

# Greater Sacramento Urban League Program Welcomes People of Color into Booming Cannabis Industry

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**T**hirteen people of color made history recently by mastering the skills to enter Sacramento's legal cannabis industry—with the city's blessing.

The eight men and five women became the first to graduate from the Cannabis Opportunity, Reinvestment and Equity Program (CORE), at the Greater Sacramento Urban League (GSUL). They met 18 consecutive Thursday evenings, learning cannabis business development/operations and marketing.

"CORE has been a long time in the making," GSUL CEO Cassandra H.B. Jennings told guests at the December 19 graduation. "However, the progress we made is evident by our presence here to recognize" the league's initial CORE class.

After California voters legalized recreational marijuana in 2016, 20 years after they legalized medical pot, activists demanded a gateway for people of color in Sacramento to legally sell cannabis in their city.

Underprivileged communities were disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs, the activists said. Starting about 1970, thousands of people of color, particularly African Americans, were arrested for marijuana-related offenses. Their imprisonment separated families, depriving them of college educations and home ownership.

Because of that disenfranchisement, black and non-black latinx people deserved opportunities to enter the legal cannabis sector, an expected \$4-billion-a-year industry in the Sacramento region, the activists maintained.

Gateway proponents included Malaki Seku Amen, of the California Urban Partnership, an economic justice organization supported by The California Endowment.

After negotiations, the Sacramento City Council created the tuition-free CORE in 2018. The \$10,000 fee for a city permit to operate a cannabis business will be waived for CORE graduates. They will still be required to pay for state permits.

Mayor Darrell Steinberg told the graduates: "As we celebrate all the fabulous advances in our city, it's only meaningful if it's inclusive and that it makes up ... for some of the gross injustices that have been done over time to too many people—especially people of color.

"May you all start great and successful businesses."

**"ON BEHALF OF MY COHORTS, WE REALLY APPRECIATE ALL THE HELP [THE CORE PROGRAM] PROVIDED, GIVING US A HAND UP."**

**Billy Adams**  
Graduate, CORE Program

Class speaker Billy Adams said: "On behalf of my cohorts, we really appreciate all the help [the CORE program] provided, giving us a hand up."



"I think it's a good gesture for the city to try to help those who were mostly impacted by the war on drugs," Billy Adams (left), the CORE class speaker, said after the graduation ceremony. He and fellow graduate Miko Banks (right) displayed their certificates of completion. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

In an interview, graduate Miko Banks, a customer service representative for a non-cannabis firm, said: "My plan is to purchase land and build an industrial, commercial building and allow other members of my cohort" to join her cannabis enterprise.

Seku Amen, who aggressively pushed for CORE's approval, could not be reached for comment because he was on vacation.

The city has two CORE-training facilitators. The other: the Sacramento Asian Chamber of Commerce, whose first 50 students recently completed five weeks' training. They received certificates of completion, without a ceremony.

## BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, \$1 billion plan to improve the health of 14 challenged communities across the state. Over the 10 years, residents, community-based organizations and public institutions will work together to address the socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to the poor health of their communities.

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For more info, google  
**city of Sacramento**  
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# One Woman of Color is Making History in Sacramento's Growing Cannabis Industry

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**B**etty Mitchell's uncle was a pioneer in developing medical cannabis in Arkansas.

Now, Mitchell herself is being called a pioneer in Sacramento's emerging \$4-billion-a-year legal marijuana industry.

Her uncle, Dr. Ulysses Hunter, a University of Arkansas physics professor, in the 1970s created a pot-based powder that could be cooked with food to eliminate pain. He packed the powder in 16-oz. glass jars that he donated to the medically uninsured in Arkansas.

"One summer, when I was 15, I tagged along with my uncle as he distributed his product to the poor," Mitchell, a native of the Natural State, recalled recently.

The grateful recipients declared that Dr. Hunter's elixir killed their aches, said Mitchell, who quickly became a believer in medicinal marijuana.

Destined for greatness, this enterprising woman twice made history.

In December, Mitchell was one of 13 people of color who became the first to graduate from the Cannabis Opportunity, Reinvestment and Equity Program (CORE) at the Greater Sacramento Urban League. The tuition-free program was created by the Sacramento City Council to help the underprivileged learn the legal marijuana trade, and how to succeed in it.

"To the 13 pioneers here, we celebrate you," Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg told the graduates. "You are role models for others."

CORE seeks to rectify the wrongs of the war on drugs, in which countless people of color were unjustly imprisoned, starting about 1970.

CORE proponents included local activists such as Malaki Seku Amen, of the California Urban Partnership, an economic justice organization supported by The California Endowment.

**"ACCESS TO CAPITAL IS THE BIGGEST THING THAT HAS KEPT AFRICAN AMERICANS OUT OF THIS [LEGAL CANNABIS] BUSINESS."**

**Betty Mitchell**  
Graduate, CORE Program

Mitchell's other distinction: She was the first CORE participant to obtain a waiver from the city for the cost of a cannabis business operation permit (CBOP).

Though her permit would have cost about \$10,000—such permits can cost much more—CORE graduates will get their Sacramento CBOPs cost-free.

Mitchell did, however, pay \$20,000 for a second permit, from the state, for her Sacramento cannabis enterprise.



Sacramento is doing good by waiving the cost of cannabis business operation permits for CORE graduates, Betty Mitchell said. She plans to start her Sacramento business, Tively, soon. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Her entity, Tively—think of positively, without the first four letters—will sell an improved version of her uncle's medicinal food blend, starting in late February, to honor his legacy.

"Tively will start as a wholesaler to storefronts and dispensaries," said Mitchell, who will remain a social worker in Sacramento, her home since 1985.

"Access to capital is the biggest thing that has kept African Americans out of this [legal cannabis] business," Mitchell said, noting that marijuana remains illegal under federal law, a designation that means no bank loans for pot merchants. "I was lucky: I cashed out my annuities."

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# Keeping People Out of Jail

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

An activist group that stopped an \$89 million expansion of Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center in Elk Grove says its fight for criminal justice reform is not over.

Construction bids for the RCCC project had already been requested in mid-July when members of Decarcerate Sacramento asked the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors to halt it.

The grassroots group kept up the pressure until Nov. 5, when the board abandoned the project. At the time, DS was 5 months old — but it had gained support from private citizens and nonprofits.

“We received congratulatory messages from all over,” Courtney Hanson, a DS organizer, said recently.

For 2020, the group’s priorities include working with county leaders to significantly reduce the county’s jail population, currently believed to number about 3,700, most of whom await trial.

In mid-January, the Sacramento Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild — a champion of human rights — honored DS with a social justice award for its “tireless advocacy of jailhouse conditions, fighting mass incarceration (and) inhumane treatment of the incarcerated.”

The award was accepted by seven DS members, among them civil rights attorney Tifanei Ressler-Moyer.

“There’s no way we would have stopped a jail expansion unless we had a broad and diverse coalition,” Ressler-Moyer told the Guild.

The coalition brought the expansion plan to the public’s attention after the Supervisors had already voted to start accepting bids on April 23. Decarcerate Sacramento, organizing their first action in July, told Supervisors that the plan orchestrated by the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department made no sense.

“WE RECEIVED CONGRATULATORY MESSAGES FROM ALL OVER.”

**Courtney Hanson**  
Organizer, Decarcerate Sacramento

At a time when other cities had moved away from new jail construction and in-custody mental health services, the project would have added new buildings next to RCCC to, among other things, support medical/mental health programs.

Ultimately, three of the five supervisors withdrew their support for the plan, killing it.

For those who want to get involved, DS will host a General Meeting on January 30th, with details on their Facebook page.

One DS coalition member, the Anti Police-Terror Project, recently activated a three-person critical intervention team called Mental Health First that responds to Sacramento disturbances involving people with mental health issues.



Building strong communities, not jails, is a key goal of Decarcerate Sacramento’s Courtney Hanson and Adam Wills of the Anti Police-Terror Project. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

The volunteer responders, including a crisis counselor, are trained to de-escalate crises to keep people out of jail.

The team works Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., APTP member Adam Wills said. Its hotline/textline is 916-670-4062.

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**Decarcerate Sacramento**  
on Facebook or Instagram

# Youth Campaign for More Funding

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**F**our years ago, Dexter Niskala, then a junior at Luther Burbank High, campaigned for Measure Y, which would have created a new tax to fund children's programs in Sacramento.

"I asked hundreds of voters to support Measure Y," Niskala recalled recently.

In June 2016, the initiative was narrowly defeated, falling about 1% shy of the 66.67% supermajority vote required to win.

"Even though we lost," most voters were pro-youth, said Niskala, now a 21-year-old sophomore at Sacramento State University.

Today, Niskala is campaigning for Measure G, which, if approved by voters on March 3, would require the city of Sacramento to allocate 2.5% of its general budget — about \$12 million annually — to youth programs run by the city and nonprofits. This would be in addition to the funding that Sacramento currently devotes to youth programs each fiscal year.

Because Measure G is not a tax, it needs 50% plus one vote to win.

A coalition of 28 organizations — many of them supported by The California Endowment, which has no position on the initiative — has mobilized for Measure G's passage. They include Sacramento Area Congregations Together and the local chapter of the East Bay Asian Youth Center, for which Niskala works.

