

Voices from the Community

*Participant Perspectives on the Impacts and Promise of
The Thirsty for Change Campaign*



APRIL 2019

PREPARED BY MESU STRATEGIES, LLC FOR HEALTHY BLACK FAMILIES, INC. AND
THE CENTER FOR FOOD, FAITH & JUSTICE WITH SUPPORT FROM THE CITY OF BERKELEY



Mesu Strategies, LLC is a research and strategy firm committed to realizing a more just and inclusive society. Based in Oakland, California, we work nationally to create healthier, more sustainable community environments for low-income people, communities of color, and other underserved groups. We partner with leaders in communities and organizations to operationalize equity and catalyze transformational change through action research, policy advocacy and organizational development approaches rooted in the principles of cultural humility.

Healthy Black Families, Inc. (HBF) is a nonprofit organization that provides free programs to meet the essential needs of Black mothers and families. HBF works in partnership and collaboration with other community organizations to advocate for equity and progressive change for our children, families and community. HBF was founded in July 2013 with support from longstanding members of the Berkeley Health Department Black Infant Health (BIH) program.

The Center for Food, Faith and Justice is a faith-based nonprofit organization that works closely with the church to target issues beyond the general mission of the church. CFFJ leverages the power of urban gardening to address issues related to faith, hunger, food security, healthy living and environmental justice. Based at the McGee Avenue Baptist Church in Berkeley, CA, CFFJ is funded by Glide Foundation, Leadership Institute at Allen Temple, and Catholic Charities.

Acknowledgements

This effort was supported with funds from the City of Berkeley Measure D “soda tax.” In November 2014, citizens in Berkeley, CA passed Measure D “to diminish the human and economic costs of diseases associated with the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) by discouraging their distribution and consumption in Berkeley.” The measure put into place a \$0.01 per ounce tax on the distribution of sugary beverages, including soda; energy, sports, and fruit-flavored drinks; sweetened water, coffee, and tea. Measure D also created a funding opportunity for local nonprofit organizations to receive revenues generated from the tax to support prevention and health promotion activities in Berkeley. The City appoints panel of experts to identify which projects will receive support each year. Between July 2016 to June 2019, “the City of Berkeley Measure D Community Based Organization funding opportunity” has awarded funds to the Thirsty for Change! campaign. The campaign employs a multi-strategy approach focused on behavioral, policy and environmental changes to reduce racial health inequities in Berkeley resulting from consumption of SSBs. The campaign is planned and implemented by Healthy Black Families (HBF), the Center for Food, Faith, and Justice (CFFJ) and their partners.

T4C Program Photos by Monique Blodgett and Derek Brown, unless otherwise noted

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been almost five years since Berkeley voters made history by passing the country's first tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in November 2014. In the three fiscal years between July 2015 and June 2018, city regulators have collected nearly \$5 million from the penny-per-ounce "soda tax" levied upon distributors of all beverages with added sugar, including soda, fruit juices, sports drinks and sweetened coffees and teas.¹ The City distributes a portion of these revenues through the Healthy Berkeley Program to support community- and school-based strategies to reduce the consumption of sugary beverages and raise awareness about the health impacts of healthy eating and active living.²

The Thirsty for Change (T4C) campaign is a ten-year effort aiming to promote healthy and just food environments for the Berkeley Black community, specifically focusing on reducing the consumption sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). Funded in part by revenues from Measure D administered through the Healthy Berkeley Program, T4C is led by Healthy Black Families, Inc. in partnership with the Center for Food, Faith and Justice. Working in collaboration with Black communities in Berkeley, the campaign aims to advance health and wellbeing in Berkeley, reduce local health disparities, and promote racial equity through education, civic engagement, and policy and environmental change, specifically targeting the effects of soda and other sugary beverages.

Invested in creating a real difference for local communities, the Thirsty for Change Campaign tracks its progress through ongoing learning and assessment efforts related to key areas of activity. Findings from these efforts inform ongoing service delivery, program strategy and improvement. To date, the Campaign – like many of the groups funded by Healthy Berkeley – has seen important progress resulting from its work



. Fruit-infused water: a healthier choice

¹ City of Berkeley. "City of Berkeley Soda Tax Revenue." Accessed April 30, 2019 via *Berkeleyside*: <https://www.berkeleyside.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Soda-Tax-revenue-Berkeley.pdf>.

