



COMMUNITY HEALTH
IMPROVEMENT PARTNERS

making a difference together

ANNUAL REPORT

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



ED QUINLAN
President & CEO

“WE BELIEVE THAT EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ACHIEVE OPTIMAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.

“Health and well-being” may seem like a simple concept, but in truth, there is so much that goes into changing people’s behavior in ways that will help them achieve those things. When I think of what it takes for a person to live a healthy life, multiple factors come to mind: access to nutritious food, stable housing, mental health resources, a lifestyle that makes it easy to stay active, a feeling of connection to their community, and the ability to affect change in their neighborhood.

Every day, under the larger umbrella of Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP), dozens of staff, community partners, and volunteers run programs that actively work to bring more of these positive, healthful aspects into communities up and down the state. This year, we’re proud to say that we’ve directly impacted the lives of thousands of people in San Diego County and beyond through our collaborative, integrated local-level approaches.

As President and CEO, I’ve discovered three things we do exceptionally well:


- 1 As an expert facilitator of collaborations, we educate, engage and empower our 250+ community partners;
- 2 We hold ourselves and those we work with accountable for delivering results that make an impact;
- 3 We believe in a continuous learning environment where everyone embraces the diversity of thought.

A major focus for us, this year, has been to ensure that all of our individual programs integrate and work together to better serve the communities in which they exist. In Chula Vista, for example, most residents can see the tangible effects of CHIP programs on their daily lives, whether through REACH Chula Vista, the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative or the Farm to

Institution Center. We’re also working actively with local government bodies on policies that directly change lives for the better, such as pedestrian-friendly urban planning and more park space in underserved neighborhoods. Due to our expertise in collaboration, in many cases we are the backbone or primary convener tasked with executing public health programs and strategies for the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency.

People nationwide are noticing the good work CHIP is doing. The Independent Living Association, a highly successful CHIP program that provides stable housing for vulnerable populations in San Diego County, was approached by Alameda County to implement its first-of-its kind model in the Bay area. Our senior staff in charge of the Resident Leadership Academy program, which teaches residents the skills necessary to affect positive change in their neighborhoods, recently consulted for another, similar group in Kansas City. Thanks to this engagement, they brought back new ideas to improve our own program in San Diego County.

I like to say that our organizational structure is effective because it is like a tree: CHIP provides the roots and trunk, a solid base for our individual programs branching out directly into the communities where we serve. This annual report highlights the real, human impact of our work. We’ve got big plans for the upcoming year: planning a sustainable future for our organization, along with growing our data and evaluation capabilities, top that list. We look forward to seeing how we grow together.

Sincerely,

Ed Quinlan
President and CEO
Community Health Improvement Partners

2017 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

IT'S BEEN AN EVENTFUL YEAR
FOR OUR ORGANIZATION,
AND ONE WITH PLENTY
TO CELEBRATE.



The Farm to Institution Center works to create a sustainable, healthy, local food system in San Diego County by changing how institutions procure food for the meals they serve, and educating their communities on the value of healthy, local food. The Center focuses on helping local growers and institutions connect and create a path for local, nutritious food into these communities.

- In 2017, the Center designed the Farm to Institution Council as a diverse, collaborative group of stakeholders from a range of San Diego institutions, including schools and hospitals, focused on overcoming their common challenges around buying local, healthy foods.
- The Center began work with both Sweetwater Union and Oceanside Unified School Districts to develop multi-year Farm to School strategic plans, in order to promote nutrition education, build school gardens and buy more local foods to support healthy eating for their roughly 60,000 students.
- According to the Center's research, from the 2013-2014 to the 2016-17 school year, the Center's Farm to School (F2S) Taskforce has helped catalyze: a more than 500 percent increase in funding spent procuring local, California-sourced, healthy food for school meal service in San Diego County school districts, from \$3.1 million to \$19.1 million annually; and a 26 percent increase in the number of school gardens operating in San Diego County schools, from 181 to 228.



ILA is a collaborative, community-wide effort focused on setting standards for and providing high-quality Independent Living residences, for adults with mental illness and other disabling health conditions. These residences may be privately-owned homes or larger capacity complexes within community settings.

- ILA increased the number of Independent Living residences to 76 homes in San Diego County that meet ILA's rigorous standards, with 676 beds—that's an increase of 38 percent.
- ILA's model has proven so successful that other regions in California would like to replicate it. A \$400,000 bid and an idea three years ago has turned into \$1.3 million grant for CHIP to build a program like San Diego's ILA for Alameda County independent living operators.
- This year, ILA will build on its success by adding a new program focused on housing for adults in recovery from substance use disorders, the Recovery Residence Program (RRA), with support from San Diego County.



The Lemon Grove HEAL Zone, funded by Kaiser Permanente and convened by CHIP, works to empower residents of Lemon Grove, CA to lead healthier lives by advocating for policy changes that lead to healthier environments, as well as promoting public health education.

- CHIP has engaged 1,000 residents of Lemon Grove (out of a population of 26,000) in HEAL Zone activities, including a Healthy Kids Day event last April.
- HEAL Zone collaborated with the city of Lemon Grove to install exercise equipment in local parks, improving residents' access to healthy living activities in safe environments.
- Through HEAL Zone, CHIP also activated local youth groups to assess conditions in those parks. This led the city to replace lights, fix broken water fountains, and make other "quality of life" improvements—the youth groups even spearheaded the painting and cleaning of restrooms in their local parks.



The Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) award is part of a U.S Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) initiative supporting public health efforts to reduce chronic diseases, promote healthier lifestyles, reduce health disparities, and control healthcare spending. CHIP facilitates and implements the REACH program in Chula Vista, CA.

- REACH Chula Vista helped the City of Chula Vista adopt an urban agriculture ordinance that will open up opportunities for residents to turn vacant lots into productive agricultural land, providing access to locally grown produce for San Diego County's second largest city.
- With the support of REACH Chula Vista, Sweetwater Union High School District installed a culinary garden at Chula Vista High School, paving the way for 40,671 SUHSD high school students to get healthy, school-grown food in their school's cafeteria.



RLA teaches individuals the skills they need to affect positive change in their communities, particularly in low-income neighborhoods that may not have optimal access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity.

In 2017, RLA expanded its model to specifically teach residents (namely youth) from refugee populations how to address problems they see in their neighborhoods. Through a contract with the Community Action Partnership (CAP) utilizing Refugee Employment Services funding, CHIP conducted three culturally-appropriate RLA trainings in East and Central San Diego County, geared toward Iraqi, Syrian and Somali refugees. These three trainings provided 59 graduates with the tools to improve the lives of their families and community.



COI is a multi-sector coalition with the mission of reducing and preventing childhood obesity by advancing policy, systems, and environmental change through collective impact.

- In 2017, COI celebrated its 10th anniversary.
- COI's first-ever State of Childhood Obesity in San Diego County report was released in May 2017. The report presents data on the prevalence of overweight and obesity among San Diego County children and adolescents, establishes baseline indicators for how progress will be measured going forward and highlights innovative projects and activities implemented by COI partners to promote healthier lives for kids.
- COI's collective efforts with its community partners are making a difference. In the past few years, the percent of children who are overweight or obese in San Diego County has leveled off and even declined among some populations, though there is still much work to be done.



SPC provides oversight, guidance, and collective support to implement the recommendations of its Suicide Prevention Action Plan. In particular, SPC coordinates and sponsors trainings for healthcare workers, members of the military, and people from all walks of life that helps them spot the signs of someone who may be suicidal, and get them help that may save their life.

- Though there have unfortunately been many high-profile suicides in throughout the country this year, current suicide rates are the lowest they've been in five years in San Diego County.
- In 2017, in the SPC's volunteer-based gatekeeper training team for suicide intervention completed 133 Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) trainings, serving 2,778 participants in the County.

