



INSIDE MCF

Building Democracy: People and Purpose in San Diego County

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So what is movement building? Learn how Marguerite Casey Foundation grantees are working with families to promote an aspect of this democratic idea. Read how engagement, the idea of a network and philanthropy are contributing to communities.

SAN DIEGO – On a March evening at a community center here, Francisco “Panchito” Martinez stood at a public forum, a bedrock exercise of democracy, and before three District 8 City Council candidates.

With microphone in hand and more than 100 people in the audience, several of whom wore headphones to listen in Spanish, Somali and Vietnamese, the college student asked the candidates about cultivating and supporting youth leaders in the eighth most-populous U.S. city.

Martinez’s participation was a form of engagement in more ways than one. The youth questioned those seeking the privilege of representing people in government while also addressing the need for multigenerational civic involvement.

“We’re creating opportunities and vehicles to bring people in,” says Delores Jacobs of The San Diego LGBT Community Center.”

For Martinez, who often goes by Panchito, and other residents who questioned the candidates in English and Spanish, the forum marked a continuum of a broader community-leadership initiative in San Diego County – one driven by residents and grassroots organizations seeking greater voice and more accurate representation in government and community affairs.

Like other parts of the U.S., San Diego County’s population has transformed dramatically over the last several decades. Today, people of color are the majority among the county’s 3.3 million residents. Together, Latinos and Asian Pacific Islanders make up 4 out of every 10 residents.

In Barrio Logan, the San Diego neighborhood that Panchito and about 5,000 other people call home, there are industrial businesses as well as residences.

In this primarily Latino neighborhood, which is southeast of the city’s popular Gaslamp Quarter and within view of the Port of San Diego and U.S. Navy facilities, concerns over health are one reason why residents say local government should mirror the makeup of this diverse region.

Positive Disruption: Pursuing Equity

Low-income families, people of color, members of the LGBT community and various supporters are banding together with a network of nonprofit organizations. They're standing up in the fray to broaden the culture of leadership – as well as its definition – and boost civic engagement.

They're changing a system they say has overlooked their voices in community and policy decisions. They're saying political power, government representation and decisions about spending public dollars are a shared endeavor – that the promise of U.S. democracy includes everyone.

The goal is to make civic participation more accessible, and to recognize leadership across income, racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation lines. They're doing that with support from Marguerite Casey Foundation and other philanthropic investments that started years ago.

Each community organization brings a considerable focus and presence of involved families to this enterprise in San Diego County, home to "America's Finest City."

There's [Environmental Health Coalition](#); [The San Diego LGBT Community Center](#); [American Friends Service Committee's U.S.-Mexico border program](#) operated out of its San Diego-area office; Engage San Diego, which works on nonpartisan voter engagement; and [the Center on Policy Initiatives](#), a research and action institute that supports worker prosperity.

The Idea of a Network

Each organization is a grantee of Marguerite Casey Foundation, which is nurturing a national family-led movement for a just and equitable society through unrestricted grants and trust in families.

Under this framework of equity, movement building and engagement, these organizations and families are maximizing community leadership efforts through [the San Diego Equal Voice Network](#), which formalized in 2016.

Marguerite Casey Foundation supports this network and about a dozen others nationwide.

Grantee members lead the networks, convene meetings, determine topics on which to focus and share information. There is greater amplification of people's voices, concerns and solutions, participants say, through the collective.

In 2012, these organizations illuminated a startling fact: Of San Diego County's then 3 million residents, people of color accounted for 52 percent of the population. But they made up only 23 percent of those serving in government.

Questions quickly surfaced: Is everyone's voice being heard? Are families included in decision making? Who's missing? Who needs to be included? How do we ensure that equity drives the solution?

In other words: What can we do together to create positive change that we can't do separately?

They started working with other nonprofit organizations that are now members of the San Diego Equal Voice Network, as well as with grassroots allies.

They launched an effort to change a system that, [as U.S. Census Bureau data showed](#), lacked equitable outcomes for residents of color. They widened their scope to include low-income families, members of the LGBT community and any interested resident or worker in the area.

Among their goals:

- Increase civic participation and nurture new community leaders, including young people.
- Share leadership development resources and best practices with anyone interested.
- Collectively track the participation of community members in various training leadership development programs.
- Highlight what works and inform families of leadership opportunities, no matter which organization sponsored it.

Their intentionality and intersectionality dovetailed with what families were voicing, as well as with demographic shifts and investments from philanthropic organizations.

Alan Kaplan, the new director of Engage San Diego, described a goal that remains front and center for many families and the San Diego Equal Voice Network: “A San Diego where the electorate and leadership are reflective of people who live and work here.”

“We’re creating opportunities and vehicles to bring voices in,” said Delores Jacobs, a longtime community leader who is stepping down as CEO of The San Diego LGBT Community Center.

