

# IN THE SHADOW OF POLLUTION

*Southern California Women on the Front Lines*



*the* WOMEN'S  
FOUNDATION  
*of* CALIFORNIA



The Southern California region includes seven counties from Ventura to Imperial. This report focuses primarily on Los Angeles, San Diego and San Bernardino–Riverside.

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Since 1979, the Women's Foundation of California has been a funder and agent of change for women and girls in California. Addressing the impact of environmental contamination on women's health is one focus of our work. We support organizations that work to improve environmental conditions affecting women and their families where they live, work and play. In addition to grantmaking, the Foundation hosts strategic gatherings to build new alliances among people and community groups across all sectors of society including community leaders, nonprofit organizations, legislators, policy advocates and business leaders.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are 35,484,453 people living in California. Eighty-five percent, or more than 28 million, of these people live in Southern California.<sup>1</sup> With this density comes great necessity: jobs, food, shelter, transportation, healthcare. But the needs of the masses come packaged with mass problems.

The streets and highways of Los Angeles are teeming with trucks, trains and buses moving people and products. Warehouses and enormous intermodal transfer stations in San Bernardino are brimming with goods. Manufacturing companies and massive military bases line San Diego Bay. In all of these places the air and water are laced with poisonous particles from trucks, trains and industry.

Everyone is affected, yet it is the poor who find that the only financially viable places to call home are in the areas surrounded by factories, freeways and toxic waste. A high percentage of people of color live in Southern California neighborhoods that abut industrial areas. Neighborhoods surrounding the top 100 air-polluting facilities in Los Angeles County contain a significantly higher percentage of Latino/a residents than similar neighborhoods in different parts of the county.<sup>2</sup> In many of these neighborhoods, houses and apartments are owned by offsite landlords,<sup>3</sup> and residents are left without decision-making power in matters as big as local corporate development and as small as the choice of paint on the walls. Without financial and political influence it is virtually impossible to put distance between home and the chemicals that are ubiquitous to industry.

As our report *Confronting Toxic Contamination in Our Communities* explains, women have traditionally borne the consequences of environmental contamination. **According to Women Assessing the State of the Environment, women's bodies are often "the markers of environmental contamination through diminished fertility, abnormal fetal development, increased rates of cancers and other spiraling forms of environmental illness."**<sup>4</sup> **Women are, in essence, the canaries in the coal mine.**

Despite progress, women still hold certain gender-based roles in our society. Nearly two-thirds of all women in the United States bear sole responsibility for family healthcare decisions. According to the Department of Health and Human Services,



around 15% of all Americans are informal care givers for family members who are ill or who have disabilities. An estimated 72% of these care givers are women, many of whom are sandwiched between caring for ailing parents and their own children.<sup>5</sup> Women are also still largely responsible for providing sustenance for their families.

It has never been easy for a woman to keep herself and her family safe and healthy. And, increasingly, dangers are created by humans, working against our own best interests.

In Southern California, women are taking the lead to solve these problems. This report highlights three women who are sowing the seeds of our future. Gilda Haas spends her days working to rid homes in poverty-dominated South Central Los Angeles of harmful lead and give children a place to sleep at night that will not make them sick. Jan Misquez lobbies to keep the ethnically diverse families of San Bernardino free from the toxic effects of air pollution. Sonia Rodriguez works to prevent people living in the barrios surrounding San Diego Bay from feeding their families dangerous chemicals. All these women and others like them are leaders in their communities. This work, given the support it needs, will help legislators craft laws to prevent children born today from being exposed to chemicals that will endanger their lives tomorrow.