CHIP PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

INDEPENDENT LIVING ASSOCIATION

(ILA)

STANDARDS OF LIVING

The Independent Living Association broke ground as the first organization to set standards governing Independent Livings.

Here's how it's growing in 2018.



Each month, ILA hosts an educational course to support new and existing operators, helping them continue learning and implementing best independent living home practices. These trainings provide knowledge, mentorship, support, and camaraderie from ILA staff and seasoned ILA operators.

For someone living with mental illness or any other disabling health condition whose only source of income is Social Security, finding a safe place to live can be an enormous financial hurdle. Independent Livings, or privately-owned residences that provide stable, affordable housing for these vulnerable populations, are crucial to San Diego County's efforts to reduce homelessness. However, until seven years ago, no uniform set of standards existed for these residences. This meant that while some Independent Livings provided high-quality home situations for these vulnerable individuals, others were plagued by overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and safety issues.

Enter the Independent Living Association (ILA). In 2011, CHIP and its partners with the County of San Diego determined that something had to be done to improve the quality of housing for County social services clients who were living with mental illness, but could function independently and didn't need medication oversight. Both CHIP and the County believed that stable housing can help those clients manage and recover from their conditions—as well as decrease the use of public services (including MediCal), cut back on hospitalizations, reduce homelessness, and improve public safety.

"Before ILA, there were many homes that provided the safe, clean, affordable, supportive living situations clients needed to get back on their feet and feel empowered," said ILA program director Melanie Briones. "However, we heard too many reports of others that almost made life on the street seem like a preferable choice, where residents were crowded into filthy spaces that lacked house rules and structure. ILA is the first association of its kind—the standards it sets for members mean that residents have the dignity they deserve, so they can live a healthy life."

ILA was established as a free, voluntary professional association (modeled on organizations like the Better Business Bureau). Its uniform quality standards are an easy way to determine that members who meet them are safe, comfortable Independent Livings that provide the best housing situation possible for residents.

ILA's mission is to support Independent Living owners and residents, as well as the community as a whole, by providing every resource possible for those operating and living in these arrangements.

ILA ACHIEVES ITS MISSION IN FOUR WAYS:

1 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Operators open their homes as Independent Livings for a variety of reasons, whether purely financial or motivated by a personal connection to the populations they serve. ILA members enroll in continuing education courses for operators, geared toward helping them learn best practices for successfully housing adults with mental illness.

2 MEMBERSHIP AND ONLINE DIRECTORY

ILA membership is by no means mandatory for Independent Living operators in San Diego County—but it does offer an official “seal of approval” for members who meet its rigorous quality standards. ILA members are also listed in the organization’s searchable online directory, which allows County agencies and hospitals to refer clients to ILA members, knowing they are high-quality homes.

3 PEER REVIEW

ILA members are part of a community of like-minded Independent Livings operators, enjoying benefits such as exclusive discounts and networking. They can also rest easy knowing that experienced Independent Livings operators, and people who currently or have resided in lived in Independent Livings, will be conducting the annual quality assurance home visits required for members. Members can also turn to ILA staff and other operators for advice and coaching.

4 ADVOCACY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

ILA isn’t just focused on supporting Independent Livings operators and residents. By providing high-quality Independent Livings for vulnerable populations that might otherwise experience homelessness, the organization aims to improve the safety and quality of life for all members of the San Diego community. It also aims to address the stigma surrounding residents of Independent Livings, and combat NIMBYism by fostering understanding in the community of the challenges faced by those living with mental illness. Finally, ILA is a unified voice for Independent Livings in the halls of local government, helping to inform decisions about affordable housing and other policies that aim to combat San Diego’s growing homelessness problem.

Many adults with mental illness also struggle with substance abuse, which contributes even further to housing instability. To this end, ILA began working with partners to fill the need for safe, stable housing for adults in recovery from addiction. In response, the County of San Diego increased ILA’s funding, enabling the organization to develop a new program focused solely on serving this population in 2018: The Recovery Residence Program (RRA). RRA will operate under the umbrella of ILA, with access to all the resources, standards, and networks that come with it, giving those in recovery and their families the peace of mind knowing that each residence will provide a healthy home.

ILA’s impact in San Diego County is growing—and other localities across the state of California have noticed. Three years ago, officials from Alameda County in northern California asked ILA to help them replicate their Independent Livings standards. That idea has since grown to a multi-year grant to help Alameda County build their own version of ILA, serving vulnerable populations in Oakland and other major Bay Area communities. Other counties in California have also since approached ILA for guidance, and ILA staff are in active conversations with these localities.

“Good Independent Living residences provide a foundation and a mental health support system to help people live healthier lives,” said Briones. “ILA works with everyone involved, from operators to residents to the community and local government, to support quality Independent Livings. I’m proud to be a part of it, and I truly look forward to seeing how our model grows.”



ILA member Tracey Wilson and her RootedLife tenants participated in the annual NAMIWalk to celebrate in their journey to recovery.

BY THE NUMBERS

ILA’s model is working—and impacting the lives of more and more adults with mental illness every year. Right now:

There are 76 ILA member homes operating in San Diego County, providing 676 beds.

So far in 2018, 15 more Independent Livings have applied to become ILA members.

90% of ILA member homes provide meals for residents.

56% of ILA member homes have a resident advisor, house manager, or owner living on-site.

Adults looking for an Independent Living can choose to live in co-ed or single-gender set-ups:
49% of ILA homes are co-ed
21% of ILA home are male only
21% of ILA home are female only

CHIP PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

RESIDENT LEADERSHIP ACADEMY (RLA)

PUTTING PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE PUBLIC'S HANDS

For people living in historically underserved San Diego communities, CHIP's Resident Leadership Academy (RLA) offers concrete answers to the question, "what can I do to improve my neighborhood?"—and gives them a high-level, evidence-based course in public health.



Members of the Community Iraqi Soccer Team (boys' team) graduated from the first RLA refugee training in El Cajon, CA.

In vulnerable communities across San Diego, residents are often at least somewhat aware of the public health problems facing their community, from high childhood obesity rates to unrepaired infrastructure to pedestrian-unfriendly urban centers. Many of them know that something needs to be done in their neighborhood, but don't know where to start, or even what words to use when discussing possible solutions with local government leadership.

CHIP's Resident Leadership Academy (RLA) gives interested residents from under-resourced areas the language, ideas, and tools they need to "do something." It's a free, curriculum-based series of classes and workshops, created in partnership with the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, that teaches residents how to make lasting, positive changes in their neighborhoods—and teach their neighbors to do the same.

"In many ways, RLA participants learn the same things you would for a Master's degree in public health," said Dana Richardson, director of RLA and CHIP's vice president of community health and engagement. "In a very short period of time, they learn about the social determinants of health, or the conditions in the places where people live, learn, work and play; important public health topics like the socio-ecological model of public health; environmental prevention; the basics of community planning; and how to effectively advocate for the policy changes that will make their families and their neighborhoods healthier."

RLA courses typically focus on helping residents address their own issues and concerns, like increasing access to healthy food, making their neighborhoods more conducive to physical activity, and improving public safety. Solutions to these problems can include bringing farmers' markets to low-income neighborhoods in "food deserts," where residents can use SNAP benefits to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables; adding bike lanes and converting vacant lots into parks or community gardens; and advocating for the building or widening of pedestrian walkways.

RLA participants spend the first three sessions building a basic understanding of how our environments affect our health, particularly when it comes to

GRADUATES OF
RLA HAVE MADE
REAL CHANGES
IN THEIR
COMMUNITIES.

THIS YEAR:

Angeles Nelson (Lemon Grove RLA graduate, 2014) was named to the Board of the San Diego Breastfeeding Coalition.

