



# Seeds

The Agricultural Worker Health Initiative Program Quarterly



## Poder Popular funding ends — impacts continue

By Victoire S. Chochezi, RCAC public affairs specialist

For decades, many people from different sectors all over the U.S. have shown concern and advocated for farm workers, who directly contribute to improving the health of the rest of America by helping grow and harvest fresh fruit and vegetables necessary to good nutrition. Despite these efforts, farm worker needs persist.

In response to continued farm worker needs, a few years ago Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) partnered with The California Endowment to help implement The Endowment's Agricultural Worker Health Initiative (AWHI). AWHI included a program component known as Poder Popular (Popular Education Methods). The California Endowment funding is now coming to an end, as the Endowment moves into a 10-year Building Healthy Communities initiative.

While farm worker needs remain great, Poder Popular experienced many successes and its efforts have greatly helped

empower farm workers and significantly improved their communities.

### Farm Worker Needs

Farm workers in the U.S. have endured much and continue to face enormous challenges and dangers associated with the nature of the work they perform. Jennifer Torres reported in a Jan. 19 article on *recordnet.com* that right now California farm worker advocates are working hard to prepare farm workers to eliminate deaths related to heat stress. Last summer, several farm workers died and others suffered serious heat illness as a result of working in the fields in very

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## Poder Popular policy at work: 2008 in review and what's next

By Jennifer Hernandez, Cultivo Consulting partner

From the Central Valley to the Central Coast, Poder Popular partners have engaged in community education and mobilization around key policy issues affecting rural communities including water, transportation, pesticides and occupational health. Working from local communities to the state level, partners educated and mobilized community residents and Poder Popular committee and assembly members. Poder Popular partners played a critical role in ensuring farm worker voices were part of the dialogue when regulatory changes were proposed.

For example, community residents in the Central Valley turned out in high numbers to testify about Pesticide Drift Emergency Response Protocols before the Office of Emergency Services, to ensure protocols would effectively address their concerns. As a result, residents themselves made policy recommendations, some of which

were included in final regulations released in early 2008.

Poder Popular participation in listening sessions is another example. Secretary A.G. Kawamura of the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) led efforts to develop a vision

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## Special Insert

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- Agricultural worker commission persists

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## Poder Popular creates impacts

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high temperatures without ready access to shade and drinking water.

In addition to harsh working conditions, farm workers generally earn low wages, which limits their access to decent, safe, affordable housing. According to the Housing Assistance Council's (HAC) September 2003 Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Housing publication, "Farmworkers are among the poorest people in the country, with a poverty rate of 61 percent."

Nearly 52 percent of the units HAC surveyed were crowded, excluding dormitories and barracks. "This figure is almost 10 times the national average. Children lived in 74 percent of the crowded units."

HAC's survey also revealed that 33 percent of farm worker-occupied housing units were substandard, including 44 percent of the mobile homes where farm workers lived. In addition to sagging roofs and porches, structural damage, rodent and insect infestation and holes in walls, 43 percent of these homes lacked a working telephone. They also face high risk of pesticide exposure because the housing is often very near the fields. More than 50 percent of the housing next to the pesticide-treated fields lacked a working tub, shower or laundry machine.

### Poder Popular

The Endowment's Poder Popular effort recognizes that health is not the absence of illness, but rather an overall, balanced state of well-being. Poder Popular addresses farm worker physical and mental health, working to reduce depression, substance abuse and violence (gang and/or domestic) through strategies that build self-esteem and empowerment of the individual. Through these efforts, Poder Popular seeks to improve community health — including the creation and expansion of social and cultural associations, increasing grassroots engagement and access to decent housing, and clean air and water. The program was implemented in phases beginning with capacity building, involving training, asset mapping and stakeholder analysis, followed by organization for action. In

the second phase, participants brought stakeholders together to identify priorities and conduct strategic planning. The final phase is the implementation phase, which is now in effect.

### Promotores Comunitarios de Salud

In the final phase, RCAC provided technical assistance to support farm worker mobilization initiated by the new grassroots leaders. Poder Popular includes two components; the Promotores Comunitarios de Salud Strategy is one. The strategy expands on successful models in Latin America, where ordinary citizens are trained to provide basic health services and screenings to improve health in underserved communities. Funded by The California Endowment, the strategy empowered farm workers to discuss pressing issues affecting them, identify partnerships, and develop and implement viable solutions. The Endowment funding for the program ended in October 2008. In The Endowment strategy, the term *promotores comunitarios* refers to agents of change and community advocacy.

