

Transforming Community Engagement in the Cultivation of Equitable Climate Resilience



Mission:

Leadership Counsel works alongside the most impacted communities to advocate for sound policy and eradicate injustice to secure equal access to opportunity regardless of wealth, race, income, and place.

As a grant-funded partner in the Climate Change, Health & Equity (CCHE) network, the Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability (“Leadership Counsel”) in collaboration with Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Central California Environmental Justice Network, Central Valley Health Policy Institute (CVHPI), Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, and Faith in the Valley, have been working to confront climate and health impacts disproportionately borne by lower income communities and communities of color in Fresno, California. Their efforts align with the overall [CCHE Theory of Change](#) as part of Strategy 3.

Throughout the CCHE initiative, the Leadership Counsel experienced groundbreaking successes with engaging residents and stakeholders in issues related to land use, transportation, air quality, and public health while also playing a direct role in pandemic response and recovery efforts. As a result of this work, the Leadership Counsel (1) secured a \$500,000 budget allocation from the City of Fresno to develop a climate action plan, (2) launched an inclusive community participatory process to define the vision and implementation of a 30-year investment plan that will allocate \$8-9 billion for a new transportation future in Fresno, and (3) defeated a deeply flawed and unjust transportation sales tax measure.

The Leadership Counsel has contributed to a transformed culture around local decision-making and supported residents in their ability to independently lead local policy advocacy with stakeholders from organized labor, public health departments, and transportation and land use agencies. A [New York Times article \(June 2023\)](#) dives into the complex and historically inequitable environmental health issues that impact Fresno and the greater San Joaquin Valley, and how the Leadership Counsel, their partners, and residents are spearheading change. The Leadership Counsel increased residents’ knowledge and awareness of environmental health issues, which strengthened community-led policy and programmatic advocacy efforts. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Leadership Counsel has strengthened partnerships with the Fresno County Public Health Department and which contributed to solutions and policy advocacy for healthy, thriving, and climate-resilient neighborhoods. For a high-level overview of the Leadership Council’s CCHE-related efforts, see their [2022 CCHE theory of change \(slide 24\)](#) and described in detail below.

Policies, Activities, and Initiatives Advanced During the CCHE Initiative

Coordinated campaign efforts to shift decision-making and secure policy and investment wins. Following the successes noted above and based on years of advocacy, local and state agencies have begun to regularly consult and invite members of the Leadership Counsel for strategic input on policies and projects affecting communities. For example, The Fresno Council of Governments invited Leadership Counsel to standing committee meetings to provide guidance on environmental justice and climate resilience.

Provided systemic policy interventions and reshape Fresno’s status quo and developed an equitable Climate Action Plan for the City of Fresno.

The Leadership Counsel’ work with the Transportation 4 All campaign has shifted the status quo and has proposed community-driven policy to begin to address inequities and shift the legacy of inequitable investments and culture of exclusionary decision-making in Fresno County. For example, the City of Fresno reached out to the Leadership Counsel members to support residents’ participation in city hearings and information sharing with residents. After securing a budget allocation to develop a Climate Action Plan, the Leadership Counsel engaged residents and other partners to develop an Environmental Justice plan. The City of Fresno continued to collaborate with the Leadership Counsel in refining both plans.

Select Resources

- [Measure C Renewal Documents \(2022\)](#)
- [In California’s Heartland, a New Resistance Movement is Taking Root \(2023\)](#)

Built health sector partnerships to engage throughout community advocacy campaigns. Through collaboration with CVHPI, Leadership Counsel contributed to a [recent report](#) on the impacts of land use on economic growth and job creation for residents. This work together led to new initiatives including rural mobile health clinics to better support rural communities. Despite progress in working with the local public health departments and healthcare practitioners, the Leadership Counsel continues working to solidify partnerships. Working with healthcare providers was particularly beneficial during the pandemic, when the CBO could act as a bridge with vulnerable populations to ensure they were protected.

Elevated community-based narratives with organizational partners and community leaders. Leadership Counsel worked with community residents to share their own stories, both struggles and successes, in order to inform systemic change. For example, residents shared how the lack of transportation to medical care impacts their health. These important stories helped inform and advance strategic efforts to defeat a flawed transportation sales tax measure.

