



Staging Change: Community Engagement Through Youth Theater Performances

by Sambo Sak and Sovanna Has

Challenge

Long Beach is known to have one of the worse air pollution in the nation resulting from diesel trucks from the nearby port next to residential neighborhoods. An estimated 27% of young adults are considered obese and more than 17% of residents smoke cigarettes. A recent survey that assessed the cost of cigarettes and alcohol and the placement of cigarettes, sugary foods and drinks, and alcohol in California stores revealed that Long Beach continually measured worse in indicators. The average price of cigarettes is 10 cents cheaper in Long Beach (\$4.30 versus \$4.41). The percentage of tobacco products placed near candy was 45.2% (39.1% in California). Long Beach is also home the largest Cambodian American population in the U.S. with 39% of tobacco usage. Lung cancer rate is 61 per 100,000 among Cambodians. The explosion of e-cigarettes products also has attracted alarming rates of youth including Cambodians to experiment with vaping.



"I thought it was great. Mainly how the polluted air affects Long Beach. This was a good way to show the community in an artistic way and easy to understand."
- Eduardo Tovar (EM3 Youth)



Educated Men with Meaningful Messages (EM3), a youth empowerment program of Families in Good Health (FiGH) at St. Mary Medical Center, along with Endoil and the Collaboratory from Great Leap Inc, empowered low income youth leaders through theatrical performances to tell the story of Long Beach's air quality issues to reach a larger audience. The group developed a community theater program entitled, "The Air We Breathe" and trained youth leaders and community advocates to tackle chronic health problems from air pollution, obesity, the diabetes epidemic and tobacco use including electronic cigarettes in Long Beach.

Solution

The "Air We Breathe" was developed as an artistic performance to inspire community members and youth to get involved with environmental issues, such as air pollution, healthy eating active living and tobacco smoke in the city of Long Beach. The various skits included strategic messaging that inspire other community members to tell their stories and to get involved with exiting health promotion campaigns and/or organizations to take action to combat air pollution and other health issues. The performers engaged their audiences to feel a greater sense of empowerment and purpose. The performances showed not only the negative effects of air pollution, but also offer resources and creative solutions to address environmental health challenges affecting diverse communities in Long Beach.



Results

Since its debut performance in February of 2014, The Air We Breathe group was asked to perform at various community events. Each performance featured

health promotion and equity messages intended to inspire people to take action and support existing campaigns such as “Healthy Active Long Beach, Rethink Your Drink, Fresh Air Dining Long Beach, Healthy Beverage Vending and e-cigarettes to classify e-cigarettes as tobacco products. After performances in early March, 2014, there was a unanimous Long Beach City Council vote to include E-cigarettes in the definition of tobacco under the current Long Beach Retailers Licenses Ordinance. This meant that E-cigarettes are included in the current regulation of tobacco use, such as mandated permits to sell, no sales to minors and no vaping in parks or inside restaurants and other businesses.



Contact

Sambo Sak and Sovanna Has
Families in Good Health –EM3
St. Mary Medical Center
1045 Atlantic Avenue, Suite 705
Long Beach, CA 90813
562-491-9100 phone
http://www.stmarymedicalcenter.org/Who_We_Are/Serving_the_Community/205877

Sustainable Success

As a result of the vote to include E- cigarettes in the definition of tobacco and to continue on the work on equity, Families in Good Health’s youth program, Educated Men With Meaningful Messages (EM3) will continue “The Air We Breathe” work. EM3’s focus will be on educating young men on issues around tobacco and alcohol use, and promoting healthy eating and active living, therefore empowering the young men to inform their communities through spoken word and theater performances.

Your Involvement is Key

Theater Education can be a powerful tool for communities that have a high language barrier. The use of visual representation can help break down obstacles in Long Beach and help educate community members interested in improving their environment. It can also bring different generations from the Cambodian community together to share each other’s personal stories.

Families in Good Health worked with the Coalition for a Smoke- Free Long Beach to engage community members to learn about the dangers of tobacco use including E-Cigarettes. Reach out to your local council members to educate them about your community’s needs.



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