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Voces Del Canal: Building Safe Communities Through Strong Partnerships in the Canal

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VOCES DEL CANAL

VALUES
CANAL
 TOGETHER
 SUPPORT

FAMILIES
 WORKING TOGETHER
BETTER
HOUSING

ACCESS HIGHER
EDUCATION

ALLIANCE HEALTHY CHILDREN
COMMUNITY INCLUSION

WITHOUT FEAR
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TOGETHER
COMMUNITY
SUPPORT
 VALUES
THRIVE

BUILDING SAFE COMMUNITIES THROUGH STRONG PARTNERSHIPS IN THE CANAL

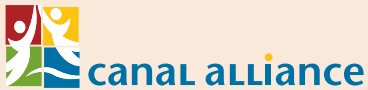


Table of Contents:

| | |
|---|---------|
| Introduction & Background | 2 - 3 |
| Methodology: Stages of Research for Action | 4 - 6 |
| Analysis of Community Concerns | |
| • Community Safety is the First Step | 7 |
| • More Support for Youth and Families | 8 - 10 |
| • Community Collaboration and Cohesion is Key | 11 - 13 |
| Conclusion | 14 |
| Acknowledgements | 15 |
| End Notes | 16 |

Introduction & Background

“From the depth of need and despair, people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems, and fill their own needs with dignity and strength.” — Cesar Chavez

These words by civil rights activist and farm labor leader Cesar Chavez resonate more clearly today than ever before for marginalized, low-income communities across urban America who are mobilizing to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives. This is the central vision for families living in the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael, Marin County who are lifting their voices and working together to transform their community.

The Canal, a vibrant community of Latino immigrant families, is rich in diversity and cultural traditions, strong family networks, and a determination towards economic self-sufficiency. Latino immigrants in Marin County are heavily concentrated in the Canal and have the highest labor force participation rates in the County.ⁱ Despite being a vital part of Marin’s social, economic, and cultural society, Canal residents continue to struggle to meet basic necessities for their families.

To this end, a coalition of resident leaders from the community came together to form Voces del Canal to lead an unprecedented community-driven research project. Residents wanted to affirm their role as authentic, local experts and give power to the collective experiences of 678 residents who shared their personal stories, opinions, and vision for a stronger and safer Canal.

Through this community-led project, families have prioritized the persistence of public safety issues as the most immediate barrier to success facing their community. Sixty percent (60%) of surveyed residents reported that they did not feel safe in the Canal. They



Local residents leaders discuss the importance of Voces del Canal as an opportunity to give voice and affirm the expertise of residents on priority issues impacting their community.

Vision Statement: Ten years from today, we envision the Canal as a safe, clean, and healthy community where families and children can walk and play freely. Families will live in safe and better housing conditions. Our children will have access to resources and a quality education that supports their pathway to higher education. Our cultural values and ethnic heritage will be respected and families will be treated as equal partners working together with local agencies, police, schools, and community institutions to develop joint solutions. Our community of resilience will empower families to fulfill their full potential and live a safe, healthy, thriving quality of life.



Residents created a visual framework of major community roadblocks and inequities that need to be addressed in order to create a safer and thriving community.

understand that safe streets are correlated with strong communities and that public safety is closely linked to social inequities. General research confirms that there is no single cause for neighborhood violence. Rather, crime is a symptom of larger, interconnected structural barriers and risk factors including joblessness, poverty, discrimination, substance abuse, educational failure, fragmented families, domestic abuse, internalized shame, and feelings of powerlessness.ⁱⁱ

In this report, residents have shared their experiences of how public safety issues have taken a toll on their community. They have conducted their own analysis of intervention and prevention strategies to address these concerns and to ensure long-term safety in the Canal. The short-term intervention strategies are essential for quickly improving community conditions and building the venue for developing more long-

“Every family has the right to feel safe. We have the right to live in a safe community and to get the services that we need. We need to bring the community together to talk about these issues and we need support on how to make this change.” — Marina, Canal Resident Leader

term prevention strategies that address the broader structural causes of neighborhood crime.ⁱⁱⁱ

Canal residents offer their own framework of preventative measures to address barriers to safety in the Canal: a better quality education and after-school programming for their children, more parent resources, and improved coordination and delivery of family services. Within this framework, residents present their own priority recommendations and concrete strategies for promoting community development and revitalization.