Built community strength and co-empowerment by increasing access to decision-making processes for historically excluded communities. The Leadership Counsel has seen progress with engaging residents and stakeholders in issues related to air quality, land use, transportation, housing, and water quality. This included partnering with residents from South Fresno to support their participation in the AB 617 Steering Committee and in informing the truck route study, South Central Specific Plan, and the State Implementation Plan to improve local air quality in disproportionately pollution-burdened communities. Stakeholders also began engaging more deeply in the Transportation 4 All Coalition as they realized the Coalition’s impact on local policies and the importance of including residents in land use and transportation planning.

Reflected community priorities in land-use planning and decision-making and ensured alignment with climate and health priorities. In a recent draft land use plan for south central Fresno, there was a greater commitment by the City of Fresno to increase greening and establish more protective measures for industrial development. These elements of the plan reflected advocacy efforts and contributions from residents, Leadership Counsel, and other community partners. Residents have also independently engaged in public hearings relating to land use decisions in their communities and submitted verbal and written testimonies for new legislation. Residents regularly participated in the Transportation 4 All Coalition, guided the air district’s work under AB 617, and engaged in the development of the AB617 Truck Route Study and South-Central Specific Plan as described above.

Raised awareness of the collective, community-driven nature of climate change advocacy to hold local and regional decision-makers accountable. The Transportation 4 All Coalition placed residents in the driver’s seat to develop their vision for the future of transportation, climate resilience, and environmental justice in Fresno. Additionally, residents’ ongoing advocacy and engagement alongside Leadership Counsel and project partners in the land use planning and air quality improvement plans identified above presented a clear, community-driven vision for the Climate Action Plan and Environmental Justice Elements that are now in progress. This progress would not have been possible without the ongoing trust and relationship building with multidisciplinary stakeholders and multigenerational residents.

Insights from CCHE Initiative

- **The COVID-19 pandemic hindered engagement with healthcare practitioners but opened doors for collaboration with local health departments.** The healthcare system in Fresno was not equipped to meet community needs during the height of the pandemic. Local governments needed to develop an equity plan in order to receive federal funding for pandemic relief. The County of Fresno consequently contracted community-based organizations, including, which led to greater collaboration with local health departments. Over time, Leadership Counsel and local health departments have employed statewide advocacy and policies to push local government to support residents’ community priorities and needs.
- **Trust and relationships with community is the core of this work.** As Leadership Counsel and project partners continue to grow, they are prioritizing authentic trust and relationships with residents that do not foster dependency. Their “No on Measure C” campaign was a 12-year campaign given the amount of time it takes to build relationships, engage in decision making, inform policy and investment plans, and foster intergenerational community leaders for policy advocacy.
- **This work requires an intersectional and holistic perspective.** Leadership Counsel’s portfolio of work and engagement with residents consistently focuses on the connectedness between building climate resilience and addressing issues related to air quality, water quality, land use, health, economic opportunity, and transportation.

Looking Ahead

Throughout the CCHE initiative, Leadership Counsel has seen more opportunities to continue their work with support from other funders and partners. The Kresge Foundation’s investment in Leadership Counsel demonstrated confidence in the organization and their efforts. The Leadership Counsel will continue to collaborate with residents to develop an equitable climate action plan for Fresno and pursue equitable land use and transportation planning for an environmentally just future in Fresno County. The success of the work to date has been a result of ongoing, multi-year funding which has allowed Leadership Counsel to build capacity and policy expertise, develop and sustain trust-based relationships with community leaders, and develop and implement sophisticated advocacy strategies at the local, regional, and state levels.

Key Partners

Organization	Type
Building Healthy Communities Coalition	Community Partner
CA Air Resources Board	Government Partner
Central California Environmental Justice Network	Environmental Partner
Central Valley Health Policy Institute	Institutional Partner
City Manager and City Council Members	Government Partner
Faith in the Valley	Community Partner
Fresno County Interim Health Officer	Government Partner
Fresno County Public Health Dept.	Government Partner
Fresno Housing Authority	Government Partner
Healthy Fresno Air	Community Partner
Identifying Violations Affecting Neighborhoods	Environmental Partner
San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District	Environmental Partner