Measure G proponents collected about 39,000 voter signatures to qualify it for the March primary.

The measure would strengthen critical resources that help impoverished children

succeed, said Ana Taukolo, of the Sacramento Youth Alliance, which is part of the Alliance for Education Solutions, a coalition member.

"For me, it goes back to the saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child,'" Taukolo, 23, said, adding that now, it takes a nation to do that.

"Our villages, our (poor) communities, are hurting," she said. "I would like to see more funding for organizations that are on the ground, in the neighborhoods that are hurting the most," trying to help youth.

Measure G would make that possible, she said.

**"I WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE FUNDING FOR ORGANIZATIONS" TRYING TO HELP YOUTH.**

**Ana Taukolo, age 23**

By serving children and youth most impacted by poverty, trauma and violence, the measure would increase graduation rates and keep kids out of the criminal justice system, said Jim Keddy, of Youth Forward, another coalition member.

Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg is seeking to place a counter-measure for youth funding on the November ballot. If Measure G passes, it would be superseded by his



Youth programs increase graduation rates and reduce the number of kids who enter prison.  
Photo by Kate Gonzales

proposal, which would generate varying amounts of youth funds annually, depending on the economy.

Based on city budget projections over the next four years, the counter-measure could provide between \$2.5 million to \$3 million to youth-serving programs per year.

For more on the mayor's plan, visit <https://engagesac.org/blog-civic-engagement/2020/1/29/a-better-way-mayor-steinberg-offers-plan-to-boost-funding-for-youth>.

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# Activists Seek Justice Reform for Youth Sentenced as Adults

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

As a youth, Kim Kim made one good decision after another — eventually becoming an honors student at Sunny Hills High in Fullerton, Orange County.

“I was in the National Honors Society. And I was the son of a doctor with aspirations to follow in his footsteps to medical school,” Kim, 43, told a Sacramento audience during a recent visit. “I was pretty much a garden-variety nerd, a ‘model minority’ kid.”

Unfortunately, a bad decision—one he wishes he could undo—derailed Kim’s life

At 16, he and four other fellow students joined a plot that led to the brutal beating death of a 17-year-old Santa Ana student. Like the victim, most of the plotters were high achievers from Asian/Pacific Islander (API) families.

During the slaying, inside a private home in 1992, Kim sat in his car outside, as a lookout. One student, the alleged mastermind, believed the victim wanted to tell police about a plan to rob a computer salesman, published reports said.

“I wasn’t an active participant in the crime, but under the law, even minor participants were held liable to the fullest extent,” Kim said. “So at 16, I was arrested, tried as an adult and sentenced to 25 years to life in prison for murder.”

After serving 20 years, Kim was released in 2012.

He now educates on criminal justice issues. California has led the nation in reforms, passing a bill last year which stopped prosecuting 14- and 15-year-olds as adults.

Juveniles’ brains are not fully developed, preventing them from making fully-mature adult judgments, he said, citing scientific studies.

Kim spoke at a symposium at Sacramento’s California Museum, now hosting “smallasaGIANT,” an exhibit by Oakland artist Ise Lyfe, about Californians sentenced as teens to long-term sentences up to life in prison.

“I’M DOING MY BEST TO MAKE UP FOR ALL THE HEARTACHE AND STRESS I PUT (MY PARENTS) THROUGH.”

**Kim Kim**  
Former Juvenile Lifer

The powerful exhibit, ending March 15, is co-sponsored by The California Endowment.

Entitled “Rising Above Shame and Silence,” the symposium drew attention to what Kim described as API families’ longtime refusal to discuss drug addiction, incarceration and other issues that he said impact API’s, just as they afflict people of all races.



“Prosecuting juveniles as adults is wrong,” said Kim Kim, who as a teen was himself tried in adult court for his secondary role in a Santa Ana youth’s murder. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Because of cultural pride, many API’s pretended to be immune to crises, perpetuating the “model-minority myth,” about API’s being trouble-free over-achievers, he told his audience.

API’s are finally discussing these topics, and finding it salutary to do so, said Kim.

The Ohio-born son of Korean immigrants said his parents never abandoned him.

“To this day I’m doing my best to make up for all the heartache and stress I put them through,” said Kim, who is now working in Los Angeles.

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**smallasaGIANT.com**

# Fighting for Family

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Three years ago, Lan Nguyen, then a UCLA grad student, needed a subject for her Master's Thesis in Asian American Studies. Rather than pen a traditional research paper, Nguyen undertook something more daring: She made a documentary film about a family of refugees from Vietnam's indigenous tribes that was torn apart by stringent U.S. deportation policies.

Her explosive movie, "Fighting for Family," or FFF, was recently shown at Sacramento's California Museum.

The screening coincided with an exhibit co-sponsored by The California Endowment, about Californians sentenced as teens to long prison sentences, which, in the case of many immigrants, are followed by deportations. "My main goal in making this movie was to spread awareness about incarceration and deportation of Southeast Asians," said Nguyen, 24, a U.S.-born daughter of Vietnamese refugees, who teaches Ethnic Studies at Cal State Long Beach. "People convicted of crimes aren't bad people. They're people who ... make mistakes and have learned and grown from these mistakes."

FFF captures the story of Chuh A, who fled Communist Vietnam with his parents in 1996 when he was 13. The family settled in North Carolina, where Chuh fell in love with Rex, another refugee from Vietnam.

The couple had four daughters, now ages 6 to 14, but struggled to support them. He worked multiple low-paying jobs. She became a nail technician.

In an act of desperation he regrets, Chuh made extra cash by selling ecstasy, the party drug. Arrested in 2013, he was convicted of felony drug trafficking.

He served nearly three years in prison, during which his legal residency, or green card, expired.

Upon his release, Chuh was seized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which held him for 13 months before deporting him in 2017.

Since then Chuh has led a difficult life, mainly in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon.

**"I ALWAYS CRY EVERY NIGHT BY MYSELF ... LOOKING AT MY KIDS' PICTURES."**

**Chuh A**  
Deported Vietnamese refugee in film  
"Fighting for Family"

He suffers discrimination and police harassment for being a Montagnard, an ethnic minority, and because his father fought beside U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. Chuh's drug-trafficking conviction further limits his job-finding ability.

"I always cry every night by myself ... looking at my kids' pictures," Chuh says in the 31-minute movie, part of which depicts his reunion with Rex and the girls when they visited Vietnam last year. During the reunion, the couple wed.

Through video conferencing, Chuh answered questions from the museum audience. He



Filmmaker Lan Nguyen at a recent screening of her documentary at the California Museum. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

said, for example, that being bilingual — he speaks Vietnamese and English — hasn't helped him get ahead in Vietnam, because the entire system seems to be against him.

The family is fighting for Chuh's return to America.

Under Trump Administration policies, 14,000 to 16,000 Southeast Asian refugees — some from Vietnam, some from other nations, and not all previously incarcerated — face potential deportation.

FFF was scheduled to return May 30 for the Sacramento Asian Pacific Film Festival, with Nguyen speaking. Coronavirus may delay the showing.

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# Not your ordinary nonprofit

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Christmas 2019 came early for Julius Thibodeaux. Fifteen days before the holiday, Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg announced during a City Council meeting that City Manager Howard Chan had reached a decision on efforts to reduce local youth violence: Chan was extending the city's two-year-old, \$1.5 million contract with Advance Peace Sacramento for two more years.

The mayor's words delighted Thibodeaux, APS's strategy program manager. His team contributed heavily to the city having no teen murders in 2018 and 2019 – results that city officials could only dream about when they entered into partnership with APS.

Taking the mic in the council chambers, the grateful Thibodeaux told the city's leaders: "You can feel good about your investment ... You're doing things that are different – things that are new."

APS is not your ordinary nonprofit. From a downtown office, Thibodeaux directs a squad of Senior Fellows, ages 18-29, known as Neighborhood Change Agents. All were previously incarcerated before turning their lives around and returning to their hoods in Oak Park, Del Paso Heights and South Sacramento, where they now mentor Junior Fellows: youth 12 to 17 – including gang members – who are the most likely to be perpetrators and/or victims of shootings.

Along with positive guidance, the youth receive incentives to be law-abiding, said Thibodeaux, who served 23 years in prison for a firearm-related conviction.

In recruiting mentors, "I wasn't looking for someone who could tell war stories about what they had been through, but someone who had influence in their neighborhoods, and who would bring a skill set of how to de-escalate gun violence and be skilled in conflict resolution," he said in an interview.

