



In Southern California, environmental justice concerns are deeply intertwined with Safe Routes to School. Communities with populations that are predominantly Latinx and low-income suffer the greatest burden of pollution and bad air quality, in addition to lacking infrastructure that makes streets safe for walking and biking. Yet for many residents, walking or taking transit are their only options for transportation. For advocates working to advance policies and programs that support healthy, active communities, it is crucial to connect active transportation issues with environmental justice.

With support from Kaiser Permanente, the Safe Routes Partnership has a senior equity and policy manager, Demi Espinoza, working to uplift environmental justice and transportation equity policy changes in Southern California. Demi's intersectional advocacy and coalition partnerships have helped disadvantaged communities in the Inland Empire make tangible progress toward safety and environmental improvements.



One such community is Muscoy, CA, an unincorporated area of San Bernardino County that has one of the worst air quality scores in California, with a CalEnviroScreen burden profile of 96-100 percent. CalEnviroScreen is a mapping tool that helps identify California communities that are most affected by many sources of pollution and where people are often especially vulnerable to pollution's effects, and the tool helps guide California's environmental justice advocacy work. Muscoy's population is 82 percent Latinx and predominantly low-income. As in other communities in the region, many people in Muscoy rely on walking and public transit to get around, and streets are often dangerous for people on foot. In addition, the poor air quality makes it dangerous for young children, older adults, and people with asthma or other health problems to walk or be active outside. A recent survey found that 79 percent of parents in Muscoy believe walking to school is a healthier option, but 74 percent do not allow their children to walk under current conditions.

Grassroots Organizing Takes Root

In 2018, a community group in Muscoy, SOAR IE, began organizing to address safety concerns and poor walking conditions around schools in the area. The group contacted the office of Assemblymember Eloise Reyes to request a meeting to discuss Safe Routes to School. The Assemblymember's office did not have any prior experience with Safe Routes to School, so they reached out to Demi and asked her to attend the

meeting to provide expertise. That was the beginning of a robust partnership between SOAR IE and the Safe Routes Partnership that has resulted in new funding opportunities, infrastructure improvements, and ongoing environmental justice advocacy in Muscoy.

After the meeting with Assemblymember Reyes, Demi worked with SOAR IE and Muscoy residents to pick a policy project focused on improving walkability in the neighborhood. She helped them organize a walk audit around two schools, where volunteers took photos to document the hazardous conditions around the schools: incomplete or missing sidewalks, dangerous street crossings, high traffic speeds, lots of idling trucks contributing to poor air quality, and limited accessibility for people with disabilities. "Quite a few students use wheelchairs, and to get to school they have to go through gravel where the sidewalk is missing," said Demi. "We also observed many students crossing mid-block through traffic to get to school, because there isn't any safe way to cross."

Demi worked with Maha Rizvi, legislative liaison with Assemblymember Reyes, to train 15 residents to conduct bike counts at the two schools on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for two weeks to document observations, street conditions, and how many kids were walking and biking. "There's currently no bike infrastructure, and the kids who do bike have to ride in the street or on the shoulder of the road that's often obstructed by gravel and debris," said Demi.



Go Human Tactical Urbanism Event Builds Community Support

After the bike counts, Demi applied for a \$3,500 Go Human community engagement grant to fund a tactical urbanism project. “Our goal was to show the community, if we had the walking and biking infrastructure we want, this is what the street would look and feel like,” she said. Community members agreed on three priorities to showcase during the pop-up event. They created sidewalk bulbouts using tires and plants and they also painted temporary artistic crosswalks designed by students, based on children’s books. Since Muscoy is a rural community in the desert where it gets hot and there is very little shade, they built a bus shelter out of pallets to help shield people from the sun. The bus shelter is still standing and being used today, months after the event.

Nearly 50 volunteers showed up to build the pop-up project, and on the day of the event, more than 150 people showed up to experience the street. Demi helped set up a feedback station where people could share their experience in English or Spanish, and also hosted a press conference in English and Spanish with city council, parents, and students.

“The pop-up event was a huge success, and it helped build significant momentum and community support for better walking conditions,” said Demi.

Demi and advocacy partners leveraged feedback from the event and community support to convince the county to pursue funding through California’s Active Transportation Program. Demi wrote portions of the application for \$200,000. Unfortunately, the project was not awarded funding during Cycle 4. “The ATP application process is extremely competitive, and they are looking to fund the most transformative projects. Our proposal to build basic infrastructure like sidewalks, bulbouts, and a bus shelter was not considered transformative enough, even though it would have been transformative to people who walk on that street every day in Muscoy,” said Demi. However, as a result of her advocacy and relationship-building, Demi was able to push the County to include Vermont Elementary in their Countywide Plan efforts and bring non-infrastructure educational resources to the area in 2019 and 2020.



Bringing Safe Routes to Every School in Muscoy

This spring, Demi connected Muscoy to another unique Safe Routes to School opportunity—the Safe Routes Partnership’s Safe Routes to School Launch program. Muscoy is one of five California communities that received free technical assistance valued at \$10,000 through the program, which provides communities with the tools, trainings, and assistance they need to develop effective, comprehensive Safe Routes to School programs. The National Partnership’s consulting staff will conduct a policy and data review, and host a workshop on how to start and sustain a local Safe Routes to School program with elected officials, agency and school staff, families, and community members. National Partnership staff will then develop a tailored Safe Routes to School Initial Action Plan for Muscoy based upon the workshop planning efforts. As a result, every school in Muscoy will have the opportunity to participate in Safe Routes to School activities, and it will provide a roadmap for future applications for grants to implement infrastructure improvements. California Walks is also conducting a workshop on bike and pedestrian improvements near the schools and Demi is represented on the committee to help assist as well.

While Demi continues to help Muscoy residents advance active transportation initiatives, she is also involved in environmental justice initiatives that will benefit Muscoy and other disadvantaged communities in the Inland Empire. Demi sits on the steering committee for Assembly Bill 617, a measure that mandates community-driven action strategies to reduce air pollution and improve public health for communities who experience disproportionate burden of poor air quality. Muscoy is one of the first 10 communities included in the pilot year, and will receive resources to help engage community members in crafting air pollution reduction strategies. Demi is partnering with other local community-based organizations through AB 617 and hopes to advocate for air quality monitoring at Muscoy schools that includes educational citizen science components to build knowledge among residents. In recognition of Demi's extensive work with the community of Muscoy, she was nominated by Assemblymember Reyes as a finalist for Women of the Year in February, 2019.

“We’re excited to continue engaging the community around intersectional issues of transportation and climate justice,” said Demi.