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# Active Living in Latino Communities

George R. Flores, MD, MPH

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Active living takes on unique dimensions in Latino communities. Several papers in this special issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*<sup>1-4</sup> point to factors in physical environments where Latinos (Hispanics) live, work, play or go to school, that have bearing on activity behavior. Influential factors described here and elsewhere include SES/poverty rate, concern about safety, place of residence, social relationships/social support, acculturation, and park access.<sup>1-8</sup>

As the nation's largest, but one of the poorest, ethnic groups, many Latinos live in places that promote inactivity and unhealthy lifestyles: neighborhoods of older, overcrowded, substandard housing, high crime rates, excessive traffic, and lack of access to parks and other facilities for physical activity. It is little wonder that Latinos are the most physically inactive racial/ethnic group in the U.S.<sup>9,10</sup> The consequences of inactivity are reflected in Latinos' inordinately high rates of obesity and diabetes.

Examining barriers to active living in Latino communities provides an opportunity to consider the deep and persistent social and environmental inequities that underlie patterns of inactivity as well as multiple disparities in health status. Yancey and Kumanyika<sup>11</sup> remind us that "when we ask why the environments of minority and low-income children are relatively less conducive to healthy eating and physical activity, we confront the all-too-familiar reality that people who are socially and politically disadvantaged with respect to the larger social structure are in fact, socially and politically disadvantaged in many respects."

Many Latino communities are deeply affected by a systematic disadvantage of power and opportunity. De facto immigrant apartheid eviscerates whole neighborhoods from the American Dream. Priorities in those places tend not to be parks and open space, but jobs, housing, and safety/security. Workers with intimate knowledge of the community and its trust find that the pathway to advocating for healthy environments starts with assistance for the higher-level priorities. Fortunately, some of those higher priorities are served by healthy environmental planning, for example, safety (improvements to street design, lighting, facility design), housing, and air quality (land use, transportation).

To act on urban planning and design that promotes physical activity in Latino communities is to confront the limitations and barriers with the realization that intervention in places with the greatest inequities and populations with the most limited choices can yield the greatest payoff.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as the population least likely to have access to medical care, the disease-sparing qualities of health supportive environments like active living take on added significance for Latinos. Building places and creating conditions that make it easier to be physically active can lessen the risk of diseases that might otherwise require costly care and interfere with productivity, two consequences that land high on the list of priorities for Latinos to avoid.

Practice-based experience in Healthy Eating Active Communities, a program of the California Endowment, demonstrates that it is not enough to observe conditions and behaviors in Latino communities to make a policy case for environmental change. Nor is it sufficient to develop models and tools and point the direction.<sup>12</sup> If sustainable improvement in physical activity is the goal, then the target communities themselves must be engaged in and take ownership of the policy solutions. With active living, this means that the inclusion of people with the deepest stake in the outcome, grassroots to leadership, is cultivated and supported from design to planning, and from policy development to implementation.

Even when faced with significant challenges and long odds, some Latino communities have demonstrated a willingness and determination to play an active role in changing their environments. The 92701 ZIP code of Santa Ana is one of the most densely populated places in the state, 92% Latino, and without a single park for the 61,000 residents, 68% of whom are living at or below two times the federal poverty level. This is where one finds signs—"\$50 fine for outside noise"—and children exercising in the bathroom, to accommodate the many renters sleeping in shifts in every other room of tiny apartments. Healthy Santa Ana, a coalition led by Latino Health Access, a local organization deeply rooted in the principles of social justice and community organizing, is working with Trust for Public Land, the City of Santa Ana, and the Santa Ana School District to address the lack of open space and to acquire and convert land to recreational use. Training youth and Spanish-speaking *promotores* to gain a voice in civic decision-making about land use and planning, and persistence with civic officials and the business commu-

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From the California Endowment, San Francisco, California

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: George R. Flores, MD, MPH, California Endowment, 101 Second Street, 24th Floor, San Francisco CA 94105. E-mail: GFlores@calendow.org.

nity has led to small victories with more to come. Awarded a pocket park, and now working toward agreements for the after-hours use of school grounds, Healthy Santa Ana embodies the requisite spirit and drive to deliver on active living in Latino communities.

In Los Angeles, new urban environmentalism is being termed, “browning the green movement” in recognition of the emerging power base of Latinos forming the Alianza de los Pueblos del Rio. Starved for parks and opportunities for urban recreation, and fed up with “No Soccer Allowed” signs, Latino voices are pushing for the transformation of the Los Angeles River from a vast concrete wasteland that winds through miles of Latino neighborhoods, to a ribbon of green space and parks that invite families and healthy activity. Nearby in Boyle Heights, Latino residents got a cracked sidewalk around a cemetery transformed into a 1.5 mile rubberized jogging path. Use increased from 200 to 1000 people a day walking, running, and socializing.<sup>13,14</sup>

While it is clear that willingness, determination, and the capacity to advocate effectively for healthy environments can lead to success, it is equally clear that most Latino communities are not yet on that pathway. Latino health advocates and others are calling for the research, community capacity-building, and programs that will lead to policy and systems change solutions to improve environments for physical activity and nutrition.<sup>12,14</sup>

Institutions such as local public health departments and healthcare providers that could serve to inform and advocate for healthy community design and planning, especially for places with deep inequities, are often found to be lacking not only in resources but also in environmental as well as cultural competence. Separated from environmental health and planning decisions for years, the capacity to be effective agents in the planning arena as well as in community discourse, needs to be vastly strengthened through training and leadership development.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, researchers and advocates for health and the environment must use more effective frames and messages that resonate with

Latino and non-Latino audiences alike. Even the best scientific evidence doesn't necessarily translate into public policy, much less behavior change. Getting others to believe in and act on creating healthier environments starts with building relationships and strengthening communications across cultures and disciplines. Latino communities are an essential part of the solution.

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