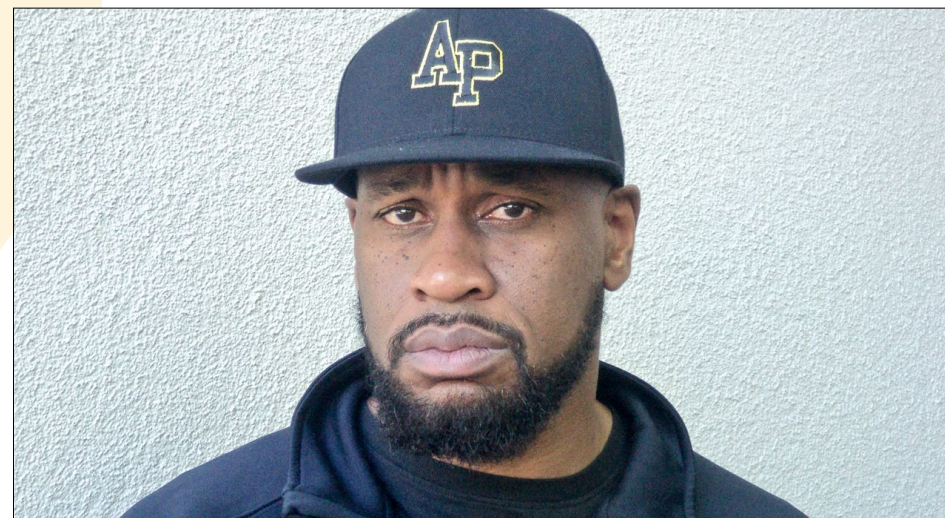
**"YOU DON'T GET ENOUGH CREDIT FOR THE WORK THAT YOU AND YOUR TEAM ARE DOING."**

**Rick Jennings**  
Sacramento City Councilman

APS will continue working with its fellow advocates for nonviolence like Black Child Legacy, Thibodeaux said.

APS's four-year contract stipulated that Chan could end the agreement after two years if the city was unhappy with APS's performance.

While the renewed pact won't mean additional city funding for APS, it does mean the city will honor its ongoing commitment and award APS \$750,000 over the next two years, city spokesman Tim Swanson said in an e-mail. APS also receives funding from the state, CalVIP and The California Endowment.



"The youngsters are making better decisions" that help them avoid gun violence, Julius Thibodeaux of Advance Peace Sacramento said. "Some of them have jobs, or have taken up internships ... Make sure you give the young people credit." Photo by Edgar Sanchez

At the December meeting, Councilman Rick Jennings told Thibodeaux:

"You don't get enough credit for the work that you and your team are doing. Now we have more time to really implement this strategy so we can be the model program for the country."

APS has continued to provide services and supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Thibodeaux, a mom told him gratefully, "Even though we've been locked down, APS has been checking on us, making sure that we have food, water and hygiene."

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# Facts Matter

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Ivan Caballero has thick skin. That would explain why the Sacramento City College freshman recently revealed he doesn't care what President Donald Trump says about news reporters.

Trump has labeled journalists everything from "disgraceful" and "enemies of the state" to purveyors of "fake news."

"He can say whatever he wants," Caballero, 21, said in an interview, with no hint of anger, adding that the president's repeated attacks on the media will not deter him from becoming a news reporter.

"I feel like journalism is the perfect field for me," said Caballero, who lives in Meadowview. "It encompasses my passions of photography and videography, and writing about social issues."

Caballero first appeared in this column in 2017, when he was in Access Sacramento's Neighborhood News Youth Correspondents Program, or NNYCP, which is sponsored in part by The California Endowment.

Access Sacramento, a nonprofit public-access television/radio station, launched the program in 2012. Until December, the young correspondents met in a newsroom in the garage of a Tahoe Park home owned by Isaac Gonzalez, NNYCP's founding director. This year they have met at Capsity Coworking in Sacramento under a new director, Maria Madril Hernandez.

On average, each correspondent works four months, earning minimum wage

while learning the basics of broadcast journalism, from shooting and editing videos to writing on-air scripts.

About 50 students have gone through the program, with the current team consisting of five youths, ages 17 to 24.

Caballero, it turns out, was a youth correspondent longer than usual – a total of nearly four years, until December.

In 2017, the Kennedy High graduate expressed pride in being in the program. He was already sold on a career, saying then, "I want to someday be an actual journalist. I enjoy doing local stories, stories that matter to people."

**"... JOURNALISM IS THE PERFECT FIELD FOR ME."**

**Ivan Caballero**  
Freshman at Sacramento City College

He filed what he called his biggest one in 2016, when Trump was running for president on an anti-immigrant platform. Caballero interviewed local undocumented immigrants, who told him that if Trump became president, they would avoid talking to the police or even going to a hospital for fear of being deported.

"If people are in danger or sick, you want them to get help," Caballero said.



"Journalism has become a multiplatform thing," Ivan Caballero said. "You have to know how to write, how to videotape, how to videoedit, how to take photos, how to interview – but I'm in love with those things."  
Photo by Edgar Sanchez

With City College closed due to coronavirus, he's taking online classes. He eventually plans to attend Fresno State University, where he will major in journalism and communications.

After toiling as a pro newsman, covering traditional beats like the courts and City Hall, Caballero wants to open his own journalism academy. In it, he will impart a key lesson he learned from Gonzalez, the former NNYCP director: Always be factual, always tell the truth.

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# Staying in Place

BY ANNE STOKES

COVID-19 has changed the way people live their lives across the globe and California has not escaped the pandemic's health or economic effects.

Unemployment rates are at record levels and millions are rightfully worried about being able to pay rent. But new regulations are offering temporary relief for tenants. Many local jurisdictions are passing regulations preventing evictions for renters who have lost income due to COVID-19, including Sacramento County and the cities of Sacramento, Rancho Cordova and Elk Grove.

"It allows tenants to have that safety and security ... at a time when folks are not supposed to be out and about. Searching for housing is ridiculously hard and also involves being out during the shelter-in-place order," said Sarah Ropelato, managing attorney at Legal Services of Northern California's Sacramento office. "If we didn't have protections, ... we'd be looking at a vast amount of hardship. Going forward, the reason folks need to know about this *now* is that there's stuff they have to do right now in order to benefit from these protections."

Ordinances differ among jurisdictions, but they typically protect tenants who:

- Are sick due to COVID-19
- Are caring for a sick household member
- Were laid off, lost hours or income due to COVID-19
- Can't work because they're complying with shelter-in-place orders
- Can't work because they have to care for a home-bound, school-aged child

While protections are in place to ensure residents can safely shelter in place and help prevent the spread of coronavirus infections and deaths, there are steps tenants must take in order to be protected under local ordinances:

- Notify landlords of an inability to pay rent in writing
- Notify landlords before rent is due
- Prove that inability to pay rent in full is COVID-19 related
- Pay what they're reasonably able to

**"IT ALLOWS TENANTS TO HAVE THAT SAFETY AND SECURITY ... AT A TIME WHEN FOLKS ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE OUT AND ABOUT."**

**Sarah Ropelato, managing attorney  
Legal Services of Northern California -  
Sacramento**

In addition, ordinances require renters to catch up on rent payments after the governor's emergency declaration has been lifted.

Unfortunately, Ropelato said tenants are still receiving eviction notices. In such cases, Legal Services of Northern California is able to provide counsel, advice and other services. Fellow community groups like Sacramento ACT, Alliance of Californians



Attorney Sarah Ropelato says tenant protections are needed to prevent vast amounts of hardship during the pandemic.  
Photo courtesy of Sarah Ropelato

for Community Empowerment (ACCE) and Sacramento Building Healthy Communities Hub are able to provide direct assistance, as well as outreach efforts to help educate tenants on their rights and responsibilities under the new ordinances.

"ACCE and Sacramento ACT are amazing organizations that are spreading the word, and we're trying to get them the information they need so they're able to tell folks what they need to know," Ropelato said. "It's a concerted effort that we all undertake together."

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or visit **www.lsn.net**.



# Emergency Response

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**W**hen COVID-19 hit greater Sacramento, causing unemployment, hunger and dozens of deaths, one local nonprofit did something about it.

Sacramento Area Congregations Together, or Sac ACT, created a COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund to support low-income families facing financial struggles amid the pandemic. By early May, the fund had nearly \$101,500 – which was distributed among roughly 200 families in Sacramento and Yolo counties, with the neediest families receiving \$500 each.

“We were hearing from a lot of families that they had lost their jobs, and they weren’t going to be able to pay for rent, food, and utilities,” Tere Flores Onofre, Sac ACT’s director of organizing, said recently. “So we decided to start this fund.”

Sac ACT, an advocate for social justice with the support of The California Endowment (TCE), launched the fund in late March.

By then, its member congregations, representing more than a dozen religions across the community, had transitioned to online religious services. They and other community partners learned about the fund mostly through social media and email.

Donations poured in. The smallest: \$8. The largest: much bigger, including a contribution from TCE.

About 340 families applied for grants by an April 3 deadline. Recipients were chosen

through computer-assisted lotteries, starting in April and continuing into this month.

“This fund is a blessing,” said Elizabeth, 33, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who received \$500 in early April. She applied for help at the urging of her sister-in-law, a member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church.

The grant allowed the mother of three and Juan, her significant other, to help pay their April bills, including \$1,000-plus in rent for their Sacramento home.

## “THIS FUND IS A BLESSING.”

**Elizabeth**  
Undocumented immigrant, recipient of \$500 emergency grant

“We’re going through a very difficult moment,” said Elizabeth, whose full name is being withheld for her privacy.

In mid-March, after the pandemic materialized, Juan, 38, the father of her two youngest children, lost his job installing bathroom appliances. Soon after, Elizabeth, who cleans offices, also became unemployed.

After almost a month without a job, Juan now works one or two days a week in construction. Like Elizabeth, he too is undocumented. Neither qualified for a stimulus check or unemployment benefits.



