Coachella Civic Engagement Academy

Final Project
The California Leadership Academy for the Public's Health

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Coachella Civic Engagement Academy

Background

The Coachella Civic Engagement Academy (CCEA) is the conceptual product that resulted from 1-year collaboration between a selected group of individuals from partner organizations working on the City of Coachella's General Plan Update. The organization and participants are:

- California Rural Legal Assistance—Cristina Mendez[1], Community Worker
- City of Coachella—Gabriel Perez, Senior Planner
- Inland Congregations United for Change—Karen Borja, Community Organizer
- Riverside County Department of Public Health—Miguel A. Vazquez, AICP Healthy Communities Planner

This team came together through an invitation from The California Endowment to participate in the California Leadership Academy for the Public's Health (CaLAPH)—a project of the Center for Health and Leadership & Practice. The CaLAPH is designed to "develop a multi-sector and trans-disciplinary network of transformative change agent leaders in California. These leaders will have the commitment and capacity to lead the policy, systems, and community change needed to improve community health and health equity in California".

After much brainstorming, debate and coaching, the team decided to focus its attention on developing a system of community empowerment. The Coachella Civic Engagement Academy is the first attempt to bridge traditional gaps between community and government. The main purpose of the CCAE is twofold:

1. To create a space where community members can have an opportunity learn about decision-making processes, local government functions and operations, and their impact on the public's health, and
2. To develop an avenue for the City of Coachella's leadership to communicate its roles and functions and to raise an objective awareness of civic participation's barriers.

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[1] Cristina Mendez is no longer in the position as a Community Worker for the California Rural Legal Assistance but is still providing support for the CCEA project.

Introduction

This report identifies a framework for a Coachella Civic Engagement Academy (CCEA) as a vehicle to provide residents with opportunities and resources to increase civic engagement in the City of Coachella. For the purpose of this project, civic engagement is defined as "activities such as voting, participating in community meetings, volunteering and membership in community associations". To this end, a key component for towards civic engagement is the existence of a capacity building system that supports bilateral education and awareness between local government and community at large. Based on our collaborative experience our team identified the lack of civic engagement in the City of Coachella as a major barrier in addressing health disparities not only in the City, but also throughout communities located in the eastern part of the Coachella Valley. We believe the lack of civic engagement is largely attributed to structural barriers and demographic characteristics in the City of Coachella. Civic engagement is essential for healthy communities since there are major decisions made in the public interest by local agencies. Healthy communities are created by residents that are active in local government and engage in the decision that take place in their communities. The primary focus of our project is the City of Coachella as the responsible agency for local decision-making and is where many structural barriers to civic engagement may be encountered.

The City of Coachella is 96% Latino, low-income, largely Spanish-speaking with a low level of educational attainment. Research indicates that individuals with higher levels of education tend to be more civically engaged.[2] In the 2012 November elections, the voter registration numbers were considerably different between the City of Coachella and the nearby City of Palm Desert, of comparable population size. In the November 2012 Presidential election, there were 25,044 registered voters (51% registered) in Palm Desert with a total population size of 48,445, compared to 9,795 registered voters (24% registered) in the City of Coachella with a population size of 40,707.   Voter turnout in the November 6, 2012 Presidential election showed a turnout of 5,883 people or 60% for the City of Coachella compared to a turnout of 20,136 or 80% for the City of Palm Desert. In Coachella 55% of residents have less than a high school education compared to 10.8% in the nearby City of Palm Desert with a similar population size. Since there is a positive correlation between educational attainment and civic engagement, we may be able to conclude that the City of Coachella may also have the lowest level of civic engagement in the Coachella Valley since it also has the lowest level of educational attainment.

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[2] Verba, S., Scholzman, K.L., and Brady, H (1995) "Voice and equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics." Harvard University Press.