² City of Berkeley's Public Health Division. "Healthy Berkeley: Public Health Working for You." Accessed April 30, 2019: <http://www.healthyberkeley.com/>.

over the three years it has been in operation.^{3 4} The Campaign has also seen evidence of knowledge and attitude changes among communities suggesting that Black communities in Berkeley are making the reductions in SSB consumption found in congruent academic studies.⁵⁶

Curious to explore the nuances of its service delivery, what's working and what could use improvement, the leaders of the Thirsty for Change Campaign invited Mesu Strategies, LLC to launch an assessment effort in 2018 called *Voices from the Community*. The purpose of *Voices from the Community* is to surface important contextual information about the T4C Campaign to help leaders in Berkeley plan and navigate the campaign's next steps, and to potentially help others replicate the program in other communities.

The *Voices from the Community* effort involved the completion of six brief semi-structured interviews with campaign participants. Interviews focused on identifying insights and expanding understanding of the T4C campaign and how it contributes to health and equity outcomes. Participating community members represented the diversity of the Campaign's reach. They ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-60s; represented single-parent households, double-parent households, and single households, including both single young adults and single elderly adults; and were involved in T4C programs led by both HBF and CFFJ. All participants identified as African-American and involved with T4C to varying degrees; while some were helped to administer programs, others were only recipients of campaign services.

Interview participants were asked to describe changes they had experienced or witnessed in their family or in the community at large related to the thirsty for Change Campaign, as well as factors contributing to change or obstructing it, and recommendations for future efforts.

Key themes across the interviews include:

- **POSITIVE CHANGES AT THE INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEVELS**, including:
 - **Healthier behaviors and beverage choices**
 - **Increased awareness of healthy drinking and healthy eating**
 - **Positive financial changes**

- **INFLUENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CAMPAIGN**, including:
 - **The educational program content**
 - **The campaign's roots in the Berkeley Black community**
 - **Congruent policy and environmental factors**

³ McLean J & Flores D. (August 2017). "Thirsty for Change (T4C) Campaign Assessment: July 2016-June 2017 Final Report." Mesu Strategies, LLC.

⁴ John Snow, Inc. (January 2018). "Healthy Berkeley Program Evaluation: Executive Summary." Accessed April 30, 2019: <http://bit.ly/HealthyBerkeleyYear1Eval>.

⁵ McLean J. (February 2019). "Thirsty for Change Interim Impacts summary." Mesu Strategies, LLC.

⁶ Lee MM, Falbe J, Schillinger D, Basu S, McCullough CE, & KA Madsen. (April 2019). "Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Consumption 3 Years After the Berkeley, California, Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Tax." *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 4 (April 1, 2019): pp. 637-639.

- **CONDITIONS THAT CHALLENGE THE SUCCESS OF THE CAMPAIGN**, including:
 - **The current economic environment**
 - **The physical environment in Berkeley Black community neighborhoods**
 - **Certain social factors in the Berkeley Black community**

When asked what they'd recommend that the campaign change or continue, the six people involved in the T4C Voices from the Community interviews offered numerous suggestions. Common themes included recommendations to:

- **Continue the programs**
- **Build consistency across the programming**
- **Invest more in programming**
- **Scale up the effort to specific communities**
- **Upgrade the efforts to deepen the work among current participants**

These results reinforce the importance of continuing peer-led educational activities related to healthy eating and drinking, at least until the point that they reach saturation in the Berkeley Black community. They suggest several opportunities for new and/or expanded programming around topics of youth priorities, healthy lifestyle, family financial management, and healthy eating and drinking for Black men and boys. These results present a strong case for T4C to expand and deepen partnerships to address the social, economic and physical environments that give rise to and perpetuate SSB consumption and other behaviors that promote chronic disease.

This effort also suggests that there might also be value in future research to explore the perspectives of community members who are not engaged in the Thirsty for Change program, either by choice or by circumstance, to understand trends and perspectives related to health promotion. In addition, expanded interviews with T4C participants could shed light on broader trends and additional details that would help to inform public health interventions and other public policy making to promote health and reduce race-based health disparities in Berkeley.

“T4C has been helpful for me to motivate me to take a second look at how I spend my money, what I put in my system, and how I feed my kids. Not only has it helped my family be able to make changes and advocate for those changes, it’s also helped us show up with something beautiful. [The fruit-infused water] makes the other kids interested. This helps them outside the home – they don’t want to do what parents tell them; they want to do what other kids do. [What we learn] can change your family as well as your community – expose others to healthier alternatives.

