

Introduction (Lay of the Land) and Program Approach

The Catholic Multicultural Center offers the bilingual Community Environment program aimed at actively including a more diverse group of people in environmental stewardship and education, with a special emphasis on serving the Latino community. With this project, the CMC planned to address climate equity by offering four climate-related events in 2021. The goal of the events were to gather feedback from a more diverse and representative group of people on climate change and to create interactive, fun ways to learn more about a climate-related topic or to take an environmental stewardship action together.

Using the foundation built by previous CMC environment program events, the CMC attracted 118 unduplicated individuals (adults and kids) to participate in 2021 programming. Outreach was conducted primarily through other CMC programs, to past environment program participants, and through CMC community partners. Programs were led in the style of popular education, where participants were encouraged to learn from one another and/or a variety of voices were highlighted at the event, rather than one “expert” in a subject lecturing the group.

In addition to hosting events, CMC conducted a provider survey to reach out to other social service providers and community-based to collect their feedback regarding climate change and climate action. This provided the material requested by the County to begin to scope the possibility for work to be done in the area of climate equity. CMC focused its survey efforts on organizations that serve a similar population to CMC (low-income and/or immigrant groups) and/or organizations that CMC has a connection to.

Project Activities

During the project period, CMC hosted five bilingual (English/Spanish) events all broadly related to climate equity. *Climate Change in the Americas* attracted 35 online participants to hear about the impacts of climate change throughout the Americas and listen to solutions that activists in different countries are implementing. The event featured presenters from Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Florida. The audience was primarily from the Midwest United States with many Euro-descendant participants and some Latino representation. The underlying goals of the event were: 1) Help United States residents understand how their lifestyle and actions impact people in other countries; and 2) Show a more diverse face to climate activism that is often under-represented or ignored here in Dane County and the Midwestern U.S. Citizen’s Climate Lobby was a key partner at this event, helping connect us to presenters and to plan event content.

Healthy Eating for You and the Planet focused on inspiring ways to take better care of our own health while also promoting environmental health. Food choices have a significant impact on our environment and on climate change. During this online event, participants heard from a bilingual nutrition educator from UW Extension about reading food labels and from a CMC environment program participant about the impacts our food choices have on the planet. The event reached approximately five participants, which reinforced our perception that the population the CMC community environment program is trying to serve is not best served through online events.

The *Annual Clean-up of Wingra Creek* collaborated with twelve volunteers and environment program participants to pick up trash in and around Wingra Creek. Taking care of the environment in our own back yard is an important component of climate action, which helps people connect a global problem to their own neighborhood. Participants collected a shopping cart full of trash and recyclables. MSCR generously lent us use of two canoes for the event.

In July, the CMC hosted a *Green Neighborhoods Picnic & Discussion* to gather feedback regarding climate action from CMC participants and neighbors. Five community partners including the County were present to hear 14 residents' ideas and concerns. The event was planned with regular program participants, who thought a picnic would be a good way to attract people and not using the words "climate change" would help the event appeal to a broader array of individuals. Feedback was collected via guided discussion and note sheets at each table which included the topics of: water resources, green spaces, transportation, and home energy use.

From this event, some common themes and key ideas emerged. Madison's water resources are really important to residents of all walks of life, yet many feel they are not being cared for well enough. Several participants said they were discouraged from swimming in the lakes because of how dirty/weedy they look. They were worried their kids would get sick swimming in the lakes and said if the lakes were cleaner, they would enjoy or use them more. Others emphasized that the lakes are a big part of what makes Madison a beautiful place to live and how they appreciate that the lakes are accessible.

For home energy, obtaining housing and housing costs (especially due to pandemic economic impacts) are a concern before even considering environmental impacts. How to make energy efficiency improvements when one is renting was on a lot of people's minds. Some people in the group depend a lot on public transportation. People want more access to public transportation that is close by them, especially connections throughout Dane County, not just Madison. Ideas included more guidance or education on recycling, a sustainable lawn contest event, using less a/c, access to solar energy, and planting more rain gardens or wetlands restoration.