In order to achieve this community transformation, residents are calling for more meaningful community engagement and collaboration with the local institutions and agencies that serve them. Residents want to work in partnership with key decision-makers and actively participate in the development of community-determined priorities and solutions. At the same time, they are seeking to strengthen community cohesion within the Canal to empower families to take a proactive role in becoming social change agents for their community.

Disparities in the Canal

In human development terms, Marin County is a national leader with an index of 7.75. At the bottom is the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael, with an index score of 3.18—below that of West Virginia, the lowest-ranked state on the American Human Development Index.*

- **58%** of the families live below the Federal Poverty Level and despite this poverty, and **92%** do not receive public assistance.^v
- **50%** of Canal residents lack a high school diploma.^{vi}
- The majority of families live in rental apartment housing where there is a “very high degree of overcrowding” with multiple families sharing a unit.^{vii}

**The “human development index” is an indicator of community progress measured by an individual’s ability to realize their fullest potential in terms of health, access to knowledge and living standards.^{iv}*

Methodology: Stages of Research for Action

Over the years, local agencies and community organizations have conducted various needs assessments of the Canal neighborhood. However, these assessments often have not been conducted as part of a comprehensive community engagement strategy and have not included mechanisms for active community participation and feedback. In response to the need for a bottom-up community change agenda, Voces del Canal was formed in 2012 as a collaboration between Dominican University, Canal Alliance, DataCenter, and a network of community-based organizations serving the Canal to empower and develop the leadership of residents to advocate for improved community conditions.

A critical finding was the extent to which many residents felt they were not heard or included by local agencies and organizations in the identification of the issues that most impacted their lives. Residents felt that their needs were not sufficiently met by providers and agencies and that there was a lack of effective community partnership building. To address this need for meaningful community engagement and to leverage local knowledge, residents were guided through a multi-stage, resident-driven Research Justice framework to develop their skills as informed, confident leaders to become powerful and effective advocates for the community.

Step 1: Developing the Research Strategy

A dedicated team of 13 resident leaders participated in a series of training workshops to develop their leadership and research analysis skills and to create a shared vision for change for their community.

Resident leaders specifically wanted to advance the following community engagement goals:

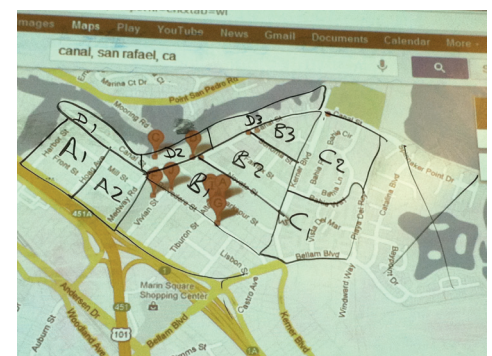
- To engage local families in discussions about neighborhood concerns and inspire them to get involved and take action;
- To conduct a critical analysis of key issues impacting their community and to contextualize their personal experiences in broader social issues;
- To foster a dialogue and partnership building with service providers, schools, and local agencies to improve service delivery and strengthen program coordination; and
- To foster a dialogue and partnership building with key stakeholders with decision-making authority, including civic officials and leaders, funders and law enforcement.

Step 2: Developing the Research Plan

A series of skills-building workshops were held with the resident leaders in the development and selection of key research questions, survey design, outreach, data collection and analysis. Resident leaders identified three major community themes based on research questions they had generated: neighborhood safety, after-school programs, and satisfaction with community direct services. Although labor intensive, residents decided to collect the data through in-person interviews as a vehicle for strengthening community engagement and initiating community conversations.

Research Justice is a strategic framework that seeks to transform structural inequities in research and was developed by DataCenter in 2009. It centralizes and affirms historically marginalized community voices and supports local capacity-building in an effort to facilitate genuine, lasting social change.