The per capita income in the City of Coachella is considerably low at $11,685, versus $40,784 in the City of Palm Desert. Higher economic inequality leads to less trust and in turn lower rates of volunteering.[3]

In Coachella 88.4% of residents speak Spanish at home and 43.4% Speak English less than "very well." In the City of Palm Desert only 7.9% of residents speak English less than "very well." This means that nearly half of Coachella residents are at a distinct disadvantage since the official business at the local, county, state and national level is conducted in English. The City Council and Planning Commission meetings are conducted primarily in English, though translation services are available to residents on an as needed basis. All documents related to items for consideration by these decision-making bodies are largely printed in English. All Zoning and General Plan documents that include all standards and policies in the City are all printed in English. Since nearly half of the residents of the City of Coachella do not Speak English very well, many may be disengaged since they do not understand the language in which official business is conducted and they do not understand dominant cultural norms.

Research indicates that greater civic knowledge among residents leads to support for democratic values, promotes political participation, and builds trust in government and elected officials.[4] The less connected and involved residents are in the local political process, the less likely they are to be able to influence decisions that are made about their communities and can lead to disenfranchisement. Civic knowledge helps residents understand their interests as individuals and as members of groups. The more knowledge residents have the more readily they can connect with and defend their interests in the political process.[5]

The Eastern Coachella Valley CALAPH group decided that a civic engagement academy would serve as a way to address structural barriers and demographic challenges to civic engagement in Coachella. Civic engagement academies have been implemented in other local jurisdictions in Southern California such as the cities of Chula Vista and Riverside to increase civic engagement. These academies provide a group of residents selected for the academy with knowledge about the operation of local government and important local issues.

The Coachella Civic Engagement Academy is designed to lead to the following outcomes:

1. **Residents are comfortable to participate in local government decision-making.**
2. **Residents understand how their City government functions.**
3. **Residents can clearly communicate how City of Coachella operates.**
4. **Resident are more civically engaged.**

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[3] Uslaner, Eric and Brown, Mitchell (2005) "Inequality, Trust, and Civic Engagement" Sage Publications.
[4] William A Galston, "Civic Education and Political Participation," Political Science Online, April 2004.
[5] Ibid.

5. **Residents understand the connection between City government and its impacts on public health.**
6. **City leaders are able to communicate the functions of the local government and City departments clearly.**
7. **City leaders are more aware of barriers to local civic participation.**

Discussions between local nonprofit, county and local government entities have led to a consensus of the topics that would shape the curriculum for the academy. We believe the Coachella Academy would be unique since it involves collaboration and exchange between government and community organizations. These topics for the Academy would include the following:

1. **History of Coachella**
2. **Parks and Recreation**
3. **Wastewater and Water Utilities**
4. **City Finances**
5. **Land Use Planning/Building and Safety**
6. **Engineering and Streets**
7. **Community Health and Wellness**
8. **Community Engagement.**

Structure of the Coachella Civic Engagement Academy

Community Organizations ICUC, CRLA	City of Coachella	County of Riverside Dept. of Public Health