RLA graduate and trainer Mohammed Tuama founded Newcomer Support and Development (NSD), an organization in El Cajon dedicated to helping refugees and new arrivals find employment resources.

RLA graduate and trainer Janice Luna Reynoso launched her nonprofit, Mundo Gardens, in National City, which now operates the city’s Paradise Creek Community Garden.

preventable conditions like Type II diabetes, heart disease and asthma. Then, the group explores examples of how their environment may be contributing to public health problems, and community improvement projects that have worked in other communities they may know of, both locally and state/ nationwide. Finally, the last three sessions are spent formulating a plan of action to address a specific problem the group has identified in their community, and strategizing how they will define success, work together, and engage key players like the police, faith organizations, neighborhood and civic groups, community-based organizations and local government leaders.

The education RLA offers is even high-quality, high-level enough to benefit those very same government leaders RLA graduates end up working with—Lemon Grove Mayor Racquel Vasquez, Lemon Grove City Councilmember Jennifer Mendoza and Lemon Grove City Planning Commission member Stephen Browne are all either graduates or have gone on to become certified RLA trainers.

Above all, though, RLA is dedicated to enabling those who may not have the connections, vocabulary, access, or knowledge of local systems to make changes where they live. San Diego County resettles some of the highest numbers of refugees anywhere in the United States—and county officials realize that empowering these residents to navigate American systems and improve their new communities is key to fully welcoming and integrating them into American culture. To this end, in 2017 RLA expanded its model to specifically teach residents from refugee populations about engaging local leaders and addressing the problems they see in their neighborhoods. Through a contract with the Community Action Partnership (CAP) utilizing Refugee Employment Services funding, CHIP implemented three culturally-appropriate RLA sessions in East and Central San Diego County, geared toward groups of Iraqi, Syrian and Somali refugees. Each group, after working through RLA’s public health curriculum, picked a community improvement project, elected leaders, and formulated a plan of action—and saw real results, such as building relationships with the City of El Cajon’s Parks and Recreation Council with the goal of expanded soccer activities in El Cajon parks.

RLA graduates aren’t just supposed to keep engaging with local leaders and pursuing community improvement projects—they’re also encouraged to train their friends and neighbors in the same skills they’ve learned. Many RLA graduates have chosen to continue their leadership development training by becoming certified RLA trainers. RLA’s “train the trainer” workshop series, developed in 2013, teaches RLA graduates how to become trainers themselves, and spread their new public health and government advocacy knowledge.

Other communities around the U.S. are taking notice of RLA’s success, too: recently, RLA was approved by NeighborWorks America to consult nationally with similar groups across the country. Recently, in Kansas City, MO, RLA’s lead staff audited three “Community Engagement” courses conducted at a similar local organization’s May 2018 National Training Institute. This resulted in an exchange of ideas that RLA’s leadership excitedly brought back to San Diego to improve its own programs even further. RLA staff are also looking forward to replicating RLA’s “train the trainer” program on a national level in a three-day format elsewhere in America in 2019.

“What I hear most often from our trainees, especially those in our pilot communities of Lemon Grove, National City, east Oceanside and southeastern San Diego, is this: RLA takes people who know their community needs improving, and shows them the steps to actually get things done,” said Richardson. “I’ve had the privilege of watching RLA grow in ways I never expected since its inception in 2010, and can’t wait to bring our model to other communities nationally. Most of all, though, I look forward to seeing how our graduates continue to educate their neighbors and work on concrete, positive changes in the places they live.”

Members of the Community Iraqi Soccer Team (girls' team) graduated from the second RLA refugee training in El Cajon, CA.



BY THE
NUMBERS

As of 2018:

There are 629 RLA graduates in communities throughout San Diego County.

117 people have now been trained as RLA trainers.

RLA sessions are taught in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Arabic.

| CHIP PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

FARM TO INSTITUTION CENTER

FRESH, HEALTHY, LOCAL: RETHINKING SCHOOL FOOD IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

CHIP's Farm to Institution Center is dedicated to supporting farmers and building community-wide access to healthy food through institutions—and nowhere is that mission more evident than the Center's highly successful Farm to School (F2S) Taskforce.



Members of the Farm to School Taskforce brainstorm ideas during one of their regular meetings.

Fresh produce and locally-sourced ingredients from local farmers—sounds like the menu from a new upscale restaurant, right?

As of this year, it's increasingly the norm for school breakfasts and lunches in 32 of San Diego County's 42 public school districts, thanks in part to the Farm to School (F2S) Taskforce. The F2S Taskforce is a collaborative group of stakeholders who are passionate about getting local food into San Diego County schools. Members include school food service and child nutrition staff, community partners, distributors, and local farmers. The Taskforce catalyzes development of all things farm to school (local food procurement, school gardens, and nutrition education) in an effort to build healthy eating habits, and a greater appreciation for food and farming among students.

The Farm to Institution Center was founded in 2010, with the mission of connecting nutritious, local food with institutions like hospitals, universities, and school districts. The Center does this in order to create a viable way for good food to reach all communities in San Diego County, while promoting healthy eating. This mission is a win-win, as it also supports a sustainable, local agriculture sector and a healthy food system in the region. The Center's work stems primarily from its three core collaborative groups: the Nutrition in Healthcare Leadership Team, the Farm to Institution Council, and the F2S Taskforce.

"More people are beginning to realize the impact that serving and promoting good, healthy food in settings like schools can have on community health," said Prem Durairaj, director of the Farm to Institution Center. "This is clearly evident in our schools, where food service directors continue to impress as they improve school meals. However, until we launched the F2S Taskforce, there was no central group connecting child nutrition and food service directors, distributors, community nonprofits, farmers, and everyone else who was interested in creating farm to school relationships. Through the Taskforce, we have developed and continue to manage a group that inspires, motivates, shares best practices, and brings together each of these stakeholders in an effort to help everyone in San Diego County make healthier choices."

BY THE NUMBERS

Here are some key numbers and highlights that we can share about the 2016-2017 school year.

A deeper look at F2S in San Diego County public schools during the 2016-2017 school year will be available in the upcoming State of Farm to School in San Diego County report.

The number of San Diego County school districts purchasing local food increased from 28 in the 2015-2016 school year to 32 in the 2016-2017 school year. This is a 12.5% increase.

San Diego County schools spent \$19.08 million procuring local food (sourced within the state of California)—a 10% increase from the year prior.

A significant portion (11%) of the \$19 million spent on local food went to farmers within San Diego County.

Nine San Diego County school districts now regularly purchase food directly from local farms.



A crucial part of the F2S Taskforce's mission is ensuring that schools can access local food cost-effectively, without compromising quality—especially given the urgency of addressing nutrition in San Diego County schools. Over half a million students are enrolled in San Diego County public schools, and 40 percent of them are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. During the 2016-2017 school year, San Diego County school districts served a total of 58,908,882 meals. That's an average of 175,406 lunches and 68,335 breakfasts per day—many of them to students whose families lack consistent access to healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables.

Taskforce members represent over 74 percent of the San Diego County public school population. Marketing the value of local food to both school districts and the public is a major focus, as is sharing best practices for nutrition education and increasing participation in statewide programs like California Thursdays, emphasize serving food produced and grown in California. The F2S Taskforce, like the Farm to Institution Center's other local food-focused industry networks, also plays a major role in the Center's annual Good Food Showcase, a local food trade show that serves as the premier marketplace for connecting local growers and distributors with institutional buyers.