## FACT SHEET Los Angeles and the Figueroa Corridor

- *Los Angeles County is the nation's most populated county, with nearly 10 million residents.*<sup>6</sup>
- *In Los Angeles County, 17.9% of residents live below the poverty level; nationally, 12.5% of the population lives below the poverty level.*<sup>7</sup>
- *Lead poisoning is the number one environmental threat to children's health in the US.*<sup>8</sup>
- *Pregnant women and children under the age of six have the highest risk of absorbing lead in the largest quantities.*<sup>9</sup>
- *The health effects of lead exposure include developmental neurotoxicity, reproductive dysfunction and toxicity to the kidneys, blood and endocrine systems.*<sup>10</sup>
- *442 million pounds of lead were released into the environment in the United States in 2002.*<sup>11</sup>
- *In January 2005, lead was officially added to the US Department of Health and Human Services' list of cancer-causing agents.*<sup>12</sup>
- *In 1925, an international covenant banned the use of lead in paint. The US continued to use lead in paint until 1978.*<sup>13</sup>
- *70% of residents in the Figueroa Corridor are Latino/a, 16% are African American, 7.5% are Asian and 6% are white.*<sup>14</sup>
- *The St. John's Well Child clinic found that 54% of 2,500 Figueroa Corridor children under the age of six had lead concentrations in their blood above the level demonstrated to cause disabilities.*<sup>15</sup>

## GILDA HAAS, STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR A JUST ECONOMY

The massive Staples Center presides over Figueroa Boulevard southwest of downtown Los Angeles. The \$375-million complex attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors, sports fans and conventioners. Just beyond, Figueroa continues toward South Central LA, where, not five minutes away, sits some of the oldest housing in Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> “There are 200,000 poor people in this area,” says Gilda Haas, Director of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), a nonprofit social justice organization.

On both sides of the street in what is now called the Figueroa Corridor, past the liquor stores, auto parts stores and fast food joints, are blocks of big Victorians, smaller cottages and modest apartment buildings where danger lies in chipping and peeling paint that exposes pregnant women and young children to lead poisoning.<sup>17</sup> Exposure to this toxic metal can lead to a host of threats for pregnant women (see the box at end of this story). In children, exposure leads to a multitude of ills: speech delay, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities, neurological damage, anemia, hearing loss and cognitive damage.<sup>18</sup> The Figueroa corridor is a lead hot spot.<sup>19</sup>

Gilda Haas curls into her chair in the corner of an old warehouse — and the new headquarters of SAJE — in the Figueroa Corridor. She looks at a map of the Corridor and says, “This might not look like everyone’s idea of a neighborhood, but this is a tight community. People work hard to have safe streets, organize block clubs and develop youth programs.” Since the construction of the Staples Center, the neighborhood has become a target of gentrification, while the poor are being squeezed tighter and tighter.

Gilda’s vision is of a neighborhood where people are healthy and proud. “A lot of work goes into building coalitions,” she explains. “First, we craft visions of what we want the place to be, and as we go, we envision larger models.”

Haas and her SAJE staff run six economic justice programs. They have helped create jobs by working with Staples Center management. They have stopped scores of illegal evictions, forced repairs in slum buildings and organized tenant unions. They have helped hundreds of welfare recipients be accepted into the mainstream banking system. And Haas’s relationships with two other area nonprofit leaders, Nancy Ibrahim of Esperanza Community Housing Corporation and Jim Mangia of St. John’s Well Child and Family Center, led to a coalition called Healthy Homes. Haas explains, “It was obvious. There is no ‘other’ side to this. There is no down side to better health.”

Healthy Homes is a healthcare coalition of three nonprofits, each of which provides a unique service to pregnant women and children suffering from issues related to lead poisoning. The St. John’s Well Child and Family Center provides free testing and follow-up healthcare services for children. The Esperanza Community Housing Corporation is responsible for door-to-door education and organizing among residents. SAJE is responsible for eviction prevention, tenant organizing and job development. As more residents got involved, SAJE began to hold weekly tenants’ rights workshops that combined legal education with health information. At the same time, Esperanza workers were going door-to-door to build relationships with

area residents and find women to join their six-month *promotoras* training program. Esperanza's *promotoras*, or health promoters, act as conduits to health, social and legal services and direct residents to the St. John's clinic. Today, a dozen area mothers are active *promotoras*, walking the neighborhoods, working to educate residents about lead poisoning, testing and treatment.