Coachella Civic Engagement Academy

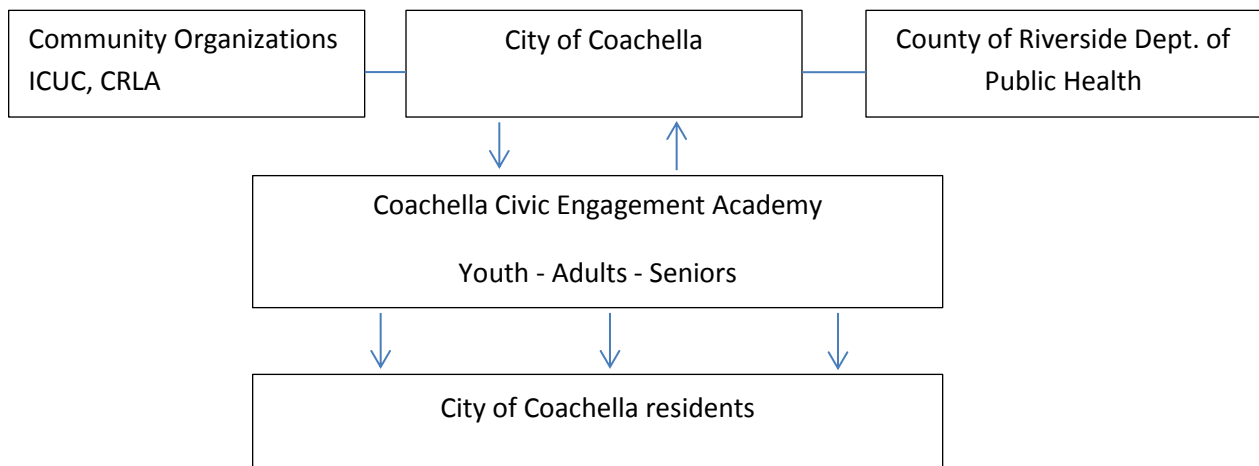Youth - Adults - Seniors

City of Coachella residents

Figure 1: The CCEA is envisioned as a cyclical process with the agency partners providing logistical support and information sharing with academy participants. It is expected that the groups will also learn from the CCEA participants. The participants will be equipped to share information from the CCEA with other residents. The expected outcome is increased civic engagement, including more resident interest in local elected office and more participation in City commissions and/or community organizations.

Coachella Civic Engagement Academy

Topic 1: HISTORY OF COACHELLA

Purpose: To share the informational history of the City of Coachella (when the city was first settled, who settled it, where did the name come from, who was here, how big was the city with people and land, who has lived here, our incorporation and why, 2-3 social movements, our political history).

Session leader: CALAPH Member

Guest presenters: Librarian of Coachella, former political leaders [Mayors, council members, Union Organizers, organizers], elders, maybe even the mayor.

Agenda:

1. How long have you lived in Coachella? [one important change since you've started living here?]

2. Introduction to the CCEA and sharing of the information and expectations for the program.

3. Presentation of History of the City of Coachella by invited guest such as librarian or former councilmembers. Other guests can share social change experiences in the City, and a union representative or organizer to share experiences of social change and the relevance of those experiences to the lives of the community presently. City of Coachella will share archive of historical photos. Participants will be asked to share historical photos they own that they would like to share with the group. Invite guest speakers to add on to any historical research.

4. Questions & Answer section

5. (Next Steps) What is the Coachella legacy you want to leave behind? [Visioning]

6. **Group Task**: Identify an upcoming City public meeting to attend.

Topic 2: PARKS AND RECREATION

Purpose: To share information on the operations of the Parks and Recreation division and other park and recreation providers. The session will discuss the latest improvements and challenges for the City Parks and Recreation division. The session will also discuss the impact of parks and recreation on creating positive community health outcomes and the role community members can play in improving parks and recreation opportunities.

Guests: Maritza Martinez (Public Works Director), Steve Salado (Parks and Recreation Superintendent), Community Organization Member, City of Coachella Parks and Recreation Commissioner, Sports League representative

Other Parks and Recreation stakeholders:
Public Works Dept., City of Coachella Parks and Recreation Commission, Desert Recreation District, Coachella Senior Center, Baseball Leagues, Football and Soccer Leagues, Youth Clubs and Organizations.

Activity: Field Trip

Agenda:
1. **Introduce** members to existing and planned community parks and spaces.
   a. Number of parks
   b. City and State Park Standards
   c. Map of existing public facilities.

2. **Inform** residents of the list of recreational organizations listed in the City's web-site, and add additional programs that may not be listed. Ask if any group is missing in the list of players/participants in this department?

3. **Discuss** the Department's budget, the source, and financial responsibilities.

4. **Field Trip**: Visit up to two parks with City staff (Bagdouma Park and Rancho Las Flores)

5. **Evaluate** the current programs and lists to see if they're responsive to the community's leisure, physical, cultural, and social programs needs.
   a. Such as an enclosed facility in the summertime and what are the possible ways to make it happen
   b. Discuss ways in which residents and city department can better promote safety, preservation of park space, graffiti abatement, etc.

Topic 3: WASTEWATER AND WATER AGENCIES OF COACHELLA

Purpose: Share information on importance of the Wastewater and water agencies of the City of Coachella including customer usage information [importance of water and water for our community, how many people do water business with Coachella, what parts of the city have water lines/pipes/etc., water history- infrastructure/managing/pricing etc.]

Session leader: CALAPH Member

Guest: City employees- Utilities Manager, City Manager, city employees that work at the plants and read meters etc.,

Activity: FIELD TRIP to City of Coachella Wastewater Treatment plant

Agenda:

1. Intro Question: How many of you know what it takes to get water to your faucet?

2. **TAKE FIELD TRIP**!