Unlike conventional research methods, Research Justice employs strategies to deepen community engagement. Residents learn to use research as a tool to elevate their expertise, amplify their voices, and lead change in their community.



Upfront investment in community ownership led to remarkable success in survey collection. Resident leaders canvassed the Canal neighborhood and conducted 678 resident surveys.

Step 3: Executing the Research

The team of resident leaders divided the Canal community into block assignments and paired up in teams to canvass the neighborhood. Over the course of 5 weeks, the leaders conducted a total of 678 resident survey interviews. The demographic characteristics of survey participants were primarily young Latino families with school-aged children who had lived in the community for an average of 10 years.



Residents gathered together in a community workshop to design the community survey tool and generate key research questions that will help advance their social change goals.

Participatory Research Workshops – DataCenter facilitated a series of participatory workshops with residents to engage in a process of community knowledge synthesis, prioritization of key issues, and the development of recommendations. This approach is rooted in Freirean popular education – surfacing the collective experiences of participants as experts of their realities to understand root causes of public safety and providing support to identify strategies for long-term social change.

Community Focus Groups – A total of three focus groups, with an average of 10 participants, were conducted to share data findings with constituents from community organizations serving the Canal, including Parent Services Project, Canal Alliance, and Next Generation Scholars. These sessions included participation from middle and high school youth and were co-facilitated with the resident leaders to gather more qualitative data, deepen their analysis of community issues, and strengthen engagement with other residents in the community.

Resident Profile



Oscar Rodriguez, worked as a technician for a telecommunications company in his home county of Guatemala. Witnessing the lack of wage and workplace protections at his job, Oscar became actively involved in organizing a labor union and advocating for workers' rights. He was fired from his company and could not find employment in Guatemala because of his involvement in labor organizing activities. With a family to support in Guatemala, Oscar made the decision to come to the U.S. in search of job opportunities.

Oscar came to the U.S. and found employment in construction, landscaping, and painting. Drawing on his background and passion for organizing, he became actively involved in the community. He advocated for immigrants' rights in Sacramento and served as a community organizer for the Consulate of Guatemala to help families in the Canal with documentation needs. Recognized as a community leader, Oscar was invited to join Voces Del Canal. He shares, "I want to make a difference in this community."

Key Informant Interviews – To gain more insight into the network of Canal service providers, Julia van der Ryn and Jennifer Lucko, Assistant Professors at Dominican University of California, led a student research project which included personal interviews with 20 providers. The interview question protocol was developed with DataCenter to assess community engagement levels, collaboration with other agencies, and overall accountability to community needs. DataCenter also conducted interviews with five service providers actively serving the Canal community.

Literature Review – Additional research data and information were collected and analyzed from existing studies, reports, and needs assessments of the Canal community.

Step 4: Building on the Research for Action

The Research Justice framework assumes research to be a tool for action, which includes helping residents develop a plan to disseminate research findings with targeted audiences and decision-makers who can help advance the community’s interests. This report is produced to serve as a legitimating tool for residents to articulate issues as they understand them and advocate for their vision.

| Demographics of Canal Survey Participants (Total: 678) | |
|--|---|
| Country of Origin | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 52% of respondents are from Guatemala ■ 33% are from Mexico ■ 9% are from El Salvador ■ 6% Other |
| Marriage status | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 42% of respondents are married ■ 30% live in common law marriage ■ 23% are single ■ 5% are divorced |
| Gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 65% female ■ 35% male |
| Age | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 57% of respondents between 18-34 years old ■ 28% between 35-44 years old ■ 10% between 45-54 years old ■ 5% 55 years or older |
| Residence | Respondents lived an average of 12 years in the United States and 10 years in the Canal. |
| Children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 95% of respondents have between 1 - 3 children |
| Children’s Age | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 4% of children less than a year old ■ 31% between 1 - 5 years old ■ 27% between 6 - 10 years old ■ 21% between 11 - 15 years old ■ 17% 16 years and older |

Analysis of Community Concerns

Community safety is the first step towards stability

“We need a safer community, a better relationship with the police, and more protection for our homes. We need safer parks and places to gather.” — Darlin, Canal Resident Leader

A neighborhood environment where families and children can freely gather, play and be physically active is an essential component for vibrant, healthy communities. Strong neighborhood cohesion is positively associated with lower crime and better health outcomes.^{viii} Yet for many families in the Canal, public safety concerns have become a part of their daily lives and has inhibited their overall quality of life.

