

California Convergence: Promise and Progress in Building a Movement

The Vision

“Convergence is about much more than preventing obesity – it’s about creating equity in communities so everyone has the same opportunities for healthy lives.” –Genoveva Islas-Hooker, Regional Program Coordinator, Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program

In June 2008, a group of community leaders from across California came together to imagine a healthier state: a place where all residents have access to healthy food in safe neighborhoods with plentiful opportunities for physical activity. Many of the attendees at the first California Convergence conference had already spent several years creating and advocating for local programs and policies to combat obesity by changing the food and physical environments in their communities. This group, which represented over 40 communities and seven separate initiatives, sought ways to work together across California to advocate for statewide policies, to learn from each other and foster a movement to improve the health of all Californians.

The journey of California Convergence is one in which participants recognize the value of working together and are meeting the challenges of collaboration with readiness, energy, enthusiasm and optimism. The strong roots of the work—both in the community and in the experience of local leaders—have been critical. The peer learning opportunities, the availability of technical assistance, and ongoing communication among partners have fostered both enthusiasm and commitment to the converging process.

Sponsored by Kaiser Permanente and The California Endowment, the vision for California Convergence stems from the idea that when experienced community leaders talk across geographic regions, share priorities, make collective decisions, learn from each other and, ultimately, take action together, their common voice will be deafening. The result will be a strong, sustainable movement, with local leaders and statewide advocates working side-by-side to improve the health of all Californians, especially those most at risk.

While many of the policies local leaders advocate for will benefit all Californians, the populations that face the greatest obstacles to good health are low-income communities of color. Changing environments that most impact health is a primary tenet of California Convergence. Participants and sponsors seek to promote equity and social justice by improving the conditions in which people live, which can lead to better health outcomes. The policies and programs promoted by California Convergence are designed to engage typically disenfranchised populations and address the specific challenges they face.

What It Looks Like

From a practical standpoint, California Convergence brings local community leaders and advocates together on a regular basis –in person, virtually and via phone—and provides a forum for peer learning and leadership development. These activities are led and facilitated by the Partnership for the Public’s Health (PPH), which has a long history of bringing groups together to improve health in local communities and across the state.

Site leaders from seven separate health initiatives first came together in January 2007 to discuss what, if any, advantage there might be from ‘converging’ efforts to address obesity through improving food and physical activity environments. The group agreed that the time was right to start a partnership to address the environmental factors contributing to obesity. As a result of these conversations, California Convergence was born.

California Convergence Goals:

- Ensuring shared framing and messaging around improving food and activity environments
- Facilitating efforts to change state and local policy
- Connecting and supporting community leaders
- Coordinating research and evaluation

California Convergence Policy Focus:

- Land use and transportation planning
- Retail food environments
- Public safety in neighborhoods
- Improving school nutrition standards for children

Local advocates collaborate in a process coordinated by the Partnership for the Public’s Health. Participants recently identified two policy priorities – the “joint use” of school facilities to increase opportunities for physical activity and creating incentives for retail stores to sell healthy food. Local leaders are working together on regional strategies to change policy in these arenas through webinars, in-person meetings, and a virtual peer learning network and by connecting with state advocates.

Early Lessons

“There is real value in Convergence, as long as it continues to reflect and support local work.” – Genoveva Islas-Hooker, Regional Program Coordinator, Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program

The roots of California Convergence are firmly planted in 40 communities across California – large and small, urban and rural. Participants agree that the impetus for statewide change, along with policy priorities, must bubble up from the neighborhood and community level. Building on local successes and needs, community leaders collectively decide what issues to address and determine strategies for advancing policy change. Advocates seek to change policies that directly impact how their neighborhoods and communities are shaped.

California Convergence also is strongly rooted in the history of its participants. The local leaders involved are sophisticated about strategies and efforts to promote health through changing nutrition and physical activity environments. They have engaged in multi-sector, multi-faceted strategies through a variety of initiatives for a number of years. They understand the substance of the work as well as what it takes to build a successful and sustainable movement.

Key convergence principles of fostering multi-sector collaborations, creating environment and policy change, and promoting equity are reflected in local healthy eating, active living initiatives. For example, Chula Vista’s Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) initiative encouraged schools, neighborhood groups, and local health departments to work together in creating a healthy vending program for the city, started a Healthy Community Task Force, and

implemented state nutrition standards in schools. All of these successes, and the accompanying challenges, prepared them to translate their local efforts on a broader state level.

Similarly, in Richmond, by participating in Kaiser's Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) effort, the health department and community groups overcame a long history of antagonism to create HEAL Zones which are areas in their community that support healthy eating and active living with consistent messages and a conducive physical environment. Richmond advocates supported civic engagement by encouraging residents to take leadership roles in policy and advocacy activities. This history – both in the substance of the work as well as the process – gave local leaders the background to come together with others who had similar community-based experiences.

