

Community First and Forever in the San Joaquin Valley


Convergence
Partnership

PolicyLink

August 2021



PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works**®.

www.policylink.org

The Big Picture

Carrots, lettuce, grapes, tomatoes, cotton, asparagus, peaches, kiwis, tangerines, walnuts, garlic—these are among the more than 250 crops to be found in the San Joaquin Valley. A [UC Davis center](#) calls it “the most productive agricultural region in the world.” It is no wonder the Valley has earned that moniker. The larger Central Valley, of which the San Joaquin Valley is a part, [has the world's largest patch](#) of top-grade soil. The sun shines close to 300 days a year. Its temperature is ideal for agriculture. Run-off from the Sierra Mountains yields water. A third of the produce eaten in the US comes from the Central Valley.

What is less recognized is the incredible racial and ethnic diversity of the Valley, and the significant inequities suffered by many of the people who make the area so productive. Many of the workers who power the region's rich economy are immigrants who work the farms, ship the produce, and absorb the pesticides, and are then denied health care.

The region is also home to the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund (SJVHF), a community-driven funder collaborative in which the Convergence Partnership has invested. Since its inception five years ago, the SJVHF has supported nearly 150 community partner organizations to advance health and racial equity across the region. "It's a community-first funder collaborative," says Ellen Braff-Guajardo, director of regional programs at the Sierra Health Foundation and The Center at Sierra Health Foundation, which manages the SJVHF. "That means that the SJVHF puts the experiences, priorities, and leadership of community partners and the communities with whom they work at the center of all it does."

With the support of the SJVHF, community partners band together to create an annual policy platform focused on immigration, health, housing, education, environmental justice, and land use and planning (IHHEEL for short). That's a wide range of issues—too many to form a meaningful policy platform, some might say. But as Braff-Guajardo points out, "The IHHEEL policy priorities aren't siloed. It's not just that one community is facing only immigration issues, and another community is facing only health issues. Instead, these issues are intersectional. The communities that SJVHF partners work with typically face all the issues lifted up by the policy platform."

The SJVHF network helps partners learn from one another and build power to strategically address the full range of policy issues. Or, as one community partner put it, "The IHHEEL platform is a dedicated space for us all to get together and think about the big picture—how we can help each other create a healthy environment." Some of the SJVHF's partners are profiled below.

The Colors of Inequity

Take a look at [CalEnviroScreen 3.0](#)—a detailed map of pollution and other hazards based on data from the California Environmental Protection Agency—and you will see a dramatic illustration of the health inequities in the state. The San Joaquin Valley is a swath of orange and red, indicating the highest levels of pollution and social vulnerability. As you zoom into counties and cities and census tracts, you'll see more fine-grained inequities. In Fresno, for example, the southern part of the city, home to many communities of color, is red because of a heavy manufacturing presence leading to higher rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease; as you go north, the map turns shades of orange, yellow, and finally deep green, right about where the country club and golf course are located.

Changing those inequities is hard work, not least of all because of the influence of industry, says Nayamin Martinez, executive director of the Central California Environmental Justice Network, or CCEJN. For example, "Commissioners on the Fresno Agricultural Commission mostly feel that their role is to protect growers from pests, not to protect the workers from pesticides," she says.

With support from the SJVHF, CCEJN staff are fighting pesticides on multiple fronts. They are educating farm workers about their legal rights and how to report employers for violations. They are working with the Fresno Agricultural Commission to provide basic services, such as a phone line or web pages, in Spanish and Mexican Indigenous languages. And when the organization discovered that the Fresno school district was using Roundup, a weed-fighting pesticide linked to cancer, staff mobilized parents as well as health and children's organizations to voice their opposition—and they won a stop to the use of the pesticide on school grounds.

Elsewhere, in the city of Arvin, Kern County, CCEJN and partner groups organized against permits for four proposed oil and gas wells. People's personal stories helped the cause, Martinez explains, but data was essential to persuade lawmakers: "It's one thing to say, 'It's not good to live next to an oil well.' But it's another when we had residents collect air samples, take the readings, and measure the data against standards from the state safety agency." Even after painstaking work, CCEJN was all but certain they would be defeated. After all, Martinez says, Kern County produces much of California's oil and gas, and Kern County supervisors are pro-oil. The oil and gas industry turned out its own people to testify in favor of the permits. But

thanks in part to the testimonial of locals turned out by CCEJN, the permits were rejected.