Clad in a T-shirt that in Spanish reads “No Human Being Is Illegal,” Sac ACT’s Tere Flores Onofre stands in front of the 2324 L Street building, part of which houses the nonprofit’s new office. For now, the office is closed, with its staff working at home during the COVID-19 crisis. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Yet, despite being “without papers,” Juan pays state/federal taxes when he works. In late April, he received a federal tax refund – enough for May’s rent. The family also receives food from concerned relatives and friends.

While the fund benefited immigrants, regardless of immigration status, it also helped native-born Americans of all races.

Sac ACT is accepting donations for families on a waiting list.

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**sacact.org/donate**



# Correcting Inequities

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Aaron Howard obeys the rules. And now that he's trying to get back into Sacramento's legal cannabis sector, he has a partner in his brother Julian, a truck driver who will deliver the goods.

"To be competitive and to open the businesses we're planning, we need funding," Aaron, 47, said recently, noting that access to capital is a barrier to launching weed ventures — especially for people of color.

The good news: In April, the City of Sacramento announced it had been awarded a \$3.8 million state grant to provide no-interest loans for cannabis business start-up costs.

Loan applicants must have gone through the city's Cannabis Opportunity Reinvestment and Equity program, or CORE, which trains minorities on how to operate legal pot enterprises.

Julian and Aaron are eminently qualified, having graduated in December from the first CORE class at the Greater Sacramento Urban League (GSUL).

Mayor Darrell Steinberg witnessed the graduation, applauding the 13 graduates.

Another 50 students completed CORE training late last year at the Sacramento Asian Chamber of Commerce.

The \$3.8 million grant is from the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz), in partnership with the Bureau of Cannabis Control.

"This money will help correct some of the historic inequities ... in the legal cannabis industry by creating a pathway for business

ownership" by minorities, Davina Smith, head of Sacramento's Office of Cannabis Management, said in a press release.

Aaron Howard launched his first medicinal cannabis business in 2014. He and his associates cultivated marijuana plants in a local home, with Aaron ensuring the tiny firm broke no laws.

Then, in 2017, a city official told him that Sacramento's evolving marijuana-grow rules had changed again.

**"... WE NEED FUNDING."**

**Aaron Howard**  
CORE Program graduate

"He said I needed to close down until I found a commercial building in an industrial area," Aaron said. The move would have cost \$23,000 annually for a temporary city permit, excluding other fees.

Unable to relocate, Aaron closed his business.

Grateful for a new opportunity, he and Julian will seek at least \$25,000 each in GO-Biz loans toward their new dream.

Besides trucking expertise, Julian, 50, has "people skills and an ability to creatively think outside the box."

As of mid-May, the city had not announced the max amount for GO-Biz loans, or when it would begin accepting loan applications.



Julian and Aaron Howard need at least \$50,000 in City Hall loans to launch the first two businesses of a legal medicinal/recreational pot enterprise. Under the name California Rose Gold, they would eventually run six vertically integrated micro-businesses consisting of cultivation, manufacturing, delivery, transportation, distribution and storefront dispensary. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

The funds must be disbursed by Aug. 31, 2021, city spokesman Tim Swanson said.

The tuition-free CORE program was proposed by activists, including Malaki Seku Amen of the California Urban Partnership, which is supported by The California Endowment. Attorney Brenda Davis, who directs GSUL's CORE program, also fought for its creation.

Deemed essential businesses, marijuana dispensaries have remained open amid COVID-19.

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For more info, Google  
**City of Sacramento**  
**CORE Program**

The **HUB**  
Building Healthy Communities  
[www.SacBHC.org](http://www.SacBHC.org)

# Racial Discrimination in the Time of COVID

BY ANNE STOKES

While COVID-19 is a global pandemic, its origin in China has caused an increase in hate crimes committed against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). In response, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, Chinese for Affirmative Action and San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies department created the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center. Three months after its March 19 launch, the center has received more than 1,700 reports of coronavirus-related discrimination and harassment from across the nation.

"We want to be able to document the discrimination and to be able to say, 'This is really happening in our community,' and also to be able to report that to elected officials and stakeholders," says Nkaj lab Yang, co-director of Hmong Innovating Politics (HIP), a partner of The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative that helped translate the site's incident report for Hmong communities. "The reality is that racial discrimination is something that still exists whether we want to admit it or not. The data collected is a way to inform policies that would be for the greater good of all of our communities."

Verbal harassment is most common, making up nearly 70% of reports. Incidents happen most often at businesses and women are three times more likely to be harassed than men. California, which has the highest Asian

American population in the nation, has the highest rate of reported incidents.

By collecting incident details and descriptions, Stop AAPI Hate aims to help local and state officials develop guidelines to combat harassment, publicly denounce discrimination and identify safety measures. Yang says it also serves to give people a place to share their experience with hate-based crimes and harassment.

“(THIS) IS A WAY  
TO INFORM  
POLICIES THAT  
WOULD BE FOR  
THE GREATER  
GOOD OF  
ALL OF OUR  
COMMUNITIES.”

**Nkaj lab Yang**  
Co-director, Hmong Innovating Politics  
(HIP)

"Maybe they think, 'It was just a verbal thing that happened for 10 seconds,' but the impact is longer-lasting than those 10 seconds," she says. "Their situation and their story matters and if we're able to show



Nkaj lab Yang is the co-director of HIP, which is a strong supporter of the new Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center. Photo courtesy of Nkaj lab Yang and HIP

this is a concern, it would actually get more attention from folks who have decision-making power."

Yang says she also hopes the project's focus on coronavirus-related hate crimes will address society's larger culture of discrimination and open up dialogues among communities.

"We really do want to approach it from a social justice (perspective) ... so that eventually we can get to a point where we can not only inform policy, but also start to do some education with all of our communities," she says.

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racism incident report,  
visit [www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/stop-aapi-hate](http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/stop-aapi-hate).



## Tale of Two Cities

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**S**acramento, one of America's most diverse urban areas, is fraught with racial and economic fault lines that make it a city of the haves and the have-nots, where race and income can determine how people vote.

That disquieting conclusion was reached by pro-youth activists recently, after probing into why Sacramentans rejected a March 3 ballot initiative that would have allowed more children of color to join local youth programs run by the city and nonprofits.

An analysis of the voting revealed that poorer neighborhoods such as Meadowview and Oak Park overwhelmingly supported Measure G, aimed at increasing graduation rates by keeping youngsters out of trouble. Wealthier neighborhoods, such as Land Park and East Sacramento, strongly opposed it.

Needing a simple majority of 50% plus one vote to win, Measure G drew 45% of voters' support, even though it would not have raised taxes.

Measure G called for the City of Sacramento to allocate 2.5% of its general budget — about \$12 million annually — to children/youth programs run by the city and nonprofits, with minority kids impacted by poverty, violence and trauma getting priority. The new funding, through the next 12 years, would have been in addition to the money Sacramento currently devotes to youth programs each fiscal year.

Dexter Niskala, a Sacramento State sophomore who campaigned for Measure G, was devastated.

"It was heartbreaking," Niskala, 21, said of the measure's demise. "I cried on the inside."

Results of the analysis were released in May by Sac Kids First, a coalition of 24 organizations that collected 39,000 voter signatures to place Measure G on the ballot. Some coalition members, including Youth Forward, are financially supported by The California Endowment, which is prohibited from taking stands on ballot measures and legislative issues.

### "I CRIED ON THE INSIDE."

**Dexter Niskala**  
Measure G campaigner, describing his reaction to initiative's loss

The 18-page post-election report, "A Tale of Two Cities: The Campaign for a Sacramento Children's Fund," was mainly written by Jim Keddy of Youth Forward.

"People of color who have read our report usually say it's not surprising," Keddy said. "White people ... find it hard to accept."

Measure G would have redirected city funding, which some saw as a move toward defunding of police — the words now shouted in nationwide Black Lives Matter protests after the May 25 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police.

"Measure G was an attempt to shift funding away from law enforcement toward



Three times in the past four years Dexter Niskala, 21, has campaigned for ballot measures that would have expanded Sacramento's youth programs. All three were rejected by voters, the latest being Measure G in March. "I'll do it again," Niskala vowed, posing with Jim Keddy (right), main author of a report detailing why G lost.

Photo by Edgar Sanchez

youth and prevention," Keddy said. "Police services take up the biggest percentage of the Sacramento city budget and the police union likely saw Measure G as a threat, which is why it contributed \$31,000 to the opposition campaign."

The battle over the measure intensified when Mayor Darrell Steinberg asked Sacramentans to vote against it. He promised a youth-programs counterproposal for the November election.

The mayor did not respond to a request for comment on the Tale of Two Cities report.

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To read "A Tale of Two Cities": [https://www.youth-forward.org/uploads/9/8/8/6/98869028/a\\_tale\\_of\\_two\\_cities\\_final.pdf](https://www.youth-forward.org/uploads/9/8/8/6/98869028/a_tale_of_two_cities_final.pdf)



# Black Lives Matter

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

The 2018 killing of Stephon Clark by Sacramento police deeply impacted Josh Harris, an American River College student. Shocked and angry, he became an activist against police brutality, joining protests organized by Black Lives Matter, or BLM.

In May, after Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd – whose name, like Clark’s, is now on the long list of unarmed African Americans slain by law enforcement – Harris vowed to continue to speak out against what he termed police oppression of Black people.

