

**“IF WE DON’T SPEAK, OUR VOICES WON’T BE HEARD”:  
ORGANIZING FARMWORKERS THROUGH PODER POPULAR**

**Gloria Sayavedra  
Ron Stochlic  
Bertha Sarmina García**

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**CALIFORNIA  
INSTITUTE FOR  
RURAL STUDIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Efforts to improve the health and well-being of low-income and other marginalized populations have historically focused on individual-level strategies, often consisting of outreach and education promoting behavior change or improved access to health care. Nonetheless, the limitations of focusing on change at the individual level are becoming increasingly apparent. Many health-related conditions are associated with broader environmental conditions that cannot be addressed through individual level strategies, and despite years of efforts, rates of obesity, asthma and diabetes continue to rise.

The California Endowment has become increasingly aware that more “upstream” approaches to improving health are in order and has turned its attention to promoting policy and systems change that will address the *root causes* of poor health. This model is based on collective citizen participation, community organization, empowerment and civic engagement of members of traditionally disenfranchised communities.

One example of this approach is *Poder Popular*, a program of The California Endowment’s Agricultural Worker Health Initiative (AWHI). *Poder Popular* is a place-based initiative working to promote improved health by addressing the community and environmental factors that are at the root of poor health and well-being. The approach is based on the belief that every community, regardless of social, economic, physical and other conditions, has assets and resources that can be mobilized by an informed and empowered set of residents.

A demonstration project based on two distinct approaches is currently being implemented in nine California regions. One approach is based on organizing community members through broad-based *Comités del Pueblo* and *Concilios del Pueblo* (“People’s Committees” and “People’s Councils”). This model is being implementing in North Tulare County and the Salinas Valley in Monterey County.

The other approach, known as the *Promotores Comunitarios de Salud* strategy, seeks to develop and test a new model of resident-based leadership and advocacy addressing social and environmental determinants of health. This approach, which is modeled on Latin American – particularly Mexican – experiences, is currently being implemented in seven California regions: Napa/Sonoma, Fresno, Merced, Kern, Ventura and San Diego Counties and the Coachella Valley.<sup>1</sup>

The cornerstone of the *Promotores Comunitarios de Salud* strategy is the involvement of community health workers, or *promotores comunitarios*, in developing their leadership skills and mobilizing community residents to create change. The *Poder Popular* model is based on the assumption that long-lasting and sustainable change in farmworker communities occurs most effectively when it originates within the community, is driven by

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<sup>1</sup> The original portfolio consisted of eight sites. Nonetheless, funding for one site was discontinued due to a lack of sufficient progress in meeting their stated objectives.

locally identified priorities and takes advantage of existing community assets. This approach differs from the model being implemented in Tulare and Monterey Counties because it takes a significantly more grassroots and “bottom-up” approach to advocating for policy and systems change that will result in improved community health and well-being.

This research brief presents preliminary findings from an evaluation of the *Promotores Comunitarios de Salud* model, which is being conducted through a collaborative effort between the California Institute for Rural Studies and Harder+Company Community Research. We seek to shed light on the implementation of this model and the effectiveness of this approach in farmworker communities, which present a set of challenges and opportunities that are very different from other low-income and marginalized populations.

## BACKGROUND

The State of California has one of the largest immigration rates in the US. The 2000 United States Census indicates approximately 2.1 million authorized immigrants in California, of which more than 50% were from Mexico or Central America. Findings from the National Agricultural Worker Survey<sup>2</sup> indicate that approximately 95% of all agricultural workers in the U.S. – approximately 40% of whom are women – were born in Mexico. While 52 percent of farmworkers self-report as undocumented, the actual number is likely much higher and is generally estimated at 70 to 80 percent.

Latinos produce and transform most of the food consumed in the U.S. Ironically however, the same agricultural workers who are responsible for producing an abundance of food find themselves at serious risk of hunger, diet-related chronic diseases, unsafe living and working conditions and inadequate access to health care. As a farmworker interviewed through this evaluation noted, “I’m disappointed in this country, which is supposed to be the best in the world. Here it’s not true that if you work hard you’ll have health and housing. I’ve been working day and night, and no, in this country there is no health.”