Sixty percent (60%) of survey respondents reported that they did not feel safe in the Canal and that crime was easily visible in the streets, including harassment, public drinking, broken car windows, and shootings. One out of five residents surveyed said they were a direct victim of crime including gang violence, armed assault, theft, and domestic violence.

Police Mistrust

Families understand that addressing public safety issues requires a community-policing model where families and the police are actively working together to protect the community. Yet, survey and focus group participants express a lack of confidence in the police to adequately address public safety conditions. A history of police mistrust contributes to this sentiment. “We want to have more community meetings and conversations with the police to build trust. We want the police to be in relationship with the community, not just physically present,” shared a mother and long-time resident of the Canal.^{ix}

According to survey respondents, 44% are not satisfied with the local law enforcement and name the following reasons: police abuse and discrimination (25%) and poor response and long wait times (23%) when calling for assistance. Residents discussed how they often feel criminalized during police interactions and are frustrated that a Spanish-speaking officer is often not available. One-third of residents who experience crime did not report the incident because of fear of police misconduct or deportation.

Some claim that youth in the Canal have turned to gangs in response to police harassment and the prevalence of violence. One mother explained, “Youth have watched their family being humiliated and harassed by the police, so joining gangs makes them feel like they have some form of power.”

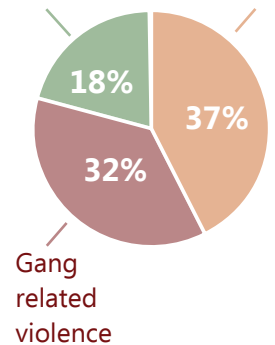
Residents discussed their frustrations that important safety concerns of the community are not prioritized by the local law enforcement. In the focus groups and survey comments, residents discussed how they feel that police focus a disproportionate amount of attention on small infractions such as not possessing a drivers’ license or standing outside of Mi Pueblo — while ignoring much more serious crimes such as violent aggression on the streets, harassment, mugging, drugs and shootings.

Poor Neighborhood Conditions

Living in a deteriorating physical and social neighborhood environment can have profound community health implications for families in low-income communities. The perceived safety of a neighborhood, often as important as the actual safety, impacts the health and well-being of families by affecting engagement in physical and social activities.^x Violence is among the most serious of health threats. Health consequences for those who are victimized

Top 3 Reasons Why Canal Families Feel Unsafe:

High rates of shootings/assaults/violence
Public drinking/drug activity



and/or exposed to violence can include physical injury, post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other long-term health problems.

xi

Survey and focus group participants shared how poor neighborhood conditions and infrastructure in the Canal have contributed to public safety and health concerns. According to survey respondents, inadequate street lighting was a common concern and made it easier for others to engage in criminal activity. The lack of signage and safe pedestrian walkways in their neighborhood was another major priority issue for many families who generate a lot of foot traffic while on route from their homes to public transit. Eighteen percent (18%) of survey respondents complained about reckless drivers along busy pedestrian traffic areas.

Residents shared public health concerns about neighborhood cleanliness. They wanted improvements made to deteriorating housing conditions since many families lived in overcrowded, high-density apartments that were not well maintained by property owners and prone to public health issues such as pest infestations.



Resident leaders participate in a group activity to analyze and prioritize survey findings into major community themes.

Recommendations from Canal Residents: Neighborhood Infrastructure

- Additional street lighting, security cameras, traffic signage, and designated pedestrian walkways.
- Recycling education programs and installation of public recycling and more trash containers.
- Safer and adequate housing, via better housing code enforcement and public housing services.
- Safer physical spaces for children and families to convene, including parks and indoor facilities for after-school programs and cultural events.