- Interview Participant



Thirsty for Change Campaign education at Ashby Flea Market, photo by Monique Blodgett

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I. INTRODUCTION



Thirsty for Change education with STEP Sisters Program

Thirsty for Change (T4C)

The Thirsty for Change (T4C) campaign is a ten-year effort aiming to promote healthy and just food environments for the Berkeley Black community, specifically focusing on reducing the consumption sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). Funded in part by revenues from Measure D, the historic SSB tax policy in Berkeley, the campaign supports a range of programs and activities, including “Rethink Your Drink” presentations, Eat Smart/Shop Smart classes, critical dialogues with youth groups, and food justice education, among other activities focused explicitly on Black Berkeley residents. Over the long-term, the campaign aims to advance equitable policy and environmental changes to meaningfully advance the health and wellbeing of the Black community in Berkeley, reduce local health disparities, and promote racial equity.

Voices from the Community

Since the launch of the campaign in 2016, Health Black Families, Inc. (HBF) and Center for Food, Faith and Justice (CFFJ) – the intersectoral partnership leading the campaign – have partnered with Mesu Strategies, LLC – a research and strategy firm committed to a just and inclusive society – to create a Learning + Assessment (L+A) strategy to measure the progress and impacts of the campaign.

Ongoing data collection and analysis from L+A efforts have allowed staff, leadership and funders to continually sharpen and adjust strategies to ensure resources are making a meaningful difference. In the first two years of the campaign, T4C L+A survey data showed that T4C educational activities positively influenced community knowledge and attitudes concerning SSBs.

To explore the factors contributing to these positive impacts, and to identify ways to build upon these gains, the T4C L+A Team launched an effort in 2018 called *Voices from the Community*. The purpose of *Voices from the Community* is to surface important contextual information about the T4C Campaign to help leaders in Berkeley plan and navigate the campaign's next steps, and to potentially help others replicate the program in other communities.

Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with a range of participants in the campaign, the *Voices from the Community* effort aims to:

1. Explore and identify changes among the Berkeley Black community related to the Thirsty for Change Campaign, specifically related to SSB knowledge and attitudes
2. Provide information concerning conditions in which the campaign is operating
3. Explore opportunities for improving the campaign's effectiveness
4. Share lessons about what aspects of the program to continue, expand, and/or change



The purpose of Voices from the Community is to surface important contextual information about the T4C Campaign to help leaders in Berkeley plan and navigate the campaign's next steps, and to potentially help others replicate the program in other communities.

II. METHODOLOGY

The *Voices from the Community* effort involved three major steps, including planning and alignment of the leadership team, completion of six brief semi-structured interviews with campaign participants, and data cleaning, analysis, and writeup.

These steps are outlined in detail below.

Planning and alignment of the leadership team

The leadership team met to discuss key factors regarding this research effort. Drawing from past work and evaluation planning, the team identified:

- a. Priority L+A outcomes of relevance at this stage of the Campaign
- b. Specific research objectives
- c. Interviewee selection criteria

Interviewees were selected among a broad group of individuals familiar with T4C. Selection criteria sought diversity across age, gender, family status, relationship to T4C, and familiarity with the campaign.

Semi-structured interviews with campaign participants

Six community members were selected according to criteria related to the research objectives. Participants ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-60s and represented single-parent households, double-parent households, and single households, including both single young adults and single elderly adults. Half of participants were male, half female; half involved with T4C programs administered by HBF, half by CFFJ. All participants identified as African-American and involved with T4C to varying degrees; while some were helped to administer programs, others were only recipients of campaign services.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to generate insights and expand understanding on the T4C campaign and how it contributes to health and equity outcomes. To increase validity, interviews were designed to:

- (1) establish trust and credibility between the interviewer and the interviewee,
- (2) provide relevant background and context to focus the conversations,
- (3) affirm confidentiality to allow the interviewee to speak freely without concern for retaliation or consequence, and
- (4) maintain consistency in format through structured interview protocols.

Interviews were conducted with transcripts that allowed for probing questions. Questions explored participant involvement in the campaign; changes in individual, family or community knowledge or action related to the campaign; ways the campaign contributed to changes; campaign or other obstacles to achieving change; and opportunities for future improvement.

To triangulate findings, interviewers built upon interviews with probing questions from completed literature scans and prior interviews. Brief “low-touch” follow-up with interviewees and review of relevant recommended documentation was conducted as necessary.

Data cleaning, analysis and write-up

Interviews were transcribed by a two-person team and reviewed for common themes, prominent ideas, and illustrative stories related to the research objectives and outcomes.

III. FINDINGS

Interviews with community participants in the T4C efforts not only reinforced survey findings that the campaign is supporting knowledge and attitude change about healthy eating and drinking among members of the Berkeley Black community, they also revealed that the community is making behavioral changes, as well. Community members attribute some of these changes to the campaign's content as well as its design. Participants specifically named aspects of the programs they found helpful and described how the campaign's focus on the Black community is an asset. The campaign staff and leadership's understanding of local culture, connections to historic community institutions, and connections to other important community resources make the programs more accessible to the community and help participants feel more open to the programs.

