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# PHOTOVOICE:

## Giving Local Health Departments a New Perspective on Community Health Issues

### Abstract

This article describes how local health departments (LHDs) can use Photovoice to complement quantitative data, gain a community perspective on health concerns, and promote community education and health advocacy. It identifies the key elements of an LHD Photovoice project. Photovoice is an engaging photography and storytelling technique that offers community residents an opportunity to share their perceptions and impressions of their community and of the local conditions that affect their community's health. Examples demonstrate how one local health department in California has used Photovoice and identify lessons that have been learned over the past several years.

### Setting the Stage

Local Health Departments (LHDs) are responsible for conducting needs assessments, advocacy efforts and program evaluations. Photovoice, an innovative process utilizing the skills of community members, offers an important tool for assessing community assets and needs. It is a valuable addition to the traditional use of quantitative data. Through the use of Photovoice, community members from different backgrounds and neighborhoods use photography to tell their stories about health issues affecting their communities. Contra Costa Health Services (CCHS) has found these compelling images and essays to be a starting point for identifying important issues that are sometimes overlooked or simply unrecognized by LHDs. In addition, Photovoice can be a springboard for community participation in local health efforts to address issues identified through the eyes of the resident photographers.



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## What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a technique that enables community residents of all ages and languages to share information about their communities through pictures.<sup>1</sup> It serves as a grassroots approach to photography and social action. The Photovoice methodology was developed by Dr. Caroline Wang in 1992. It was first used to empower women living in the remote countryside of Yunnan Province in China to use photographs and narrative stories about their photographs to influence policies that affect their lives.<sup>2</sup> As part of the Photovoice process, cameras are given to community residents. Residents then take photos and tell stories from their unique perspectives about life in their communities. They are encouraged to focus on community assets, community interests and needs, and anything else they think policy-makers need to know about the health of their community. Photovoice offers project participants an opportunity to define for themselves and others what is valuable and worth preserving, and what needs to be changed.<sup>3</sup> According to Caroline Wang, Photovoice is based on the premise, “What experts think is important may not match what people at the grassroots think is important.”

Photovoice accomplishes the following objectives:

- Engages community residents to document their community’s strengths and problems
- Promotes dialogue about important community health issues through facilitated group discussion about photographs
- Provides qualitative data to LHDs for program planning, needs assessment and evaluation
- Engages community residents in partnerships with their LHD
- Advocates for community health issues with local policy-makers to influence and change policy
- Educates the broader community about local health issues

<sup>1</sup> PhotoVoice Community Assessment Through Pictures. South Shasta Healthy Eating, Active Communities Project.

<sup>2</sup> Wang CC, Burris MA, Xiang, Y. Chinese village women as visual anthropologists: A participatory approach to reaching policymakers. *Soc Sci Med* 1996; 42:1391–1400.

<sup>3</sup> Photovoice.com method

## Value to Local Health Departments

Traditionally, LHDs collect quantitative data for assessment, identification of trends, and planning. They use that data to issue reports, illustrate program needs and accomplishments, and develop content for their literature and websites. This quantitative data is valuable but, as we’ve learned from our work in communities, it is only one part of the story. With the addition of qualitative data through techniques such as Photovoice, the LHD is able to glimpse how residents see the communities in which they live. These images and stories provide LHDs, and even communities themselves, with ideas for program direction, community priorities, and new LHD practices, in a way that often complements what quantitative data trends suggest.

Photovoice provides an opportunity for the community to have a voice through an accessible medium—a camera. It can be used in myriad ways with a wide range of community members who have varying levels of language skills, literacy and comfort talking with LHD employees. It is an empowerment and youth development tool as well. As part of our TeenAge Program, high school students became trainers for a middle school Photovoice project. Furthermore, our Tobacco Prevention Coalition and Alcohol and Other Drugs Services programs have used Photovoice-like techniques to educate and mobilize youth around key health issues, reduce youth access to alcohol and tobacco, and pass local tobacco ordinances.

Photovoice provides a forum for residents to examine the underlying causes of health and well-being from their own perspective and then communicate those issues to LHD staff. It also helps LHD staff understand what “public health” means from the community’s perspective. In discussions about their photographs and what they’ve seen, project participants share profound insights with public health professionals about the connections between their health and issues such as neighborhood blight, housing, and limited access to fresh foods.