“The police are dangerous,” Harris, 23, who is African American, said recently amid the latest BLM protests in Sacramento. “We need to defund them, so they can’t be a weapon against our communities.”

He wants police held accountable for murder, whether the innocent/unarmed victims be Black, Latino or of other races.

He is not alone.

As Harris chanted “No justice, no peace, no racist police!” in day-after-day local protests after Floyd’s death, marchers worldwide also demanded a halt to police violence.

The ongoing protests have a seemingly unstoppable momentum, involving people of all races supporting systemic reform of law enforcement, the courts and the carceral network. It’s a historic moment with great potential.

By mid-June, Harris had participated in 10 local protests, most of which at some point involved Capitol Park rallies.

Like Capitol Park’s mighty trees, many who mobilized there seemed to be from around the world.

“There were Latinos, Native Americans, Muslims, Asian Americans, Sikhs, whites” and others, including LGBTQ people, in solidarity with Blacks, Harris said.

At times Harris marched beside his mentor, Ryan McClinton, a community organizer for Sacramento Area Congregations Together, which is supported by The California Endowment.

**“THE POLICE ARE DANGEROUS.”**

**Josh Harris**  
Sophomore, American River College

“Ryan is like a big brother to me,” Harris said. “He taught me humility” and the importance of helping others.

Harris never met Stephon Clark.

But last fall, recalling Clark’s tragic death, Harris told this column: “I feel like Stephon Clark was my brother.”

Harris blasted the videotaped over-reaction of two Sacramento police officers who killed Clark in the backyard of his grandmother’s Meadowview home on the night of March 18, 2018.



“I really hope we see long-lasting institutional change” from the worldwide protests against police brutality, said Josh Harris, a sophomore at American River College, posing before the fenced-off State Capitol in May. “I hope the momentum doesn’t die.”  
Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Seeking a fence-hopping man smashing car windows, the officers fired 20 shots at Clark, believing he had pointed a gun at them. At least seven bullets struck Clark, 22, who was holding an iPhone.

No charges were filed against the police.

“I have three younger brothers,” Harris would later say. “I don’t want them shot by police for being Black.”

His brothers – Levi, 20, Jeremiah, 14, and Titus, 8 – are wary of anyone with a badge and gun.

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# Defunding School Resource Officers

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

For 20 years, some members of the Sacramento Police Department had one mission: to help provide security for the Sacramento City Unified School District in their role as school resource officers, or SROs.

Initially, each armed SRO worked full-time in a local high school or middle school.

But the district's money woes and increased community opposition to police on campus led to a gradual reduction of SROs, from about 12 roughly 15 years ago to three roving SROs and a sergeant this spring.

Before SROs arrived in SCUSD in 2000, the district had its own police department, a force born amid the turbulent psychedelic era, when drug use among youth skyrocketed.

"The district started its own police department in 1968 at the urging of SPD," said Vince Matranga, chief of the Sac City Unified Police Department from 1986 until his 2010 retirement. "The five high schools in the district were calling SPD almost daily to handle calls for service, including for outsiders selling drugs on campus. Those calls were draining SPD resources."

The district's police slowly faded after 2000 when the district embraced SROs to supposedly cut costs. In fact, Matranga believes SROs should remain – because, he said, they deter criminal activity on or around school campuses.

Now, however, it appears the SROs' watch in Sac City Unified may be over, just as it soon will be in other cities like Oakland.

The \$600,000 contract between the Sacramento school district and the police department expired June 30 and likely won't be renewed. During a virtual meeting in June, district trustees approved a tentative fiscal 2020-21 school budget with zero funding for SROs.

Soon after, School Board President Jessie

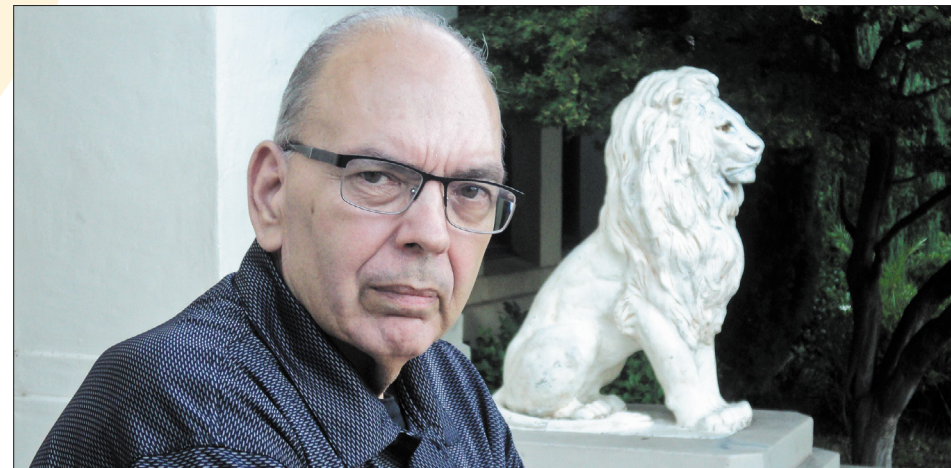
**"THIS IS WHAT  
WE'VE BEEN  
ADVOCATING FOR  
..."**

**Alma López**  
Brown Issues leader, after approval of new tentative SCUSD budget that has zero funds for police.

Ryan directed Superintendent Jorge Aguilar to craft a resolution this month to create an Alternative School Safety Task Force. It would include community groups along with district staff, parents and others.

"I'm glad ... (this) resolution" is forthcoming, board member Mai Vang told her colleagues. "I hope we can continue to ... dismantle a system that has hurt many of our students."

Alma López of Brown Issues, a statewide organization that is grooming the next generation of Brown leaders, said in a later interview: "This is what we've been



"Students want to be safe in school. So they were our best source of information about which students were carrying guns or illicit drugs on campus," said Vince Matranga, now retired, who led Sac City Unified Police Department for 24 years.  
Photo by Edgar Sanchez

advocating for – no contracts with law enforcement."

A board commitment to implement an alternative safety plan is also needed, said López, whose group is supported by The California Endowment.

Calls to remove school police have been made by others, including the Black Parallel School Board.

They contend SROs unfairly place youth of color in the school-to-prison pipeline, and that after defunding police, the district should hire more mental health/academic counselors and other staff.

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In Neighborhoods

BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

# A crisis-resolution option

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**P**eople of color increasingly think twice before dialing 911 to report an emergency, be it on the road or at home.

This reticence reflects a profound fear of police among growing numbers of African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and Native communities.

A 911 call by a dark-skinned citizen has at times resulted in the caller and/or relatives being beaten or even killed by law enforcement, followed by the survivors' arrest. Caucasians dialing 911 also risk the same tragic fate, but at lower rates.

Fortunately Sacramento now has an alternative way to resolve certain crises, without police involvement.

"We are not anti-police," Adam Wills, a co-founder of the new system, emphasized recently. "We are anti-police terror, which is when entire communities fear for their safety in dealing with law enforcement."

The new program, Mental Health First, or M.H. First, is a volunteer critical intervention team that primarily responds to disturbances involving persons with mental health issues. Its responders include registered nurses, crisis counselors and others, with a doctor always on call. The unarmed team, which has modified its operations amid COVID-19, is sponsored by the Anti Police-Terror Project, a grassroots group that believes police are overburdened.

Sacramento County's police agencies respond to thousands of non-criminal mental health

calls yearly, Wills, an experienced mental health worker, said.

"Police chiefs across the nation say police don't want to be mental health workers," he said.

**"WE ARE NOT  
ANTI-POLICE. WE  
ARE ANTI-POLICE  
TERROR ..."**

**Adam Wills**  
Co-founder, Mental Health First

Between January and March, when COVID-19 arrived, M.H. First independently responded to dozens of calls for people with mental health issues. The calls vary from "people acting erratically because they're hearing voices or seeing (imagined) things" to "someone acting paranoid, thinking someone is out to get him," said Wills' wife, Asantewaa Boykin, R.N., an M.H. First member and an emergency room nurse at a local hospital.

One call concerned a pedestrian weaving in and out of traffic downtown. Such situations can be exacerbated by "authoritarian figures" armed to the teeth, Wills said.

"When you approach people in crisis, you approach them meekly," he said. "You ask them, 'How are you doing? May I help you?'"

The first step can be as simple as handing the



Mental Health First is for Sacramentans who "are not comfortable calling 911, or who will not call 911," said R.N. Asantewaa Boykin (left), who, like her husband Adam Wills (right), is a founding member of the volunteer response team. Both wore M.H. First's distinctive green tops. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

distressed person hot cocoa, sodas or blankets.

Keeping people out of jail is a priority — which explains why some M.H. First volunteers belong to Decarcerate Sacramento, a group supported by The California Endowment.

For now, COVID-19 has turned M.H. First into a "support line." Callers are counseled on how to de-escalate crises, or are referred to mental health programs.

The team works Fridays/Saturdays/Sundays from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Its hotline/textline: 916-670-4062.

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# Diverse Voices Ask for Change

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

As a newcomer to Sacramento, Katherine Moua admits to not knowing much about Mayor Darrell Steinberg – except that he wields power and influence at City Hall. But when she learned that Black Lives Matter would hold a “die-in” near Steinberg’s home, the Sacramento City College freshman had to be there.

