

3rd Annual Town Hall Meeting Translating Breast Cancer and Environmental Research into Action

Community-Based Research for Environmental Justice

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Carla M. Perez, Northern California Program Director for Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), began her presentation by providing an overview of their community-based research and how it has benefited the CBE members and communities.

CBE's collaborative study was involved in taking indoor air and dust samples in three communities. The first was Cape Cod, Massachusetts, a primarily white, affluent community with no point sources of pollution but with a history of spraying with DDT for pest control.

Indoor and outdoor air samples were taken in the other two communities, Richmond and Bolinas, California. There are a large number of polluting industrial sites in the Richmond area, whose population is 80% people of color with 15% of them being at or below the poverty line. Bolinas is a primarily white, affluent coastal town with no point sources of pollution.

What these three communities have in common, however, is a high rate of breast cancer. While the study was not a health outcome study, it did have many benefits for CBE and the community members who were involved.

Perez explained that the study was an important outreach and organizing tool for CBE that offered empowering education to community members. It started people thinking about the toxic exposures in their homes and workplaces, about the consumer products they use, and the choices available to them. By bringing data collection into the homes of research participants, they were able to learn more about science. During the report-back process, participants also learned how to read charts and graphs, which helped them to better understand scientific results in general.

An important outcome to community participation, Perez affirmed, is that it develops strong advocates. They are making personal connections between the chemicals known to be collected in their homes, their illnesses and their symptoms. Rather than depending on an organization to speak for them, community members are taking their concerns to the podium at city council meetings and planning commissions and speaking for themselves. They are supporting policies that can help their communities.

In conclusion, Perez explained the concept of cumulative impact policy, which seeks to include more than just individual toxic loads when determining what regulations should

be adopted. In addition to multiple sources of many chemicals to which people are exposed, in order to achieve environmental justice, other life stressors must also be considered as well. Rather than setting caps on individual, potentially harmful chemicals, Perez emphasized that there needs to be a pollution cap for all toxins to which a community is exposed.