When the Healthy Homes project began, Haas, Mangia and Ibrahim agreed they would adopt a policy of no tolerance for lead in children's blood. Haas explains, "It was a struggle to move St. John's doctors to adopt our 'zero tolerance' policy for blood lead level. They kept referring to the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) standard of ten milligrams of lead per unit of blood sample. Once they saw the light, they became clear advocates — ahead of the recent *New England Journal of Medicine* findings."

According to Mangia, "The *New England Journal* released a study that revealed that blood lead levels as low as three micromoles per milliliter of blood can cause serious developmental disabilities and dramatic lowering of IQ levels in children."<sup>20</sup> The St. John's Well Child clinic found that 54% of 2,500 Figueroa Corridor children under the age of six had lead concentrations in their blood above this level.<sup>21</sup>

Haas' style is to think big and make big things happen. Now that there is an established corps of doctors experienced in getting children's blood lead levels down to zero, she is working to spread the word to the county, state and ultimately the entire nation. "I want those doctors to write complaints to the health board," she adds. "A cadre of doctors can get the county to pay attention."

Healthy Homes has improved the well-being of thousands of children and women living in lead-contaminated homes. It has convinced landlords to remove lead, mold, mildew and other health hazards and helped to generate new policies, such as California Senate Bill 460, which incorporates lead safety into local municipal building inspection programs. A larger county-wide Healthy Homes Collaborative, which now involves more than 20 organizations including SAJE, was built on the SAJE Healthy Homes model.

Despite this good work there are times when Haas' optimism falters. "Major slumlords are having more negative impact on community health than all our best efforts. The dearth of home ownership opportunities has pushed middle- and upper-income people into the rental market, creating an apartment building boom at the top of the economic ladder and a vacuum at the bottom. Unscrupulous landlords circumvent rent control laws to get rid of low-income families. One tactic is to make building conditions worse by turning off electricity and letting sewers and plumbing overflow. As these tactics increase, public health suffers." Haas adds that residential hotels are becoming a last resort for many who are trying to avoid homelessness, but because residential hotels are not recognized as housing by the

Department of Health, health conditions are poorly monitored, and problems like lead poisoning are common.

Haas reflects for a moment. "We are empowering people to be part of our movement. If we don't do it, then who will?"

For more information about Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, see <[www.saje.net](http://www.saje.net)>; Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, see <[www.esperanzachc.org](http://www.esperanzachc.org)>; and St. John's Well Child and Family Center, see <[www.wellchild.org](http://www.wellchild.org)>.



## WOMEN AND LEAD CONTAMINATION

*According to the National Safety Council, "When a pregnant woman has an elevated blood lead level, that lead can easily be transferred to the fetus through the placenta. In fact, **pregnancy itself can cause lead to be released from bones**, where lead is stored — often for decades — after it first enters the bloodstream. The same process can occur with the onset of menopause. Once lead is released from a mother's bones, it re-enters the bloodstream and can end up in the fetus."*

*Because lead is stored in bones and teeth, simply being pregnant can trigger the release of lead, and babies can be born with elevated lead levels.<sup>22</sup> **Even at low doses, lead exposure during gestation has long-term effects on a child's behavior and intelligence, including developmental delays, aggression, poor language skills, hyperactivity and delinquency.**<sup>23</sup> Lead exposure during pregnancy also increases the risk of miscarriage, low birth weight and stillbirth.<sup>24</sup>*

*Lead released from the bones during menopause is suspected of accelerating the decline in bone density and interfering with bone formation — both symptoms of **osteoporosis**.<sup>25</sup>*