Health indicators for agricultural workers are generally worse than their non-farmworker Latino counterparts. Farmworkers are exposed to a range of occupational health problems on a daily basis, including pesticide exposure, musculoskeletal injury, heat stroke, accidents and injuries associated with heavy machinery, falls from ladders, cuts and lacerations and illnesses associated with poor field sanitation.

At the same time, farmworker communities also suffer from numerous non-occupational health problems, including asthma and other respiratory illness, obesity, poor diet and nutrition, substandard housing, household and community violence, inadequate access to health care and behavioral health issues associated with loneliness and isolation from their families, harsh working conditions and stress associated with fear of immigration raids and deportation.

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<sup>2</sup> Carroll, Daniel, Susan Gabbard, Carmen G. Sum and Trish Hernandez. (2006). “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers, (NAWS) 2003-2004.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

## THE “PODER POPULAR” PROMOTORES COMUNITARIOS DE SALUD STRATEGY

The *Poder Popular Promotores Comunitarios de Salud* strategy is a three-year pilot program that has taken place during the period 2006-2008. It is a place-based strategy implemented by community-based organizations in seven California regions with large concentrations of agricultural workers. The grantees represent a diverse mix of organizations, including health clinics, community organizing agencies and social service providers. Each site is implementing this effort in three surrounding rural communities. Inclusion criteria include relatively small population (under 10,000) and a high percentage of agricultural workers and accompanying family members.

The main objective of this program is to give farmworkers and their families the tools with which to identify the *community-level* issues affecting their health and well-being and the skills to advocate for policy and systems change through strategic alliances and advocacy with local and regional authorities and other stakeholders. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to empower farmworkers to stand up for themselves and create the change they want to see in their communities. In the words of a young *promotor*:

“We are giving voice to the people who are too scared to speak. We need to get rid of this fear that is in the community. If we don’t speak, our voices won’t be heard. I’ve been through a lot and stayed quiet, but we need to speak up and help others speak up too.”

## THE EVALUATION

Given the innovative nature of the *Promotores Comunitarios de Salud* strategy, the evaluation has both formative and summative components. The goal of the formative component is to detect problems and issues as they arise, in order to contribute to the formulation of mid-course adjustments in program design and implementation that will increase the likelihood of the initiative’s success. Summative goals include documenting the process of implementing this initiative and identifying successes, challenges and lessons learned. The summative component of the evaluation will also provide recommendations for modifications to program design, should this effort be replicated elsewhere. Ultimately, the evaluation will shed light on the effectiveness of this innovative approach in achieving the goal of organizing farmworkers to advocate for policy and system change that will result in improved community health.

The principal avenue for data collection is site visits that are conducted with each agency twice a year, generally in the spring and fall, when agricultural workers are less busy and can more actively participate in the evaluation. The purpose of the site visits is to assess each site’s progress and identify successful practices, challenges and lessons learned that

can be shared with the other sites. An additional purpose of the site visits is to elicit staff and *promotores* recommendations for improving program design and implementation. In-depth individual and group interviews are conducted with key stakeholders, including program managers, field coordinators, *promotores*, *comité* members, collaborating partners and agencies, community-based allies, elected officials and other decision-makers and stakeholders (e.g. school officials). Five rounds of site visits have been conducted as of April 2008.

With respect to the *promotores*, the purpose of the interviews has been to gauge the impacts of participation in this effort on them, in terms of their understanding of this complex initiative, challenges to participation and unintended “spillover” effects of participating in this effort, for example, impacts on family dynamics. We have also attempted to gauge impacts of participation on the *promotores*’ self-esteem and leadership skills, important intermediate outcomes that are a necessary precursor to their ability to recruit and organize community members around key issues.

A participatory photography component was included in the evaluation as well. This optional aspect was offered with the objective of allowing the *promotores* to conduct a participatory assessment of this initiative based on their own perspectives. Six sites expressed interest in this component of the evaluation. They were trained in participatory photography and interviewing techniques and received digital cameras and tape recorders.

