



Make the Road's Healthy Homes Initiative

Grant Results Report – July, 2008

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Make the Road New York

301 Grove Street

Brooklyn, NY 11237

Phone: 718-418-7690, ext. 231

Contact: Irene Tung, Director of Organizing

irene@maketheroad.org

Grant Title: Healthy Homes Initiative

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Period Covered by the Grant: December 2006 – July 2008

Foundation Program Officer: Sara Timen

ABOUT THE GRANTEE

Make the Road New York (formerly Make the Road by Walking) is a nonprofit, membership-led organization with offices in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. Its members are primarily low-income and recent immigrant New Yorkers.

Make the Road New York promotes economic justice, equity, and opportunity for all area residents through community and electoral organizing, strategic policy advocacy, leadership development, adult education, and citizen services. It provides free legal services for problems related to housing, employment, debt, disability, and government benefits.

Healthy Homes Initiative

THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED

Bushwick has the highest rate of children hospitalized for asthma in Brooklyn—four times the citywide average. Asthma also is the leading cause for children to miss school. In low-income neighborhoods such as Bushwick, poor housing conditions and poor maintenance practices in rental apartments lead to rodent and insect infestations and the use of pesticides, which can trigger asthma flare-ups. With education, residents can remove some asthma triggers and improve indoor air quality and their living environment.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The Healthy Homes Initiative taught families with asthma how to reduce their exposure to indoor triggers such as dust, mold, mildew, rodent infestation, bedbugs, cockroaches, and pesticides. Through community outreach and education, using intensive block-by-block community organizing and partnerships with a local hospital and the New York City Department of Health, Healthy Homes sought to reduce the number of hospital visits for asthma.

UNDER THE GRANT:

Over 18 months, the Healthy Homes Initiative accomplished the following:

- **Community outreach.** Some 28 volunteer asthma block captains—who received six hours of training—knocked on 6,000 doors in Bushwick, and spoke with more than 3,000 people, screening them for asthma and distributing information on reducing asthma triggers.
- **Health promoters.** Three paid health promoters—who received 20 hours of training—conducted home visits, identified 750 households as having a person with asthma, and enrolled those households in an asthma registry. Through an intensive home visit program, they followed up with 176 of these households (in person and over the phone) regarding asthma symptoms and strategies to reduce

- asthma triggers. To help in that effort, health promoters distributed 157 allergen-proof dust-mite covers for mattresses and pillows. They also distributed 171 AeroChamber spacers to maximize the dose of medication delivered by an asthma inhaler.
- **Bilingual workshops.** Staff conducted seven bilingual interactive asthma and mold workshops, reaching approximately 210 Bushwick residents.
 - **Community asthma summit.** In May 2008, staff conducted an educational event attended by 77 people.
 - **Outreach to medical community.** Despite efforts put forth through cooperation with Woodhull Medical Center and the offering of continuing medical education credits to health care providers, area physicians did not attend a presentation on the effort to reduce asthma rates in Bushwick.
 - **Bushwick Asthma Registry.** Project staff worked in collaboration with Woodhull Medical Center to create the Bushwick Asthma Registry. The registry tracks information about individuals with asthma, its severity, their exposure to indoor allergens, knowledge about asthma treatments, barriers to reducing allergen exposure, emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and missed school days.
 - **Street theatre presentations.** To engage and educate the public on the danger of indoor asthma triggers and the most effective ways to remove them, 10 volunteers presented 30 short (10-minute), interactive performances at public parks, on street corners, and at community events.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT AND CHANGES TO ORIGINAL WORK PLAN

In the original project proposal, staff envisioned training and giving stipends to 25 individuals to do six intensive home visits each with their neighbors. They reevaluated, and decided that in order to guarantee higher quality services, it made more sense to provide in-depth training and supervision to 20-hour-a-week health promoters who would be responsible for conducting 50 or more home visits each. “It was more feasible to train

more people as volunteers to do outreach for the program through door-knocking, but to then have our paid health promoters do the follow-up home visits,” says Irene Tung, director of organizing.