Recommendations from Canal Residents: Police Services and Collaboration

- Partnership-building activities between residents and local police, including Neighborhood Safety Committee meetings, to address police related concerns and organized events such as neighborhood walks and police “walking the beat,” where police routinely walk through the neighborhood to create personal relationships and learn about community issues.
- Additional cultural competence training for police staff with support from community members in curriculum development.
- Establish San Rafael as a “Sanctuary City”^{xv} to protect immigrants’ concerns about deportation and raids.

More support for youth and families builds stronger, safer communities

“Three out of four low-income high school students in 9th grade at San Rafael High School will fail to graduate. Many of those who do graduate still do not qualify for a four year college.”^{xii}

Low performing and under-resourced schools

Families in the Canal were overwhelmingly concerned about the impact the constant exposure to crime has on their children and their future. Youth focus group participants unanimously agreed that they did not feel safe in the Canal. Witnessing violence and crime can correlate to higher levels of aggression, stress, withdrawal, and lower levels of school achievement for youth.^{xiii}

Educational attainment and access to a quality education are essential pro-active measures for creating a safe community. At the community level, more education is correlated with less crime, public savings on remedial education and the criminal justice system, and greater civic participation. At the individual level, more education is correlated with better physical and mental health, stable employment, marital stability, and a longer life. ^{xiv}

Yet there is a significant academic achievement gap for children living in the Canal in vast contrast to other Marin counterparts. San Rafael High School, where the majority of Canal students attend, has some of the lowest standardized test scores in the County. Fewer than half of the school graduates will have completed the coursework required for the state university system, despite satisfying the high school graduation requirement. ^{xv}

Despite these inequities, the majority of surveyed families (59%) still had aspirations for their children to attend college and to break the cycle of poverty. Families are doing their best to support their children's school success: 73% of the respondents were actively engaged in helping their children with their homework.

Focus group participants discussed the need for more parent resources to help them effectively advocate for their children's educational needs. They identified barriers including language, economic hardship, and limited time for many families who are working multiple jobs or have a single working parent. According to another family needs' assessment, Latino parents in Marin also desired support to address acculturation issues and navigate the unfamiliar American public school system. ^{xvii}

Lack of Safe, Healthy After-school Opportunities for Children

Families in the Canal are worried about how the lack of healthy, accessible, after-school alternatives will impact their children's overall development and safety. Survey findings reveal that families are struggling to access after-school resources. Over 50% did not have their children enrolled in after-school activities. Respondents attributed this to:



Children of Canal residents enjoy their time together while their parents participate in leadership training workshops.

- Limited program capacity and wait lists (49%)
- Lack of information of available programs (43%)

Survey participants identified sports, arts and cultural enrichment programs, and academic tutoring as the most desired activities for their children. The lack of accessible space in the Canal for children to safely play and participate in programs is another barrier for families who struggle with mobility and rely on public transportation.

One community organization shared, "we are struggling to expand our programs because we cannot find extra space in the Canal. The Pickleweed Community Center is already at capacity." With a population of 12,000 residents, there is only one public park in the Canal compared to a city only minutes away with a population of 4,000 and over 20 parks. ^{xviii}

Spending Disparities at San Rafael High School:

Over 50% of the students are eligible for subsidized lunch and over 20% are identified as English Language Learners yet the spending per pupil is \$8,237 at San Rafael High School vs. \$10,340 at a school with 4% students eligible for subsidized lunch and 1% identified as English Language Learners. ^{xvi}

"I went to the Pickleweed Community Center to find a program to help my son with reading. They didn't have anything available for his age and we couldn't afford any of the programs with fees."

— A Mother and Canal Resident



Darlin Ruiz, an 11 year resident of the Canal, brings a rich history of community organizing and leadership. She was born and raised in a small rural town outside of Mexico City, Mexico that lacked resources and basic infrastructure. Under her leadership, Darlin brought basic utilities, including running water, telephone, street sanitation, and public transit services to her hometown.

Yet there were limited economic opportunities for Darlin as she struggled to raise five children on her own. She came to this country in 2003 and started her own housecleaning business to support her family. She began taking computer literacy and ESL classes to help her adjust to her new life. A community activist at heart, she was involved with neighborhood cleanup projects and later joined Voces Del Canal to work on broader community issues. "I joined

Voces because I am very concerned about the future of the Canal, especially for my children who are growing up here," explained Darlin.