3. Invite guest speakers to add on to any research. Where our water comes from; the difference between having a municipal water agency and privatizing; little known facts about City operations that residents may be interested; the cost to keep the water facilities in operation; Individual resident responsibilities with household services and the do's and don'ts; history of water for the City; how clean drinking water is secured for the City.

4. Costs of water and wastewater operation and their relationship to household utility charges.

5. Questions & Answer section

6. (Next Steps) How does water protect our City? [Visioning]

Topic 4: CITY OF COACHELLA FINANCE DEPARTMENT

Purpose: Share with people the reasons to understand city finances and budget in order to have a realistic perspective of what can be achieved through means of the city and what cannot. Share community issues such as water and how the budget is affecting water rates.

Session leader: CALAPH team member

Guests: Bill Pattison (City Finance Director), Council Member, David Garcia (City Manager)

Agenda:

1. **Intro Questions:** Where do you think most revenue for the city is generated from? Where do you think the least amount of revenue is generated?

2. **Interactive Activity**: Each person is designated as their own Finance Director for their own imaginary City and is provided with a designated amount of funds and responsible creating a budget for determining how the funds will be distributed for City's service obligations. Each person will share their budget and their experiences.

3. Invite City Finance Director to share with the community a simple version of the city budget, how to understand it, where to find it. Ensure that people are aware of how revenue comes into the city and how money must be spent. Share with people the biggest expenditures and why they have to be set up in a city as large as Coachella. Inform people of those who with the responsibility to organize the budget and important dates.

4. **Questions and Answer**

5. **Next Steps**: How can city residents participate with the city in creating the next budget?

Topic Area 5: Land Use, Planning and Building and Safety

Purpose: To inform residents of the Land Use, Planning, Building and Safety responsibilities of the City of Coachella. Residents will learn about the development process in the City and how the built environment impacts the financial and public health of the community. Residents will also learn about the avenues to participate in these processes and discuss ways to improve community engagement in these efforts.

Session Leader: Planning Division, Building, and Code Enforcement

Location: City Hall

Agenda:

1. **Community Activity**- (Break out into groups with a map)
    1. Identify the things that are the most positive in your community.
    2. Identify the things that you view as negative or as challenges.
    3. What is your vision on how Coachella will grow in the next 20 years?

2. **Why is Planning Important? Staff Presentation on Planning and Building Operations**
    1. Police Power over the Use of Land
    2. Stakeholder map- City Council, City Staff, residents, businesses, developers
    3. Planning History
    4. Planning Documents- General Plan and Zoning Code
    5. Zoning in the City
    6. Code Enforcement
    7. Identify important Planning Issues
    8. Planning Trends- Smart Growth, Health, Art in Public Places
    9. Costs of operations and revenues from Planning services.

3. **Community Participation:** Discussion

4. **Question and Answer**

Topic Area 6: Engineering and Streets

Purpose: To provide information on the role of the Engineering Department on the operation and safety of streets and transportation system in the City of Coachella. To share City plans to create complete streets and provide opportunities for all modes of transportation.

Session Leader: Engineering Dept and Public Works Department, Sunline Transit Agency, Riverside County Safe Routes to School representative.

Location: City Hall

Activity: Walking Audit (Downtown 6th Street)

Agenda:

1. **Walking Audit (Identify Location)**
   a. Identify Safety hazards
   b. Identify barriers for automobiles, pedestrians, and bicycles
   c. Wrap-Up with identified solutions

2. **Presentation by City Engineer**
   a. Engineering Operations
   b. Planned Projects
   c. Capital Improvement Projects
   d. Complete Streets
   e. Safe Routes to School

3. **Question and Answer**

Topic 7: Community Health and Wellness through prevention

Purpose: To understand the local efforts to improve health outcomes including the City's new Community Health and Wellness Element. The session will also identify the importance of healthy living in Coachella at a City-wide, neighborhood, family, and individual level.

Session leader: CALAPH Member

Guest: Riv Co. Mental Health Official, Riv Co, Nutritionist

Activities.
1. Cooking a healthy meal in a group
2. Conduct a group physical activity that all participants can do together
3. Review health-related maps from the City of Coachella's Health and Wellness element

Agenda:

1. **Happiness**. Define happiness and discuss how happiness makes us healthy and vice versa

2. **Healthy habits begin at home**. Discuss ways to stay healthy at home
    a. An agent of healthy behavior. Discuss how our behavior can influence our neighborhood.
    b. Discuss Creativity as a method to influence healthy behaviors.