In addition to the methodologies discussed above, we have experimented with different approaches to data collection. Starting with the spring 2007 round of site visits, we conducted SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analyses with program staff and *promotores* at each site. This methodology proved extremely fruitful in helping program participants think critically about the issues – both positive and negative – affecting this initiative’s success, which providing the research team with useful evaluation data.<sup>3</sup>

## Key Findings

### Successes

There are currently 345 active *promotores* participating in this initiative, 69% of whom are women. Their efforts are enhanced by the *comités*, most of which were formed in early 2008.

In the short timeframe since their inception, the *comités* have achieved successes with respect to both effecting change and gaining “a place at the table” in several communities. Some of these successes are listed below:

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<sup>3</sup> All participants provided permission to use findings from the SWOT analysis in order to inform the evaluation.

- *Comités* have negotiated improvements in various communities, including traffic lights, road repairs and related safety measures, improved bus service, trailer park clean-ups, playground equipment, keeping a nightclub from opening near a kindergarten, etc.
- *Comités* are being sought out by local officials to help with community outreach and to co-sponsor events, since they are considered very good at getting the word out.
- *Comités* have been invited to participate in City Development Plans and State Assembly Commissions, as well as in water improvement petition-signing.
- Local authorities are willing to supply interpreters at their meetings to encourage attendance of *comité* members. As an official explained, “that’s how much we want them there.”
- City authorities have met with *comité* members to brainstorm solutions to local problems.
- The Fresno team of *promotores* won the 10th Annual 31<sup>st</sup> Assembly District Hispanic Heritage Award for contributions to the City of Mendota, including work on City Beautification, Community Garden, Heat Stress and drought relief.
- The Healdsburg *comité* presented the City Council with a proposal for the establishment of a Human Relations Commission within the council, to better address diversity issues.
- Local owners and farmers in one community are requesting HIV services and providing time off for farmworkers to access health services.
- Health services for women and children have been obtained in another community.
- *Comités* have negotiated support for activities such as community gardens, farmers markets, beautification campaigns and fundraising events.

### ***Outcomes: Organizing for Change***

A notable phenomenon in U.S. is the preponderant participation of women in health promotion activities. *Poder Popular* is no exception, where 69% of the *promotores* are women, who, aside from their daily lives as mothers, wives and field workers, work tirelessly to organize and improve conditions in their communities.

Health has been used as a vehicle for identifying and addressing a broad range of problems affecting the well-being of community members. Health-related needs assessments were conducted in each community. Issues identified include poor housing conditions, pesticide exposure, contaminated water, immigrants’ rights, gang violence, community safety and inadequate community infrastructure.

The *promotores comunitarios* conducted health surveys and “resource mapping” in each town, to identify key concerns, assess physical and environmental factors influencing community health, and identify the resources that each community has to solve identified problems.

In early 2008, the *promotores* and *comités* also developed action plans to address the community issues identified in each town. Some sites have initiated a resident-led process resulting in the formation of *Comités del Pueblo* (“People’s Committees”) that serve as a means of community engagement and dialogue, bringing agricultural communities and

local stakeholders together to create improved living conditions for farmworkers, their families and their communities.

In carrying out their action plans, *promotores* and *comités* have developed various skills, such as reaching out to the community and bringing people together through civic and cultural events or around critical issues, staying informed of local issues by attending City Council and other public meetings, preparing presentations and speaking in public forums, and negotiating with local authorities for various kinds of support.

As action plans are gradually implemented, *promotores* and *comités* are becoming empowered, gaining public recognition, and making a difference in their communities. This phase of the *Poder Popular* program is laying a solid foundation for future advocacy work in the kinds of system changes needed to improve health and living conditions.

### ***Unanticipated Changes***

In addition to formal outcomes, the evaluation has also identified a number of – generally positive – unanticipated changes, including the following:

- Many women have reported receiving greater recognition from their husbands regarding the value of the work they are doing. They noted that this has translated into more respectful treatment at home and in the community.
- Participation in the program has served as a means for some *promotores* to deal with depression and feelings of isolation or disappointment in their experience in the U.S.
- A teenaged *promotor* noted that participation in the program helped him transition from getting into trouble after school to doing something useful, which gave him a strong sense of pride.
- Many *promotores* have improved their English and public-speaking skills through presentations at schools, health clinics, City Council meetings and participation in public debates. Some indigenous Mixteco-speaking *promotores* have improved their Spanish skills as well.