Another change to the program involved tracking the asthma symptoms of the 176 families. “Instead of using asthma diaries, we needed more phone calls and in-person visits. Many people had low literacy or would lose the diary. So keeping track of their symptoms became more staff-intensive,” says Tung.

About the inability to engage individual physicians in private practice in Bushwick, “We were overly optimistic,” Tung says. “We had more success reaching doctors who were affiliated with hospitals and larger institutions in Bushwick and in other parts of the city.”

Lastly, Make the Road New York employs a housing attorney who takes landlords to court to force them to make much-needed repairs. While a number of asthma registry participants were helped, mold, leaks, and rodents continue to present health risks to many Bushwick tenants. For example, one Healthy Homes family had a leaky roof, rodent infestations, and mold in the bathroom and living room. Despite several court orders, no repairs have been made.

“The law is not that effective,” explains Tung. “The extent of the mold in an apartment has to be 25 square feet in order to be considered an immediately hazardous violation by a housing inspector. Lots of asthmatics have 10 or 15 square feet. We can distribute all the HEPA air filters, pillows, and mattress covers possible, but if we can’t get rid of mold—if it is not even a violation—we are fighting a losing battle.”

PROGRAM RESULTS

The Healthy Homes Initiative has helped improve many residents’ health by connecting them with asthma specialists, persuading their doctors to prescribe preventive medicines, and encouraging individuals to use other preventive measures.

Based on data collected between February 2007 and June 2008 from 176 asthmatics enrolled in the Healthy Homes home visit program, 68% of participants reported that they had less frequent asthma symptoms, 26% said symptoms were the same, and 6% said the frequency of asthma symptoms worsened.

Of those who reported improvement in their asthma condition, 15% said their daily symptoms changed to every other day, 11% said their every other day symptoms changed to twice a month, and 8% said their every other day symptoms now occur less than once a month. Other program participants recorded various other changes in frequency of symptoms, including 5% who said their daily symptoms now occur less than once a month.

Program staff cited these examples of individuals¹ who saw an improvement in their asthma symptoms:

- Since Carmen Reyes began taking **preventive medicine nightly**, her asthma cough wakes her up only about twice a month, instead of every night.
- Since Eduardo Canales filled out **asthma action plans** with his children's doctors, their asthma has improved. Jeffrey, Jansy, and Jonathan, who formerly had nightly symptoms, now have them every two weeks.
- Esther Santiago's asthma has improved, because she now takes preventive medicine and **damp mops** her apartment to control the dust. She, too, has gone from having daily symptoms to having symptoms twice a month.
- Jessica Castillo's son, Jeremiah, who used to have symptoms every week, now has them only once a month since she **switched from using strong-smelling detergents and stopped using cockroach "bombs."**
- Maria Aburto began to use preventive medicine, stopped using strong-smelling detergents, and **covered her mattress and pillow cases** in allergen-proof dust-mite covers, and found that her daily symptoms now occur only every few weeks.

¹ Clients' names have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

- Using an **air purifier** in her bedroom enabled Michelle Minthe to stop waking nightly with her asthma; she now wakes twice a week.
- Project staff helped Cecilia Nolasco persuade her landlord to **fix the mold** and leak in her bathroom. Her grandson Javier used to have asthma symptoms every night and now has them only monthly.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

Project staff worked with Woodhull Hospital, a leader in the fight against childhood asthma, to convene a press conference in February and call attention to indoor asthma triggers. News coverage included the *Daily News*, *AM New York*, *Metro*, *El Diario*, and other local Brooklyn newspapers.

“We are working with a State senator to call attention to the problem of indoor mold and how it exacerbates asthma symptoms,” says Tung. “We also have participated in and testified before the governor’s State Toxic Mold Task Force.”

THE FUTURE

Project staff members plan to send a report about their work to local public officials, city council, and local community groups that work with asthmatics and tenants. They also are in the process of making all the educational materials developed under the project available on the Make the Road New York website.

The project has received private foundation funding to continue some of its work through 2009.



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