## FACT SHEET San Bernardino

- *The Riverside–San Bernardino region is the fourth most polluted area in the world following Jakarta, Indonesia; Bangkok, Thailand; and Calcutta, India.*<sup>26</sup>
- *1.8 million people live in San Bernardino County, making it the fourth most populated county in California.*<sup>27</sup>
- *The average lifetime diesel soot cancer risk for a resident of San Bernardino County is one in 3,497, which is 286 times greater than EPA’s acceptable cancer level of one in a million.*<sup>28</sup>
- *A child born in Riverside or San Bernardino county will be exposed to as many cancer-causing agents in its first 12 days of life as most people are in 70 years.*<sup>29</sup>
- *Researchers determined that pregnant women who were exposed to high levels of ozone and carbon monoxide, as produced by automobiles and trucks, were three times more likely than other women to give birth to babies with cleft lips, cleft palates and defective heart valves.*<sup>30</sup>
- *Carbon monoxide pollution is believed to contribute to cardiovascular disease, which is the number one cause of death for post-menopausal women.*<sup>31</sup>
- *California residents face high diesel-related health risks based on the heavy concentration of diesel truck traffic in urbanized areas.*<sup>32</sup>
- *According to the American Lung Association, the rate of asthma in children has increased 72% since 1982.*<sup>33</sup>
- *The federal poverty rate in San Bernardino County is 15.8%, compared to a national federal poverty rate of 12.5.*<sup>34</sup>
- *The population of San Bernardino County is 40% Latino/a and 44% white.*<sup>35</sup>

## JAN MISQUEZ, WESTSIDE RESIDENTS FOR CLEAN AIR NOW (WESTSIDE CAN)

Jan Misquez pulls over her minivan in front of a modest white house with green trim and a small lawn in San Bernardino. A swamp cooler churns. “This was my house,” she says with pride. “I lived here for seven years before I got sick.” A car pulls up to the house next door and three children pile out and scamper into the house. “There are seven kids living there,” Misquez remarks. She turns the van back down the street. Across from the last house on the block is the wall of the Omnitrans public transportation agency refueling station. The top of a bus can be seen over the wall. Clouds of white steam dissipate into the air and swirl around the bus while the driver refuels his liquid natural gas tanks. “Everyone in the neighborhood is sick,” Misquez says.

Misquez’s former neighborhood is shaped like a horseshoe with Omnitrans at the open end. Not 200 feet away is the schoolyard of the Ramona Alessandro Elementary School. Misquez points to another small neighborhood house, a daycare for toddlers. Across the street, on the other side of the fueling station, is the only community center and park in town. “We have dance and ESL classes at the center.” The park sits right in the middle between Omnitrans and the enormous intermodal goods-transfer yard of the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe railroad. Jan notices a diesel truck just beyond the park, and turns to her coworker Terry Lopez. “Look, they’re idling next to the park again.” Across the street, hundreds of diesel-powered trucks and diesel trains load and unload. Misquez sighs, “We put up tape so the trucks won’t sit near the park. They just take it down. And who’s to stop them?”

Jan Misquez is one of the founders of an organization called Westside Residents for Clean Air Now, or Westside CAN, an group under the umbrella of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ), based in nearby Glen Avon. One of CCA EJ’s goals is to prevent exposure to pollution in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Misquez says, “Never in a million years would I have seen myself doing this. I was a mommy. I took the kids to and from school, went to the store, cooked and cleaned.”

Standing at the edge of the park, you feel as if all the goods for the Western states pass through this Route 66 town. Shipping containers are stacked like children’s blocks along fences, next to concrete walls, by highways and town streets. Massive warehouses swallow up acres of land, and trucks line up at rows of warehouse doors gathering merchandise to bring it to stores near you. “We’ve become the inland Port of Los Angeles,” Misquez says. “And more warehouses, trains and highways are coming.”

Jan suffers from severe ulcerative colitis, diabetes and asthma. Her husband of 25 years has a nerve disorder. Misquez explains, “When I first moved here, I was healthy. Eventually I was spending five days a month in the hospital. My grandkids were getting sick when they visited. I had to move.”