3. Discuss Health Conditions in the City of Coachella

4. Discuss the City of Coachella's Health and Wellness Element

5. **The Food Environment**. Discuss food value in terms of costs and nutrition

6. **Physical Activity**. Discuss the value of embedding physical activities throughout the day. Take this opportunity to discuss building physical strength and value for cardiovascular health.

7. **Healthy in Coachella**. Discussion.
    a. What does it mean to be healthy in Coachella
    b. How can the City of Coachella help provide opportunities for healthy living?

c.   How does health link to the other topics of this academy?

Topic 8: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Purpose: Showcase the various options participants have in getting involved and creating change after the academy. Talk more about commissions that exist and explore which others could be developed and how. Also talk about the power voting can have in civic participation, and explore other means of participation.

Session Leader: CALAPH Team Member

Guest: Organizations that engage residents in the community, City Commission members

Activity: Community organization fair.

Agenda:

1. **Leading Question**: Have you ever been a part of a group or committee in your city, neighborhood, school? If you could create a committee with people to do one thing in the City of Coachella, what would that committee be?

2. Invite guest to set up tables/panel, to have participants learn the different work the organizations are engaging in currently.

3. **Questions, comments, evaluation**

4. **Next Steps**: What commission/organization are you committed to perfroming 10 hours of community service with?

CCEA LOGISTICS

The Coachella Civic Engagement Academy will be hosted primarily at Bagdouma Community Center. There will be activities that lead participants to other locations such as city hall, the corporate yard, or the water treatment plant; all within city limits.

The team will invite people who are known to have shown interest in civic participation; the team will make those specific invitations through one to one conversations. Current city commission members will be highly sought after and invited specifically as well. Still, a simple application is to be available to all city residents- the program will only be accepting twenty-five participants for the first academy. A clear goal is to insure a successful academy promotes new and varied residents to participate in the forthcoming academies.

Due to the large Spanish- monolingual population of the City of Coachella, the academy will be bilingual with the aid of translators and translation equipment. Sessions, no longer than four hours at a time, will be held on 8 Saturdays over a period of 2 months. Once the academy cycle has come to a close, a graduation ceremony will be hosted at a local city council meeting. Participants will be recognized by the council and presented with a "City of Coachella" pendant. At the ceremony, participants will share where they will be investing their ten hours of community service following the academy to the community.

 The academy team will have to also plan roles that will be on going throughout the academy and a budget that includes printing, food, speakers, possibly gas. The different ongoing roles anticipated are of timekeeper, discussion moderator, welcome crew, set-up crew, phoning and/or email lead. There is the strong possibly that these roles be filled with academy team members for starters and later developed as leadership roles for the participants.

EVALUATION

Purpose: In order to build a genuine relationship and bridge between community residents, and City representatives and structures, we hope to better understand which sessions and information in this Civic Engagement Academy are of most use and interest to you as a City of Coachella resident and participant. We hope this feedback will let us see if we're building bridges, thus, accomplishing our goal and the opportunity to improve as we learn together. We provide a few sample questions to serve as conversation starters and to be discussed in a group setting in order to learn from each others' learning experiences and evaluation.   Also, we want to give everyone the opportunity to share your ideas, comments and suggestions in an individual and private manner.

Leader: Community Organization Leader, Mayor, City Council Member, and/or City Commission Member

Group Evaluation:

- What information topic was most useful to you?
- What data have you been able to utilize in your personal life?
- Do you have a better understanding of how decisions are made in your community?
- Are there any suggestions for the Community Engagement Academy Team for the next session?
- How many of you attended council meetings, wrote letters, and/or made phone calls to inquire or learn about a situation in the city?
- How many of you volunteered service hours to any group/organization in the community?
- How many of you would recommend the academy to your peers or neighbors?
- Do you have people in mind who could benefit from this learning experience?

Individual Evaluation:

- What part of the Program was most useful to you? What activity did you learn from the most?
- What suggestions do you have? What areas can we improve on?