“BLM’s fight is our fight, because BLM is not just fighting for Black lives, it is fighting for minority rights,” the Fresno-born daughter of Hmong refugees from Laos said recently.

The June 5 “die-in” was part of a national uprising against police brutality prompted by the videotaped murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police 11 days earlier. The ongoing protests spread around the world. Floyd’s brutal death alarmed the 19-year-old Moua.

A videotape showed police officer Derek Chauvin pressing his knee on the neck of the handcuffed African American, ignoring his repeated “I can’t breathe” cries. Three fellow officers, including a Hmong American, did not intervene, the video showed.

“I only watched about two minutes of the video, on the internet. That was all I could stand,” Moua said.

After moving here a year ago, Moua began volunteering at Sacramento’s Hmong Innovating Politics, or HIP, a grassroots

organization supported by The California Endowment.

On June 5, she and two HIP colleagues drove to Steinberg’s Pocket neighborhood, where a multicolored sea of diversity was forming. Over 1,000 demonstrators of all races and backgrounds assembled peacefully to demand that Steinberg help defund the Sacramento Police Department and ensure that its officers respect Blacks and other people of color.

Displaying signs naming unarmed Blacks killed by police nationwide – from Floyd and Stephon Clark to Breonna Taylor – the activists raised their hands and shouted in unison, “Don’t shoot!”

**“WE DEFINITELY SENT A MESSAGE ...”**

**Katherine Moua**  
Participant in recent “die-in” near Sacramento mayor’s residence

Then everyone laid down for eight minutes and 46 seconds, the time that Chauvin, now charged with murder, had his knee on Floyd’s neck.

The silent bodies splayed along four blocks represented victims of police violence.

“We definitely sent a message not only to the



A volunteer for Hmong Innovating Politics, Katherine Moua educates fellow Hmong Americans on democracy’s greatest privilege – the right to vote. “I want to be part of HIP’s effort to get-out-the-vote” for the Nov. 3 presidential election, said Moua, who posed at Sacramento City College.

Photo by Edgar Sanchez

mayor but to anyone watching,” Moua said. “We want laws that protect African Americans and other people of color.”

In a tweet, Steinberg called the demonstration “a powerful and necessary expression of the ... demand for greater change in our city and in our country.”

He promised to work with his colleagues and Police Chief Daniel Hahn toward new police reforms.

This was Moua’s second protest. In 2018, she and other students walked out of Sanger High in Fresno County to press for safer schools and gun control.

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# Latinx Support BLM

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Three months ago, a Sacramento teen faced a decision: To be or not to be at a local march against police brutality?

A young Chicano, Roger D. Zapata, concluded he *had* to be at a late May protest organized by Black Lives Matter. The 16-year-old rapper, aka “Chuco,” later attended two other BLM demonstrations in Sacramento, for a total of three.

He believes Latinos’ involvement in these rallies solidified the Black-Brown bond. He recalled that African Americans had defended Latinos when Donald Trump, then running for president, assailed Mexican immigrants as rapists and drug smugglers in 2015.

“When that stuff was happening, the Black culture supported us,” Zapata said recently. “They stood with us when there was nobody there. So it’s only fair that we support them too.”

Like millions of people, Zapata was shocked by the videotaped death of George Floyd while in the custody of Minneapolis police on May 25. As the handcuffed African American lay on the ground, a police officer knelt over Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes, without intervention from other officers.

“I felt horrible watching that tape, man,” Zapata said. “That was somebody’s cousin, brother, somebody’s dad. Anything that has to do with stuff like that, I get angry.”

Spurred by that tragedy, along with police murders of other unarmed Blacks nationwide,

Zapata joined diverse Sacramentans in marching with BLM, which also seeks judicial/carceral reforms. At one protest, he paired with his mentor Henry Ortiz, a formerly incarcerated activist who co-founded Self-Awareness and Recovery, a program supported by The California Endowment.

“I FELT HORRIBLE  
WATCHING THAT  
TAPE, MAN.”

**Roger D. Zapata, aka “Chuco,” on his reaction to the videotaped murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police**

“Henry’s taught me” many good things, Zapata said of the 39-year-old, now a law-abiding “community healer.”

This June, Zapata completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade at Monterey Trail High in the Elk Grove Unified School District, for which his mother, Jasmine Guevara, is a special-ed teacher. He now attends South Sacramento’s Las Flores High.

For years, classmates thought Zapata was a pachuco – a juvenile gang member – because he dressed like one, down to heavily starched pants and hat. They dubbed him “Chuco,” a diminutive of pachuco.



Roger D. Zapata – aka “Chuco” – would like to vote on Nov. 3, for candidates who support Black Lives Matter. But, as things now stand, he won’t be able to cast a ballot until he’s 18 in 2022.  
Photo by Edgar Sanchez

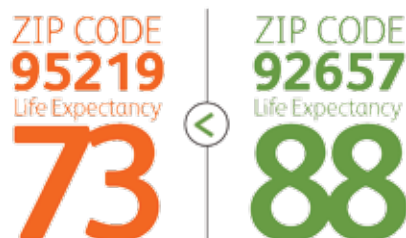
Zapata, however, is too smart to join a gang. For him, avoiding gangs is best.

After becoming a rapper in 2017, the California native entered a rapping contest. His song, “For All My People,” won a \$500 scholarship and placement on YouTube.

More recently, Zapata has traveled to Los Angeles to co-star in a fact-based movie about a gang-banger seeking a gang-free – and better – life. Still in production, Chuco plays Chico in the film, a friend of the tormented gang member.

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In Neighborhoods

BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

# Be Counted

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Abelardo “Abe” Ruiz believes in the power of the census.

The proud Sacramentan has participated in every decennial population count since 1980, when he was a new immigrant from Mexico. This year the naturalized U.S. citizen completed and mailed his family’s 2020 Census form five months before the September 30 deadline.

“It’s important that all Sacramentans be counted in the census, so our communities won’t lose federal funds for new highways, schools and parks,” Ruiz, chef/owner of Anthony’s Italian Cuisine Restaurant in South Natomas, said recently. “Filling out the census form is easy.”

But, he added, time is running out. Unfortunately, some Sacramentans are difficult to count. By conservative estimate, Sacramento County and its cities lost at least \$140 million in federal funds over the past decade because the 2010 Census missed thousands of local residents.

Getting a full count in 2020 is a priority. The census determines where billions of dollars in federal monies go to help build new hospitals, bridges and other infrastructure. It also shapes the federal budget for programs such as Head Start and Meals on Wheels. Lastly, among other things, the census establishes the number of congressional seats for each state.

To increase census awareness, the county created Sacramento’s Complete Count Committee in 2018, with members selected

by the county and the Sacramento Region Community Foundation.

Reflecting the county’s diversity, the members include government partners such as employees from the cities and counties, plus more than 30 community organizations, some of them supported by The California Endowment.

**“IT’S IMPORTANT  
THAT ALL  
SACRAMENTANS BE  
COUNTED IN THE  
CENSUS.”**

**Abelardo “Abe” Ruiz, civic-minded  
restaurant owner in South Natomas**

“We’ve been meeting for over a year” to develop integrated outreach strategies for the 2020 Census, said Gabby Trejo, the committee’s co-chair and director of Sacramento Area Congregations Together. “What’s at stake is bringing the resources ... for people to live in our community.”

One new tactic: Every Sunday, the faithful attending virtual services at Sac ACT parishes are reminded by pastors to “do” the census. Besides the SCCC, the county formed 16 subcommittees, each of which has reached out to a specific hard-to-count group, ranging from refugees to the homeless.



“Participating in the census is part of being a good citizen,” said Abelardo “Abe” Ruiz, owner of Anthony’s Italian Cuisine. His wife Patricia and their children work at the 15-year-old restaurant, now focused on take-out and delivery amid COVID-19. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

The community-government partnership appears to be succeeding. Despite COVID-19, which halted one-on-one gathering of census data for months, responses in local hard-to-count communities have risen dramatically, pointing to a successful census, said Judy Robinson, Sacramento County’s 2020 Census manager.

The census is confidential. Residents who haven’t responded to census surveys are being visited by census takers. The forms can also be filled out by telephone, with assistance in 14 languages, at 1-844-330-2020, or online at [my2020census.gov](https://my2020census.gov).

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In Neighborhoods



BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

# Get Out the Vote

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

The long, hot summer of 2020 was unlike any Josh Harris had ever experienced. Once it began, he repeatedly took to the streets to demand that police treat Black people like him as human beings – not as targets for bullets and hatred. Chanting “No justice, no peace, no racist police!” the 23-year-old American River College sophomore participated in about 12 Sacramento marches organized by Black Lives Matter, starting in late May. The day-after-day rallies for racial justice unfolded across America and the world, ultimately involving millions of people.

Now that the protests have slowed, even as African Americans continue to be shot by police across the nation, Harris has a new cause: urging people to vote on Nov. 3.

While marching for progress is good, another step must be taken – into the voting booth, Harris believes. He’s urging his family, friends and other people of conscience to help elect candidates who will enact sweeping reforms at all levels of government for a more equitable society. First and foremost, as he told this column in June, Harris wants police held accountable for murdering unarmed Black people like Stephon Clark in Sacramento, George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville.

