



Brownsville Community Advisory Board:

Success Through Partnership

The City of Brownsville has achieved national renown in recent years for its efforts to build a culture of health in Cameron County after it won the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture of Health prize in 2014. Cameron, the county in which Brownsville is located, is one of the poorest in the country with over one-third of residents living in poverty (median household income is \$33,390; per capita is just under \$15,000). 80 percent of residents are overweight or obese and one-third of residents under the age of 65 are uninsured. These issues, however, have not stopped the community from taking holistic steps to address the health of residents.

These efforts date back to 2001 when the University of Texas Health Science Center (UTHealth) first opened a campus in Brownsville. At that time, faculty knew they wanted to be a part of the community and establish community connections that would enable them contribute to improving community health using collaborative approaches. An Imagine Brownsville city planning initiative was underway and the university took part in its health-related conversations. Over time the health focus crystalized and the Community Advisory Board (CAB) was formed with a regional focus on improving community health and was chaired by Belinda Reininger, a faculty member at the UTHealth School of Public Health. Over the last decade the CAB has grown to over 200 members and structurally is led by a leadership committee of longtime partner organizations including the City of Brownsville and supported by staff from the UTHealth School of Public Health. The advisory board meets quarterly at which time the active sub-committees report back on actions taken. Every one to two years the advisory board reviews its stated priorities, and subcommittee structure to see if they are still relevant.

These priorities include:

- » Increasing physical activity,
- » Improving healthy food choices
- » Increasing access to quality preventive services
- » Decreasing tobacco use
- » Improving quality of life for seniors

The goal of preventing chronic disease has not changed over time. Tangible activities supported by the CAB include:

- **Tu Salud ¡Si Cuenta!** (“Your Health Matters!”), a bilingual community wide campaign program that uses television, radio and print to motivate residents to increase their physical activity and healthful food choices.
- **The Challenge** – a community-wide, 3-month initiative aimed at encouraging weight loss among residents.
- **Indoor / Outdoor tobacco free ordinances** in cities in the region
- **Chronic Care Management Program** institutionalizing a network of promotoras, community health workers, who engage and connect residents who don’t have access to health care to community resources and events to improve health outcomes associated with diabetes.
- **Brownsville Farmers Market** and affiliated community gardens – all part of a connected effort to boost income generation opportunities and increase access to healthy foods options poor food insecure neighborhoods

Staffing and Funding. The CAB was launched with initial support from a grant from the National Institutes of Health and the School of Public Health continues to receive federal grant funding for the initiative. Reininger notes that these grants are fairly small and just cover the time for one staff member to organize quarterly steering committee meetings and a pool of funds for mini-grants which the CAB administers to seed new projects organized by community partners that fall within the CAB's priority areas.

In reality, multiple members of the UTHealth outreach team are involved in supporting the CAB. Two staff members monitor and coordinate meetings of the CAB steering committee; in addition, other staff support the CAB subcommittees. This is a more robust model than they have had in the past and was done in recognition that CAB members are not just leaders of the initiative, but also volunteers.

The remainder of resources needed to support CAB-directed activities has come from a variety of sources including the Centers for Disease Control, the Cancer Prevention Research Institute of Texas, Texas Department of State Health Services, Texas Parks & Wildlife, private foundations and even from the Health & Human Services Commission through a 1115 waiver. Local businesses step up to support specific events – like The Challenge – with financial and in-kind support. When funds are needed for a project or event “the network comes together and does it because it is important. Our region doesn't have a lot of money. We never have. We know that we just have to roll up our sleeves and find a way to do it. The other thing we pride ourselves on is that if you give us money, we will spend every dime carefully,” says Reininger.

Sustainability. It has been 13 years since the CAB was first formed and, over that time, it has become an institution, able to survive through changes in funding and staffing. Reininger notes that it helps that they can point to clear successes in which all members are partners. Everyone recognizes that what has been accomplished would not have been possible had the various partners not come together. A great deal of joint programming between CAB partners has been developed – and funded – in the past few years. This success through partnership has created a momentum that propelled the CAB through the start-up stages and to the level of sustainability it has achieved today.

Communication Across Sectors. Reininger says that one of the biggest lessons she has learned over the course of her involvement with the CAB is the importance of being able to speak the language of the work you are doing in terms your audience understands and cares about. When she says this, she is not talking about being able to speak Spanish fluently. Rather it is about the importance of making sure the various members of your coalition find value in the work both to themselves and to their communities, and that they are able to communicate that value accurately back to their communities and other members of their sector. When you are working to engage diverse community members, the conversation can't be just about health. You need to have the flexibility to relate the importance of your work to economics, education, environmental impact – whatever it is that your stakeholders most care about.

As an example, when the CAB decided to start a farmers market to improve access to healthy foods, they had to engage farmers and city zoning officers in the process – whose first priorities are not community health issues. CAB members had to consider and be prepared to discuss topics like how to ensure business sustainability (for the farmers) and how to increase utilization of city amenities. Today the farmers market takes place in a park located next to the fine arts museum and zoo. Thus, in addition to creating revenue opportunities for local farmers and increasing access to fresh, healthy foods for residents, the market has also increased utilization of city-supported cultural resources. Today the Brownsville Farmer's Market has its own board of directors committed to running this non-profit and remains an active member of the community advisory board.

Measuring Impact. Almost all initiatives and projects initiated by the CAB are measured in some way despite evaluation usually not being formally funded. Thus, it is an issue of doing what is feasible given available resources. Attendance at events, participation in initiatives and behavior changes associated with participation are captured. For example, in initiatives like The Challenge the CAB measures percent weight loss, and for those who are repeat participants, maintenance of weight loss. Also, policy changes and the number of people impacted by them are tracked, as are exposure to various media and reported health behaviors associated with the *Tu Salud ¡Si Cuenta!* campaign. Sustainability is viewed as a success for initiatives like the farmers market and related community gardens. And, as an example of tracking non-health data, the farmers market also captures income reports from farmers.

Advice for Those Working on Similar Initiatives:

- » Make impacting the most vulnerable, typically underserved populations a priority in every decision. They have the most to gain and are most lacking in the resources to make change happen.
- » Understand the resources that already exist in your community and enlist as many of them as possible. City government should always be on that list. If city government is large, you will need to engage representatives from different functional areas.
- » Recognize that you will need to engage a variety of sectors to change culture. Focus on getting your messaging right.