Photovoice is a strong advocacy tool for communities and LHDs, a community education strategy and

a tool for social change. The photos often present a compelling argument for action. For example, in Richmond, California as part of our West County Picture This project, one resident took a photo of filthy drinking fountains at a local school. When the photo and essay were shown to school officials, a cleanup effort was launched. In our Central County Picture This project, one resident took a photo of a portable toilet that was dirty and inadequately maintained. She pointed out it was the only toilet in a newly built park where soccer teams practice and play every weekend. After the participant showed this photo to city officials, a bank of portable toilets appeared. Finally, as a result of a countywide Photovoice project with homeless individuals, the photographs taken and the stories told by the homeless participants were exhibited in the Board of Supervisors chambers, bringing attention and action to the issues that were raised.

Photovoice provides an excellent tool for bridging cultures and language barriers. Many of our communities in Contra Costa County are changing, with new immigrants entering what had once been more homogeneous, low-income neighborhoods. As a result, ethnic tensions threaten to divide common local interests. With Photovoice, photos become the shared language. Photovoice allows diverse communities to come together and share concerns about common problems. It forges a sense of community that a more traditional town meeting does not. For example, in the East County Picture This Project in April 1998, African-American and Hispanic project participants were surprised to see how many of them had taken photographs of garbage and trash. In fact, some participants from each ethnic group had taken photos of the same trash. This turned out to be an important experience in building a sense of cross-ethnic community pride as a common value and a shared focus community action.

Much to our surprise, we learned that Photovoice could also be an assessment tool for understanding more about how to make changes in the built environment—the physical environment in which we live—by

bringing to the process the view through the eyes of those who live in that environment. For example, as part of the Central County Picture This project, one mother took a photograph of a badly broken up sidewalk and pointed out that pushing strollers over that kind of sidewalk was virtually impossible. In our Teen-Age Program Project at a local high school, one participant took a photograph of open space in the eastern portion of the county and then wrote about how this space was slowly disappearing as more and more subdivisions were being built. Another youth, also in that project, took a photo of a large sign at a strip mall that advertised all the fast food restaurants in that complex. Through the photograph and written words, this young man explained how the availability of fast food in his community was contributing to both poor eating habits and the lack of family time together over a meal at home.



*“This is a picture taken at Grant Elementary School. I see an ugly water sink. I used to be a student there. It used to be one of the best and cleanest schools. Everybody drinks out of here. You can get bacteria, germs, and infected blood from this. This exists because people are too lazy to clean it. No one cares to clean it up. We should get the City of Richmond to get a supervisor over there to check the school. I don’t want this for my kids someday. They say kids are the future of the world but they’re not even taking care of this school.”—David Rivera*

## Photovoice Examples

When CCHS' Family Maternal and Child Health Program conducted its first Photovoice project, managers realized that the community defined family, maternal and child health issues very differently than the LHD. For example, while the LHD was focused on issues such as low birth weight, infant mortality and teen pregnancy, the community was taking pictures that underscored the importance of cleaning up schools, getting rid of trash and making communities safe places to live. One example of that different perspective was the photo one participant took of a young woman with a baby. To the LHD, it was a good illustration of the need for more education about teen pregnancy prevention. But the participant photographer explained, "This young mother is sad. The baby's father beat her while she was pregnant, she was living with her parents for safety reasons." The message from the participant was that, above and beyond the issue of teen pregnancy prevention, the LHD needed to find ways to provide support for teen parents.



The Monument Community Partnership Photovoice Project was a joint effort between CCHS, the Monument Community Partnership and community residents living in this diverse, low-income neighborhood in the city of Concord. The Project was the LHD's first effort to use Photovoice in an open-ended way without a predetermined theme. The Partnership was intrigued with the idea of using Photovoice to engage its largely monolingual Spanish-speaking community in the process of describing and setting priorities for improving their community's health. Residents were recruited through existing formal and informal community groups. Training was provided in Spanish and English. The resulting photos and stories were used with demographic and health data to create a dynamic and compelling profile of the Monument Corridor neighborhood. The images and descriptions expanded the understanding of the health department and other institutional partners of the concerns and assets of this community, and increased the department's credibility with its residents.