Following are Poder Popular and Promotores Comunitarios Strategy highlights.

### Policy/Systems Change and Civic Engagement

Most *promotores* have now learned to navigate public and nonprofit systems to address community needs, such as advocating for stop signs, street lights, bus services, new mailboxes, clean bathrooms and sidewalks.

Farm workers are typically uninvolved in community issues, sometimes due to fears of deportation or retribution. So, it was a major accomplishment when members from most Poder Popular sites spoke out at hearings associated with the state's Agricultural Vision 2030 process.

The *promotores* strategy led to many successes in civic engagement. For example, a *promotora* from Merced is the first Latina to hold a position on the Municipal Advisory Council. Three *promotores* in Sonoma and Healdsburg hold positions on the boards of local nonprofit organizations. The Healdsburg City Council approved a Poder Popular proposal to create a Human Relations Commission on the council.

Farm workers in Kern ran for local office in water and school boards. Coachella and Planada-Merced farm workers improved their living conditions through discussions and negotiations with trailer park and camp owners. Planada-Merced even negotiated the establishment of a day-care center.

Poder Popular efforts resulted in an array of improvements such as new clinics, reduced fees for farm workers, special services for diabetics and support for residents involved in domestic violence cases in Ventura, Merced, San Diego and Coachella. St. Helena Poder Popular participants negotiated with the city to remove trees that contributed to asthma and other respiratory illness.

Another important accomplishment worth noting is that Poder Popular participants have developed their own relationships with the media and stakeholders, and have collaborated with key community members and organizations to air their needs and find solutions.

### Individual Empowerment

*Promotores* are now very well known by their communities and local organizations and authorities. Some *promotores* have benefited from their Poder Popular participation by finding paid work. For example, four *promotores* were hired at a local clinic in Coachella. In Merced, a *promotora* was hired as an apartment complex manager and in Fresno, a local nonprofit agency hired a *promotora*.

*Promotores* have received stipends from other agencies to deliver trainings and conduct community surveys. *Promotores* received training to prepare them to present information about heat illness. Once trained, *promotores* made presentations to more than 350 community members.

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*Poder Popular Intensive Sites participants attended training to learn affordable housing concepts.*

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## Poder Popular participants empowered

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Several promotores are working to develop their English proficiency and others were motivated to continue their studies. In San Joaquin, a promotora earned her general education degree after a long absence from school.

While the strategy made great strides, promotores have identified more goals they wish to achieve and are searching for more funding to continue their progress.

### *Intensive Sites*

Alongside the Promotores Comunitarios de Salud Strategy is the other arm of the Poder Popular program. Instead of the bottom-up approach used in the promotores strategy, this model organizes community members through broad-based committees and councils. It facilitates grassroots activists and those in power to work together. The model, referred to as the Intensive Sites, is being implemented in North Tulare County and the Salinas Valley in Monterey County.

At the Monterey County Intensive Site, RCAC staff conceived a housing collaborative that brought together organizations with complementary skills and services to more effectively provide services and minimize duplication of effort related to affordable housing. A similar effort is underway in Tulare County. Safe, decent affordable housing is fundamental to physical health. Bringing together affordable housing developers, housing counseling agencies, health services providers, city and county officials, banks, growers and other stakeholders will increase the momentum and capacity to provide such housing to agricultural workers and other low-income residents in both counties.

Poder Popular policy efforts were primarily led by staff from strategic partner organizations such as Center for Community Advocacy; California Rural Legal Assistance; COPA; Relational Culture Institute; Center for Race Poverty and the Environment; and

various United Farm Worker affiliates, according to the “Poder Popular: Policy Brief.” As a result of local stakeholder and community organizer advocacy efforts, Tulare County implemented new pesticide regulations through a county-level pesticide permit on Jan. 1, 2008. The permit disallows use of restricted pesticides within a quarter mile of schools, occupied agricultural labor camps and residential areas. Much groundwork was done by other organizations prior to Poder Popular involvement, which helped position all the parties for the policy win.

