

Our work in the first quarter of 2021 responded to the continued inequality of COVID's primary and secondary impacts even as relief from the disease appeared at the horizon, the looming risks and opportunities of a post-pandemic world, and the everyday fight for clean air, safe drinking water, and healthy housing and neighborhoods.

While we can't share all the work we did in the first three months of 2021, we share here a representative sample of **successes, ongoing battles, and indispensable partnerships.**

Increasing Access to Vaccines - Meeting People Where They Are



The thrashing impact of COVID-19 infections came fast and early to rural farmworker towns in the San Joaquin Valley. Vaccines, on the other hand, in early 2021, were largely inaccessible and deployed at a slower pace in many of those same small communities. While direct health services and vaccine administrators have never played a role in our community-based advocacy model, the early days of 2021 signalled an urgent, if temporary, shift.

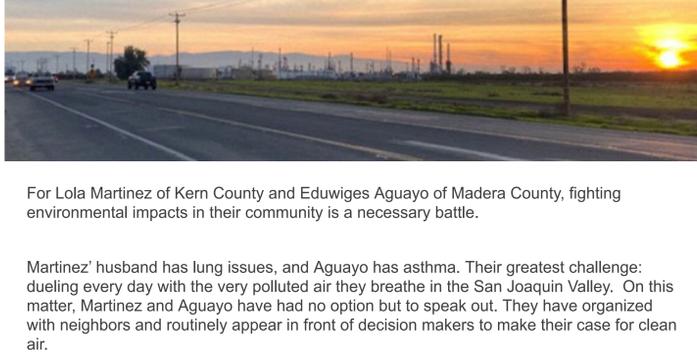
Inequitable vaccine deployment made it impossible for hard-hit communities to access life saving protection. In response, we partnered with community partners to expand access to the vaccine for rural communities and specifically agricultural workers. We mobilized a team to begin outreach and within a week we were helping to coordinate clinics and register people from Fresno County. Soon, our work spread to rural communities Tulare and Madera counties as well.

We knocked on doors. We registered people on windy mornings during their work breaks. And we responded to our hotline all day and evening. We helped register and vaccinate almost 2,000 residents of rural San Joaquin Valley communities and connected hundreds of other residents to other clinics.

This important work must continue, and it will help drive our collective effort toward an equitable recovery and a more equitable California.

Your support makes the difference

Open Burning of Agricultural Waste - Is there an end in sight?



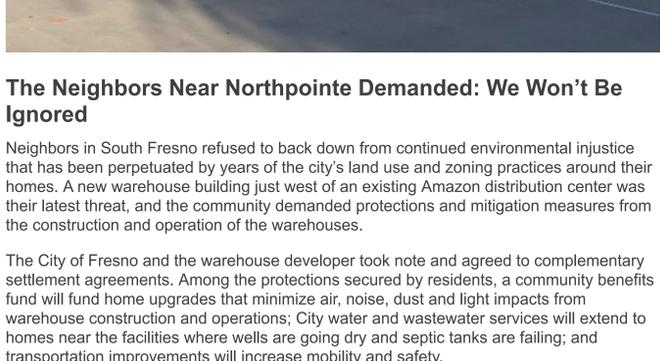
For Lola Martinez of Kern County and Eduwiges Aguayo of Madera County, fighting environmental impacts in their community is a necessary battle.

Martinez' husband has lung issues, and Aguayo has asthma. Their greatest challenge: dueling every day with the very polluted air they breathe in the San Joaquin Valley. On this matter, Martinez and Aguayo have had no option but to speak out. They have organized with neighbors and routinely appear in front of decision makers to make their case for clean air.

Neither state-wide nor local officials have taken strong enough measures to limit pollution from avoidable practices, such as open agricultural burning. "Ag burning," has polluted the lungs of Valley residents longer than should have been allowed. In February, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) granted a repeated -- and final -- extension for the toxic practice.

CARB voted to phase out all types of ag burning by 2025. For those like Aguayo who live as close as a mile away from ag burn sites, the phase out timeline is too long to wait, and she and others like her will continue to fight for a more aggressive timeline for elimination of the practice. In the meantime, they will also fight for common sense protections from ongoing open ag burns including mandatory notification to nearby residents of upcoming open air burns.

The next chance for Martinez and Aguayo to speak out to end agricultural burning will come this summer when a phase-out plan comes out for review.



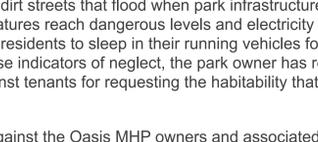
The Neighbors Near Northpointe Demanded: We Won't Be Ignored

Neighbors in South Fresno refused to back down from continued environmental injustice that has been perpetuated by years of the city's land use and zoning practices around their homes. A new warehouse building just west of an existing Amazon distribution center was their latest threat, and the community demanded protections and mitigation measures from the construction and operation of the warehouses.

The City of Fresno and the warehouse developer took note and agreed to complementary settlement agreements. Among the protections secured by residents, a community benefits fund will fund home upgrades that minimize air, noise, dust and light impacts from warehouse construction and operations; City water and wastewater services will extend to homes near the facilities where wells are going dry and septic tanks are failing; and transportation improvements will increase mobility and safety.

The settlement reinforces what we know: community voices must be heard in development and land use decisions. Going forward, the city and industry must put an end to doing business as usual. Rather, they must listen to and partner with residents to meaningfully address decades of racially discriminatory practices through community-driven solutions.