To the surprise of staff, pedestrian safety was identified as a key community concern. One resident neighborhood action team subsequently received training from CCHS staff when they wanted to advocate for traffic-calming strategies. In addition, the Monument Community Partnership recently joined with CCHS and others to secure funding to improve the built environment to promote healthy eating and active living.

## How Photovoice Works

The planning and implementation steps for a Photovoice project are described below.<sup>4</sup> However, as we have learned from our experiences, it may not be possible or necessary to complete all of these steps for each project. We have found that Photovoice is flexible and can be adapted to the needs of many topics and different situations.

You may want to include as many parts of the Photovoice process as possible, particularly if you intend to duplicate the process in different venues or use the information for assessment or evaluation purposes. The priorities, available resources and timeline for the project may dictate how rigorously you follow the suggested steps. While there is a broad range of ways in which Photovoice can be conducted, according to Caroline Wang there are three key elements that make a project useful for communities and LHDs. These three include: 1) Enabling people to record and reflect their community's strengths and problems through photographs; 2) Providing an opportunity for dialogue about the photographs through group discussions; and 3) Engaging policy-makers to make changes based on community ideas and input ([www.photovoice.com](http://www.photovoice.com) website).

## Planning and Implementation Steps: Project Planning

- Decide what you are going to do and why, including defining the broader goals and objectives, from which segments of the community you want to hear, and on what health issues you want community input
- Engage resident participation in the planning
- Determine your budget and staff resources (budget may include food, location, cameras, developing, childcare, staff time, etc.)
- Design recruitment strategies and materials
- Recruit participants, including building on existing networks

<sup>4</sup> A more extensive description of Photovoice steps can be found online at [www.photovoice.com](http://www.photovoice.com)

- Coordinate logistics, including purchasing disposable cameras, identifying and confirming a space for sessions, planning for film developing, purchasing food for sessions, setting up childcare and translation as needed

- Share photos and essays with policy-makers and key community leaders
- Conduct participatory evaluation of policy and program implementation

## Getting Started

- Train the Photovoice project trainers/leaders
- Schedule sessions—including how many, what time of day, convenient locations for residents, etc.
- Assemble necessary consent forms

## Launching Your Project

- Conduct Photovoice training sessions with Photovoice participants, including information on photographic ethics
- Agree on the purpose and/or themes for taking pictures
- Take pictures, including giving participants envelopes to mail their disposable cameras back to you, and arranging for developing film. Based on your participant group, you may need to develop an alternate plan for collecting film
- Schedule and facilitate group discussion about the pictures, including exploring any problems, challenges or surprises they encountered while taking pictures
- Encourage critical reflection and dialogue, including selecting photographs for discussion, storytelling, and organizing the issues, themes and theories
- Document the stories, e.g. through traveling photo exhibits, newspaper articles or power point presentations

## Making Change Happen

- Discuss next steps, including with whom the participants want to share their stories and the information they learned from the photos
- Reach policy-makers, donors, media, researchers, community members and others who may be mobilized to create change

## Key Elements for Photovoice

In our experience with Photovoice, we have found that the following activities are important to a successful project:

- It is crucial to identify the themes and/or issues to address in conjunction with community members. Sometimes, the LHD has an issue or theme about which they want information from community residents. At the same time, community residents may have specific issues they would like to see explored. Sample themes might include: community pride as a health issue; safety in the neighborhood; or recreational activities in the community. CCHS has used Photovoice to raise awareness about the barriers the homeless community faces in getting services and housing; how tobacco advertising influences and affects youth; healthy eating for middle school youth; the ways in which youth and adults perceive the communities in which they live; and understanding what improving family health means to the communities we serve.
- Fliers and other community outreach strategies need to be developed to reach and recruit as many people as possible to ensure that a good cross section of the community knows about and has the opportunity to participate in the project. LHD community outreach workers should know about the Photovoice project being planned so they can spread the word among the people with whom they come into contact. At the same time, be aware that you could get more participants than you have planned for. One CCHS project aimed to recruit 25 people and was so successful that it drew 43 adults and 23 children, even though we only had responses that 25 people would attend.