About seven years ago, Marilyn Alcantar, a teacher at Ramona Alessandro noticed that many of her students were getting sick, vomiting or having nosebleeds. She started talking to neighbors, including Misquez and Lopez. Misquez adds, “Neighborhood kids constantly had bloody noses

and respiratory infections. We couldn't use our swamp coolers because the smell of natural gas intensified with moisture. The smell was awful. We started doing research, and found we were experiencing side effects of exposure to natural gas and methyl mercaptan." Methane is the principal component of natural gas. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "Mercaptans are intentionally added to compressed natural gas to provide an olfactory warning. Nausea and headaches are classic symptoms of methane, hydrogen sulfide, and methyl mercaptan exposure."<sup>36</sup> The women formed neighborhood teams to gather information and learned that Omnitrans was in the process of converting its bus fleet from diesel to natural gas. "They admitted to us that they bought old compressors. They were spewing natural gas into the air for hours every day," Misquez adds.

Westside CAN members met with Omnitrans officials, hoping to find a solution. They were dismissed as "hysterical mothers." "Being called 'hysterical' made us work even harder," recalls Misquez. They went to their elected officials. "We got pushed around." When she spoke with her local councilmember, he told her, "They only pay me fifty dollars a month. They don't pay me enough to help you."

The women worked for three years before finding an ally in Senator Nell Soto (D-Ontario). "She had enough heart and concern for kids to do something," Misquez says. In 2000, Senator Soto and Westside CAN authored SB1927, which required that Omnitrans conduct an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on the neighborhood, something, the mothers point out, they should have done when they began the conversion process. Unfortunately, Omnitrans conducted a cancer assessment rather than an entire environmental assessment, and they found no cancer risk.

Misquez and Westside CAN members began training residents about the health risks associated with natural gas. She remembers, "We held a course across the street from my old house. Local moms took the class while the dads babysat the kids in a house nearby. After the training, the kids put on a dance show. It was a lot of fun." Lopez adds, "The children are learning too. We now have 11- and 12-year-old *promotoras* (health promoters) in the neighborhood."

Westside CAN's work with Omnitrans has raised public — and lawmakers' — awareness about natural gas exposure. And it set the women in motion as major players in the struggle to better the environment in San Bernardino and Riverside counties. These days, Westside CAN is working to prevent Omnitrans from placing more refueling stations in residential areas, specifically in low-income neighborhoods. Misquez recently took a new job as Perchlorate Relief Project Program Coordinator to tackle the issue of water contamination. And CCAEJ is involved in five lawsuits challenging the lack of environmental studies on the impacts of major area industrial facilities.

When they began their efforts, Lopez says, "Even our husbands told us it was a hopeless task. Now, they are so proud of us. People come to us as the experts."

"We aren't asking Omnitrans to go away. We love our public transportation," Jan says. "We just want them to move the refueling stations out of neighborhoods. There are studies that say that liquid natural gas is just as bad as diesel. Doesn't everybody deserve to breathe clean air? We have wonderful technology that can make our air cleaner. Is that too much to ask for?"

For more information about the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, see <[www.ccaej.org](http://www.ccaej.org)>. For more information about Westside Residents CAN, call 909-381-8883.



## WOMEN AND AIR POLLUTION

- A study of pregnant women who live in areas of Los Angeles with elevated ozone and carbon monoxide levels showed evidence that their newborns were three times more likely to suffer from serious **heart defects**.<sup>37</sup>
- Exposure to air pollution during the third trimester of pregnancy contributed to **low birth weight** of children in Southern California. UCLA researchers believe that elevated pollution from stagnant air conditions in winter months contributes to high rates of **low birth weight** and **pre-term** babies.<sup>38</sup>
- An ongoing University of Southern California/South Coast Air Quality Management District study of children living in Riverside County found children exhibited disproportionately **weak lung capacity** and **slow lung growth** resulting from prolonged exposure to ozone and respirable particles.<sup>39</sup>
- Carbon monoxide pollution from cars is believed to contribute to **cardiovascular disease**, which is the leading cause of death for post-menopausal women.<sup>40</sup>