To conclude the year, CMC hosted a *Field Trip to Indian Lake County Park* in October. Part of environmental equity is having access to enjoy nature. CMC helped overcome barriers of transportation, language, knowing the rules of using a natural area, and simply not feeling

welcome by coordinating a field trip where transportation and language support in Spanish was provided. This event attracted more than 60 adults and kids, making it the largest event of the community environment program to-date. Participants spoke five different first languages between them and ranged in age from infant to 90-something. Staff and volunteers led participants on a nature walk to discuss topics like oak savannah habitat, edible plants, native plants, and more. The event concluded with a picnic to help make everyone feel welcome and cared for.

Finally, CMC reached out to five Madison area social service agencies to capture information on their climate priorities for the marginalized communities they serve, and gauge interest in additional collaboration. Responses were received from three of the agencies: the YWCA, Wisconsin EcoLatinos, and Rooted. To participate, staff met virtually for a 20-minute open ended, conversation-based survey where staff recorded answers concerning the work their agency does and environmental issues they witness among the community they serve.

Provider (“Partners and Allies”) Survey Feedback Compilation

In the pandemic, the YWCA’s usual programming was moved to mostly all virtual, which caused issues with the housing program and keeping the buildings sanitized and staffed 24/7. They have been working on grants to make their transportation program and historic buildings more energy efficient by getting electric vehicles and replacing old lighting. Many of the people they serve are concerned about how expensive food and A/C bills have gotten due to climate change related issues. The agency is concerned with the cleanliness of the environment and how it affects the health of the community. When it comes to resources the organization needs, unrestricted funds will help get accessibility to resources the community needs. Overall solutions that work best come from collaborating with organizations that are environmental justice focused because environmental justice groups tend to have a more realistic approach to situations.

Wisconsin EcoLatinos activities were changed by the pandemic, but they said Zoom made it easier to connect with people. They have focused on reaching out to the community about how to test their homes for radon as well as about clean air and water. Air quality is a big concern of theirs for the health of the community. Many of their clients still buy bottled water because they are concerned with water safety and have no knowledge of how to test their water quality. They say money is always needed so people can have the opportunity to properly test their home’s safety and afford things that are better for the environment. The agency also can use more funds for spreading their message to the people affected by these issues and to people who can help. Having agencies that are close to community members is helpful so they can conveniently access the services. Participation and inclusion of the community affected by environmental issues in decision-making processes regarding such issues is needed more often because the results of the decisions being made about these issues usually affect them the most.

Rooted has continued to grow throughout the pandemic, despite programming becoming virtual and taking measures to keep their workers safe. They focus on food security, renewable energy in the gardens, and environmental justice initiatives. They are working to teach the effects of climate change to farmers and community members so they know how to combat it. Food insecurity in Madison is a big concern of their clients. Unrestricted funding is needed to improve programs for the community. An issue they have noticed is how funds are inadequately allocated to agencies who are unsure how to use them best for environmental justice programs.

Overall, these agencies wish to further spread awareness of the environmental issues the community faces in order to have individuals take action in preventing these issues. The programs they offer help groups combat issues most related to environmental health, food insecurity, and energy efficiency. To continue these programs and the many positive effects they have on the community, the budget will have to include funds for materials that create a more efficient and sustainable environment.

Budget Scenarios

A common theme between survey participants and CMC is the need for more funding for environmental justice programming, and that those funds be unrestricted. In our experience, there are funding opportunities for environmental projects or funding for social service projects, but far fewer opportunities for the intersection of environment and people. Environmental justice grants that do exist are often small pools of money. Since 2014, the CMC environmental program has operation on a budget typically of \$600 to \$2,000 per year, though the amount of resources going into programming would amount to at least \$5,000 to \$7,000 per year.

Staff time is the most important component of any budget for climate equity programming. CMC and the providers interviewed all feature hard-working, dedicated staff who are truly tuned in to the needs of the community. Supporting their time and effort is key to advancing environmental justice initiatives. Within any given agency, sometimes support of environmental justice programming can be lacking if staff time is not adequately funded.

