

Saving south Sac

California Endowment aims to improve health in city's most diverse community

By Sena Christian

Alberto Mercado spent a recent weekend hanging out for 10 hours at a supermarket on Franklin Boulevard. He talked to more than 100 people, primarily Spanish speakers, hoping to encourage the involvement of more Latinos in a new program called Sacramento Building Healthy Communities.

“This has become my new job,” said the unemployed Mercado of his volunteer work. “Having conversations with people, that’s my paycheck. I’m so blessed.”

Mercado, an Oak Park resident, worked at the Tower Records distribution center for nine years—eventually becoming manager—before the company closed in 2006. He’s been without steady work ever since. This volunteer opportunity has given him a way to feel productive, he said.



Oak Park resident Alberto Mercado helps clean up the neighborhood as a volunteer for Sacramento Building Healthy Communities.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES

Building Healthy Communities is a 10-year strategic plan funded by the California Endowment to improve south Sacramento through achieving four goals: reducing youth violence, reversing the childhood obesity epidemic, expanding health access for all children and increasing school attendance.

The foundation has promised to pump millions of dollars into south Sacramento annually for the next decade, starting in 2010. This area includes 18 small neighborhoods, such as Colonial Manor, Avondale, Fruitridge Manor, Oak Park and Tahoe Park. The 89,000 residents here speak more than 10 languages.

“There are distinct neighborhoods in south Sacramento,” said Christine Tien, project manager with the California Endowment. “The challenge is unifying the neighborhoods.”

The foundation considered unemployment rates, income levels, diversity, crime rates and other indicators in selecting south Sacramento as one of 14 grant recipients statewide. The area ranked third lowest in per capita income out of 51 ZIP codes in the county. Nearly half of all families qualify for Medi-Cal compared to one in five countywide. Four in 10 adults lack a high-school diploma. Nearly nine in 10 students participate in free and reduced-price meals programs.

More than 40 organizations are involved in the local project, but resident involvement is also key, Tien said, which is how volunteers like Mercado come into play.

Mercado knows firsthand the struggles of growing up in south Sacramento. He moved to Oak Park from Mexico with his family in 1990 when he was 10 years old. After graduating from Sacramento High School, he had three options, he said: Go to college, get a job or join a gang. He had several friends involved with drugs and gangs, but he managed to stay out.

Life doesn't necessarily get easier as an adult, as Mercado, now 29, has experienced. His car has been stolen twice and burglarized four times this year alone. He doesn't spend much time at a nearby park because he often sees teenagers doing drugs there. Without health insurance, Mercado hasn't seen a doctor in three years. Only one grocery store—Food Source—serves the neighborhood. There are some 25 corner markets, most of which sell alcohol, but not fresh produce.

Despite boasting the Guild Theater, McGeorge School of Law, BrickHouse Art Gallery and, soon, Old Soul coffee, the neighborhood has struggled to bring in new businesses throughout the years.

“It's the stigma,” said Joany Titherington, president of the Oak Park Neighborhood Association. “‘Well, that's the bad part of town.’ It really isn't that way anymore.”

Building Healthy Communities hopes to stimulate south Sacramento's gradual resurgence by supporting the growth of family-owned businesses, fixing schools contaminated with lead and mold, making more pedestrian-friendly streets with mixed-use development and treating violence as a public-health issue. Health is key, and that includes improving access to healthy foods, through farmers' markets, community gardens and nutrition-education programs.

Volunteers will attempt to reach 5,000 residents in the next few months to bring together one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the United States and begin determining the specific needs of south Sacramento residents.

As for Mercado, he'll continue canvassing. Still without a job, he has time to volunteer. Besides, he's doing this for his father, whom he thanks for moving his family to Sacramento almost 20 years ago.

“I'm trying to make him proud,” Mercado said. “He did a lot by bringing us here. This is how I can pay him back.”

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