The ABC's of Lead Poisoning in Denver

The interns talk about lead poisoning with ABC member Ester Lozano.

The Interns

Thomas Garrett
Suk Rhee
James Johnson

The Campaign

Getting the lead out of Denver

Most Memorable Moment

"We rented seven different automobiles during the campaign. We even melted the hubcaps off of one of them.'"

Why should you worry about something you can't see, smell, taste or hear? This seems to be the attitude of officials of the Denver Housing Authority (DHA) about the lead paint prevalent in Denver's housing developments. When a concerned housing authority project resident went looking for answers to the almost invisible problem of lead poisoning, a housing authority official told her that "you're not a child, don't eat the paint."

MAAP interns Thomas Garrett, James Johnson, and Suk Rhee had the opportunity this summer to change the attitudes of DHA officials about the seriousness of lead poisoning in Denver. Working on the first campaign of the newly-formed Denver Action for a Better Community (ABC), the interns organized to pressure city officials to "get the lead out" of Denver.

Lead-based paint, previously considered only an "east coast problem," is the single largest source of lead exposure and poisoning for children under 7 in the United States. In Denver, Colorado, more than half the housing stock (57%) is expected to contain some lead-based paint. In low-income communities of color, the percentage can be as high as 96%.

The PUEBLO Model

Modeled after a successful campaign by People United For A Better Oakland in California (PUEBLO) to force county officials to implement a prevention, detection and abatement program, Denver ABC introduced the issue of lead exposure and poisoning to four housing authority projects in Denver, Colorado. ABC's first lesson was that you can't just superimpose a campaign from one community to another and expect a perfect fit. Getting the lead out of Denver has demanded different tactics, research, and community sensitivity.

"We went back to the PUEBLO lead campaign and found out that one strategy used, the house meeting, was really going to be the most effective way to create a strong, powerful organization in Denver," said David Portillo, a former organizer with PUEBLO and currently an organizer with ABC.

Problems & Action

As a local grassroots organization, Denver ABC understands the problem of lead in the context of social problems that can be addressed through community action and organizing. Thus, ABC was not only working on the lead problem, but laying the foundations for what will be a lasting and successful organization for social change.

The first few days of the campaign required thorough research and adapting to the environment. James "I love to eat" Johnson spent a great deal of time adjusting to Mexican food. At times he was caught ordering a hamburger and fries at Mexican restaurants. Most of the remaining time was spent building the membership base through doorknocking. And doorknocking. And doorknocking. This gave ABC the opportunity to find out what Denver residents knew about lead, how willing

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Host Organization Profile

Denver Action for a Better Community

Denver Action for a Better Community (ABC) is a new organizing project whose goal, according to lead organizer Sonia Peña, is to build a "grassroots, multi-racial citywide organization of low-income people."

Launched in the spring of 1992, Denver ABC grows out of the model of organizing developed by the Center for Third World Organizing in Oakland, California. CTWO's organizing project in Oakland, People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO), successfully organized a campaign last year around the issue of lead contamination and lead poisoning, and it is this issue that ABC has taken on for its inaugural campaign.

ABC staff give three reasons for picking lead as their first campaign:

1. PUEBLO is one of several groups around the country that have successfully organized around the issue of lead, and thus there are several successful models to emulate and learn from.

2. In the last few years, the national awareness of lead as a serious environmental problem in the inner city has grown, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), based in Atlanta have announced new guidelines that dramatically reduce the amount of lead in the blood considered to be safe.

3. It is well documented that lead poisoning can cause long-term learning disabilities and other problems. Organizing to end lead contamination is something that can be done in the present to prevent long-term problems.

Denver ABC organizers Sonia Peña and David Portillo decided on where to begin their efforts by looking at census information. They pinpointed two neighborhoods that had both high percentages of old housing (where there is likely to be lead paint) and large numbers of children (lead poisoning is by far more severe in children than adults). As it turns out, these were also the two neighborhoods with the largest housing projects in Denver.

"It changed the campaign a bit when we realized we'd be working a lot in the projects," said Peña. "The more we dug into what was going on there, the more we realized that the DHA (Denver Housing Authority) has not been following the law."

According to ABC, the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) regulations stipulate that if the DHA knows there is lead in the unit, they must notify the family moving into the unit, and refer them to a place to be tested for lead poisoning. However, the DHA has been moving people into the units, telling them that there might be lead in the paint, but not informing them of the potential effects of lead poisoning or where they could go to be tested. New residents are also given a form to sign that basically absolves the DHA of future responsibility for any problems related to lead poisoning.

ABC has picked as its first target Pat Nolan, the Director of Public Health for Colorado, as the person who could make some changes in the way information about lead is given out to families about to occupy public housing. "We want her to get the DHA to follow the law," says Peña. ABC also wants Nolan to endorse their campaign, and mandate that all doctors in Colorado have to test children under six for lead poisoning once a year, following the CDC guidelines.

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Another demand is a change in the way people are referred to the agency that does testing for lead, the Early Periodic Screening and Diagnostic Testing (EPSDT). ABC has found out that the reason the EPSDT does not currently test all children for lead is that the Colorado Health Department does not mandate that it be done.

To get these demands met, say ABC organizers, a new approach to organizing other than the ones that have been traditionally used in Denver is required. Long-time Denver activists note that the city does not really have a tradition of direct action organizing, where community organizations are built from the ground up, with the intention of changing the relations of power between their community and the power structure.

"Direct action takes the struggle outside the arena in which politicians and officials operate," explains Peña, "and puts it back in the arena of the community. On this level, the issues are cut along the lines of necessity — kids are dying and we want action — and we can get away from arguing about the budget or about the right process for doing things." She believes that ABC's style will fit in well with the current political scene in Denver. As the only city-wide, multi-issue, multi-racial community organization in Denver, ABC will fill a niche that is not currently occupied by any other group.