Despite the campaign's success, interviewees also recognize the limitations of the program as it stands. They note that there is still much work to do to create significant transformation in the community. They describe community conditions that call for deeper, more expansive efforts, and particularly those targeting young people. Interviewees stress the importance of both acknowledging environmental conditions, such as the economic and social climate, and helping bring community members along on understanding why this work is important, how community health conditions today have come to be, and the actions that individuals can take to make a difference in the lives of their families and community.



There is still much work to do to create significant transformation in the community... community conditions call for deeper, more expansive efforts, particularly ones targeting young people

Specific themes from the interviews are listed below, and organized into the following categories:

Changes in the community related to the Thirsty for Change Campaign

Factors contributing to community change

Community conditions that shape changes and future potential for impact

Recommendations for future efforts

Changes in the Berkeley Black Community

Interviewees named several specific changes in the community related to aspects of the Thirsty of Change campaign, including healthier behaviors and beverage choices and increased awareness of healthy eating and healthy drinking. Other positive changes were also named.

Theme Healthier behaviors and beverage choices

Every interviewee reported changes in drinking behaviors, either among themselves, their families, or others in the community, including people at church, or kids in the family. Many interviewees told more than one story about changes they had taken part in or witnessed within the community. Such changes included:

- Reduced consumption of soda, juice, or brand-name sports drinks
- Increased consumption of water, including fruit water, sparkling water, and tea
- Consciously choosing to shift drink choices
- More people carrying around water bottles
- Fewer people carrying around sodas

Theme Increased awareness of healthy drinking and healthy eating

Half of the participants stated that they had either experienced or witnessed among family, friends or other community members an increased awareness of food options, greater willingness to try new foods, and/or changes in diet among family or friends.

Some participants reported improved knowledge and confidence to purchase healthier foods among themselves, friends and family, including stronger ability to connect with the farmers at the farmers market or to advocate for healthy foods among managers in the grocery store.

Theme Financial changes

Some interviewees named benefits to family finances, either through the improved ability to tackle healthy family budgeting by linking budgeting to healthier eating, or through the savings resulting from lower health care costs.



Participants in Healthy Black Families, Inc.'s STEP Program pose after an Eat Smart workshop

"This work has made me more aware of what I put in my body. Around the church, I've seen more people carrying water bottles around. A lot of people I see are carrying water bottles, and a lot fewer people with sodas."

"I've started drinking a lot of water. I lost 5 pounds. My kids drink even more water than I do. I keep water in my car for myself or for others. I drive for [a ridesharing service] and I share the water there. I'm also not afraid of drinking tap water. We have some of the best tap water anywhere."

"My daughter is 7 and at Thanksgiving, we were visiting my uncle, who lives far from here and is not really into the water thing. We were eating all kinds of food and we had a lot of soda and juice around, and my daughter asked for fruit water. She said, 'I need some fruit water!' He told her no, but even at [age] 7, she was firm about it... [We ended up getting it for her.] Plus, my uncle was really interested and wanted to learn more."

Campaign Factors Influencing Change

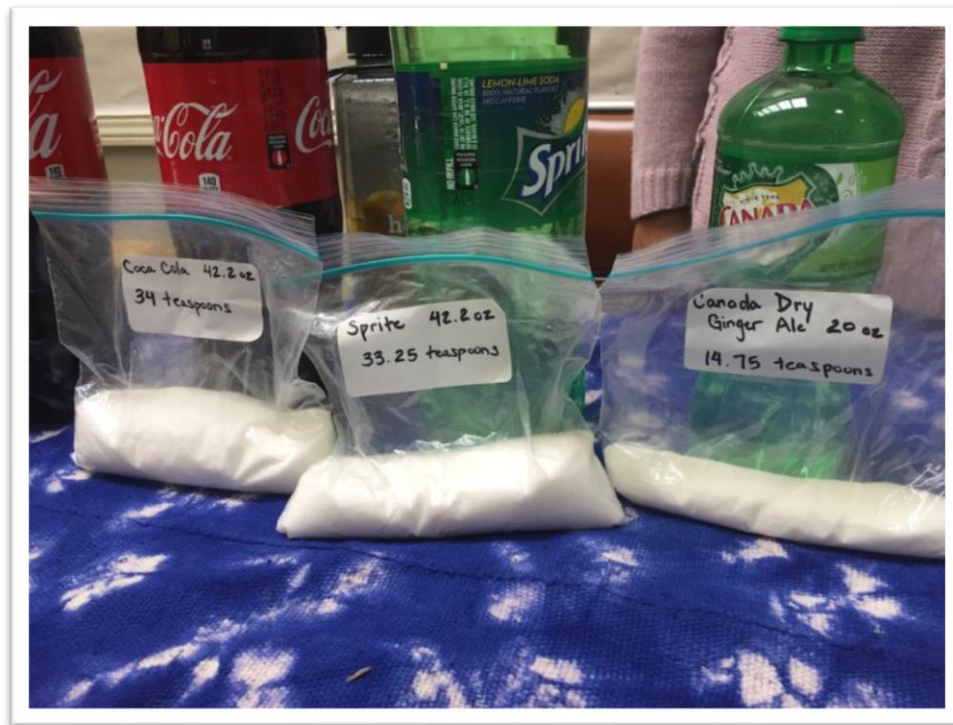
Interviewees named the aspects of the Thirsty of Change campaign that they felt were supportive of the changes named above. Themes centered around the content of the educational programs, the campaign's specific focus on the Berkeley Black community, and certain policy and environmental factors included in the campaign.

