

PROFILE: Nuestra Casa

A Coastal Adaptation Case Story: The Nuestra Casa Environmental Justice Program



BACKGROUND:

"Generosity and sharing are key." This is one of the driving forces of Nuestra Casa, a non-profit dedicated to supporting Latino families in East Palo Alto and surrounding cities in San Mateo County, California. East Palo Alto has a population of about 30,000, the majority of which are Hispanic or Latino. This area is acutely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Regional temperatures have increased by nearly 2°F since 1950 and sea levels have risen over eight inches in the last century, causing more frequent and intense extreme heat and flooding events. Neither the effects of these events nor the resources to adequately respond are distributed equally across communities, with the most vulnerable residents experiencing more severe consequences than those in other communities. Nuestra Casa aims to level the playing field by training local environmental justice champions and educating community members.

Community-led initiatives are key to addressing climate change at the local level. These types of efforts use the firsthand experiences of community members in education, planning, and implementation. Nuestra Casa's training programs center personal experience and local expertise as a means to identify community vulnerabilities, needs, and strengths. The organization trains residents to become more informed and effective advocates for the issues that matter most to their community.



PROGRAMS:

Nuestra Casa trains community members to be environmental justice and equity leaders. The Environmental Justice program was created to listen to community members and aid in the creation of community-developed solutions for consideration by government officials in local policies and plans. The trainings focus on personal experiences, expertise, and knowledge. The goal is that all communication is clear, direct, culturally relevant, and mindful of community members and values. The program reaches about 6,000 individuals a month through its trainings and workshops. A complementary six-week Environmental Justice Academy was created so parents and high school youth could learn about climate change, local impacts, and potential community-based solutions. The Academy is split into three cohorts representing East Palo Alto and its surrounding communities—African American, Pacific Islander, and Latinx—and encourages participants to leverage their cultural backgrounds in advocating for a climate-resilient community. In 2020, 128 parents and 25 high schoolers were trained through the Academy.

Local community members are trained to act as promotoras or "trusted messengers" to spread the word about Nuestra Casa's projects and programs and encourage their neighbors to participate. These leaders are established and respected members of the community and therefore play an important role in guiding Nuestra Casa's programmatic priorities.

"If you want an inclusive process, you need to include funding in your budget for local community groups to collaborate with you. Please value our expertise, our local relationships, and our time. Don't hire consultants and then ask us to do the work for free."

– Roxana Franco, Nuestra Casa

SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES:

While Nuestra Casa has experienced many successes, barriers still exist that challenge the organization's ability to amplify local voices in the climate change movement. For example, local residents do not often relate to jargon, which creates a barrier between climate professionals and community members. Nuestra Casa provides a space for the community to create and use their own language regarding climate change and environmental justice.

Through its efforts, Nuestra Casa has learned that an organization cannot assume what a community needs or wants. Authentic engagement with community members is critical to identifying needs and solutions. These close community ties have been instrumental in gathering meaningful resident feedback on local development projects by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, supporting the development of an environmental justice and social equity amendment to the San Francisco Bay Plan, and establishing collaborative partnerships with local public agencies such as the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative to address climate change.

FUNDING SOURCES:

Silicon Valley Community Foundation
Palo Alto Community Fund
Heising-Simons Foundation
Latino Community Fund
The San Francisco Foundation
Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund
The Grove Foundation
JML Foundation

REFERENCES & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Ackerly D, Jones A, Stacey M, Riordan B. 2018. San Francisco Bay Summary Report. California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment: <https://barc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2020-12/20190116-sanfranciscobayarea.pdf>

Nuestra Casa: <https://www.nuestracasa.org>

Nuestra Casa. A Bright Future for East Palo Alto: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa9e4bc25bf022c99d1226a/t/5f691da6e96b9c0977eb4141/1600724411157/LCF_NuestraCasa_onepager_8.pdf

Nuestra Casa. 2020 Noticias: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa9e4bc25bf022c99d1226a/t/5f618a8894f47c7b8a4819f3/1600227981808/LCF_NuestraCasa_AR_onepager_6WEB+%281%29.pdf

San Francisco Bay Conservation & Development Commission. Environmental Justice and Social Equity Bay Plan Amendment: <https://bcdc.ca.gov/ejwg/BPAEJSE.html>

United States Census Bureau. East Palo Alto, California Demographic Information: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/eastpaloaltocitycalifornia>

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