The California Endowment selected five Poder Popular communities (Arvin/Lamont, East Salinas, West Fresno, East Merced and Coachella) to participate in its new Building Healthy Communities initiative, a testament to Poder Popular’s success. Poder Popular accomplishments are expected to have a lasting impact on farm worker communities well into the future. 🌱

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## Poder Popular policy work makes strides

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for California agriculture to be achieved by 2030. Poder Popular partners, promotores and other farm worker and rural community advocates came together to publicly comment on the vision. Community members participated in various listening sessions held across the state to give input to the vision. They shared their personal stories of how they have been impacted by the current agricultural system and their hopes for the future of agriculture. On the airwaves, Radio Bilingüe conducted a strong public awareness campaign to ensure residents understood the value of participating in the visioning sessions. On the day of the Tulare hearings, Radio Bilingüe interviewed community residents, advocates and Secretary Kawamura at the Tulare Ag Center and broadcast the interviews live.

In late 2008, CDEA produced a summary document outlining key findings from the sessions. While not comprehensive, the document is the starting point for additional work for community members and advocates ensuring that the farm

worker voice is clearly audible in the continual development of a vision for agriculture by 2030. Final comments on the CDEA draft were due in February.

Much work will be done this year to continue advocating for better enforcement and policy changes. Pesticides and community health have been common policy issues across all Poder Popular sites in different ways. The partners in Monterey County successfully held a series of community-led town halls where residents learned of the roles and responsibilities of the county agricultural commissioner. Moving forward in 2009, partners in Tulare County continue their work on pesticide exposure. They are using community-based research to mobilize residents in an effort to voluntarily engage growers in the region to prevent pesticide drift. While in its initial phases, residents in the area have taken advantage of other opportunities such as participating in a recent hearing in Bakersfield where the Department of Pesticide Regulation held a public

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*“Pesticides and community health have been common policy issues across all Poder Popular sites in different ways.”*

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forum to discuss proposed regulations around emission reductions of Volatile Organic Compounds in the region. While no clear decision has been made, the message of the impact of pesticides on farm workers, the residents and community health (including air quality and water quality) has been resonating across the region.

We know times are tough because of the economic downturn; however, people in the local communities have seen the value of their participation in Poder Popular as a vehicle for change. Despite challenging financial times, partners remain committed to improving farm worker health in California. 🌱

# Seeds — final issue

*Seeds* was first published in Spring 2003 as RCAC's only newsletter focusing solely on agricultural worker issues. Funded by The California Endowment, RCAC has since produced *Seeds* quarterly in both English and Spanish versions, and provided it free to the RCAC network. Program funding ended in February 2009, and this issue in English and Spanish will be the last. RCAC will continue to report news about farm worker communities in its other publications, *RCAC's Network News* and *RCAC's Rural Review*. You can subscribe to RCAC publications through RCAC's website at [www.rcac.org](http://www.rcac.org) or e-mail your name and address to Shirley at [swade@rcac.org](mailto:swade@rcac.org) and let her know which publications you would like to receive.

*Seeds* reflects the work so many are doing to improve the lives of farm workers. Special thanks go to The California Endowment, Poder Popular partner agencies, program staff and volunteers, promotores, advisory committee members, Agricultural Worker Health and Housing Commission members, and RCAC staff and former staff who contributed to serving farm workers and producing *Seeds*. 🌱

## Poder Popular Program Members

### Region and Agency

**COACHELLA** — *Desert Alliance for Community Empowerment*

**FRESNO** — *PROTEUS, Inc.*

**MERCED** — *Golden Valley Health Center*

**MONTEREY** — *Foundation for Monterey County*

**NAPA/SONOMA** — *St. Joseph Community Health Systems  
California Human Development  
Vineyard Workers Services*

**SAN DIEGO** — *CSU San Marcos:  
CSU San Marcos Foundation  
National Latino Research Center  
Vista Community Clinic  
Community Housing Works*

**SOUTH KERN** — *Catholic Charities,  
Dolores Huerta Foundation*

**TULARE** — *United Way Tulare County*

**VENTURA** — *CAUSE (Ventura County  
and AWHI Collaborative)*

### VENTURA continued —

*Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Program*

*Interface Children Family Services  
(St. Paula Farm Resource Center)*

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