Theme The educational program content is contributing to change

In describing educational content, they found influential, some interviewees specifically named the programs operated by the campaign, including the Rethink Your Drink presentations, Eat Smart Shop Smart classes, and gardening programs. Most participants were likely to name aspects of the programs they found influential.

- Gaining exposure to sugar content and healthy alternatives

“Once they actually see it – how much sugar is actually in the bottle – people realize that they’re killing themselves. They decide to put the soda down and say they’re not going to drink it. They taste the fruit water and I’ve seen it change a lot of people.”



Rethink Your Drink! Presentation, photo by Natalie Orenstein (c) 2018 BerkeleySide

- Participating in food tours and cooking classes

“We go to different stores and learn how to shop. That’s another big part of the help that has helped me tremendously. When I needed to change my way of eating, that’s also part of my attraction. I’ve simply learned that I can put vegetables in almost everything. I have learned that I can put them in a turkey loaf. It’s food and it’s good and where we shop, the type of stores, they matter. It has taught me to cook inside and then I end up having more money. I have more money when I cook at home.”

- Understanding the findings from the health status report and implications

“This is what’s going on. We constantly talk about the health disparities [from the Berkeley Health Status Report]. We [the Black community] matter just as much as everyone else and we want to make sure that people of color are represented just as much as everyone else. We can have a commonality among one another so we can work together to do this together... when I see my brothers doing better, they understand I know their struggle. We talk about it during the shopping tours, the Health Party, and especially when we’re training more people so people can understand what’s going on.”

- Exchanging information about the health impacts of sugar and water with friends and family

“With some of my personal friends, I have friends who now drink less SSBs, and I believe it’s because of my influence they’re going vegetarian they’re starting to talk about what they’re eating. What I tell them [about SSBs, from information shared through T4C] gets reinforced on TV. For instance, sugar feeds cancers, and then they see it on TV. Then all the other info I have given them is validated.”

Several interviewees acknowledged the campaign staff and leadership as being influential for change, noting how their culturally-appropriate efforts, expertise, delivery and/or modeling have made an impact on the specific needs of the Berkeley Black community.

- Staff are part of our community
"A lot of people might have the same struggles and people don't know what we're dealing with. Others might come and tell us to change and we'll push back. But when [campaign staff] are rooted, it's easier to open up and to be able to trust what they're saying ... they're not an outsider looking in, they're relatable. They understand that [changing behaviors] is not [something to do] cold turkey but that you have choices."
- Staff provide caring attention as appropriate
"It's obvious, I see it in [the staff], the energy and caring. Sometimes, they call. A couple of times, as seniors, we can easily forget the time and date... But the obvious caring about results that comes out of the leaders. They care about us being timely, I want to push more for timeliness, I care about being on time and we need to teach that. It shows you care about what you're engaged in. I think the [T4C staff] are really good."
- Staff promote stronger community ties
"Because of the [T4C] program, it's our belief that we also have to educate the community. Make them aware of resources and programs. Not everyone is homeless but needs better availability of foods."
- Staff are role models
"[The campaign manager] talks to [grocery store] managers. They give us more insight about things that nobody else would know: who is distributing [the food], wholesale prices, deals, [the fact that] someone can pay \$8.99 a pound. [She teaches us to] know the butcher, the people who work the floor, and other—to build relationships with the people we are purchasing food from. There is a new store on Fourth Street, a very expensive local chain. Lots of high priced, fresh and personalized foods. It's over by Rockridge as well. They gave us taste tests, we got to do the tour, heard about how olive oil is created: where it came from, what day it goes on sale, that kind of thing. [The campaign manager] shows us that sometimes it's time to do info building, other times it's time to shop and taste more foods and see what it's like. Now I feel confident I can go in and not feel intimidated. Part of the tour is info building and getting used to learning what food is in season, how they are harvested. Next hour, shopping on our own, or we're cooking in the class with food bought from market."



