



Community preps for millions in health funds



Residents meet with health experts to talk about the Healthy Richmond Initiative (photo by Julia Landau)

By: [Julia Landau](#) | September 27, 2010 – 6:54 pm

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\$1 billion in aid is marked for California cities. Community health advocates in Richmond want to be certain that this town spends its share wisely.

More than two dozen community advocacy groups and more than 130 residents convened at Grace Lutheran Church Saturday to discuss how best to use about \$1.3 million over the next year aimed at improving Richmond's health.

Several local leaders speaking at the event emphasized a holistic approach as crucial to bettering health.

"Today it is time to think about the long term vision," said Kanwarpal Dhaliwal of [RYSE youth center](#). "The charge of the steering committee is to figure out what and who it takes to put the vision into action."

The funding is the result of a [California Endowment](#) grant that will disperse \$1 billion to 14 California cities. This year is just the beginning, over the next decade, Richmond will receive millions more to improve local health.

[Healthy Richmond](#), a consortium of local organizations, is working to develop a 10-year strategic plan.



Residents listen to a presentation on racial disparities in health. (Photo by Julia Landau)

Planning efforts harvested research from key areas over the past year, targeting the Iron Triangle, North Richmond, Belding Woods, Coronado, and Pullman neighborhoods.

Representatives for over 25 agencies—the county health department, the school district, youth groups, and faith-based organizations—make up the Healthy Richmond steering committee.

In-depth research added credibility to the planning process, as well as valuable data from Richmond's more troubled areas. Some research was novel in form. Ten former prisoners hired by the [Pacific Institute](#)— a nonprofit supporting Healthy Richmond— returned to their old neighborhoods to gather data.

In a year, they conducted over a thousand interviews to gauge problems stemming from social environments hostile to health.

Beyond access to traditional health care, the summit spotlighted ways in which race and class shape well-being.

Clicking through charts showing health outcomes of African-Americans compared with other groups, organizer Alvin Herring underscored the stakes of the day's conference.

"We have people dying prematurely of things like diabetes, because there are powerful social inequities in place. Race matters. At the risk of sounding grim, it's killing us," Herring said.

Areas traditionally thought of as health related, like diet and exercise, were assumed to be important but not sufficient for healthy communities. Recent research has shown that self-respect and sense of control over one's life can impact health substantially.

The stress of discrimination and anxiety due to uncertainty – in employment, violence, education – can actually lead to lower life expectancy.

Herring, a director with the [Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization](#), called on the audience to think of themselves as experts in their own lives.

"What interests you the most: Health care access, education, violence prevention, or jobs and economic development?" Herring said. "Which area can you bring the most to the table?"

Julie Freestone, a Contra Costa Health Services worker, stressed that community health is a broader concept than merely hospitals and doctors.

"A very small part of the health process actually takes place inside of a health center, like 10 percent."

Freestone engaged in a spirited discussion with her audience.

“Years ago, health care focused on communicable diseases: Tuberculosis and things like that. What about now?” Freestone said.

The group floated some answers.

“Chronic diseases,” one woman said.

“A lot of these things are associated with stress,” another audience member said.

“Asthma is a big problem too.”

Freestone challenged the group to think differently.

“You should be asking yourself, is this going to change a system, or is it just going to change me?”

The conversation touched on infrastructure changes that encourage walking and biking, and making healthful food more affordable and available.

Food health “includes community gardens but they are not the answer,” said Tracey Rattney, of Contra Costa Health Services. “The primary prevention is creating environments that support healthy behavior: What do you see, what can you buy, what do you eat?”

Nita Sisamouth, an [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#) organizer, noted that availability is not everything—what we choose to eat reflects entrenched habits, she said.

“I used to work at Safeway on San Pablo and McDonald. I would see all the people from the hills buying fruit with their eco-friendly totes and people from the other side of the tracks were buying all sugar-filled things with their government food stamps,” Sisamouth said.

Cheryl Vaughn, a Richmond resident in her 50s who recently lost her health coverage, said information drives change.

“I recently found out that the infant mortality rate for black Americans is the highest in the country.” Vaughn said. “How did that come to be? Information in and of itself starts you thinking about what that means.”

Wary of the graveyard of good ideas, organizers emphasized sustained public commitment to the health project.

“Move your thoughts and ideas from your head to the people around you, and don’t stop,” Sisamouth said.

The steering committee will present their proposal to California Endowment next month. After that, the first of the funds will be dispersed.



Steering committee members record feedback during a group discussion (Photo by Julia Landau).

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Julia Landau has worked in documentary production and print journalism. Her first feature documentary, about a physicist who helped to pioneer Chaos Theory, is in production. With an extra life, she'd study neuroscience and mathematics. She grew up in Washington, D.C. [View full profile.](#)

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Teresa

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