CMC, the agencies interviewed, and other “on the ground” providers know what the community needs most and what programming they would like to see. Another crucial budget component is funding to support whatever environmental and climate justice programming the agency sees fit to offer: funding for event materials, food, child care costs, and anything else it takes to host programming for the community. Based on direct feedback from CMC participants and on feedback from partner agencies, funds are needed for programming such as: eco-friendly upgrades for homes, nature field trips, protecting water resources, local foods and gardening, native plants and improving greenspaces, and transportation.

Funding is also needed for agencies to carry out their own environmental initiatives: energy efficiency upgrades, renewable energy, building renovations, etc. These budget items tend to be much more costly than offering programs, but have a bigger impact on the agency's environmental footprint plus a positive impact on the agency's budget over time.

Impact Scenarios

Ultimately, changes at the federal and corporate level are what will have the most impact on environmental justice and climate equity. As these efforts lag behind the progress that is needed now, smaller, grassroots organizations can have a significant, nearly immediate impact on climate equity in Dane County. Local non-profits like the CMC are already doing amazing work with tangible impacts: building rain gardens in low-income neighborhoods, providing local foods and gardening programming for youth of color and the greater community, connecting people to nature who otherwise might not have access to it, aiding with employment transportation via emissions-free vehicles, offering programming that is linguistically and culturally appropriate to various marginalized groups, and more. Many of these non-profits see that their own environmental footprint affects the people they serve and are trying to reduce their climate and environmental impact. Getting funding into the hands of grassroots organizations who truly know what the community wants and needs will help further the cause of climate equity.

If local and regional government team up with these organizations and groups, the impact can be greater: Creating better public transportation to reduce environmental impact and to increase mobility for lower income people. Encouraging smart growth for cities and energy efficiency for lower-income buildings, so that not only the wealthy enjoy the benefits of an expanding and vibrant Dane County. Involving more people in growing and utilizing fresh food produced here in our County. All of these can be achieved if the County continues to devote time and resources to its climate action plan and supporting grassroots community partners with resources, expertise, and funds to help them carry out this vital plan while ensuring marginalized groups are prioritized.

Funding Opportunities

As mentioned under budget scenarios, funding opportunities for environmental justice work are quite limited. CMC has received grants from the following agencies over the past seven years to conduct community environmental programming: Dane County Environmental Council, Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, Friends of Lake Wingra, Walmart small grants program, and the Green Bay Packers Foundation, which includes the environment in its three-year funding priority rotation. Any of these sources could potentially provide funding for other Dane County environmental initiatives.

Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency offers a federal grant called the Environmental Justice small grants program. At first the CMC was excited about this potential opportunity this year, seeing that its environment program seemed to match many of the grant guidelines. However, the CMC discovered the grant amount was \$50,000. A local, stand-alone agency like the CMC would not stand a chance of receiving this funding because 1) We do not have the staff capacity to manage a federal grant of this size and 2) The amount of environmental programming one agency can offer, unless environmental justice was its sole focus, would not amount to enough to warrant \$50,000 in funding. So, this “small grant” program essentially excludes many qualified agencies because they lack the capacity to pull off that amount of programming and grant management. Nonetheless, a coalition of local agencies could potentially apply together and split the funds of such a grant, collectively having the capacity to manage a grant of this size and offer that amount of programming. This requires coordination and time that local agencies still might not have the capacity to do.

Conclusion

With this funding, CMC was able to educate locally on the global impacts of climate change, offer the tools for environmentally-friendly healthy eating, care for a local waterway, facilitate discussion and feedback from a diverse group of individuals on climate action, and connect a large number of individuals and families to enjoy nature who otherwise might not have had the opportunity. CMC also made the effort to reach out to five other service providers, of which three responded, to compile their thoughts and needs regarding climate action and environmental sustainability. The CMC trusts the County will take the information gathered from events and provider outreach seriously to help shape urgently needed climate action in an equitable manner.

While several local or statewide funding opportunities exist for such programming, more funding is needed, especially mid-size grants (\$2,000-\$15,000) that are sufficient enough for grassroots organizations to accomplish environmental justice work, but small enough that they are accessible to small to mid-size non-profits.

The CMC is truly appreciative for the opportunity to advance climate equity work and information gathering and looks forward to future opportunities to collaborate with the Office of Climate and Energy.