## FACT SHEET San Diego Bay

- *San Diego County is the second largest California county with 2,930,886 residents.*<sup>41</sup>
- *A study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) listed San Diego Bay as the second most toxic of 18 bays studied.*<sup>42</sup>
- *The largest shipbuilding operations in the San Diego Bay are concentrated adjacent to low-income communities of color.*<sup>43</sup>
- *75% of the residents of San Diego neighborhoods in industrial areas, such as Barrio Logan and National City, are people of color; more than 40% have household incomes of less than \$10,000.*<sup>44</sup>
- *Studies have revealed high levels of mercury, PCBs, zinc, tributyltin, chromium and lead in San Diego Bay, especially in close proximity to shipbuilding sites.*<sup>45</sup>
- *Mercury can cause severe brain damage in children and is associated with spontaneous abortions; PCBs can shorten gestation periods, alter women's menstrual cycles and affect fertility. Chromium has been associated with lung cancer, kidney and liver damage and death.*<sup>46</sup>
- *56% of the sediments in the San Diego Bay are acutely toxic to marine organisms.*<sup>47</sup>
- *Wintering waterfowl that historically make their homes in the San Diego Bay have declined by 90%.*<sup>48</sup>
- *The US Navy occupies 181,000 acres of San Diego County, including eight bases and 120 commands.*<sup>49</sup>
- *There have been 14 documented accidental releases of radiation associated with naval reactors, including releases of radioactive coolant water into San Diego Bay.*<sup>50</sup>
- *San Diego Bay will soon have the largest concentration of nuclear carriers on the West Coast, consisting of three nuclear aircraft carriers with two nuclear reactors each, six to 14 nuclear submarines, two nuclear repair facilities and a radioactive hazardous waste storage facility.*<sup>51</sup>

## SONIA RODRIGUEZ, CLEAN BAY CAMPAIGN

Shipyards and factories with stark fences, security sheds and concrete block walls line the shore of San Diego Bay. Every so often, tucked in between the sprawling industrial buildings, is a small park with a public pier that juts out into the bay. On San Diego's many sunny days, people from nearby neighborhoods come to these piers to cast fishing lines into the water. Much of the catch is packed on ice and carried home for family dinners. It is not unusual to find Sonia Rodriguez on the same docks, but she's not there to fish.

Rodriguez lives in National City, a grid of small, pleasant homes interspersed with auto body shops, corner grocery stores and manufacturing plants just south of San Diego where residents are 60% Latino/a and 18% Filipino/a.<sup>52</sup> Neighborhood buildings are dwarfed by the massive US Naval base on the shore of the Bay. National City is next to Barrio Logan, another collection of homes next to the shipyards.

Sonia moved to San Diego from Tijuana in 1988. Her 21-year-old son is a Marine who has done two tours of duty in Iraq. Her 13- and 18-year-old daughters attend area schools and help their mother with her work. Rodriguez is an active member of an organization called Military Families Speak Out and helps provide therapy for military families. She is also the lead organizer for the Clean Bay Campaign at the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC).

Two decades ago, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) tested levels of pollutants in sediment and fish found in bays around the nation. They found that San Diego Bay was the most contaminated on the West Coast. Since then, manufacturing practices and environmental laws have improved, but sediments lining the Bay preserve toxic pollution from earlier eras.

San Diego Bay has been a fleet base for more than 80 years and is home to one-third of the US Navy's Pacific fleet — including between nine and 16 nuclear vessels. Over the time that base workers have built, repaired and decommissioned ships and submarines in and above these waters, the Navy has been exempt from many federal environmental regulations. Not surprisingly, the Navy is the largest polluter of the San Diego Bay.<sup>53</sup> The shores of the Bay also host three major shipyards. Today, San Diego Bay sediments contain high levels of mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), chlordane, zinc, tributyltin, chromium, lead and the list goes on.

Studies have shown that children whose mothers ingested PCBs while pregnant have poor performance in gross motor skills and mental development, abnormal reflexes and multiple behavioral problems as well as impaired thyroid and immune systems. Researchers have also linked PCB exposure to an increased risk of breast cancer.<sup>54</sup> Tributyltin, a fungicide and bactericide used in underwater paints, is thought to cause neurological and immune system problems as well as harm to the liver.<sup>55</sup> Lead can have a multitude of adverse health effects (see bottom of page 3).