"The quality of the food we eat plays a huge role in how we function day-to-day," said Durairaj. "From school gardens to nutrition programs to the breakfasts and lunches many students depend on, we have a critical need for better food in schools. I'm proud of the work the F2S Taskforce has done to catalyze the growth of farm to school activity in school districts, and to really educate schools, students, and families alike about the value of fresh, local, healthy food. By elevating the value of local food, we also elevate farmers, who are a critical part of our regional economy. The Taskforce and the Center's other collaborative groups have created so many valuable relationships through their networks, and I look forward to seeing how these grow as a part of the Farm to Institution Center's work in San Diego County."

The Good Food Showcase, one of the Farm to Institution Center's most important events, connects institutional food buyers with local farmers and producers.

CHIP PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

SAN DIEGO COUNTY CHILDHOOD OBESITY INITIATIVE (COI)

PREVENTING CHILDHOOD OBESITY, PROMOTING HEALTHY LIVES

The San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative's collaborative approach has made a profound impact since its inception in 2006—and its first-ever State of Childhood Obesity in San Diego County report details what's working.



COI and its partners work to promote school and community gardens as a way for children to access fresh, healthy foods.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in six children and adolescents in the U.S. are now obese, and many more than that are considered overweight. Childhood obesity is a growing, nationwide issue with a variety of root causes, from a lack of safe outlets for physical activity in neighborhoods to “food desert” communities with nowhere to buy affordable, healthy food.

In San Diego County, however, the percentage of children who are affected by obesity has leveled off, and even declined among some populations. That's thanks in part to the efforts of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative (COI), a multi-sector coalition organized by CHIP, now in its twelfth year. COI's first-ever State of Childhood Obesity in San Diego County report highlights how COI's efforts have worked over the last decade to reduce childhood obesity rates in San Diego and its surrounding communities, and serves as a baseline against which to measure future progress.

“Childhood obesity is an extremely complex problem with no one cut-and-dry solution, and to that end no one entity can solve it,” said Dan Fesperman, COI's director. “Most of the time, it's hard to quantify COI's success by numbers, because at our core we're focused on bringing together all of the right partners, people, and agencies to work, on multiple fronts, toward promoting healthy lives for kids and preventing childhood obesity. COI, and all of the projects it oversees, is a coordinating force that makes things happen, from lobbying for more walkable communities to bringing community gardens into schools and other public spaces.”

“COI's goal is to create connections and strategies to reduce childhood obesity in San Diego County, so all children can live a healthy life. This latest State of Childhood Obesity report is a welcome reminder of just how much of an impact we have had.”

COI GOALS

COI organizes coalitions of, for, and by members of these important influencers with the following goals in mind:

Increase access to healthful foods and beverages in a culturally-appropriate manner.

Increase opportunities for safe physical activity in an inclusive and culturally-appropriate manner.

Create and improve social, economic, service, institutional, and built environments that support healthy eating and active living.

Promote operational excellence of the Initiative.

STEPS FORWARD

COI's success is particularly impressive considering the baseline rates of obesity in San Diego County, which are actually much higher than those nationwide. The California Department of Education's Physical Fitness Test research files show that over one-third (34.2 percent) of San Diego County fifth, seventh, and ninth grade children enrolled in public schools in the 2014-2015 school year were overweight or obese.

The issue is particularly prevalent among Hispanic students, who were overweight or obese at a rate nearly 2.5 times higher than white students (23.1 percent v. 10.8 percent), and among children from economically disadvantaged families, who were overweight or obese at a rate more than twice that of their non-disadvantaged counterparts (22.9 percent v. 10 percent). There are often stark differences in obesity rates by school district: for example, in the 2014-2015 school year, obesity prevalence was as low as roughly 15 percent in the Coronado Unified School District and as high as nearly 50 percent in the National Elementary School District.

The State of Childhood Obesity report measures progress in childhood obesity prevention measures in four of the seven domains that play significant roles in the health and development of children in San Diego County: school and after-school, government, healthcare, and early childhood (the other domains, for which there is no cohesive data set to allow for measures of progress, are business, community, and media).

So, how are all these moving parts working? Here are a few highlights that indicate progress at a local level, particularly in the realms of schools and after-school, government and healthcare:

- **School and After-School: Farm to School Programs.** As of the end of 2015, 33 out of San Diego's 42 school districts now conduct some kind of farm to school activity, meaning they operate a school garden, provide food-based education as part of their curriculum and procure local food for their school meals. COI works closely with CHIP's Farm to School initiative (detailed in

"Fresh, Healthy, Local: Rethinking School Food in San Diego County" on page 17) to bring farmers, vendors, and educators together to make healthy food more easily available in schools.

- **Government: Policies Promoting Physical Activity.** As of the end of 2015, according to data collected by the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, 16 of the 18 cities in San Diego County, as well as the County itself, have adopted or are developing concrete policies promoting physical activity. These are largely policies that promote safer, more pedestrian-friendly streets to encourage walking and biking, particularly in lower-income communities. COI oversees highly-localized efforts, including REACH Chula Vista (detailed in "Healthier Habits Taking Root" on page 31), and HEAL Zone Lemon Grove, to help residents of these areas advocate for these changes in how their community is laid out.
- **Healthcare: Exclusive Breastfeeding in Most San Diego Hospitals.** As of the end of 2015, 80 percent of infants born in San Diego County hospitals are exclusively breastfed, thanks to administrative policies that promote breastfeeding as the healthiest "first food" option for newborns, and encouraging new mothers to breastfeed after they are discharged. Multiple national health organizations, including the National Prevention Council, recommend that women breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months as able, for the best lifelong health outcomes.

CHIP is a partner of Live Well San Diego, and is proud to work closely with the County of San Diego through the COI to implement the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Action Plan. But the secret, says Fesperman, lies in the breadth of its efforts.

"We have more than 200 partners across the seven domains we focus on, and it's only by harnessing the power of all the individual people within all of these that we can achieve what we have so far. Our work is collaborative, community-based, and incremental—but it adds up to make real change in the lives of children and their families."



COI supports many community wellness events in San Diego County.

REAL PEOPLE, REAL IMPACT: CHIP VOLUNTEER STORY

LISA (ILA)

LIVING TOGETHER AND LIVING WELL

Lisa Tam manages a house that provides a safe, supportive residence for adults with mental illness and other disabling health conditions. CHIP's Independent Living Association gives her the resources she needs to overcome the associated challenges—and “watch the miracle of changed lives.”



Lisa Tam speaks at ILA's annual member recognition event.

It's not easy being an Independent Living operator, but for Lisa Tam, “there's nothing like it.”

“It's basically a second full-time job, but I get to be an active part of someone's recovery and healing,” said Tam, who also runs a family business. “Not even a medical professional or therapist gets to see what I see. Every day, I watch residents go from being feeling hopeless to becoming independent and pursuing recovery from mental illness or addiction, leading and loving other people along the way. I'm not sure any other human experience can top that!”

Independent Livings are privately owned houses, apartments, or complexes that provide housing for adults with mental illness and other disabling health conditions. Residents of Independent Livings don't need medication oversight, and are able to function without supervision, but they may need or want a living situation that provides a supportive environment.

“One of the main rules for an Independent Living is that it's a group of adults living together like a family,” said Tam. “I try to create an environment where everyone can live together, and live well together. I want to give my residents a sympathetic community, someplace they can learn their value and get referrals for resources, County-run and otherwise, that can help them on their journey to recovery.”

“In short, I try to create healthy families for people who may not have had them.”

Tam is a member of CHIP's Independent Living Association (ILA), which promotes high-quality independent livings in San Diego County by providing a unified set of standards that member homes must meet, and providing its member home operators with resources for running a successful residence. (For more about ILA, see “Standards of Livings” on page 9). She became an ILA member after a years-long journey to learn more about supporting a family member with acute mental illness, spurred first by personal experience and then by her deep Christian faith.