With that success under its belt, CCEJN helped form a statewide association called [VISIÓN](#), short for Voices in Solidarity Against Oil in Neighborhoods. The association is working to advance state legislation putting new limits on oil and gas wells, and states the facts clearly: “Of the nearly five and a half million Californians who live within one mile of an oil or gas well, one-third live in areas with the highest levels of environmental pollution in the state and 92 percent of the individuals living in those heavily burdened areas are people of color.”

The View from the Ground

In the San Joaquin Valley, most people who lack health insurance are farmworkers. Consider the health insurance and health-care systems from their point of view.

First, consider the immigration status of farmworkers. Many farmworker families are mixed-status, with different immigration and citizenship statuses across the household. Under the current immigration system, it is very challenging for mixed-status families to access the services to which they are entitled without raising the fear of deportation.

Then, health-care coverage depends on where you live or what your status is. “It’s very fragmented,” says Noe Paramo of the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF). Paramo is director of the organization’s [Sustainable Rural Communities project](#), which works to ensure equal access to health care for California’s farmworker and rural indigent populations. “One county has a program that provides preventive care, but then another county doesn’t. One has specialized care for nonresidents, and others don’t. And the ‘qualified health centers’ are rural and hard to get to.”

On top of all that, there’s the cost of care. When farmworkers do have coverage, the deductibles are often so high that families cannot afford it. Farmworkers are notoriously low paid, and their income is unsteady, based on contracts, and subject to the whims of the farms.

And, do not forget the language barriers. Most farmworkers in California are from Mexico, and speak either Spanish or one of Mexico’s Indigenous languages. Health-care providers may have some services in Spanish, but most are not equipped to deal with speakers of, say, Náhuatl, Yacatec Maya, Mixtec, or Zapotec.

Given all of these barriers, one can easily imagine why immigrants—especially undocumented immigrants—faced with the current complex immigration system might avoid the health-care system altogether for fear of jeopardizing their livelihood or immigration status or that of their family members.

In response, Paramo’s project works on data, policy, education, and advocacy. In Stanislaus County, for example, a large medical center wanted to reduce its state charity care obligations for service to low-income people. CRLAF filed a legal notice to request a public hearing with the California Attorney General, and opposed the hospital’s request. The attorney general agreed with the organization’s position, and denied the reduction in care.

In Kern County, the situation was the reverse. “Kern has funding and a program on preventive care for the remaining uninsured, which includes undocumented immigrants,” Paramo explains. His project does outreach to the immigrant-migrant community to let them know what services are available. Politically, however, Paramo says it’s a fine line: “We want the program to succeed, and we also do not want to publicize it so widely that anti-immigrant forces get angry about it and crush it.”

In summary, says Paramo, “We work to expand care like in Kern, and also to oppose reduction of care, like instances in Stanislaus County. We raise the voices of people who cannot be there.”

“A Healthy Community Knows Its History”

From about 1920 to 1960, Stockton, California, had the biggest Filipino community outside the Philippines. Filipinos had been drawn to the area for jobs in agriculture, and were leaders in the Delano grape strike and boycott between 1965 and 1970 that made César Chávez a household name. His Filipino counterpart is [Larry Itliong](#), who helped initiate the strike, and who raised his family largely in Stockton.

Urban redevelopment in the following decades caused a sharp decline in the Filipino population, and, by the turn of the century, the once thriving district was down to just two blocks and a handful of Filipino families. Even further redevelopment threatened the complete loss of so-called “Little Manila” and the remaining communities of color that were there.

In 2000, Dillon Delvo and Dr. Dawn Mabalon founded an organization called Little Manila Rising in response to developer attempts to destroy “Little Manila.” In 2003, they organized against the city’s redevelopment plan for the area and even drafted a progressive redevelopment plan. Eventually, the city abandoned redevelopment of the district, supposedly for a lack of money. The duo helped get the old neighborhood of Little Manila declared a historic site, and threw a big party. From there, they organized a bus tour about Filipinos in the United Farm Worker movement, and were part of a successful effort to get Stockton public schools to adopt ethnic studies. Says Delvo, “A healthy community knows its history.”

With the history part of its work firmly established, Little Manila Rising expanded its work to tackle health issues more explicitly. In recent years, the group has worked with communities of color to reduce asthma, and with the state government’s [Community Air Protection Program](#) to fight air pollution.

Delvo says the biggest revelation of becoming a community partner of the SJVHF was to tie together diverse issues and peoples: “They encouraged us to apply in the first place, and brought us together with other groups we’d never worked with. Our communities show up in their totality,” he says, with a need for clean air, healthful food, secure housing, good education, health care, and more. “But we are marginalized when we are divided up into silos.”