Darlin shared how many residents in the Canal were initially reluctant to participate in the community surveys because they feared that their documented stories would put them at risk for deportation. Drawing on her experience as a community organizer and her ability to build trust with community members, Darlin conducted 172 resident surveys. "I want to help the community in any way I can. I am excited about this project because it is the first community-owned project that comes from the hard work of our families."

"We are working hard but it's difficult to get the better paying jobs because of our limited English or we don't have the right work experience." — Darlin, Resident Leader

Barriers to Family Economic Mobility

Despite having one of the highest labor force participation rates in Marin^{xx}, Latino families in the Canal continue to struggle with poverty and primarily work in the lower-wage employment sectors of Marin. Focus group participants discussed how securing higher wage jobs could help their family's advance, improve their quality of life, and perhaps even move to safer neighborhoods. "If I could find a better paying job, I would have more time to spend with my children, take them to afterschool activities, and enroll in ESL classes for myself," shared one mother.

In addition to low-wage earnings, families in the focus groups discussed how health care expenses created an additional financial burden and that many couldn't afford the out of pocket fees charged at the local clinics. Approximately 44% of Latino immigrants in Marin lack health insurance coverage.^{xx}

Economic Disparities in the Canal:

A single adult family with a preschooler and school-aged child requires an annual income of \$68,880 in order to remain self-sufficient in Marin County.

The typical worker in the Canal neighborhood earns just over \$21,000, about the same as an average American worker in the 1960s.^{xxi}

Recommendations from Canal Residents: Education and After-School Programs

- Stronger academic programming and college readiness support in under-performing schools serving the Canal.
- More opportunities for parent collaboration with school administrators to discuss strategies for supporting their children's success.
- Parent workshops to help them navigate the school system and become more informed advocates for their children's academic needs.
- More affordable (if not free) and accessible after-school activities, including arts and culture, sports extra-curricular programs.
- More youth rehabilitation programs for at-risk youth to help (re)build stability in their lives.
- Additional funding support for existing community efforts to address after-school programming needs.

Community collaboration and cohesion is key to genuine, lasting change

“It takes the community and the people who have power to partner together to make real change”

— *Canal Resident*

Canal residents and local organizations alike agree that creating community transformation in the Canal requires a collaborative approach and shared commitment from all community stakeholders – families, public agencies, local institutions, civic officials, and social service providers. However, the research identified the lack of meaningful community engagement opportunities as a challenge to success at the following community levels:

Between Residents and Service Providers

While many families are utilizing community services that are located within their community, there is still an unmet demand by many others who are unaware of available resources. Forty-three (43%) of surveyed respondents did not use after-school programs primarily because they were “unfamiliar” with available services.

In a community where trust and personal relationships are important, Canal families rely heavily on informal social networks or “word of mouth” from friends and family members to learn about community resources.^{xxii} Resident researchers shared that while conducting survey interviews, many families asked for a comprehensive list of community resources.

Residents described the need for social services that are better aligned with residents’ evolving needs. They see minimal opportunities to provide input and participate in the development of services offered to their community. One out of four of survey respondents were not satisfied with community health programs and one of out five respondents were not satisfied with public transit services.

There was also a general perception among focus group and survey participants that racial discrimination played a role in the lack of quality services. One mother shared, “We feel like we are not being treated fairly by agencies and getting the services we need because we are Latino immigrants, we don’t speak the language, and we are unfamiliar with how things work in this country. It’s easy for them to ignore us.”