“I was away at college when my brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia,”

recalled Tam. “He has lived in my parents’ home his entire life, and to be honest, he was kept away from me—and the rest of the world, really—for 20 years, because he ‘brought shame’ on our family. They didn’t know how to help him. When my mom passed away, my dad was at a loss for what to do about my brother, because she had always run the house. Her death sent me searching for education on how to help a family member living with debilitating mental illness—and how to work with my own, because I live with an anxiety disorder. That’s how I found Grace Alliance, a Bible-based support group for people living with mental illness and their families, and NAMI [the National Alliance on Mental Illness]—and they’re how I learned what an Independent Living was, and found ILA.”

A speaker at a NAMI Family to Family advocacy meeting first introduced Tam to the idea of independent livings. “People like my brother and many others live daily with threatening voices, and a health system that is difficult for even the most resourceful to navigate. They don’t have very many options for finding shelter and food, never mind finding a purposeful life. When I first learned what an independent living was, and how it can do that for someone in recovery from mental illness or addiction, I thought ‘Wow, that is such a nice idea, I hope someone can do that.’”

Tam soon became that “someone.” About six weeks after the NAMI meeting, she was inspired by a Bible study session on “Daring Faith,” which challenged her to “initiate” on something “that seemed so big only God could do it.” She emailed the speaker from that NAMI meeting, who pointed her toward ILA. In June 2015, Tam became an ILA member, and started attending trainings. In October 2015, she purchased a house in north San

Diego County, and began remodeling it to accommodate multiple adults. She opened the doors of her 6-bedroom, 4-bathroom Independent Living in February 2016—and had a full house by March. She hired a house manager who had been trained to work with people who had mental illnesses, planned a healthy menu that would provide residents with two meals a day, and began “a long learning process.”

For her residents, Tam pays the bills, makes sure they have two balanced meals a day, and provides them with a disability bus pass. She also incentivizes her residents to actively learn life and coping skills. “I’ll do little things. For example, if three or more of my residents attend a meeting at the mental health clubhouse or another community-sponsored support group, I will pay for lunch and their public transportation fare there.”

At her Independent Living, Tam checks in with each resident one-on-one at least once a week, and holds weekly house meetings, which are preceded by a “family dinner” where everyone talks about how their week is going. “To be honest, that’s where most the healing really occurs,” stated Tam. “Everyone is treated like the regular human beings they are.”

Tam recounted the story of one resident who was worried about calling his father on Father’s Day. “He was stressing. He said that his dad had kind of disowned him, that he was ashamed of him, and he was afraid of making that call. I talked to him about getting his support system in place, and reminded him of all of his progress, and all that I was proud of him for. He looked at me and said ‘I know, Lisa. That’s why I get up every morning.’”

Nearly three years into being an independent living

operator, Tam is also still confronting challenges. “I have had confrontations with neighbors who are not happy about our residents being next door, and encountered many, many other issues” said Tam. “But I have also witnessed the miracle of changed lives.”

“I believe I have been called by God to do this, but I also think the hardest part of being an independent living operator is the ‘not-knowing,” said Tam. “I like to think I’ve been a pretty smart, resourceful person my entire life, but this has presented some situations I just don’t know how to handle—and I’m not sure where I’d be without ILA. They’re the ones that came up with my house rules, and have helped me find the right resources if someone’s ever having an acute episode.”

Added Tam: “I cannot imagine doing this without ILA. Each of the challenges I face, I get to ask for recommendations. They are committed to my success, and will support me in any way their expertise directs them. If they don’t have the answers in-house, they connect me to resources that do—and all at no cost.”

Tam receives her referrals largely through word-of-mouth, and the ILA directory. “To anyone who has a loved one facing an acute mental illness or other disability, I want them to know that independent livings are a reliable option,” said Tam. “For most residents, they’re a transitional living situation. For others, it’s their forever home. For all, it’s a starting point toward their recovery.”

“Above all, I want my residents to feel safe,” emphasized Tam. “When people feel safe, they blossom. I get to be part of restoring their life, and to me that is a true privilege.”



Lisa Tam with ILA Director Melanie Briones at ILA's annual member recognition event after receiving the 2017 Operator of the Year award.

REAL PEOPLE, REAL IMPACT: CHIP VOLUNTEER STORY

GEORGE AND NATHAN

(SPC)

SAVING LIVES, BUILDING AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP THROUGH SPC

San Diego County Suicide Prevention Council (SPC) volunteers George Zolla and Nathan Burrow have taught more than 1,000 San Diegans how they can intervene if someone they know is considering suicide. Here's how they became a team, and why they believe in SPC's mission.



George Zolla and Nathan Burrow pose with CHIP Program Coordinator Lora Cayan after George was named SPC's QPR Trainer of the Year in 2016.

George Zolla and Nathan Burrow readily admit that they're an unlikely pair of friends.

"He's Army, I'm Navy," joked Zolla. "Totally different worlds!" Burrow countered: "I'm a little pup, he's an old man!"

They are an odd couple of sorts, at least on paper. Zolla is in his sixties, a retired Naval Aviator with a long career in IT and engineering. Burrow is his thirties, an Army veteran who served in Iraq, currently balancing his undergraduate studies with raising a young family.

But their bond is evident to even the casual observer—they often meet for lunch, socialize with each other's families, and of course, there's plenty of good-natured teasing between the two of them. Together, they've also led dozens of trainings through the San Diego County Suicide Prevention Council (SPC), a program run by CHIP and funded by the County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency-Behavioral Health Services Division. Zolla and Burrow specialize in teaching people how to recognize if someone they know is suicidal, ask them if they are considering suicide (and open a conversation about what's going on in their life), and then refer them to resources for help, an SPC training known as Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR). Both believe that the skills taught in QPR trainings can help prevent future suicides by destigmatizing mental health issues.

Both also feel a personal connection to SPC's mission of zero suicides in San Diego County, and use their experiences in a tandem approach when leading QPR trainings.

Zolla teaches QPR from the perspective of someone who has lost a loved one to suicide, and wishes he had known how to intervene before it was too late. After his best friend Wally took his own life, Zolla went to a QPR training to "get some help." He quickly became a QPR trainer himself, and resolved to ensure that nobody else would have to go through what he and Wally's family did. "Looking back, if I had just taken that one class, I would have known the steps that could have saved Wally's life," said Zolla. "If I'd had QPR training, it would have alerted me to how serious his situation was. I would have asked him specifically and directly what was up, and known how and where to refer

HERE’S HOW THEIR
STORY BEGAN,
AND HOW THEY
BECAME A TEAM.

him. There are things you can do to save someone, and I wasn't able to do that because I didn't know what to do.”

Burrow, on the other hand, teaches QPR from the perspective of someone who has been suicidal himself. After an honorable discharge from the Army, where he had broken his back, he struggled with depression and PTSD. Losing friends in battle had left him with intense survivor’s guilt. Rehabilitating from his injury proved long and difficult, and he had a hard time translating his military skills and certifications to a civilian job. Eventually, Burrow made a plan to take his own life—but he credits his wife Ziba, who recognized that he was suicidal, with saving his life. She reached out “to anyone and everyone,” for help, and quickly got it from one of Burrow’s friends, a fellow veteran. The friend reached out to Burrow and directly asked him if he was suicidal, thereby opening a conversation about how he could get help. QPR training, he said, helps more people do for others what his wife and friend did for him years ago. “No matter where we go, or who we’re talking to in a QPR training session, our focus is the same: how do we help someone who is hurt and hopeless, no matter how old they are and where they come from?”

WHERE THEY MET

After breaking his back in the Army, Burrow sought help through Wave Academy, a San Diego-based agency dedicated to helping veterans with PTSD and physical injuries through water massage therapy. Burrow’s water therapist Kit used the therapy pool in Zolla’s backyard (Zolla’s wife Cheryl, also a water therapist with Wave Academy, has worked with numerous veterans and caregivers, and was then working with Burrow’s wife). Zolla often talked to clients who came to their home for sessions, and made a point of sharing his military experience to make them feel at ease.