According to Laura Hunter, Clean Bay Campaign's director, "We know health information travels through women, so we found Sonia, who participated in our community SALTA classes, or *Salud Ambiental, Latinas Tomando Acción* (Latinas Taking Action for Environmental Health). She was a volunteer for four years before joining the staff." Rodriguez is now

responsible for organizing community education meetings and trainings and can often be found on the 24<sup>th</sup> Street Marine Terminal Pier and in Pepper Park, Barrio Logan and National City talking to fishermen about the dangers of bringing Bay fish to their dinner tables. Last year, she conducted a survey about fishing practices with 110 fishermen in Chula Vista, National City and San Diego.

The survey proved that local residents were, for the most part, unaware that some Bay fish have been found to contain toxic contaminants. She discovered that a majority of people who fished from the public piers in Chula Vista and San Diego did so for recreation, while many of those in National City did so for subsistence.

The numbers tell the story: 96% of the anglers are people of color (57% Latino/a and 39% Filipino/a), and 58% eat fish at least once a week. Of those, 25% fish every day. Sixty-one percent eat the catch, and two percent give it away. The EHC survey showed that Filipino/as are more likely to eat the fish — and are more likely to eat the whole fish, including the skin and organs, which harbor most of the contaminants. She also found that 78% of the people fishing have children.

Of the 209 children represented in the survey, 41% eat fish caught from the piers. According to Hunter, “We found that frying and stewing were the most common ways of cooking their catch. These methods of cooking maximize exposure to toxins.”<sup>56</sup>

To educate the public, Rodriguez and other Clean Bay Campaign staff conduct public hearings and workshops. EHC is also working with a local physician to create a fish-consumption advisory that includes information on the different parts of the fish, healthier recipes and how to reduce the risks. This is especially important information for women, who often do most of the cooking for their families. “The program has been very popular,” Rodriguez explains. “We aren’t approaching people with an attitude of wrongdoing. We give them options and the ability to do something about their health.”

“This survey will have a huge impact. No one has done anything like this,” Laura Hunter says with enthusiasm. In fact, Rodriguez and EHC will be presenting their results to state regulators as part of the Sediment Quality Objectives project, which will set standards for the entire state.

EHC is also working to tackle the source of the problems. While the military has taken some steps toward reform, according to Hunter, the shipyards remain unwilling to clean up. In response to the Clean Bay Campaign, local shipyards hired a private company to do health research. They found no threat to public health because, counter to Rodriguez’s reports, they did not believe people were eating fish from the Bay. State regulators remain slow to respond. The last public hearing about Bay clean-up was more than two years ago, and a scheduled hearing has been postponed time and again.

On a recent day, Rodriguez was fast at work preparing for a fishermen’s workshop in National City. She was also rushing to

get home to prepare for her son’s return from Iraq. She paused for a moment before leaving, then added purposefully, “These are just first steps. We need to get people to the table. We are just starting to get organized.”

For more information on the Environmental Health Coalition, see <[www.environmentalhealth.org](http://www.environmentalhealth.org)>.



## CHAIN REACTION: CHEMICAL CONTAMINATION AND WOMEN’S BODIES

*Women who ingest even a small bit of chemically contaminated fish are often starting a chain reaction:*

- *Biomagnification is the tendency of chemicals that persist in the environment to accumulate as they climb the food chain and concentrate in tissue or internal organs. Consumers at the top of the food chain (such as humans) accumulate greater concentrations of chemicals than plants or animals lower on the food chain.*
- *A number of **synthetic chemicals are soluble in fat and collect in tissues with high-fat content — such as breasts, the liver and the brain.** Women, on average, have a two to 10% higher proportion of body fat than men.*<sup>57</sup>
- *A recent Japanese study discovered that mercury in umbilical cord blood was 1.6 times as high as in maternal blood, seriously increasing the risk of major health problems for a developing fetus.*<sup>58</sup>

## A CALL TO ACTION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Because of the sheer magnitude of the state's area and population, California policies and legislation carry nationwide implications. The work of these women will resonate across the country. Lawmakers, funders, industry leaders and individuals need to increase support for organizations, such as SAJE, EHC and CCAEJ, doing front-line work. The following recommendations are a starting point.

