

Community Advocates Leadership Academy (CALA)

I. The Need: Underrepresented Communities in Policy Making

Civic empowerment enables residents to inform policies that create the conditions for health, and it is necessary to cultivate a thriving, multicultural democracy. Yet, communities that experience health inequities such as residents of lower incomes and people of color are underrepresented in policy decision-making processes. Their voices have historically been marginalized and intentional culturally-informed efforts need to be in place to support the authentic leadership and engagement of all our communities. Having their voices inform decisions that will impact their community health is key to advancing health equity and supports improved sense of social connection and mental health.

"I left CALA with an awesome network of like-minded, ethical community-based leaders in the region who are dedicated to making a stronger, healthier communities from different fronts." - Ofelia Bello, East Palo Alto Planning Commissioner and graduate of the CALA class of 2018

II. The Solution: Multiple Stakeholders Finding Common Ground

The [Community Advocates Leadership Academy](#) (CALA) equips residents of San Mateo County and Santa Clara County with the tools and knowledge to advance environmental protection and health equity. CALA is a program of the [Committee for Green Foothills](#), a long-time environmental advocacy group that stewards the protection of the natural resources of the Peninsula and South Bay. Green Foothills launched CALA in 2013 to broaden their base to reflect the diversity of the region and more strategically inform policies that impact the natural environment. They recognize the interconnectedness of the natural environment with human health and make healthy communities a component of their training. CALA has graduated more than 200 San Mateo County and Santa Clara County residents. Since 2015, Get Healthy San Mateo County has supported CALA to ensure that San Mateo County residents are included in the program with a specific focus on diversity of participants. Communities of color and lower-income communities experience the worst health inequities and are often left out of leadership programs.



Since then, 79 San Mateo County residents have participated in the program, and many of them are now serving in decision-making and policy-advisory bodies including the San Mateo Sustainability Commission, East Palo Alto Planning Commission, the Redwood City Planning Commission, and the San Mateo County Harbor District.

III. The Essential Ingredients for Success: Strategic Goals and Flexibility to Meet New Challenges

- **Diversity Goals and Targeted Outreach:** CALA sets clear diversity and inclusion goals for each of its cohorts before recruitment starts. These goals are accompanied by a targeted outreach plan to ensure they are achieved.
- **Scholarships:** CALA offers scholarships to remove the financial barrier that low-income communities face when accessing leadership development opportunities.
- **Recalibration:** CALA has developed and recalibrated its curriculum every year based on feedback from participants, key stakeholders, and their own evaluation metrics.

IV. Challenges: The Sustainability Movement Does Not Reflect the Diversity of The Region

Diversifying the sustainability movement is critical to scale the impact of Green Foothills advocacy work. San Mateo County is over 60% people of color, CALA aims to broaden the movement to reflect the diversity in the region. CALA has graduated over 70 people of color, and at least 150 people of lower incomes. It is estimated that 75 percent of the people who have participated in the program would not have been able to have done so without a significant scholarship.

“There needs to be a larger, more diverse base of community leaders who are working across sectors for the natural environment” –
Megan Fluke, Committee for Green Foothills Executive Director

V. Looking to the Future



In order to meet the growing environmental and social challenges experienced by the region, CALA has revamped its program. CALA will offer a sharper curriculum that will explore the intersectionality of environmental issues with policies and practices that have created barriers for marginalized communities to engage in decision-making processes. It will also shift its teaching models from the traditional teacher/student model to a more culturally competent teaching model that emphasizes the lived experience of participants as a source of expertise. These changes are important elements to build a more inclusive sustainability movement in the region.

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