

Southern Humboldt Photovoice Project

with

Humboldt Partnership for Active Living (HumPAL)

A California WALKS Network Case Study

Introduction

Humboldt County is situated on the northern coast of California, with a population of approximately 135,000. Humboldt County is largely non-metropolitan and rural in character, with a density of 33 persons per square mile, mostly concentrated in the central coastal communities around Humboldt Bay. The southern inland part of the county is very rural, with much of the population living in unincorporated areas or on rural parcels; southern Humboldt served as the location of the Active Communities Photovoice project from 2009-2010. This project was designed to create an opportunity for disadvantaged rural youth to develop communication and leadership skills, deliberate in peer groups, and address decision-makers and the public about their personal experiences with barriers to activity and transportation.

The Photovoice methodology originated with a United Kingdom –based charity by the same name. The mission of Photovoice is “to build skills within disadvantaged and marginalized communities using innovative participatory photography and digital storytelling” to create the opportunity for community members to represent themselves, create dialogue with decision-makers, and create positive social change. This method has spread beyond the United Kingdom and is now being applied to communities in the United States and elsewhere.

Background and Need

Southern Humboldt’s economy was primarily resource extraction-based in decades past, and has contracted significantly. Infrastructure was developed to primarily support motorized vehicles, putting non-drivers, including many youth, at a transportation disadvantage due to limited accessibility, long travel distances, and few public transit options. School closures and lack of facilities with joint-use options have limited opportunities for physical activity.

Photovoice afforded the opportunity for youth in Southern Humboldt to address these inequities with their own creativity and voices.



Photo credit: Elizabeth

Process and Actions

The Active Communities Photovoice project in southern Humboldt was one of five statewide photovoice projects sponsored by the California Central Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) and funded by the California Endowment (TCE).

The Humboldt Partnership for Active Living (HumPAL) worked with on-site Americorps volunteers in Southern Humboldt to recruit several community youth with an interest in creating their own photo and narrative story around transportation and activity barriers in their community. With the guidance of HumPAL staff and Americorps volunteers, the youth took photos, wrote narratives, and worked together to select the visual and written components for their posters. Public speaking

training was held to review talking points and develop basic public speaking skills before a series of presentations to decision-makers, health professionals, and the community at-large.

Results and Outcomes

Some of the more tangible benefits that resulted from the Active Communities Photovoice project include media coverage and presentations to the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors and Public Health Branch, ArtsAlive in Eureka, and as part of a SOS (Save Our Schools) fundraiser in Garberville. The Eureka Times-Standard, the paper of record for coastal northern California, ran an article, developed by the project team, about the project in both print and online media. The presentations provided an opportunity for the participating youth to showcase their work and their concerns to local elected officials, public health officers, teachers, youth, and community members.



Photo credit: Emily

Although the tangible outcomes were significant, the personal benefits to the youth storytellers may, in the long run, be even greater for both the participating individuals and their community. Through participation in a peer-driven project, from individual expression and creativity to collaborative process in selecting final photos and narratives, the storytellers were able to find and develop their own voices with support from each other. Those voices ultimately led them to speak together to address transportation and health inequalities in their community.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

This Photovoice project enabled not only leadership development for the Southern Humboldt youth but also energized the community to support a bond measure the following November to reconstruct and repair deteriorating infrastructure at the school. This project enabled both the grassroots youth community and active living to gain new skills and tools to effectively engage with the media and decision-makers to enact environmental and policy change around active living and transportation.

Noelle Melchizedek, the project lead for HumPAL, notes that “rarely do we have the opportunity to truly hear the voice of our youth and how they see their environment, on the ground, day to day. These images capture more than barriers to physical activity. They capture the land use and transportation policies and planning decisions that have impacted their ability to be physically active in their own communities and in their school. And as we all know, having opportunities to be physically active increases health of a community.”

The youth and project team were first challenged in engaging with this new methodology to communicate community concerns; however, this pilot Photovoice project was so successful that many organizations in Humboldt County have begun to utilize this methodology. The project was so successful because of the prime focus on empowering the youth to be able to tell their own stories. Identifying one particular story to tell was challenging for some of the youth initially; however, the experienced enabled them to understand policy and environmental connections to the issues they experienced day to day.



This case study is part of California WALKS’s effort to share information and best practices from around California. We are highlighting the work of our network members and groups we have worked with to show the depth and breadth of pedestrian safety efforts in the state. Please contact Rhianna Babka (Rhianna@californiawalks.org) for more information or to share a case study from your community.