### 1. Adopt a "First Do No Harm" approach.

Public policy decisions should, first and foremost, be guided by a "First Do No Harm" approach. Project proponents or manufacturers should supply evidence that products will not harm those who are most vulnerable (often women and children). Policy and consumer decisions should take into account a full range of alternatives and then be made by selecting the option with the least risk.

### 2. Promote Smart Growth to improve air, water and quality of life.

As Southern California continues to grow, urban planning must continue to integrate environmental and economic concerns. This includes protecting human health and the environment, improving transportation, improving employment and housing options and ensuring access to safe, healthy food. Regulators must strengthen pollution regulations, offer incentives to businesses and individuals to adopt cleaner practices and utilize and harness government purchasing power to set an example.

### 3. Improve research and data collection.

Scientists and health officials must expand research on

chemical contamination to take into account a more comprehensive assessment of the cumulative and synergistic effects of chemicals and involve communities that are heavily impacted by contamination. Simultaneously, research must track the relationships among socioeconomic indicators such as race and income, the location of pollution sources and associated health impacts. Policymakers should give priority to actions and programs that will mitigate disproportionate impacts on low-income families and communities of color.

### 4. Support and foster long-term collaboration.

Community and issue-based advocacy groups need to help build regional coalitions among Southern California organizations that work on various aspects of an issue, such as the Healthy Homes project. Funders should nurture and sustain support for multiple constituencies with long-term investments.

### 5. Hold polluters accountable.

To protect California's long-term economic vitality, resources should be invested in protecting human health and the environment. Manufacturers and industrial users of chemicals should assume responsibility for, as well as pay the costs of, environmental cleanup and help craft healthier products and solutions. Fees paid can be leveraged to cover expenses for community education and health services. Individuals, meanwhile, must exercise their consumer power by supporting companies that adopt environmentally friendly practices.

### The Future of SAJE's Healthy Homes Campaign:

Gilda Haas and SAJE are currently working to gather data and implement studies to create new public health policy to include:

- A single room occupancy ordinance that will protect and improve conditions and housing rights for people in residential hotels.
- Increase fines for landlords who repeatedly violate health and safety standards to make their responsibility commensurate with their public burden on the health system. Dedicate a portion of these fines as reimbursements for community clinics and health programs.
- Create new and powerful slum housing sanctions and penalties for the worst public health offenders.

### The Future of CCAEJ's Westside CAN programs:

Westside CAN, CCAEJ and Jan Misquez continue to work toward healthier Riverside and San Bernardino counties:

- CCAEJ and Westside CAN staff are part of a coalition supporting SB 1397 (Escutia), a bill that would require the railroad industry to reduce emissions from existing locomotives.
- Westside CAN is working with the San Bernardino Police Department to stop illegal parking by big rig diesel trucks on the West Side of the city.

### The Future of the San Diego Clean Bay Campaign:

The Clean Bay Campaign continues to work on several initiatives:

- To ensure the cleanup of contaminated sediment to levels that will help protect human health and the San Diego Bay ecosystem.
- To secure a development plan for the Chula Vista Bayfront that will protect the environment, create good jobs, serve the community and contribute to the regional economy.
- To shut down and decommission the South Bay Power Plant in Chula Vista and replace it with local power generation that serves the region, does not impact the bay or public health and promotes renewable energy resources, energy efficiency, conservation and quality jobs.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

California Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Justice, <[www.calepa.ca.gov](http://www.calepa.ca.gov)>.

California State Legislature information, <[www.leginfo.ca.gov](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov)>.  
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