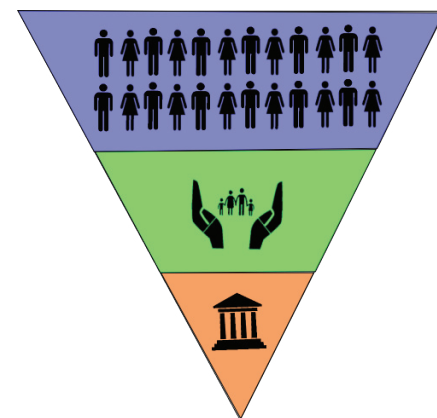
Between Service Providers

Key interviews with over 20 services providers, led by Dominican University service-learning students, described a lack of meaningful collaboration among service providers despite the evident desire of those who staff them. In an environment where resources are limited, providers often compete for the same funding rather than partnering for joint funding. One Executive Director of a community organization explained, “The competition for funding creates political tension. We need to build trust with each other. It would be helpful to learn about other agencies’ future vision and how they define collaboration.”

“The gaps (in the services we provide) are a reflection of the lack of communication between the community and organizations that serve them. I understand each organization has its own mission and we pay attention to the feedback of the community to see what is missing, but sometimes clients may not even know what they need. We need to have a relationship with our clients and understand their goals in order to help them.”

— *Canal Service Provider*^{xxiii}

This lack of collaboration impedes integrated and coordinated services that are essential for helping families achieve long-term, quality of life outcomes. Survey and focus group participants expressed their confusion in navigating the



Inverting the Pyramid of Power:

Community transformation begins with valuing and recognizing community residents as experts in their own lives. Second, nonprofit service providers partner with residents to develop community-driven services. And finally institutions and agencies invest resources and funding to support these community-led strategies. Voces del Canal is an example of this transformation.

fragmented network of providers and understanding the differences in services offered.

Between Residents and City Leaders/Decision-Makers

While there have been some opportunities for community engagement, they have not been sustained on an ongoing and consistent basis. Residents expressed frustration that they are not seeing meaningful changes in the Canal. One resident shared, “Agencies come into the Canal, ask questions, and then we don’t hear back or see any changes.” Residents discussed the need for more dialogue and active partnerships with leaders and civic officials to support community-informed decision-making. They want to be in relationship with key decision-makers as equal partners to forge a shared vision for their community.

Between Residents

There are residents in the Canal who are taking initiative to bring change to their community. Yet the experience challenges in building trust and engaging the broader community. “Families are scared to get involved with what is happening in their neighborhood. They don’t trust the community and don’t think it will make a difference,” shared one advocate.



A Canal father and his son work together with resident leader Oscar Rodriguez to craft a future vision for the Canal.

“More efforts on cross agency type of work, and sharing information and services need to occur, so that we’re building on each other’s efforts instead of trying to create and solve everything in one particular place. This then takes a lot of heavy lifting because there needs to be a lot of people involved in more conversations.”

— Community Service Provider^{xxiv}

Other focus group participants discussed how residents’ diverse cultural backgrounds and immigration statuses has created divisions between community members. Some are able to speak out more than others due to ability to obtain work permits and legal status while others are much more limited. These dynamics have created real tensions between different parts of the community and an impediment to civic engagement among various community members.

Resident Profile



Jose Gomez, an immigrant from a small village outside of Mexico City, has lived in the Canal community for almost 25 years. Over the years, Jose has acquired extensive work experience in construction, painting, carpentry and he eventually launched his own sub-contracting business. During this time, Jose also lived through many neighborhood transformations in the Canal and has noticed a widening generation gap between the older generation of immigrant families and the younger residents who have quickly assimilated into the new culture and do not have a strong sense of community.

Jose shares how he was always interested in becoming a teacher and he saw a need for community leadership and change in the Canal. He has volunteered as an ESL teaching assistant at the Canal Alliance and has received training for a restorative justice project serving at risk-youth in Marin. Jose joined Voces del Canal with a specific goal of restoring trust in the community. “I am hopeful that through this project, we will start to see changes in the Canal and more residents will become leaders for our community,” explains Jose.

Residents shared that some families do not get involved in the community because they are intent on returning to their home country. Another resident shared distinctions between recent immigrants and others who have assimilated into the mainstream culture. "I see a big problem with residents who have been here longer, speak better English, and are only focused on their own needs. They get caught up in the 'individualistic' mindset and don't help newer immigrants. We cannot do it alone. We need to work together."