### ***Lessons Learned***

- Based on their experiences, numerous sites have made changes to their *promotores*' recruitment strategy. For example, many sites presented the community organizing aspects of the program incrementally, in order to avoid people's fears of committing to leadership positions. Many also placed greater emphasis on the advantages of personal empowerment and education as a result of participation in this program.
- As the majority of the *promotores* are women, providing childcare during all meetings and trainings facilitates their attendance and participation. Their children have also reported that they like attending these meetings. Exposing children to these types of activities also allows children to see their mothers engaging in leadership roles outside the home (particularly important for girls), providing an invaluable foundation to self-esteem and shaping future community leaders.

- Using cultural and health events are an effective means of recruiting *comité* members.
- Training for the *comité* members has been much more dynamic than for the *promotores*. The trainings are more spread out over time and are intermingled with various activities in order to maintain interest and build momentum.
- In retrospect, it may have been more productive to form *comités* earlier in the funding period. The timeline enabled *promotores* to develop their skills and become known in the community before broadening their scope of work, but the interaction with a broader circle of community members also enhanced their leadership skills and provided important input to action plans.
- There have been implementation differences with respect to *promotores* serving as *comité* members or as external support. It appears that having *promotores* serve as members of the *comité* is more effective, as this is a better use of the leadership skills they develop through the program. Given their important role in the communities, they can participate as full members.
- It is helpful and even strategic to implement some immediate, short-term actions early on, in order to build momentum and confidence, as well as to achieve visibility and recognition.
- Allowing the *comité* members themselves to prepare presentations and reports, rather than rely on agency staff, develops communications skills, builds trust and increases accountability.
- The *Mesas Directivas* (elected representatives from within the *comités*) are potential sources of the leadership needed to sustain motivation. These representatives are recognized by the communities as capable of convening and motivating others. Many have women in recognized leadership roles, who help keep other people motivated.

## **Challenges**

In addition to what is proving to be the many positive aspects of this initiative, many challenges have arisen along the way. The economic recession, immigration policy, fear of deportation, fear of job loss and fear of reprisals raise the stakes and make it challenging for farmworkers to lift their voices. Migratory patterns, 12 to 14-hour work days during the harvest, lack of transportation and increasing hostility from some local residents are additional barriers to participation in this effort. The following are some key challenges identified by the evaluation.

- Most *promotores* expressed a need to be constantly creative in finding ways to motivate people and encourage them to overcome their fears and other barriers to participation.
- Reconciling disparate visions and priorities among *comité* members of different ages, family status, employment status, etc. has been a challenge in some areas, particularly with regard to youth and adults.
- There is a strong risk of burn-out, especially among female *promotoras* and *comité* members, whose workload is already overburdened between family, home and work.
- Some jurisdictions have asked Poder Popular to help with community outreach. While this is an important role, the challenge lies in finding a balance between conducting outreach and focusing on advocacy activities directly related to the action plans

developed. As one stakeholder said, “*There is only so much a person or program can do without diluting the mission. Poder Popular has to be careful not to overextend itself.*”

- Furthermore, as one stakeholder commented: “*In order to be sustainable, Poder Popular has to get involved in organizational development along with leadership development. The organization does not have to be formal, it can be an association, but they need to learn how to run that organization, how to be accountable for moving their issues forward.*”
- With initial funding for this effort coming to a close, ensuring long-term sustainability presents a serious challenge. The agencies must obtain additional funding and/or develop appropriate exit or hand-over strategies, linking the *comités* and *promotores* with other organizations, with a view to capacity-building, effectiveness and sustainability.

## Conclusions

The *Promotores Comunitarios de Salud* strategy has created a movement empowering farmworkers and fostering dialogue between heretofore marginalized residents and local stakeholders. Local authorities have begun to realize that agricultural workers are a constituency with a voice and that they must pay attention. The program is proving effective in building a democracy that is more inclusive of farmworkers, one of the most disenfranchised and marginalized groups in the United States.