

The variety of programming at the South Bay Center for Counseling all centers around the theory of relationship building. For years, the center's Community Organizing department focused on establishing relationships through Neighborhood Action Councils, or NACs. A NAC is a group where community members can build relationships around shared values and then design and implement projects, programs and events to improve their lives and the life of the community. In recent years, while still creating and supporting the work of the Neighborhood Action Councils, SBCC has established Social Connection Groups which are groups of residents who have a shared passion around a certain topic. It could be knitting, sewing, gardening, exercise – whatever the topic or theme may be, each resident who participates in the group does so because of their passion for it.

Social Connection groups are an integral part of the Prevention and Aftercare program. The implementation and facilitation of social connection groups is a part of the scope of work for subcontractors. The City of Carson and the City of Long Beach have been supporting social connection groups since the beginning of the Prevention and Aftercare program. The groups meet weekly and are supported by the Family Development Coach in each City. The Family Development Coach identified a couple of residents who enjoyed the same thing and from there, they outreached to the rest of the community and invited residents to join them. While not all social connection groups thrived, some have been meeting weekly since 2015.

The City of Carson has three social connection groups, which meet on a weekly basis at City parks or the High School. The Crafty Club, an arts and crafts group, meets weekly at Carson Park and focuses on the gifts and talents of the group. The ladies knit and loom beanies, hats, scarves and blankets. They donate them to a local hospital for infants in the ICU or children in the cancer units. The ladies in the group continue to meet, not only for the satisfaction of being able to donate their items to those who need them, but also for the friendships they have created over the past three years. The group is not just about the crafts they create. The members of this group have bonded over the past three years, sharing times of excitement (their son's first baseball game or their daughter's first prom) and times of sorrow (the loss of a loved one). They talk about resources they found in their community, which store has a great sale coming up, what park has a new class, where they can find certain things they are looking for. Participation in the social connection group has decreased social isolation for these ladies and has also increased their knowledge of resources within their own community.

Of those surveyed:

36% state that before they joined the group, they were not connected to the community however, since joining, 80% state they feel connected.

91% state they value the relationships they've built with others in the group

91% state they feel they are a person with many strengths, gifts and talents

The Kids Arts and Crafts group also meets weekly at Carson Park. This group is comprised of a mix of elementary school and middle school students. They attend weekly, after school, and create different art projects. This groups gives the students a safe place to go after school during the week, giving parents peace of mind that their child(ren) is safe. The group has recently begun to decorate the bulletin board in the main meeting room at Carson park on a monthly basis. The youth see this as their way of "giving back" to the park, the park staff and the other residents who utilize the park.

Of those surveyed:

87% state that because of their involvement in the group, they are making a difference in their community

74% state they have become more involved in community events

74% state their family has become more involved in community events

Carson High School is home to a very large community garden, supported by a couple of dedicated teachers and a large group of students. The City of Carson has partnered with the school and teachers who oversee the garden, to help maintain the grounds. City staff meets weekly at the garden with the high school students to prune trees, cleanup the grounds, and tend to the animals. The Carson High School garden has over 300 fruit trees, so one can imagine the work that has to be done. Since the group started meeting, the garden has blossomed! Fruit trees are thriving. A butterfly garden has been built. Hercules, the garden tortoise has been fed. And students witnessed 10 baby ducklings being born! The greater community is invited to get involved with the garden as well. They not only attend the Wednesday afternoon gatherings, they also attend the monthly garden cleanups, which are an all day event, usually culminating in a BBQ for those who worked hard all day. Local refinery Andeavor has gotten involved with the Carson High School Garden as well. Not only have they brought staff volunteers to some of the monthly cleanups, they have allocated funding to the garden so that it can continue to grow.

Of those surveyed:

33% state that before they joined the group, they were not connected to the community however, since joining, 71% state they feel connected.

83% state they look forward to interacting with those in the group on a weekly basis.

93% state they feel they are a person with many strengths, gifts and talents

The City of Long Beach Social Connection groups have focused on health. They have two groups which meet regularly, at the Center for Families and Children in North Long Beach. The Zumba group meets three mornings each week. This group is centered on physical health. Each day, the music is pumping and the residents are getting their cardio in. Many members in this group have reported that not only have they lost weight, but that the Zumba provides some mental clarity as well. Because of their participation in the group, some members have gotten involved with the yoga class that is provided at the City of Long Beach as well.

Of those surveyed:

47% state they have a greater sense of personal well being

60% state they are closer to their family members

60% state they are good at managing their daily responsibilities

72% state they have had experiences since starting Zumba that challenged them and made them grow into a better person.

The City of Long Beach also has a community garden at their site. Initially the garden was cared for by a group of developmentally delayed young adults but due to a change in their schedule, they could no longer attend. Currently the garden is tended to by a group of high school students that come from Jordan High School which is adjacent to the City building. The group utilizes the time at the garden not only to plant seeds, harvest fruits and vegetable and learn about the land, they also use the time to discuss what is going on in their daily lives. The garden facilitator not only educates the youth on what is happening within the garden beds, but she also engages in the conversation regarding their daily lives, what they see in their future and how they can achieve those goals.

Of those surveyed:

66% said prior to joining the group, they were not connected to their community, whereas since they have joined the group, 100% state they (and their families) are now connected.

67% state they now are comfortable participating in other community events.

66% state they now feel they have strengths they can share.

67% state they have created lasting relationships with those in the group and know they can turn to them in time of need.

The Social Connection groups have not only given these residents the opportunity to engage in a community based group, therefore getting involved in their community, it has provided the opportunity for relationship building, bonding, and conversation that provides resources and referrals that are beneficial to the group. Upon observation, one might see the some of the groups as “just” an arts and crafts group, however, overtime, they have proven to be a space where individuals can share their gifts and talents, create lasting friendships and find support when needed.