Recommendations from Canal Residents: Family Self-Sufficiency and Empowerment, Community Cohesion

- Opportunities to strengthen investment in more employment and job training activities, ESL classes, housing support and financial literacy.
- Cultivation of leaders in the Canal who are trusted by residents and can create connections with the broader community through trainings and education on topics such as community organizing, advocacy, etc.
- A stronger and coordinated resident advocacy network to increase community participation
- More opportunities for fostering community relationships, trust, and peer support between families and neighbors, including community education workshops, cultural fairs, community garden projects, and other recreational activities.
- More effective, culturally relevant avenues for outreach including accessing informal social networks such as markets, churches, home visits, school events, cultural activities, etc.

Conclusion

The Voces del Canal project has surfaced untapped agency and expertise among hundreds of Canal residents who have vocalized their desire to be genuinely and actively engaged in changing the conditions of their community. However, residents cannot do this alone. Without adequate resources and support to address the social and economic barriers they face on a daily basis, residents will continue to struggle to realize their potential for true civic engagement.

There is an opportunity for all community stakeholders-- families, civic officials, local leaders, service providers, public agencies, and philanthropic institutions – to partner together to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses and provides direct solutions to the community safety needs of the Canal and long-term strategies to maintain this safety. Residents bring unique value to the dialogue by providing the insights of their lived experiences and supporting decision-makers to make better informed decisions about policies that would impact their lives. When there are meaningful partnerships, everyone gains.

Institutions, local schools, and agencies have an important role to play in providing infrastructure and capacity for meaningful community engagement. Institutions bring a unique set of resources and expertise to realize residents' vision and action. However, it will take more innovation and collaboration across agencies to achieve this. The traditional model of direct services to the community is not sustainable, given resource constraints and the complexity of issues facing families in the Canal. Service providers and residents can benefit from exploring and developing more asset-based strategies that unleash the power, leadership, expertise, and resilience of community residents.



Voces del Canal participants: Omar Carrera, Jose Gomez, Darlin Ruiz, Oscar Rodriguez, and Reem Assil.

“Despite all of the problems and challenges that we are facing in the Canal, there are still real people who are concerned about their community and want to make a change” —Jose, Resident Leader

Additionally, exploring more avenues for deepening collaboration and trust among community agencies and services providers will help catalyze community transformation. Service providers can work together to develop innovative partnerships and more effectively respond to community needs through joint funding and strategic alignment of resources and competencies. Institutions, government agencies, funders, and philanthropists can increase the impact and capacity of shared goals by formally acknowledging community residents as assets and partners in this work. Validating and acting on resident experience and community knowledge is essential to addressing inequities in Marin and creating sustainable change.

The Voces del Canal project confirms that residents are ready to take action and seek real lasting relationships based on trust, mutual respect and a shared stake in the larger Marin community in order to be effective drivers of change. We believe that now, more than ever, there is an opportunity to build on the momentum of community efforts to work towards their vision of a safe, strong, and thriving Canal.

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Canal Alliance helps low-income, Spanish-speaking immigrants to acquire the tools they need to thrive. Founded in 1982, Canal Alliance has been the leading service provider and community advocate for Marin's low-income, Spanish-speaking immigrants for three decades. Canal Alliance delivers education services, improves access to community resources, offers immigration legal assistance, supplemental food, and provides job readiness support.

Dominican University of California's Service-Learning Program integrates meaningful community engagement (in response to community-identified interests) with academic curriculum. We uphold best practices that embrace the principles of reciprocity between all stakeholders: the community partners are co-educators, faculty and students are engaged citizens, and the academy becomes an active member of the local and global community. Specific to this project, we are committed to increasing communication and collaboration on campus and between key constituents to become better partners, build community capacity, and increase well being and equity in the Canal neighborhood.

DataCenter is a national training and resource center that supports grassroots organizing for justice by building communities' capacity to reclaim, own and yield their knowledge to advance social change. We use research to help move the knowledge of low-income communities of color from the margins to the center of decision-making. Through research partnerships and trainings, we have supported numerous organizations in using research to leverage and win campaigns, advocate for their families and communities, and strengthen the social justice movement.

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End Notes

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