Counting Communities In

Punjabi is the third most-frequently spoken language in the San Joaquin Valley, says Naindeep Singh, executive director of the Jakara Movement. And yet in Fresno, the largest city in the Valley and center of the state's Punjabi community, there are few services for Punjabis. There are no Alcoholics Anonymous groups for Punjabi speakers, despite widespread alcoholism in the community. Only one domestic violence shelter has Punjabi-speaking staff. Only two elected officials in the entire county are Punjabi. "Services just are not there for Punjabi folks," says Singh. "They don't have the language capacity or the cultural competence."

Singh serves with a grassroots community-building organization grounded within and from the Punjabi Sikh community. Punjab is the region in South Asia bordering India and Pakistan that is home to the majority of the area's Sikhs, members of a religion that dates to the 15th century. Sikhs number anywhere between [200,000 and 500,000](#) in the United States, and California is home to half of them. Many Sikh men are long-distance truck drivers who transport the prodigious produce grown in the San Joaquin Valley, including by Sikh farmworkers.

Part of the obstacle to securing more services for Punjabi speakers is a lack of data about the size of the community or the inequities they face. In response, the Jakara Movement worked to generate support for the 2020 census. Punjabis are one of the top 10 populations in California, says Singh, and yet the federal Census Bureau only began reporting on the language in 2017, thanks in part to a grassroots mobilization that Jakara helped lead. In 2020, for the first time, the Sikh community was distinctly enumerated by the census.

With funding from the SJVHF, the Jakara Movement trained students at a network of more than 70 high schools and 15 colleges throughout the Valley to do education and advocacy around the census. In 2020, the federal census questionnaires were available online for the first time. Anyone in a family could fill it out, and the task often falls to web-savvy young people. Jakara also canvassed in rural communities, dispelling misinformation and preparing residents for the census.

"There is no data on anti-Punjabi inequities, except what we're creating," says Singh. In this and other work, he adds, "Our partnership with the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund has been transformational—not just with the Fund itself, but with other community partners." Together, those groups forged the IHHEEL policy platform that links them together in a Valley-wide movement. "With so many groups involved, it can be unwieldy," he reflects. "But that's part of starting a democracy."

Genuine Partners

“Convergence Partnership funding helped support grassroots leadership development and strengthen the learning community among our partners,” says Braff-Guajardo.

The SJVHF has, for example, organized leadership conferences, partner convenings, and, not least of all, its annual [Equity on the Mall](#) event, which brings thousands of community partners to the state capital. There, they present the IHHEEL platform to policymakers, to make them aware of and accountable to San Joaquin Valley issues.

“The San Joaquin Valley Health Fund is one of the best in making sure that on-the-ground voices are heard by the press, by other funders, and by policymakers,” says Singh. They are also proactive in working with community voices. Delvo says, “The Health Fund reached out directly to us. That sounds like a small thing, but that was huge for a small organization like us that had never interacted with a foundation beyond just the grant application,” he says. “They’re a genuine partner.”

One indication of that partnership is how grantees have influenced the grantmaking. It is the community partners who set the agenda for SJVHF convenings. And it is community partners who created the IHHEEL platform, which now serves as the core of SJVHF’s grantmaking, communications, technical assistance, and learning opportunities.

Elevating and empowering grantee partners is not just a slogan for the SJVHF, it is at the core of what they do as a funder collaborator. “Community power is a social determinant of health,” says Braff-Guajardo. “If philanthropy is serious about making sustainable community change, we must provide the supports—including funding—that will help build grassroots power.”

Acknowledgments

Convergence Partnership would like to thank [Working Narratives](#) for developing this profile, especially Paul VanDecarr, Nick Szuberla, and Mik Moore ([Moore + Associates](#)).

The Partnership would also like to extend deep appreciation to the following partners for contributing their valuable time, experiences, and insights to these stories:

- Dillon Delvo, [Little Manila Rising](#)
- Ellen Braff-Guajardo, [Sierra Health Foundation](#) and [The Center at Sierra Health Foundation](#)
- Naindeep Singh, [Jakara Movement](#)
- Nayamin Martinez, [Central California Environmental Justice Network](#)
- Noe Paramo, [Sustainable Rural Communities Project](#) at [California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation](#)



Lifting Up What Works®

Headquarters

1438 Webster Street
Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
t 510 663-2333
f 510 663-9684

Communications

75 Broad Street
Suite 701
New York, NY 10004
t 212 629-9570

Washington, DC

1301 K Street, NW
Suite 300 W-414
Washington, DC 20005

policylink.org

Facebook: /PolicyLink
Twitter: @policylink
Instagram: @policylink