Thirsty for Change Health Party, photo by Monique Blodgett (c) 2018

“Learning from the pastor -- seeing what he went through with his sickness. Getting his leg amputated. That was something. One day he’s healthy, and the next day, he almost lost his leg a few times. Just watching him go through it.... He said it’s all about the unhealthy eating. And he’s a young man. He’s a young man. To watch him go through that, it’s horrible. It’s horrible to see what the wrong food in your body. This changed my eating habits, not eating a bunch of junk. It changed everything. I’ve got kids and grandkids too. The kids and grandkids they’re healthy. They all eat a lot of vegetables. It’s scary. It gets real scary. They do this because they follow behind us, older ones in the family.”

- The program is family-based, which helps influence change

“For my kids – if I’m eating healthy or drinking healthy, then my kids will mimic and do the same. It’s generational. I got into it because Mom is doing it, and once I got into it then they will. It starts with a lot of the heads of the families, that’s why I push a lot of families to get into it because a lot of it is not knowing.”

Theme

Congruent policy and environmental factors contribute to success

Several interviewees named the importance of certain policy and environmental factors in supporting healthy changes among the Campaign.

- Water policies

“We always have a water policy in place where we always have fruit infused water to allow people to get used to the taste it so they can do it at home. We don’t promote drinking anything sugary during the class and encourage them to buy water or something else healthy.”

- Church garden

“They have a garden at the church, to help demonstrate that eating healthy, drinking healthy, getting rest, living a normal healthy life without poisoning your body, because once you get it in, you can’t get it out. I like to observe. I’m just getting into it and I’m really learning.”



Church Garden, photo by Natalie Orenstein, Berkeleyside © 2018

Community Conditions Influencing Change

Interview participants were asked to identify the factors in their community that supported or posed challenges to achieving the changes named above. Some interviewees shared details about factors even before they were asked, through rich stories and examples they provided about the campaign and its impacts. Themes centered around challenging economic environment, physical environments that do not promote healthy behaviors, and social factors related to education and norms in the Black community.

Theme **The economic environment presents obstacles for Black families in Berkeley**

The majority of interview participants discussed the challenging economic environment, particularly related to the impacts of food costs on food choices.

- Cost affects choice: soda and fast food are affordable; water and healthy food aren't
"There aren't too many grocery stores in South Berkeley. There's maybe one or two stores, but they're a ways apart. One struggle I've come across is if you're out and about and you're thirsty, a canned soda might be fifty cents whereas a bottle of water might be two dollars or a dollar fifty, so people tend to try to save their money and go for what's cheaper, so that's something I've seen people struggle with. You want me to drink healthy, but why is drinking healthy more expensive."
- People are drawn to saving and will choose fast food for financial reasons
"People eat what they can afford. What you can afford is not good for you. Even pregnant women. Babies are getting poisoned before o they come into this world. Lots of kids now are obese at 8-9 [years old], families give them anything to keep them satisfied. It's just unhealthy living. We never had programs like this growing up. If there were, my friends lately, they wouldn't have lost a limb from their diabetes. Unhealthy eating. Lack of money, lack of resources. Many kids eat what they can get their hands on. They go to after school program, they try to feed them healthy, because when they go home, there's nothing there to eat."
- Several interviewees mentioned concerns about the predatory nature of the food and beverage industry
"People feel financially bullied... What this means is – well, it depends on how somebody looks at the dollar and how they're trying to survive. Every family is trying to figure out what they need to sacrifice in order to survive. Being bullied is that you have no choices -- no healthy alternative, high prices – you don't think you can do anything other than what you think you can spend it on."

- Financial strain goes well beyond the issue of healthy foods
“[The challenges are the] lack of money, lack of resources. Many kids eat what they can get their hands on. They go to after school program, they try to feed them healthy, because when they go home, there’s nothing there to eat.”



Homeless encampment in South Berkeley, photo by Hayden Britton (c) 2018 East Bay Express

“Homelessness is having an impact. When your environment is terrible, you don’t think about anything else but survival. You numb yourself and you’re in a state of shock. A lot of people have a lot of soda because they’re trying not stay up, trying to stay alert, stay awake. People are not having stability in that area. Homelessness is getting a lot worse in Berkeley. More tents are going up by the BART station, so many people living in blankets curled up. It’s getting scarier. It’s normalizing. When it first started happening, I was shocked. But now I’m worried I’m becoming numb. It’s happening every day.”