When Burrow began coming to Zolla’s house for his water therapy sessions, Zolla had been searching for someone who could be comfortable speaking at QPR trainings from the perspective of having survived a suicide attempt. “I thought, well maybe I can find someone who’s going through Wave Academy,” said Zolla. He struck up a conversation with Burrow during a session one day, and immediately saw something special in the younger man. “I didn’t even know

his entire background, but I asked him anyway if he would consider coming with me to a training as a guest speaker, simply to share his story.”

FROM GUEST SPEAKER TO CO-TRAINER

Burrow accepted Zolla’s offer and went to his first QPR training as a guest speaker soon after. “I missed the teaching aspect of being in the military, and after I hurt my back I couldn’t do much of that anymore,” said Burrow. “What George was offering wasn’t an 8-5 kind of thing, and it was something I could do in conjunction with the therapies and rehab I was doing at the time.”

Burrow’s perspective soon became a valuable part of Zolla’s QPR training sessions. The two would ask each attendee why they were there, and begin by sharing their own stories. “Unbelievably, Nathan was better than I was,” said Zolla, smiling. “He’s such a genuine person. He really struck a chord with a lot of our attendees, and got some great conversations started.”

After a year of accompanying Zolla as a guest speaker, CHIP offered Burrow a \$500 scholarship to complete his trainer education, and Burrow became a QPR trainer himself.

“I did it because George paid for lunch afterward every time we did a training,” joked Burrow.

Those lunches, though, continue to this day, and help them strengthen the bond they have. During lunch, Zolla and Burrow debrief on the day’s training, and discuss how they could improve sessions in the future. It’s also a source of healing for the two, who are both reminded of old grief during each QPR training. “Just sharing your story is huge, but it’s never easy,” said Burrow of recounting his experience to training participants. His suicide attempt has become easier to talk about, and sharing his story during QPR sessions has helped him process that period of his life, but it also brings back old pain. “It’s hard every time, and I honestly still get hot, sweaty and shaky every time I start talking about the depth of these things. George and I both have a real-life situation that burdens us daily, but we do this for other people, to help re-establish hope.”

Burrow is currently using his QPR trainer experience as part of his undergraduate studies, too—for his senior thesis project, he’s working on a children’s book geared towards kids aged 5-9 that helps them understand how to tell if a friend is suicidal, and how to get them help. “I pulled a lot of the warning signs to look for straight from QPR, and put a lot of the information about where to find help right in the back of the book,” said Burrow. “Talking to kids about mental health is not going to scare them, it’s only going to help. You’ve got to talk to them about these things regularly—they’re the future, so them having that knowledge early is the only way things can get better. Plus, it’s not just for the kid to read, but the adult reading it with the kid as well.”

WHY THEY BELIEVE IN SPC

According to the San Diego County Suicide Prevention Council’s Report to the Community 2017, the suicide rate in San Diego County is the lowest it’s been in five years. Both Zolla and Burrow believe that it’s thanks to more county-level resources invested in suicide prevention and mental health, such as the San Diego County Access & Crisis Line (888-724-7240)—and because more people know how to talk to their friends and loved ones about mental health issues.

SPC has played a critical role in this, asserts Zolla, and has even become a first-stop resource for many in San Diego County. “We’ve been the first stop for people who had family members in a 72-hour evaluation, and we connected them to the right mental health resources from there. Burrow concurred: “I also have to commend San Diego County for giving SPC enough funding that we can offer these QPR trainings for free, for anyone who wants to sign up.”

Together, Zolla and Burrow have taught QPR sessions to a wide variety of groups, including crisis hotline operators, college and university students, social workers, nurses, VA workers and active-duty members of the military. In 2016, Burrow shared his story at the SPC’s Suicide Prevention Month press conference, which aimed to heighten support for populations at higher risk of suicide, including veterans, Native Americans, and the LGBTQ community. Both have also expanded upon their existing QPR knowledge by completing

the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) provided by SPC, which teaches participants how to quickly intervene when someone is an immediate risk for suicide (the ASIST format is often used by medical professionals, though anyone over the age of 16 can complete the training, regardless of background). The two even created a phone template for people to use when someone calls them and says they are considering suicide, for use by anyone from a VA worker to a friend.

Above all, though, both emphasize that QPR is available to any interested participant, no matter who they are or their level of education. Said Zolla: “The best person to help you, when you’re in a place where you’re considering suicide, is your best friend, and that’s who I’d like to train. QPR lets us do that in a simple, effective way. It all starts with asking one simple question: ‘Are you thinking about suicide?’”

Of QPR, Zolla concluded, “It’s kind of like CPR—why wouldn’t you want to learn it and possibly save someone’s life?”

Nathan Burrow speaks to media about his experience at a press conference event organized by SPC.



REAL PEOPLE, REAL IMPACT: CHIP VOLUNTEER STORY

DAWN

(TASKFORCE)

FROM THE GARDEN TO THE CAFÉ

With the help of the Farm to Institution Center's Farm to School (F2S) Taskforce, Nutrition Specialist Dawn Stone has made it her mission to help Escondido Union School District students learn where their food comes from—and spread healthy habits to their families and communities.



Dawn Stone holds a healthy lunch sample at the Farm to Institution Center's Good Food Showcase.

When an elementary school teacher she worked with said that none of the students in her class had ever seen a stalk of celery, Dawn Stone knew she needed to double down on her efforts to make fresh produce from local farms a bigger part of San Diego County students' school day.

"She was doing this nutrition lesson, where students were shown a whole fruit or vegetable, given a few letters as a clue, and asked to fill in the blanks and write down the name of it," recalls Stone. "When she showed them a stalk of celery, with 'c_l_ry' as their clue, they all drew a complete blank. They'd maybe seen it cut up, but none of them had ever seen an entire stalk of celery. We'd already made some huge strides by getting a salad bar stocked with local produce into the school café—but this showed how crucial it was that we use those relationships to help students learn about what they're eating, and how it affects their whole lives."

Thankfully, Stone had plenty of resources to do so, due to her long relationship with the Farm to School (F2S) Taskforce, a highly successful branch of CHIP's Farm to Institution Center. As the Nutrition Specialist for Escondido Union School District, Stone is tasked with planning menus for school breakfasts and lunches throughout the year, and procuring the ingredients used. Most (82 percent) of the students in her district qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, so Stone is keenly aware of the need for high-quality, nutritious menus. However, Stone says, bringing good, local food into schools, and talking about where it comes from, is key to better health for the entire community—not just her students.

"By bringing Farm to School activities into our district, whether we're procuring our produce from local farmers or developing school gardens and strengthening nutrition education, we're supporting the community in a multitude of ways," said Stone. "First off, we're teaching our students about healthy food, and those students take their knowledge home to their families, who start changing their cooking and eating habits, which improves the health of the entire community. Secondly, by buying local food for our school meals, we're economically supporting local farmers—and many of our students' parents work in that agriculture sector, so we're directly supporting their families in a way, too. The F2S Taskforce has helped us seriously grow our efforts in this direction."

Stone's involvement with the F2S Taskforce began in 2012, when she was a kitchen manager at Lincoln Elementary School in Escondido. Already passionate about incorporating fresh, local produce into school meals, Stone was at that time leading the charge to start Lincoln Elementary's first-ever school garden, which would become the first health department-approved school garden in the district. Escondido Union's area supervisor at the time noticed Stone's efforts, and asked if she would accompany her to a meeting of the F2S Taskforce. The rest, Stone says, is history.