Needed changes can begin with the defeat of President Donald Trump on Nov. 3, Harris suggested.

Harris first voted in the November 2016 presidential election, using an old-school ballot and pen at a local precinct. He still has his “I Voted” sticker. “Even as a 19-year-old, you could just tell Trump didn’t have the best interests of anyone who looked like me,” Harris said recently. “So I voted for Hillary Clinton, although she wasn’t a perfect candidate either.” Walking out of the precinct, Harris remembers “feeling responsible, like I had done something adult.”

“(AS A BLACK MAN), I FEEL AN OBLIGATION TO VOTE.”

Josh Harris, age 23  
Sophomore, American River College

Harris, who this time is supporting the Joe Biden-Kamala Harris Democratic presidential ticket, has little sympathy for non-voters. That includes the Sacramento-born Midtown barber who tells customers he’s never voted. And it includes the Vietnam vet who abstains from voting because, he says, voting could expose him to jury duty, something he dreads. “Not voting leads to situations where people like Trump can be elected president,” said Harris, who is not



Josh Harris proudly participated in about a dozen Black Lives Matter marches in Sacramento this summer. On Nov. 3, he will proudly vote in his second presidential election. Harris is on a personal get-out-the-vote campaign. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

related to Kamala Harris. “But I feel an obligation to vote, because my ancestors ... didn’t have that right.

“I’m telling the people around me how important this election is,” he added. “I’m telling them to make informed decisions about how they’ll vote.”

Harris is a protégé of Ryan McClinton, a community organizer for Sacramento Area Congregations Together, a group supported by The California Endowment.

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# Aggie Square

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

In mid-2018, Bill Motmans received an invitation he couldn't refuse.

The Tahoe Park resident was asked to serve on a committee that would help guide development of Aggie Square, the cutting-edge innovation center proposed for a site near Oak Park. The invitation was signed by Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg and UC Davis Chancellor Gary May.

Motmans immediately agreed to serve on the Aggie Square Community Engagement Advisory Committee, formed by UC Davis and the city, the launching partners behind the public-private enterprise with a \$1.1 billion Phase 1 cost.

"I believe neighborhood residents should have some say on a project of that import," Motmans said in a recent interview. "I was thinking about the opportunity to have some real input into something that had so much potential to help" Oak Park, Tahoe Park and other nearby neighborhoods. Motmans made those remarks nearly three weeks after abruptly resigning from the committee on Sept. 4.

In a Sept. 16 press conference, Motmans stated: "UC Davis and the city (of Sacramento) have ignored neighborhood concerns since the beginning of this project ... Despite almost a dozen meetings ... (and) conversations with UC Davis, city staff, city elected officials and others," the committee's recommendations have been disregarded for two and a half years. Motmans was not alone.

At the press briefing, his words were echoed by speakers from Sacramento Investment

Without Displacement, a coalition born from The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative. The coalition wants a legally binding community benefits agreement detailing how Aggie Square will help residents with jobs, health care and anti-displacement measures.

"Sacramento has more than 11,000 unhoused people. We can no longer continue to displace people" with projects like Aggie Square, Faye Wilson Kennedy, representing the Sacramento Area Black Caucus and the Poor People's Campaign, told the media.

**"UC DAVIS AND THE CITY (OF SACRAMENTO) HAVE IGNORED NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERNS..."**

**Bill Motmans**  
Tahoe Park Resident

Mayor Steinberg did not respond to a request for comment, but UC Davis said in a statement: "The Aggie Square team has worked closely with our Community Engagement Advisory Committee and other neighborhood organizations for more than two years... We are grateful for their guidance and input because they have directly shaped the programmatic focus of Aggie Square. We will always welcome their ideas and



Bill Motmans (left) and Faye Wilson Kennedy (right) spoke at a recent press conference where Aggie Square developers were accused of ignoring neighborhood concerns regarding the mammoth project. Other speakers included leaders of agencies such as Sacramento Area Congregations Together and the Sacramento Housing Alliance. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

feedback. Our building partner, Wexford Science & Technology, is working on programs for workforce development, youth development, public access to innovation spaces and a community partnership with a formal voice for representatives from area neighborhoods on an ongoing basis."

The developers will work to ensure new opportunities for people in surrounding neighborhoods, it added. SIWD and residents will continue to monitor Aggie Square and push for a community benefits agreement.

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To watch a video of Sacramento Investment Without Displacement's press conference, visit BHC Sacramento Facebook and scroll down to Sept. 16



# Seeds of Change

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Rubie Simonsen has worn many hats. The 30-year-old Sacramentan has been a yoga instructor, a community volunteer, a poet, a website designer and a youth program manager. But the role Simonsen values most is being a young farmer – and imparting her knowledge of how to work the land without disrespecting it.

Whether people reside in the country or in a metropolis, “Mother Earth is always humming in the background, ensuring we have the right environment to live,” one of her poems says. Another says: “Weeds happen ... even if you have planted good seeds.” In other words, farming is tough, with no guarantees of prosperity. In 2018, Simonsen taught 10 adults who had accepted that blunt concept to be ecologically sensitive farmers and to give back to their communities.

Consisting of 10 evening workshops spread over five weeks, the tuition-free class met at 252 Accelerator, an Oak Park academy that Simonsen launched as a one-year project with The California Endowment’s support. Upon graduation, the students interned for a year at area farms, their wages paid by The Endowment. That class led to Simonsen donning a new hat. She became a consultant for the California Coalition for Rural Housing. The Sacramento nonprofit wanted her 252 curriculum on the internet to serve Native Americans throughout the state. “I started working with the tribes last year, hosting

in-person workshops on community gardening,” Simonsen said. “The online class, specifically for California-based tribal members, will begin in mid-November.” Her new students need those skills: After losing their ancestral lands, many Natives also lost ancient traditions of how to grow healthy edibles.

“WEEDS HAPPEN ...  
EVEN IF YOU HAVE  
PLANTED GOOD  
SEEDS.”

Line from a Rubie Simonsen poem

Now, an emerging “food way” movement has Native Americans relearning and preserving those practices. “As we’ve moved into COVID-19, a lot of (Native) communities have started growing their own food” in remote areas, some of which she plans to personally visit, including a Paiute community in Bishop, Inyo County, Simonsen said.

The Sacramento native spent much of her youth at farms owned by her relatives in California, Oregon and Idaho. She committed to farming in 2016 by completing the seven-



Rubie Simonsen, wearer of many hats, lost her favorite fedora months ago. To show solidarity with African Americans, she wore a stunning head wrap during a recent visit to Sacramento’s World Peace Rose Garden. Head wraps were first created by Black women who toiled in the sun.  
Photo by Edgar Sanchez

month California Beginning Farmer Training Program at the Center for Land-Based Learning in Woodland. Simonsen, who has a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Sacramento State, does not own a farm but will, some day.

Some graduates of the 252 class in Oak Park are now doing community gardening. One hopes to buy a farm soon, according to Simonsen. Others are looking to start plant-related businesses.

Simonsen, who sells lavender balms, mud sticks and other natural products she creates herself, remains grateful to The California Endowment for its past support.

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Rubie Simonsen, visit  
**www.firstmother  
farms.com**





# Taking Root

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

In March 2016, Alfred Melbourne walked out of Wasco State Prison in Kern County—free at last. He had served 18 years for assault with a firearm and assault with a deadly weapon. Eager for a new start, Melbourne immediately returned to West Sacramento, his hometown.

He repeatedly asked a local agency for a job—any job. “Three times I was told to check back later,” recalled Melbourne, 43, a Lakota Sioux. “The fourth time I was told I would have to create something on my own.” That’s exactly what Melbourne did. In May 2018, he founded a network of organic farms in West Sacramento, where youth learn to cultivate the soil, be law-abiding and give back to their community.

The nonprofit venture took root on a donated plot formerly occupied by a Christian church that burned down. The endeavor has grown to three more farms, two of them part of the incubator farm program of the Center for Land-Based Learning in Woodland. The fourth operates under a memo of understanding with the International Rescue Committee.

Named Three Sisters Gardens, or TSG, for the traditional Native companion plants of corn, beans, and squash, they total a combined 1.15 acres, with the biggest just under a half acre. They produce a cornucopia of healthy veggies year-round, from lettuce and carrots to radishes, most of which are given to people in need.

“Technically, it was an open vacant lot,” Melbourne said of the hard, uneven former church grounds that gave birth to his bountiful enterprise. The project required patience, a virtue he had acquired in prison.

“As far as technical knowledge, it was hands-on learning,” said Melbourne, who also took farming classes through the Center for Land-Based Learning. Besides feeding the hungry, Melbourne had another priority: helping youth avoid the school-to-prison pipeline, in which students of color are set up for failure.

**“THIS WILL TEACH YOU MORE THAN A SCHOOL.”**

**Miguel Lopez, 17, referring to a TSG farm, one of four where he has learned organic farming.**

He and other TSG volunteers currently mentor 10 youth, including Miguel Lopez, 17, a part-time TSG worker. In two years, Lopez has mastered organic farming, from how to plant vegetables to how to spread nutrients on the soil. “This will teach you more than a school,” said Lopez, a senior at Heritage Peak Charter High, as he toiled at the TSG farm on Fifth Street. While undecided about a career, farming remains an option for him.