Powerful Partnerships

*“Being connected to others who are working on complex issues like land use and transportation makes me feel like I'm not just a small community facing Goliath. We're learning from each other, supporting each other and because of that, we may see real change more quickly.”—
Rosa Soto, Regional Director, California Center for Public Health Advocacy, Site Leader for Baldwin Park HEAC Project*

Peer learning and information sharing is an integral component of California Convergence. While participants appreciate the opportunity to network, they also recognize that building sustainable and dependable relationships is the key to their success. They want to learn from each other's successes and challenges and learn from the group's expertise. California's size, as well as the inclusion of rural and urban sites, requires a variety of strategies for successful ongoing, regular contact and ongoing information sharing through newsletters and the California Convergence website.

Leaders are building partnerships that not only reach across geographic regions, but also span areas of expertise. According to participants, California Convergence is helping them think broadly about the necessary skills to build a movement and is giving them opportunities to connect with people who have diverse skills and versatile experiences. Through Convergence, health-oriented professionals continue to build relationships with those who work in areas not traditionally associated with physical health. One site leader said she now has the tools to participate in new policy arenas, like economic development. She now has resources: advocates who have already worked in this arena who can help her navigate this unfamiliar field.

Ingredients for Sustainability

To build and sustain a movement, California Convergence participants need to articulate a shared purpose and common message about the importance of addressing physical and food environments to combat obesity. They also require ongoing technical assistance and input from experts to consistently communicate with decision-makers, the media and other communities throughout California. To this end, California Convergence convened a communications working group, comprising communications firms that have worked with the different initiatives over the past several years. These contractors are meeting to share resources among themselves, such as polling data and message research. This group also is assisting advocates with framing and messaging on the two policy priorities they've chosen – joint use and promoting healthy food retailing.

Another critical component for sustainability is developing community capacity and leadership. California Convergence seeks to strengthen the capacity of innovators and community leaders who will work together over the long-term. To assist in this endeavor, the Partnership for the Public's Health (PPH) is exploring training and coaching for community advocates in public speaking, community mobilization, policy advocacy, and strategic planning. PPH also will seek leaders to train and mentor others within their communities and connect up-and-coming advocates with others across the state.

The long-term success of California Convergence depends on a strong connection to statewide advocates and their policy efforts. California Convergence works closely with the Strategic Alliance (see above) as it brings together state advocates for peer learning as they develop policy initiatives. The two groups sit on each other's steering committees, regularly share information, and strategize on how to best connect the work of local leaders with the efforts of statewide advocates.

Challenges in Building a Long-term Movement

"All of us must make a long-term commitment – if something is important enough to start, it's important enough to finish." –Cleopathia Moore, Associate Director of Health Services Agency/Public Health, Stanislaus County Public Health Department

California Convergence is an evolving movement. Participants are optimistic about the future but also concerned about the challenges the effort faces to sustain longevity.

A key concern participants have is long-term collaboration. The funders, The California Endowment and Kaiser Permanente, have demonstrated a commitment to building the movement by consistently funding projects that address food and physical activity environments over a number of years. Local advocates also have been focused on combating obesity in their communities. But long-term collaboration is challenging – advocates can get distracted by their local commitments, conflicts can arise between participants, and collective decision-making can be exhausting. While the project has a strong foundation, participants will have to remain mindful of potential stumbling blocks as they move forward.

Participants also express concern about balancing convergence work with their other commitments. As busy community leaders, advocates already are overtaxed by multiple demands on their time. Converging means participants must expend extra energy – through ongoing communication and additional activities. While convergence work is a natural outgrowth of what advocates do locally and they know that statewide change will benefit their communities, it still takes additional energy to ensure success. Further, the current coordination provided by the Partnership for the Public's Health is key. Advocates wonder whether this work will always need an intermediary or whether it can survive without a designated entity fostering and facilitating connections, channeling energy, and coordinating policy efforts.

Finally, a long-term challenge is connecting and translating the work in California to a broader national movement. California is unique – it has multiple funders with significant resources committed to addressing food and physical environments and a large group of experienced and sophisticated advocates. Just as California's statewide endeavor is driven by local experience, national convergence efforts can learn from and support priorities identified by state and regional projects.

Participants in California Convergence recognize that changing policy is the key to improving health for all Californians. And successful policy work will grow out of a strong foundation and

commitment to regular communication, ongoing coordination, media advocacy, and leadership capacity building. There's no expectation that all policy initiatives will move forward in the same way or all will be successful, but there is excitement that local leaders have easily found common ground and are committed to working together towards statewide change.