Among those voices: Panchito and his mother, Maria. The family team, concerned about the quality of life in their neighborhood, has worked with Environmental Health Coalition for years.

Redefining Leadership and Participation

So how is this idea for change being implemented?

One of the first steps was acknowledging and legitimizing how families and individuals already were serving as community leaders. And that involved rethinking the traditional definition of leadership.

That meant recognizing:

- A mother who joined the PTA at her child’s school to address educational inequities and advocate for students who are struggling.
- Bilingual youth who accompanied their parents to canvass neighborhoods, serve as interpreters and discuss – in Spanish or Vietnamese – voting, pollution and asthma rates, which is a major concern, especially in children in Barrio Logan.
- A parent who has two minimum-wage jobs but took time to volunteer at a nonpartisan phone bank to remind neighbors to vote.

They also acknowledged that “leader” might be shunned by immigrant residents whose government officials in their former countries are corrupt or violent.

The new definition of multilevel leadership went beyond the titles of board chair, president and chief executive officer to include parent, youth, auntie, cousin, sister and neighbor.

“People enter through different doors,” said Diane Takvorian, executive director and a founder of Environmental Health Coalition.

Nurturing New Leaders and Regional Cooperation

The organizations had existing leadership programs, but network members found that a collective focus and a willingness to discuss and resolve different ideas invigorated the endeavor.

The Center on Policy Initiatives was already operating three leadership programs: one for new and elected officials, another named the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute and an initiative for college students. At the center of all three: social and economic equity, awareness, diversity and racial justice.

Center on Policy Initiatives staff also sought community leadership information from and exchanged insights with [Urban Habitat](#), a nonprofit organization in Oakland and member of [the Bay Area Equal Voice Coalition](#) which includes groups in San Francisco and San Jose.

In 2009, Urban Habitat pioneered its own Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute, which is being replicated nationwide. Staff members from these two organizations – in different parts of California – held phone conversations and meetings to deepen working relationships and share information.

Community Leaders in Elected Office

While boosting cooperation and broadening the definition of leader were part of this endeavor, advocates and families always kept the formal power of elected and appointed office in mind.

Residents and nonprofit leaders point to the path of Georgette Gómez, a community advocate who did grassroots work with The San Diego LGBT Community Center and Environmental Health Coalition.

She ran for two elected offices and now serves as a councilmember on the San Diego City Council and as chair of the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System.

Grassroots leaders say she makes it a point to hire staff of color, who understand the need for equity in public policy. They add that as a woman of color, her election wins inspire many county residents, especially those who don't see themselves represented in government or community affairs.

One policy innovation that Gómez supports, they say and her office confirms, and that has ties to her grassroots community work is a public benefits agreement, which is surfacing in other U.S. cities such as Los Angeles.

Based on an organized labor concept, it ensures qualified residents are hired for jobs, such as in construction, when public dollars or tax incentives are used for infrastructure projects.

That way, residents can have equitable access to taxpayer-supported jobs.

Network members also are looking to the future by examining the composition and accessibility of these government bodies:

- Escondido Union School District Board of Education
- San Diego County Board of Supervisors
- City of San Diego Planning Commission
- Metropolitan Transit System Board of Directors
- Port of San Diego Board of Port Commissioners

Community leaders say they'll issue a report later in 2018, an update from their earlier survey.

A Youth Steps Up

For Panchito, who attends San Diego State University, participation and leadership run in the family.

Panchito's mother, Maria, has served on the Environmental Health Coalition board of directors. The two still work closely with the group, which has an equity and justice focus. It also helped organize the District 8 City Council candidate forum to boost local democracy.

Panchito also works with the Barrio Logan College Institute, which says the average yearly household income for a family of four people in the neighborhood is \$25,000.

In 2017, Panchito received a [Sargent Shriver Youth Warriors Against Poverty Leadership Award](#) from Marguerite Casey Foundation, which recognizes collaborative accomplishments by young people.

As part of the honor, Panchito traveled to Seattle to talk about grassroots-driven change in Barrio Logan with other "Shriver Warriors," young leaders from throughout the country. They discussed injustice, advocacy and progress.

In March, after that San Diego City Council candidate forum, Panchito mentioned an immediate goal: Becoming a member of the Barrio Logan Planning Group to ensure that voices of families from the neighborhood are at the local decision-making table.

Smaller governing bodies, community leaders say, can go unnoticed, though their members make important policy decisions or recommendations that affect low-income families and people of color in neighborhoods.

On April 19, Environmental Health Coalition sent a [tweet announcing the news](#): The 20-year-old will join the Planning Group – and one focus for the college student will be access to healthy foods.

As a member of the Planning Group, which includes representatives from the Port of San Diego and U.S. Navy, Panchito will study the issues.

The youth leader also will ask questions, listen carefully and, then, cast votes.

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