Theme

The physical environment offers few healthy choices

Interview participants shared several concerns about the food environment in Berkeley, particularly for Black community members.

- Interviewees report that healthy choices are not available locally at fair prices. Healthy food in the area is not affordable and/or affordable food in the area is not healthy. Several factors;
 - High number of convenience or liquor stores
 - Low number of affordable, healthy grocery stores
 - Soda and fast food are convenient and seem to be everywhere
 - Lots of unhealthy food around now, unlike previous generations
 - Incidence of diabetes has increased -- not prevalent in prior generations
 - Foods containing high fructose corn syrup are everywhere

- Family and friends from Berkeley who are involved in the criminal justice system do not have access to healthy foods

“People come out of jail unhealthy. My friend just died in jail.”

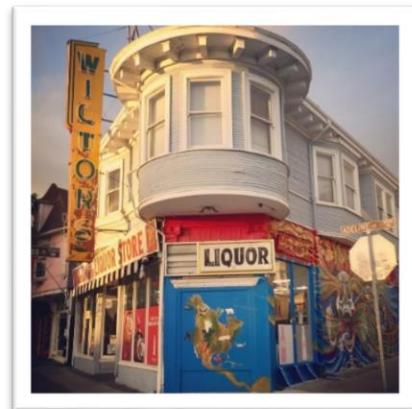
- Changes are occurring over time, affecting generations differently. Gardens are disappearing, so young people don't have access to that kind of education about healthy eating. Elderly are limited in mobility – they can't get around – so they don't have access to healthier foods, even if they can afford them.

“Elderly people aren't able to get out on their own, only able to do so much each day. Not able to get healthy foods -- they feel it's a burden for them to buy.”

“I grew up the youngest of 6 boys. Nobody then was getting sick then than now. We had a garden, we ate fresh, mamma made stuff from scratch. We ate healthy. We knew what it was to eat healthy. Growing up back then, we didn't hear about diabetes, we very seldom see people die from diabetes, not like now, see so many young people with diabetes now. Even the pastor had his bout with it.”



Produce at the South Berkeley farmer's market



A liquor store in Berkeley

Interviews revealed several themes concerning the social factors affecting healthy eating and healthy drinking outcomes. Interviewees named a number of social norms in the Berkeley Black community that can make healthy drinking choices difficult, for instance:

- Longstanding perceptions among members of the Berkeley Black community that water itself isn't tasty

"People don't like water, it doesn't taste good -- what [the water ambassadors] try to tell them and encourage them to understand is that they need an alternative to possibly make a change down the line. We're adamant about giving them facts first and help them understand what makes sense, and why it's important."

- An overall lack of awareness and discussion of healthy eating and drinking; a recognition that *"nobody talks about the food environment the way they should."* One interviewee stated that there's more talk of addressing gun violence, which is important but kills fewer people than the food environment.

- Men may refrain from participating in health programs or healthy behaviors efforts because of beliefs and norms about masculinity. Two male interviewees made comments that healthful activities or efforts to improve health can be perceived by males to be inherently female, and therefore undesirable for men to take part in, or reinforce stubbornness or negative attitudes regarding such activities.

"Sometimes we as men, some of us African American men don't want to participate in it because it's got women in it. It's bull. It's about health. It's about life change. It's about caring about sharing this health issue with little people in your family. It's about sharing it with your significant. I think the ladies [who run this program] are doing a great job."

- Several interviewees discussed the challenging norm of the obesity and overweight epidemic; that the prevalence of obesity among children and leaders in the community is high, so it's not considered to be the problem that it is.

"A lot of council members are overweight and sick. [A former council person] is overweight and it's bad for him and his eating habits. If nobody is not paying kids no attention, the girls is overweight, the boys is overweight, and the council members, they're there for votes, they don't worry about how the kids will be doing 10 years from now, eating garbage. If we implement this program, we could save a lot of lives, that's what it's all about. Not just guns and violence, but junk food."

Other recurring themes addressed the quality of health education in the community and prominent issues related to mental health.

- Concerns about poor health education in the community touched on the lack of information about the sugar content of soda, and the link between sugar consumption and chronic disease. Comments about the lack of health education by more formal means, such as in school or at the doctor's office trends, as well as from less formal means; people the community teach their kids what they know because they never learned otherwise. What's more, the community faces not only a lack of information, but also misinformation from corporate ads promoting SSBs.
- It is challenging for community members to address eating and drinking issues when the focus for many is on survival. Families are struggling to make ends meet and are confronting emotional issues related to fear and overwhelm, as well as sugar addiction.

