



Success Story

New Relationships Built with Faith Communities Result in Tobacco-Free Policies

Success at a Glance

The G.R.E.E.N. (Gathering Resources to Educate and Empower through Networking) Foundation (TGF) is a community-based nonprofit organization focused on improving health disparities impacting diverse African American communities in California. This story highlights TGF's work cultivating relationships with African American faith-based communities in the Hawthorne community of Los Angeles County, something they had never done before. This work led to generating support for smoke-free policies at Calvary Baptist Church and Victory Institutional Baptist Church, and at several community-based tobacco education events.

Approach

In July 2019, TGF was awarded a grant by the African Communities Public Health Coalition (ACPHC) to implement the Keeping Our Lungs Safe (KOLS) initiative in Hawthorne, an under-resourced community in Los Angeles County. KOLS aims to reduce tobacco-related health disparities among the African/Black communities. For two decades, TGF has worked in communities of color – primarily African American – in California to reduce health disparities through understanding cancer, the importance of participating in clinical trials, early screening, and in making healthy preventative and lifestyle choices, but the organization had never worked in Hawthorne.

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As part of its practice, TGF cultivates strong relationships with communities where they work, worship, and socialize to bridge the gap in understanding how best to support those living with chronic health issues.

Recognizing that pastors, and other religious leaders, are important influences and gatekeepers in the faith-based community, TGF reached out to pastors at local churches to provide resources about the health risks of tobacco and smoke-free campus policies. Religious institutions remain a largely untapped source for cross-cultural communication to address healthcare disparities among African immigrants, refugee populations and African American communities. Faith plays an important role in the community and faith leaders are trusted individuals to whom congregants look for advice and modeling of behavior. Additionally, faith communities are a largely “inelastic” social commodity, so while policy change may initially make people uncomfortable, they are unlikely to search out a new faith community, and instead will be more likely to stay within the community and live with the policy.

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Keys to Success

1. Identify allies and community needs. TGF connected with community-based organizations focused on the local African American community to understand where their work intersected and provide information about KOLS and resources TGF could offer. TGF team members attended local events, including church services, to raise the organization's profile in the community. TGF spent time having conversations and hearing personal testimonies from church members.

"When you get to know and ask questions and listen; they'll tell you where they are and then you can start to see how to be better impactful and establish and mutually beneficial relationships," said Ernesta Wright, TGF's executive director.

2. Build trust. No two faith organizations are the same, prioritizing the process of building trust is imperative to developing a strong relationship. Wright shared, leveraging network connections can help get an initial foot in the door. TGF built trust in the community by maintaining a regular presence. They regularly attended and participated in events, providing presenters and exhibitors.

"We wanted them to know that we weren't just coming to do our presentation and leave, that we wanted to build relationships," Wright said. "You need to have sincerity about the work and interest the organization or church and deliver. You have to make sure you can deliver what you say you can." While building community trust, Wright said it's important to pay attention to cultural nuances, including dress protocols that may be more conservative. Learn as much as you can about the organization before approaching leaders, avoid vernacular and be on time with a well-prepared presentation. Maintaining contact by periodically sending materials or even a simple thank-you card, can also help make inroads, Wright said.

"We're not sending emails that say, 'We have this policy, and we want to educate you,'" said Titania Davis, a project coordinator and community advocate for TGF. "We are right there with them building their presentation

Patience is also key, Wright said, especially for organizations that come from outside the community.

"If it's not part of your ethnicity, it may take you longer to bond," Wright said.

Building trust is crucial for faith communities who can sometimes be distrustful of outside organizations, said Calvary Baptist Church Pastor Hosea Collins.

"People always worry, 'What's the catch?' and fear an organization just wants to take over," he said, adding that while he embraces partnerships, he chooses opportunities that also maintain the church's autonomy.

3. Be a resource. Faith groups in under-resourced communities are often small operations without full-time support staff. TGF identified ways they provide support within its contract provisions, such as printing or materials distribution. At a February 2020 Calvary community outreach event to distribute food and clothing, TGF used its broader health partner network outside of tobacco to secure exhibitors to expand the event into the church's inaugural health fair, offering community resources and health screenings.

"Be prepared to share what you can provide or what you are offering," Wright said. "It could be referring to resources or programs, or current data or food distribution or community clinics – resources we may have access to. It's still information sharing. It's about providing a platform for really intentional resource sharing for the better good of the community."

The Success!

In November 2019, one month after TGF's initial meetings with Pastor Collins, Calvary adopted a smoke-free campus policy. In addition, Calvary displayed posters about the dangers of tobacco use, provides educational materials for youth members and has weekly health classes. Since the policy was implemented, two church employees quit smoking. Collins said several church members have shared testimonials about the impact of tobacco on their lives and have also quit tobacco.

However, the success went beyond the adoption of the smoke-free policy. TGF deepened its relationship with the faith-based community, connecting members of these churches with local resources and education on tobacco and tobacco cessation.

"It's not a one-time event," Wright said. "It's an ongoing and hopefully long-lasting relationship to serve the people in Hawthorne. Some of their members are reaching out for other services. It's a success of providing social services, care navigation and health."

"The G.R.E.E.N Foundation provides us with great resources that serves our community and our congregation, and we provide them with a platform to reach to people they otherwise may not reach. It's a win-win partnership. It thrives because neither one of us are recipients only; there's a mutual giving and receiving that's taking place."

For more information about TGF, visit: <http://www.thegreenfoundation.net>.

Go to <https://africancoalition.org> for more information about ACPHC and KOLS.