"I was already in pretty deep before I started going to Taskforce meetings," laughed Stone. "My husband and son helped me build the fence and plant beds for the Lincoln Elementary garden, and I'd bought a compost bin with my own funds. I stepped up my level of involvement with the Taskforce, though, because I saw that they provided real, logistical support to people who wanted to make a difference in kids' lives through food. The Taskforce enabled us put Escondido Union on the map, foodwise—thanks to their help, our elementary schools have the best salad bars in the county, and every day our students learn about where their fresh food comes from."

For the past five years, Stone has helped organize the Good Food Showcase, a premier Farm to Institution marketplace that connects institutional food buyers and distributors with local farmers, and she recently assumed a board position on the F2S Taskforce. A few years back, Stone was promoted to her current role as nutrition specialist at the district level, and ever since, she's used her Taskforce role to forge the connections that have made a real difference in students' day-to-day lives. "They've helped us do three very important

things: improve nutrition education, bring more local food into school meals and make school gardens a part of our students' education." Stone was recently selected as 2018's classified employee of the year for all of San Diego County, a prestigious award that has inspired her to continue the momentum generated by her Taskforce involvement.

When asked what changes the Taskforce has helped bring about in Escondido Union, Stone immediately lists a multitude of examples. "All the lettuce and basil we feed our students is from Sundial farms, a local hydroponic farm—and they might help one of the Lincoln Elementary teachers set up a hydroponic farm in her classroom, to teach students about how plants grow. We've set up an "A-Z" salad bar program, which features a different whole fruit or vegetable each week—like, 'S is for squash,' for example—so we'll never have that 'celery' issue again. And of course, gardens are a huge presence in all of our schools now—we've got nine of them in our district, with more on the way. The students love working in them during the day, and you can tell they're learning so much just by being outside in nature."

The F2S Taskforce also plays a major role in helping Escondido Union schools educate parents and the community about healthy food and sustainability. "They help us implement the California statewide Harvest of the Month lessons in classrooms, so kids can learn all about what's in season. They supply our teachers with good K-6 resources for nutrition education, including maps for school cafés and lunchrooms showing where in California the produce they're eating is from. The Taskforce is also a great place for us to gather tips and best practices for improving our 'parent university' meetings where we teach the parents about what

we're teaching their kids, especially when it comes to addressing cultural sensitivities. Food is such a central, personal part of our lives, so it can often be difficult to change those habits—but once you do that, it has a major ripple effect across the community."

Stone says that now, parents are overwhelmingly curious about what their kids are learning. Many parents who are home during the day often volunteer for shifts as garden assistants at their child's school. Stone recalled one parent who, after their child came home from a farmer's market event with a bag of vegetables harvested from the school garden, marveled at the variety of produce in it, which came with recipe tips for healthy meals. "They'd

never eaten a turnip before, so it was kind of a learning experience for the entire family, figuring out how to cook it and work it into a dish that everyone would enjoy," said Stone.

When asked why she believes in the Taskforce's mission, Stone cited her greatest motivation: seeing students get excited about healthy, local food, and taking their new knowledge home to their families. "When kids go up to the salad bar in the café at their school and see veggies that they planted, weeded, and harvested from the school garden, it's amazing. They take so much pride in it. Because of that, they do make different food choices. Those habits are going to stick with them for life."

Dawn Stone and her colleagues have led the charge to get fresh, healthy, local food into the Escondido Union School District.



REAL PEOPLE, REAL IMPACT: CHIP VOLUNTEER STORY

MARIA

(REACH CHULA VISTA)

HEALTHIER HABITS TAKING ROOT

Chula Vista High School teacher Maria Galleher wanted to transform two empty lots “full of weeds and trash” into a school farm. REACH Chula Vista, a project overseen by CHIP’s Childhood Obesity Initiative, helped her get started—here’s how she’s grown her efforts since then.



Maria Galleher smiles in front of the Chula Vista High School farm and garden.

As the 2015-2016 school year began at Chula Vista High School, social sciences teacher Maria Galleher had more on her mind than lesson plans for the upcoming semester.

“There were these two empty lots on campus full of weeds and trash,” said Galleher, then a brand-new teacher recently hired from Granger Junior High School in National City. “It’s a social justice issue. You’d never see space like that at an upper-income school, and I saw so much potential in those lots. Chula Vista High also serves a lot of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, and many of them don’t know where their food comes from. In lieu of that kind of education, they’ve had lots of cheap processed foods and sodas aggressively marketed to them, to the point where it’s hard to make truly healthy choices. I wanted to turn those lots into something beautiful and healthy, that would give students a hands-on learning experience, and I knew a school farm was the solution.”

She began by organizing campus cleanups on Saturdays with student volunteers, using borrowed and donated tools to clear debris away from the lot areas, and begin the foundation of what would become the Chula Vista High School’s student farm and fruit tree orchard. The project didn’t truly take off, however, until she reached out to the Master Gardener’s Association, and began working with local master gardener Stan Miller—who also happened to be Senior Director of the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) Chula Vista project overseen by CHIP’s Childhood Obesity Initiative (COI) (detailed on page 21).

“Stan started coming in on Saturdays, bringing seeds, buying us a hose, little things that got us started,” said Galleher. “The work we started together was very simple, just planting some tomatoes along a chain-link fence near a walkway.” Those tomato plants quickly grew and covered the entire area—and Galleher noticed students starting to pick the tomatoes that were growing and eating them as they walked between classes. “That was a quick win-win,” laughed Galleher. Galleher and Miller quickly began working together to harness resources from REACH Chula Vista to help Galleher realize her vision of a school farm and fruit tree orchard.

That's when Galleher saw "an enormous amount of change in just four months' time." Through REACH Chula Vista, a local branch of a federal program dedicated to promoting healthier lifestyles in underserved communities, Galleher secured a \$20,000 grant to bring in assistance from the Wild Willow Farm Educational Center. Wild Willow Farm provided equipment and resources to help physically build the farm space, and sent instructors into classrooms 2-3 times a week to help teach students about sustainability and growing their own food. At the same time, Galleher brought in Common Vision, a nonprofit she had previously worked with at Granger, to help plant a fruit tree orchard. Galleher, in turn, asked the principal and faculty advisory committee of Chula Vista High School for permission to open up a food and nutrition course that would require students to work on the school farm and orchard during the day.

Based on Galleher's previous experience and observations, she knew that the farm and orchard had to be integrated into the curriculum, and part of the school day in order for these health initiatives to thrive. "I wanted this to be more than just a passive little school garden. It couldn't be tied to just one passionate teacher and an after-school club with 5-10 kids in it. I wanted to impact as many students as possible, and incorporating hands-on work as part of their class requirement was the way to do it."

She was approved to teach two sections of a school farm-oriented nutrition course starting in the 2016-2017 school year. Galleher also recruited students to sign up for the course at an electives fair "by telling them that they would be outside getting dirty." Students signed up in droves, and those first two classes "were packed—with a waitlist." The title of the class: "Food Justice/Social

Justice." Demand is so high that this upcoming school year, Maria will be teaching three sections of the same course.

Said Galleher: "In this class, students learn how our health is often tied to our zip code, how food and food marketing often looks in lower-income communities—and how we can reclaim our health. I'm aiming to reverse all the marketing that's directed at these kids, the kind that tells them that a muffin and apple juice is healthy, when in reality it's packed with simple carbohydrates and corn syrup. After learning about all of this in the classroom, we then go outside and work on planting, weeding, harvesting, even composting food waste from the cafeteria. The kids really love all of it, even the composting. All that knowledge and experience gives them a feeling of ownership over their food and their health."