"I've been a little bit not as verbal [in T4C activities] because I'm kind of ... I'm trying to look after my health, and sometimes, I'm not as eager. That's basically it. The involvement and my ... sometimes the stuff that goes on in my head about my health and the fear... The fear... [I hope] I can get better. I will get better. It's so important. And if my involvement can show that it will be helping someone, so I've gotta do it more, and I will do it more. So, yes, I won't be so quiet anymore."



A baby looks around as her family participates in a Berkeley community event



The pastor of McGee Avenue Baptist Church discusses food justice on Earth Day, photo by Natalie Orenstein, (c) 2017 Berkeleyside

Finally, several participants mentioned the values and challenges of the faith community. The church serves an important role in bringing the community together, and in offering a venue for learning and information sharing. However, some fear the church is losing touch with youth; there is some recognition of the role of gentrification and displacement, and some debate as to whether youth are as connected as they could be.

“Our church is a commuter church. People used to live in Berkeley, but now it’s children or grandchildren who come to church. I’ve encountered kids from YouthCorps. They’re at Berkeley High but not all of them live in Berkeley. There’s a lot of Black community that don’t interact with the church. It’s about 200 people. It’s in decline because it’s aging, but we’re putting in stuff to attract younger people. That’s what we’re doing with [T4C activities], more interesting stuff to appeal, and not forcing tradition.”

Participant Recommendations

When asked what they'd recommend that the campaign change or continue, the six people involved in the T4C Voices from the Community interviews offered numerous suggestions. The following list reflects the breadth of suggestions, organized by common theme:

- *Continue the programs*, including educational activities, health parties, food tours, and attention and care to community members
- *Build consistency in the programs*, by ensuring campaign participants all receive information about the sugar content of beverages and the opportunity to sample fruit-infused water
- *Invest more in the programs*, by improving the promotional photographs and materials with better stock photos, creating more fliers and handouts to get the word out, giving out water bottles and/or water filters for people to install at home, and doing more educational activities more frequently
- *Scale up the effort*, by conducting outreach at more farmer's markets and fairs, partnering with more churches, introducing the programming at schools, and making more announcements via fliers, PSAs, and on social media. One participant encouraged more creative partnerships with local institutions, such as UC Berkeley
- *Upgrade the efforts of the campaign*, by building in more curriculum about lifestyle and grocery shopping, partnering with other organizations and leaders (such as key policy makers), building in more supportive policies, and by focusing more on young people through the schools, breakfast programs and social media

"Health care is expensive, and it's necessary – but it's easier and cheaper to stay healthy. It's better for my wallet and my health. I used to have a big sweet tooth, and I've lost two teeth behind that. Since I've started doing this [cutting back on sugar intake through T4C], I haven't had any oral problems."

IV. CONCLUSION



These findings suggest several opportunities for new and/or expanded programming around: youth priorities, healthy lifestyle, family financial management, and healthy eating and drinking for Black men and boys. These results present a strong case for T4C to expand and deepen partnerships to address the social, economic and physical environments that give rise to and perpetuate SSB consumption and other behaviors that promote chronic disease.

This Voices from the Community research effort has offered important insights into the impacts of the Thirsty for Change Campaign in its first three years, as well as challenges surrounding the effort and promising next steps forward, as seen by community participants in the campaign. These findings offer valuable information to program leaders seeking to deepen impact, and to others who aim to create similar programs in Berkeley and possibly in other comparable places.

This effort has revealed important details concerning contextual factors surrounding impacts seen in Thirsty for Change evaluation surveys of the Rethink Your Drink presentations, as well as findings emerging from academic studies of the impacts of the Berkeley soda tax, including one published by researchers at UC Berkeley in February 2019.

These results reinforce the importance of continuing peer-led educational activities related to healthy eating and drinking, at least until the point that they reach saturation in the community. They suggest several opportunities for new and/or expanded programming around topics of youth priorities, healthy lifestyle, family financial management, and healthy eating and drinking for Black men and boys. These results present a strong case for T4C to expand and deepen partnerships to address the social, economic and physical environments that give rise to and perpetuate SSB consumption and other behaviors that promote chronic disease.

This effort also suggests that there might be value in future research to explore the perspectives of community members who are not engaged in the Thirsty for Change program, either by choice or by circumstance, to understand trends and perspectives related to health promotion. In addition, expanded interviews with T4C participants could shed light on broader trends and additional details that would help to inform public health interventions and other public policy making to promote health and reduce race-based health disparities in Berkeley.

“When you watch kids picking carrots instead of potato chips and drinking water instead of 2-liter sodas, you know this program has to be implemented.”

