

IN THE SHADOW OF POLLUTION

Southern California Women on the Front Lines



the WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION
of CALIFORNIA

FACT SHEET Los Angeles and the Figueroa Corridor

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

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.¹⁶ “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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ The Figueroa corridor is a lead hot spot.¹⁹

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."²⁰ 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.²¹

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>; Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, see <www.esperanzachc.org>; and St. John's Well Child and Family Center, see <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.²² **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.**²³ Lead exposure during pregnancy also increases the risk of miscarriage, low birth weight and stillbirth.²⁴*

*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.**²⁵*