The farm and orchard are thriving, thanks to continued support from Miller and REACH Chula Vista—and Galleher is already seeing the impact of its integration into the school day on her students. "I've overheard students talking about how they're surrounded by 'fake' food on a daily basis, and how they can cut down on the amount of plastic they use to help improve the environment. They're seeing the connection between health and sustainability, their bodies, and the environment."

A few students have even found their lives directly changed by Galleher's class, and by working on the farm and orchard. One of her former students, after developing an interest in urban farming, was accepted into the prestigious Soil Science program at California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo. Another student,

who was obese and diagnosed with prediabetes and fatty liver disease, even regained his health and significantly changed his entire family's eating habits after enrolling in Galleher's class. Galleher recounted: "I got an email from his mom saying, 'Every time I picked him up from school, all he wanted to talk about was farm class.' She said that he started talking to her about how they had to eat more healthily at home, and they made some changes based on what he was learning at school. After several months of this, she took him back to the doctor for a check-up, and he no longer had fatty liver or prediabetes. She was so grateful that there was a class like that, that could engage him so much in a positive way, and also impact the health of the entire family."

When asked why she loves running the school farm and orchard so much, Galleher's response is simple: "There's something so therapeutic about being out in the fresh air and interacting with nature. No matter how far their defenses are up during the day, these kids regain a sense of joy and wonder when they're out here—they'll get so excited and call each other over whenever they find a ladybug or some other little creature among the plants. They're not worried about the daily stresses of life, what happened the hour before, or what's happening at home—they're learning and they're learning in the moment."

Galleher, who has been teaching for 30 years, was recently nominated as one of the Teachers of the Year for the Sweetwater Union High School District. If she wins, she could be nominated for the same recognition statewide. Galleher believes her work in the school farm and orchard, aided by REACH Chula Vista, helped her secure the nomination.

"This program is so unique, and it's beautiful to observe how much interest it's creating among students, teachers, and parents alike," said Galleher. "It's a wonderful way to build community at our school, and contribute to a more positive culture. Students will harvest veggies and bring them to their teachers as gifts, which creates a stronger bond between them. Students also take what they're learning home to their parents, who become curious about how they can change their eating habits. This is how we change the way people view their food, and how they relate to our planet."

Concluded Galleher: "This was a community effort, and I could not have done it without the support of my school, and especially not without the support of REACH Chula Vista."

GALLEHER ENCOURAGES EVERYONE TO CHECK OUT WHAT STUDENTS ARE DOING IN THE CHULA VISTA HIGH SCHOOL FARM AND FRUIT TREE ORCHARD.



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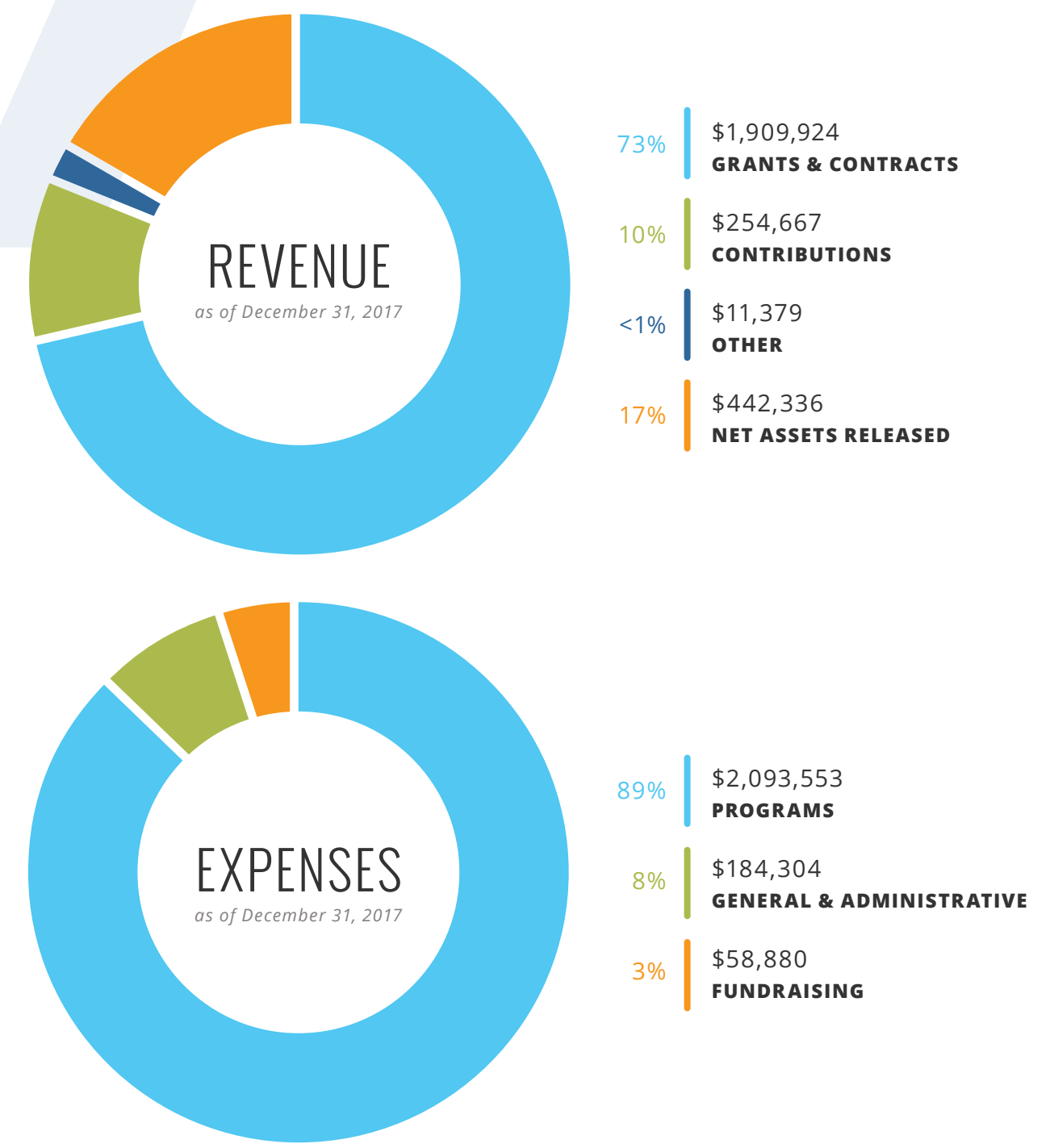
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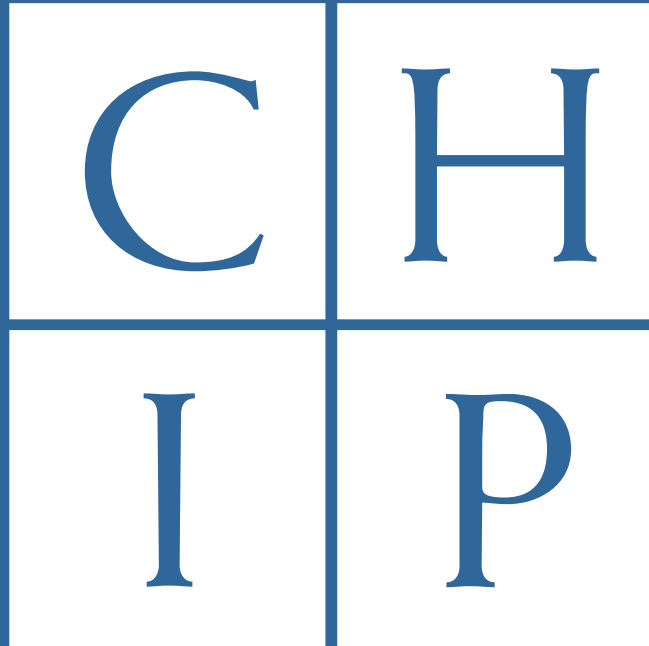
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