of community organizations, it is important to keep an updated list of contacts and notes to track progress. It was difficult to remind myself to log each response into the excel sheet, but I saw how beneficial it was whenever our team needed to follow up with an individual. I also learned how to manage my time when meeting project deadlines. During this internship, I was also doing undergraduate research on campus and it was stressful at times to complete both but staying organized helped me complete both projects. I found that working with another intern and having them as a resource was crucial. Having someone there to provide clarification or help tackle assignments helped complete this project. Whenever I needed additional assistance with an assignment, I would reach out to my teammate and she would be there to help me. Working with another intern made the workload more manageable and helped move our project along. I am very appreciative that I had Paulina there to support me during this project.

Overall, the most rewarding part about this project was working in disadvantaged communities. This aspect is what drew me to the position and one that has inspired me to continue to pursue a career serving underrepresented communities. When we would review the note cards we received from people after the listening sessions concluded, many people would write that this short conversation was helpful in getting things done for their community. I believe the communities we spoke to felt seen and heard during the sessions. Our project helped foster better relationships between community members, water managers, businesses, and elected officials. Everyone should feel that they are a part of the decision-making and have a say in what happens in their communities. I believe that this project created a space for people to freely express collective challenges and opportunities. Most of all, I believe this project will spark more conversations surrounding water and human rights. I hope this project will continue to encourage community members to voice their concerns. Additionally, I hope this project will encourage other researchers to utilize this research model in order to gain a unique understanding of underrepresented communities.



Community Listening Session **Source:** Arthur Levine, Huerta del Valle (July 2019).



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