



Boyle Heights youth create a powerful movement for change in their school and community

OVERVIEW & CHALLENGES

A group of youth who advocated for school environments centered on health and wellness are looking back on the legacy they've created over the past decade. *Healthy Teens on the Move* (HTOM) began with just a few students focusing on nutrition and wellness at their high school in Baldwin Park, CA. Now, a growing group is concentrating its efforts on high schools in Boyle Heights, CA. Over the years, they've tackled diverse challenges, including improving the food and beverage environment at their school and supporting advocacy and leadership opportunities at the State Capitol. They are a leading example in the state demonstrating why youth should be at the table in addressing equity and other key issues.



"Anything we do, we make sure youth are at the table. Changes need to come from the youth voice; we want to mentor them and see them shine," explained Belinda Campos Bresnahan, program manager with Building Healthy Communities–Boyle Heights.

HTOM is a youth-led movement that grew out of Public Health Advocates' (PHAdvocates) Building Healthy Communities initiative. PHAdvocates played a supporting role in building the capacity of youth advocates to fight for their self-identified changes and policies in the City of Los Angeles and LA schools. Their passion and powerful voices speak for itself.

THE PROCESS

As a model for this work, PHAdvocates utilized its successful Healthy Eating, Active Living Cities campaign as the framework for engaging the school community and key stakeholders and assisting youth to advance through the stages of policy change. Within a year of the first community engagement meetings with the youth, Healthy Teens on the Move gained traction at Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East LA, where youth continue their advocacy efforts today. HTOM's first challenge at Roosevelt High School was to break the school's vending machine contract with Coca-Cola and replace it with local vendors offering healthier snack and beverage options. This endeavor proved more difficult than the teens anticipated. Still, they were determined to get soda out of their school and provide beverage options that better supports student health and academic performance.

After meetings with school and district leaders, the teens prevailed and the school broke its contract. However, they noticed their peers were still struggling to find healthy beverage and food options in the vending machines. HTOM youth brainstormed ways to get healthier snacks and drinks students would enjoy. They taste-tested samples to identify the top five snacks students would be likely to purchase. This strategy helped ensure that youth advocates were addressing the needs of their peers. And it was just the beginning of more important work to come.

Not long after their vending machine victory, HTOM youth sought to find out what else their peers saw as leading health related concerns in the schools. They conducted a school-wide survey to find out. The most concerning finding was that students at Roosevelt High were not drinking water from the fountains at school because they believed it to be unsafe. Providing access to fresh, clean drinking water was an important priority. Equally important was assessing the safety of the existing fountains.

With the help of PHAdvocates, HTOM youth met with key stakeholders in the district to begin a critical conversation about water access and quality. They tested and assessed existing water stations on Los Angeles Unified School District campuses. They created an #Agua4AllStudents campaign, taking to social media to talk about water justice and the critical importance of fresh, clean drinking water on campuses. The water quality assessments revealed lead contamination in water coming drinking fountains. In response, the youth developed a petition and asked students at school events to sign on in support of new hydration stations. They also developed a resolution to ensure the school district's commitment to new water stations for all campuses and to using funding from the Local Control Accountability Plan to support adoption of the new hydration stations.

THE OUTCOME

While PHAdvocates has typically used its HEAL Cities model with city leaders, community members, and partners, this case proved the model could be adopted for use with youth and school government. On April 23, 2019, the youth's vision was realized as LAUSD voted unanimously to pass phase 3 of its Drinking Water Quality Program, allowing the district to secure \$15 million to support the effort. New hydration stations have been installed at Roosevelt High School; several other schools in the district are getting the new hydration stations installed as well. The hydration stations have improved students' access to fresh, free drinking water—a healthy alternative to sugar-sweetened beverages, which are associated with obesity and diabetes. The district is continuing to test water stations regularly for lead.



These wins prove that youth voices matter and have evolved into a powerful movement for lasting change. In the summer of 2020, the youth and other partners were successful in reducing the LAUSD police budget by 35% and allocating the savings to critical services for students, such as mental health. More recently, and after 7 years of waging an advocacy campaign, the youth along with other activists, celebrated a victory when Los Angeles city officials announced they would dedicate \$1.1 mill. to create a Youth Development Department.

The youth have dedicated much time and effort to ensuring that they, along with their families and peers, have opportunities to be healthy. PHAdvocates recognizes that meeting youth where they are at is key to this success.

“We have to make sure our students have the support and resources they need,” Bresnahan shared. “That they have food in their bellies, shelter, health insurance, know how to apply for DACA, receive letters of recommendations for work or school, and know how to complete scholarship or college applications. We are much more than public health. We are family,” Bresnahan added.

THE FUTURE

For Healthy Teens on the Move, the work is far from over. The youth are excited about continuing forward in spite of the COVID pandemic and online schooling. They have focused their advocacy efforts on identifying key health and wellness priorities for this year’s Local Control Accountability Plan and are addressing the school to prison pipeline through restorative justice models, along with trauma, healing, and improved access to healthy food and beverages on campuses.

The youth are engaged at a city-wide level in helping to inform park improvements in Boyle Heights as part of PHAdvocates’ Parks Equity Initiative, are part of the Invest in Youth campaign, and are working with partners and young leaders to help create a new Youth Development Department for the City of Los Angeles.

“HTOM opens up possibilities for youth by encouraging them to advocate for themselves,” said Kimberly Silva, former program specialist with Building Healthy Communities–Boyle Heights. Silva was a youth leader with HTOM, then joined the PHAdvocates team during college.

ABOUT US

PHAdvocates’ Healthy Eating Active Living Cities (HEAL) Cities Campaign offers an efficient approach to advancing and implementing long-lasting policies that create healthier local communities. Through the campaign, over 360 cities have established more than 1,200 health-promoting policies. PHAdvocates’ Parks Equity Campaign helps low-income cities to apply for California Prop. 68 park bond grants to build new parks or expand and renovate existing ones in impoverished park-poor neighborhoods. Building Healthy Communities–Boyle Heights is PHAdvocates’ youth-driven initiative to transform communities devastated by health inequities.

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More information at www.phadvocates.org | info@phadvocates.org