The Personification of Courage in Desert Mobile Home Park



In the desert land of the Eastern Coachella Valley a few miles from the Salton Sea, justice remains elusive for hundreds of residents of Oasis Mobile Home Park. Tenants, fed up with intimidation from their landlord and the dirty water running into their homes, have also grown tired of waiting for justice to arrive. Instead, they took courageous steps to seek it. They brought legal action against the park owner and, simultaneously, took their policy solution to the state Capitol.

Since at least April 2019, the water at Oasis has been polluted with arsenic at levels that have reached nearly 10 times the legal drinking water standard. A crumbling, leaky sewage system overflows onto dirt streets that flood when park infrastructure fails and when it rains. Food spoils as temperatures reach dangerous levels and electricity cuts out regularly for hours at a time forcing residents to sleep in their running vehicles for relief from extreme heat. In addition to these indicators of neglect, the park owner has repeatedly taken retaliatory actions against tenants for requesting the habitability that he owes them.

Tenants brought suit against the Oasis MHP owners and associated businesses earlier this year for uninhabitable conditions, retaliation, and intimidation. They raised their fight to the state Capitol where residents are working with legislators to secure relocation to safe, affordable and healthy housing.

The litigation is ongoing, and the case for relocation is building momentum locally and in Sacramento. Read more about this effort. For more information, go to <https://leadershipcounsel.org/category/justice-for-oasis/>.

Help this work continue

Getting to the Root of the Housing Crisis

The Campaign for Inclusionary Zoning in Merced

Like other jurisdictions in inland California, developers are building houses in the City of Merced, but not for lower income tenants. This exacerbates both an affordable housing and fair housing crisis in the City. Building on growing momentum from a coalition of Merced residents demanding changes in policy to address these complementary obstacles to housing access, community leaders and organizational partners are now working with City officials to develop systemic solutions to further both affordable and fair housing goals in Merced. These solutions, the resident and advocate coalition insist, will involve various tools, including development of an inclusionary zoning policy whereby future housing developments must include substantial affordable housing opportunities Stay tuned, and learn more here, as this effort heats up.

Making Right to Counsel Real in Fresno

As temporary protections sunset and rents rise, the threat of an eviction crisis looms in Fresno. This is a crisis that will only build on an eviction trend that was booming pre pandemic. Less than 1% of renters have legal representation in eviction cases, compared to 73% of landlords, and thus many tenants leave their homes due to illegal evictions or default judgments. Tenants, Leadership Counsel, Faith in the Valley, and other partner organizations developed and advocated for adoption of an eviction diversion and homelessness prevention program proposal that includes: outreach and education for tenants and landlords, legal assistance to tenants to answer questions and help fill out court documents, and direct legal representation in the event that an unlawful detainer action moves forward.

While much remains to be debated, the coalition hopes to see a public hearing in the City of Fresno the first half of this year.

In the Capitol

We kicked off 2021 with a robust and diverse portfolio that included both legislative and budget advocacy. Our legislative portfolio this year is focused on an equitable recovery, increased access to decision-making, increased access to safe and affordable water, tenant protection from short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19, and decreased reliance on polluting biofuels.

Access to Safe And Affordable Drinking Water

Senate Bills 222 and 223, authored by Senator Bill Dodd, would establish the framework of a low-income water rate assistance program, and better protect households from water shutoff if they fall behind on their water bills.

SB 403, authored by Senator Lena Gonzalez, would build on the State Water Resources Control Board's existing authority to order water system consolidation when a system consistently fails to provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water. Specifically, it would allow the State Board to order consolidation when a system is at risk of failure and, in doing so, prevent drinking emergencies before they arise.

Access to Local Decision-Making

Assembly Bill 339 (Alex Lee) makes public participation more equitable by expanding access to local government decision-making bodies to communities who experience geographic, physical, or linguistic barriers to participation. AB 339 ensures that all public meetings have both a telephonic and an internet-based service option for the public to join and that interpretation and translation services are available, that governments have a system in place for requesting them, and that the system is publicized.

Keeping People Safe in their Homes

COVID-19 has intensified the housing crisis in California. We worked alongside partners and communities to develop SB 91 to ensure tenants would be able to remain in their homes, and to ensure that tenant protections and rental assistance reached Inland California communities where little to no local protections exist. While SB 91 fell short in many ways of fully protecting tenants from unfair evictions, it did prevent an eviction wave while tenants face the health and economic challenges of COVID-19. SB 91 protections are set to expire in June and our work continues to ensure tenants remain in their home; financial assistance is provided to eliminate rental and utility debt; and that tenants do not face future economic and housing insecurity due to no fault of their own.

AB 1487 (Gabriel) seeks to stop homelessness before it starts by establishing a state fund for eviction prevention services. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that the State invest in the housing stability of low-income renters and in an equitable recovery for everyone. We will continue to advocate, not only for a Local Right to Counsel program in the City of Fresno, but at the State level as well.

State Budget Advocacy to Ensure a Just and Equitable Recovery

Leadership Counsel also spent the early days of 2021 identifying critical priorities for state spending and advocated for inclusion of certain investments that will usher in a just and equitable recovery. Identified priorities include rental and utility debt protection from people hardest hit by COVID-19's health and economic impacts, access to legal representation for tenants, protections from pesticide exposure, increased and improved investments in climate resilience and air quality protection, and housing alternatives for Oasis Mobile Home Park residents.

Budget advocacy will be a primary focus of our work between now and June, when the state passes its annual spending plan.

It does not stop here - Donate Now