## Key Elements for Photovoice continued

- Storytelling, dialogue and discussion among project participants are an essential part of the Photovoice process. This involves writing down people's answers to questions designed to help focus the participants' stories about their photographs. Since not everyone is comfortable with writing, there should be ample opportunities for residents to show the photos they have taken to one another in small groups and simply tell the stories that go with them. They can be encouraged to answer a series of questions (see below) verbally while someone else records what is being said. Then, the participant can review what that person has written and add to it or change it.
- Be sure to bring enough cameras, food and other supplies, just in case you have more people in attendance than you anticipated. You may not be able to know ahead of time how many people will respond to recruitment efforts and show up at your first session. This can have an impact on space used, supplies and staffing.



*"This is right in front of my friend's house. It's a broken sidewalk and it should be fixed because someone could fall when they're on their skates or bikes. Someone could walk by, fall, and break a bone. The problem is here because no one has fixed it. We could call the city and tell them that they need to fix the sidewalk before someone falls and makes a complaint." —Magdalena Ceja*

Caroline Wang asks participants to answer questions with the guideline of the word "SHOWED":

- S** What do you See happening here?
- H** What is really Happening?
- O** How does this relate to Our lives?
- W** Why does this problem/condition/asset exist?
- E** How could this image Educate the community/policy-makers, etc?
- D** What can we Do about it?

CCHS staff have modified these questions to create the acronym "PHOTO":

- P** Describe your Picture
- H** What is Happening in your picture
- O** Why did you take a picture Of this?
- T** What does this picture Tell us about life in your community?
- O** How does this picture provide Opportunities for us to improve life in your community?

## Key Elements for Photovoice continued

- Childcare is an essential part of this project if you hope to recruit the participation of parents and other adult caregivers. Be sure you have someone who is trained and capable of caring for several children at one time. Have games, crayons, paper, balls, etc. available for the children to play with.

## Lessons Learned

- **Translating stories into action is not always easy or possible.** It takes dedicated staff time to be able to work with Photovoice participants to follow up with policy-makers and government officials. Some of the issues that participants identify may be outside the purview of your agency. This provides an opportunity for collaboration with other agencies in the county.
- **Managing the expectations of Photovoice participants is important.** Be honest up front about whether the LHD can organize meetings for them to meet with community leaders and/or policy-makers to talk about some of the issues. Acknowledge the importance of all issues and ask participants to help prioritize the most important ones. Give the participants realistic parameters of what can be accomplished.
- **Finding dedicated staff time for your Photovoice project may be a challenge.** Sometimes you can combine Photovoice projects with other programs already in place. Even if you don't have the resources to address the issues raised, a LHD can be conscious of them and can integrate them into future work. We have found that Photovoice is an excellent small-scale project for a student intern.
- **Dialogue about the photos is important.** If there is dialogue between an initial round and a second round of photography, the second round is often much better because participants have had a chance to see what others are doing and talk about what they've seen and how to best capture what they want to portray.

- **Not everyone is going to like the photos that were taken or the stories that the photos are meant to tell.** In our first Photovoice project, several participants took photos of one of the county's health clinics. The participants complained that it was not clean, that there were long waits to get services, and that the services were not good. Some staff and administrators were upset by the photos, particularly those who worked at that site.

## Summary

Photovoice provides LHDs with an exciting opportunity to gather rich information about the interests and needs of the community. It is a community engagement tool that offers a springboard for action, either by the community, by the LHD, or together in partnership. It is an approach that takes a good deal of time, effort and energy. We have found that the benefits are definitely worth what is involved to implement a successful project. Through Photovoice, the LHD can work with community members to identify and address important health problems. It gives community members a voice and opens up dialogue about key issues that may be just below the surface.

As with any project of this nature, there will always be unanticipated outcomes – some of these will bring considerable value to the work of your LHD and some will undoubtedly raise problems that need to be addressed. Photovoice is an excellent tool for building community capacity by enabling community residents to identify problems and issues they see as important and then facilitating their ability to address these issues with LHD staff, other community members and appropriate policy-makers.

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To read more about the CCHS Public Health Division's work on photovoice and photos from our projects, visit <http://www.cchealth.org/topics/community/photovoice/>