A believer in “Educate, Don’t Incarcerate,” Alfred Melbourne (right) has turned his motto into action by mentoring youth like Miguel Lopez (left) at TSG farms in West Sacramento. Photo taken at TSG farm on Fifth Street. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Melbourne, Lopez said, also taught him to respect all people. “I like Alfred,” he said of his mentor. “After everything he’s been through, he’s trying to show a different path for the youngsters.”

TSG is supported by The California Endowment and the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation.

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# A Dialogue Begins

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**D**elphine Brody, a queer transgender woman who lives in Sacramento, is terrified of the city's police force.

"During emergencies, I avoid calling 911," Brody told this column on Nov. 21. "I fear that a police response would only escalate violent situations and inflict greater harm."

In an online forum five days before, Brody and others from the LGBTQ+ community had told the Sacramento Police Department that its officers unfairly harass and beat LGBTQ+ people, especially those of color. "Being white, I don't tend to be harassed by cops," Brody, 51, said during the 90-minute Zoom town hall, "but a lot of my Black friends are."

It was the first virtual session to be hosted by SPD for LGBTQ+ residents. A follow-up town hall featuring Chief Daniel Hahn will be held Jan. 25, exact time to be announced. SPD's stated goal: to learn why the LGBTQ+ community is "displeased" with the department, as a step to build better ties. SPD committed to holding "listening sessions" under a renewed 2019 partnership with the Sacramento LGBT Community Center, which is supported by The California Endowment. Among other things, SPD also pledged that new officers would undergo "LGBTQ-focused community engagement training."

Invitations to the meeting, distributed by the Center, emphasized that it wasn't the organizer. "This town hall will not...put an end to police violence," the Center's

invitations said. "However, this is where possible change can start." Several officers, led by Lt. Stephen Moore of SPD's Outreach and Engagement Unit, heard more than a dozen LGBTQ+ guests.

Their collective message: For the most part, SPD doesn't respect LGBTQ+ people. "I'm so dismayed at the conduct of police officers," Judah, a transgender African American man, told the officers. "We keep telling you what's going on, and nothing's changed. 'I honestly don't see a

**"THIS WAS A START."**

**Lt. Stephen Moore, at the end of a historic town hall hosted by Sacramento police for LGBTQ+ people.**

path forward for change," the 30-year-old Sacramentan continued. Judah later told this column he was traumatized by a SPD officer of color during a 2017 traffic stop.

"Somebody had stolen my rear license plate and put on a different one," said Judah, adding the officer apparently noticed the mismatch by running a check on Judah's car.

Judah was clueless about the theft until the officer yelled, "Why are you driving around like this? Why...?"

Judah, who has PTSD caused by rough



About 60 people attended a recent Zoom town hall held by Sacramento police for LGBTQ+ residents. One guest was Delphine Brody (above), a queer transgender woman, co-founder of Sacramento's Trans and Nonbinary Housing Collective. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

living, suffered a panic attack. "I was afraid I would end up on the news" as another African American shot by police, Judah said. A second officer apologized. Judah was let go.

At the end, Lt. Moore thanked the roughly 60 forum participants. "This was a start," he said. The meeting was facilitated by Niva Flor of the Sacramento Region Community Foundation.

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# Pursuing Justice

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**T**hongxy Phansopha feels lucky to be alive this Christmas. “I am so grateful” not to be dead, the 32-year-old queer nonbinary Laotian American said in a recent interview. Then, in a pained voice, Phansopha described what happened seven months ago.

On the night of May 30—soon after the US recorded its 100,000th COVID-19 death—Phansopha joined an anti-police brutality rally in Sacramento, bringing water bottles and granola bars to hand out to fellow protesters. Phansopha—who uses the pronouns they/them—was cautious while distributing the items, courtesy of River City Food Bank and Sacramento Soup, for which they volunteered.

“I wore a mask and plastic gloves,” they recalled. “I was social distancing to the best of my ability. I had simple, fast interactions. I kept moving around, not staying in one spot.” Those precautions kept Phansopha safe from the disease, but not from law enforcement. Eventually, a line of Sacramento police stopped the demonstrators at 21st and J streets. According to published news reports, officers believed rocks and other objects were being thrown at them. “I have no idea how many people were out there,” Phansopha said.

All they know is that police began firing “less lethal force” weapons, wounding several demonstrators. Phansopha was struck by six rubber bullets, including three on the left side of their face. A tear gas canister hit their forehead, drenching them in blood. “They (the police) almost killed

me,” said Phansopha, who was rushed to a hospital by friends. Phansopha was soon transferred to UC Davis Medical Center where they were hospitalized for multiple surgeries and recovery time.

A pending suit in Federal Court seeks compensation for Phansopha’s medical bills and other damages. The suit accuses Sacramento police of employing unconstitutional brutality against Phansopha. Phansopha’s lead attorney is Arlen Litman-Cleper, Esq. of The Cesari, Werner & Moriarty law firm. Sacramento police don’t typically comment on pending litigation.

**“THEY  
(SACRAMENTO  
POLICE) ALMOST  
KILLED ME.”**

**Thongxy Phansopha,  
Laotian American**

Born in Fresno to Laotian refugees, Phansopha grew up in Section 8 Housing, witnessing “how violent the police can be to Black and brown people.” In 2018, three years after moving here, Phansopha watched videos of Sacramento police killing Stephon Clark in his grandmother’s backyard. This year, Phansopha watched footage of George Floyd’s May 25 murder by Minneapolis police—an execution that turned Phansopha into a stronger supporter of Black Lives Matter.



Thongxy Phansopha said they are still experiencing residual symptoms from the injuries they suffered that night, seven months after being struck in the head by a tear gas canister and six rubber bullets allegedly fired by Sacramento police at a May BLM protest. They still need medical treatment, including counseling, to work through what they experienced.

Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Phansopha attended anti-police brutality rallies as a participant in peaceful protest and to deliver “mutual aid” to demonstrators. Phansopha, a professional cook, is a member of Decarcerate Sacramento, a coalition supported by The California Endowment.

Phansopha will spend Christmas with family, grateful that they, too, survived 2020.

## BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

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# Environmental Justice

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

As wildfires and a merciless pandemic convulsed California, a Sacramento conference explored 2020's perils and how minorities are bearing the brunt of COVID-19.

The Oct. 15 virtual event—entitled “The World on Fire: Environmental Justice Now!”—had five local environmentalists speaking from home about climate change and other crises confronting the planet. The impacts of COVID-19 “have not been felt by every community equally,” said keynote speaker Katie Valenzuela, a member-elect of the Sacramento City Council. Minorities in disadvantaged neighborhoods have been disproportionately victimized by the 7-month-old virus, she said. One shocking finding: As of Oct. 19, according to the State Department of Public Health, about 48% of Californians killed by COVID-19 were Latinx, despite making up 39% of the population.

“Very early on, we started to see (COVID-19) spikes in communities of color,” Valenzuela said, explaining that from the outset, Latinx and African Americans in marginalized neighborhoods contracted the virus at higher rates than whites in affluent sectors. The hard-hit communities were more vulnerable due to issues such as poverty, overcrowded housing and lack of health care, she stated.

“Quite possibly the most disturbing revelation came in a Harvard study,” said Valenzuela, who has worked as an environmental lobbyist. “It showed that pollution was actually carrying the virus.”

Air pollution is a big problem in South Sacramento, the next speaker, United Latinos organizer Herman Barahona, said. His nonprofit, which is supported by The California Endowment, has fought for cleaner air and water in the Sacramento Valley for three years. Many low-income South Sacramento families suffer from chronic

“I STARTED FEELING ILL, PROBABLY SIX MONTHS (AFTER MOVING TO SOUTH SACRAMENTO).”

**Mary Cervantez**  
Ex- Placer County resident

respiratory conditions, cancer, heart disease and other disorders associated with bad air, Barahona said. Contamination emanates from three major freeway corridors, as well as commercial and industrial businesses, including a power plant. But, Barahona noted, unlike other communities, South Sacramento has no federal air quality monitors, and United Latinos wants them installed. One of his friends developed asthma soon after moving to South Sacramento, he said.

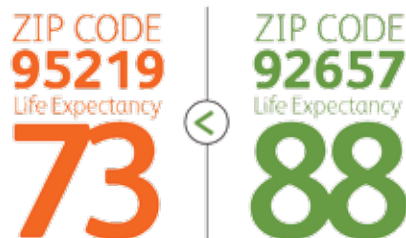


Herman Barahona, of United Latinos, (left) told a virtual conference that a friend had developed asthma soon after moving to South Sacramento. That friend is Mary Cervantez (right), who blames the neighborhood's toxic air for her illness. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

That friend is Mary Cervantez, 46, who told this column she was healthy when she and her daughter moved from Placer County to South Sacramento in 2017. “I started feeling ill probably six months later. I was wheezing,” said Cervantez, recently laid off from her administrative job. She was eventually diagnosed with asthma, a condition she attributes to toxic air. Cervantez has joined United Latinos, which seeks environmental justice—meaning everyone deserves clean air and water and has the right to participate in major decision-making in his neighborhood.

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