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Proposal for Evaluating Environmental Justice Programs within the Context of the COVID-19  
Pandemic in Stockton, CA

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Proposal for Evaluating Environmental Justice Programs within the Context of the COVID-19  
Pandemic in Stockton, CA

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In Partnership with: Rise Stockton Coalition

CESC 191BX

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## **Abstract**

California's Central Valley communities are faced with the highest pollution burdens and health vulnerabilities. Specifically, San Joaquin County residents live in food deserts and are impacted by multiple health disparities, despite the county's significant contribution to California's economy through agriculture. To address the intersectionality of these issues, Rise Stockton Coalition developed the 2019 Sustainable Neighborhood Plan (SNP), a framework for sustainable development in Central and South Stockton to translate community concerns into projects and policy proposals. While their community engagement efforts identified community priorities and outlined potential projects to be adopted by the City of Stockton and coalition partners, there has been no evaluation of the document's impact on sustainable development. To address this gap, this community-engaged research project, in partnership with Rise Stockton, aims to evaluate the 2019 SNP's influence on the coalition's program development and strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic through informational interviews with coalition partners. A semi-systematic literature review will also be conducted in order to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the strengths and weaknesses of the framework. Data gathered will be instrumental in further updating the 2019 SNP, including to reconfirm community needs and cultivate efficient project outlines to address those priorities.

Key words: community-engaged research, environmental justice, California's Central Valley, COVID-19, program development

**Proposal for Evaluating Environmental Justice Programs within the Context of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic in Stockton, CA**

This community-engaged research project was in partnership with and served the needs of Rise Stockton Coalition, an independent coalition of fifteen community organizations that focus on environmental justice work and green economy efforts that align with the city of Stockton's values and priorities (Rise Stockton, 2022). This project evaluated the influence of their 2019 Sustainability Neighborhood Plan(SNP) on the coalition's program development and strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project acts as the initial phase towards updating the 2019 SNP to include a reconfirmation and/or revision of community priorities, and a list of community recommended programs and policies to address those needs.

California's Central Valley is most known for its significant national contribution to agricultural products. In fact, San Joaquin County (SJC) is California's seventh largest producer of agricultural products, producing \$2.53 billion dollars in 2017 (San Joaquin Council of Governments, 2017). While SJC stimulates the economic vitality of California, its residents do not reap the same health or economic benefits. According to SJC's 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment, many of its community members live in food deserts and are heavily impacted by multiple health disparities. For example, obesity rates, diabetes prevalence, and physical inactivity rates are higher in SJC compared to the state, and are disproportionately higher for Latino and Black youth in the county (San Joaquin County Community Health Assessment Collaborative (SJC2HAC), 2019). The Community Health Needs Assessment (SJC2HAC, 2019) names the following as barriers for SJC residents: poverty, lack of access to healthy foods, safe places for physical activity, and easy access to unhealthy foods.

The Central Valley is also plagued with environmental issues. In 2013, the California Environmental Protection Agency's (CalEPA) Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) developed the California Communities Environmental HealthScreen Tool (CalEnviroScreen). The CalEnviroScreen acts as a mapping tool to identify California communities by census tracts with the highest pollution burdens and vulnerabilities by utilizing environmental, health, and socioeconomic information from state and federal government sources (OEHHA, 2021). Communities with a high score are interpreted as experiencing a higher pollution burden and higher sensitive population indicators than areas with low scores. Through the CalEnviroScreen's most recent update in 2021, it was determined that out of the top ten census tracts with the highest CalEnviroScreen score, seven of the census tracts are located in the Central Valley (CalEPA, 2021). In fact, San Joaquin County's census tract 95203 ranks number four of the highest CalEnviroScreen score. Thus, there is a need to investigate the intersection between environmental justice and public health issues within San Joaquin County, and evaluate the current approaches from local organizations to improve the community's overall health.

This project utilized a combination of community-engaged approaches and qualitative methods, such as interviews and a semi-systematic literature review, to evaluate the 2019 SNP's impact on environmental justice program development in Stockton, CA. Utilizing community engagement as a strategy ensured that a relational model of inquiry and ethics was integrated throughout the research process, which is a perspective that contextualizes research with interpersonal relationships, allows the researcher to confront their personal biases, and engage with the complexities of co-creating meaning with their participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The qualitative approaches allowed participants to critically reflect on how local events, actions, and meanings have been shaped by their current context (Maxwell, 2008), specifically

how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted environmental justice work overall. Furthermore, empowering community voices to assess the programs intended to support them would be an appropriate way to evaluate current strategies being implemented, and provide justification for the continuation or redirection of Rise Stockton's focus as a coalition.

### **Literature Review**

Current research has identified that the Stockton community significantly lacks programs and services to address the numerous health, socioeconomic, and environmental disparities that persist. For example, Kietzman, Bacong, Guitierrez, & Pourat (2019) investigated the needs and capacity of Stockton through a social determinants of health (SDoH) framework to identify limitations in their approaches towards diabetes prevention and management. The methods included an environmental scan of existing programs, the development of a community asset map of physical resources (i.e. parks and community centers), and analyses of secondary data to compile a community health profile. Kietzman et al. (2019) confer that current services have substantial room for improvement with respect to increasing access of physical resources and programs to underserved populations in Stockton. This demonstrates the need to further evaluate local organization's current strategies towards improving health outcomes, and how they were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is generally known to exacerbate health disparities (Green, Fernandez, & MacPhail, 2021).

Stockton Rise Coalition further voices the need for dedicated resources and strategies towards improving the community's health through their 2019 Sustainable Neighborhood Plan (SNP). The SNP is a framework for sustainable development in Central and South Stockton to translate community concerns and recommendations into potential projects and policy proposals. Utilizing group-focused outreach, surveys, and other presentation methods within these

communities(N=1,885), the SNP identified seven community priorities: energy, health, parks, safety, transportation, waste, and water (Rise Stockton, 2019). Rise Stockton (2019) also presented community recommendations, including economic development, sustainable learning, civic engagement, local capacity building, and accountability.

While it has been clearly identified that the Stockton community desires resources to improve their environmental and health outcomes, there is limited research on how the recommended strategies and resources available in Stockton were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing research that implements the impact of the pandemic is pertinent to fully understanding the community's current health status, and how they adapted to continue to provide services and community engagement. Additionally, the 2019 SNP fails to discuss the limitations of their surveying methods, such as including data from participants in zipcodes outside of Stockton, CA. Thus, it is critical to reconfirm the community priorities within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and re-evaluate strategies that were recommended by Rise Stockton Coalition and implemented as a result.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been many community foundations across the United States that have led efforts to respond to their community's needs. Azevedo, Bell, & Medina (2021) discussed how community foundations can act as grant-makers, community mobilizers, and leaders who work on identifying areas of greatest need to spearhead immediate relief efforts locally. For example, the San Francisco Foundation hosted webinars highlighting the unique needs of those most impacted by the virus in their community (San Francisco Foundation, 2020). Additionally, Azevedo et al. (2021) provided a snapshot of how foundations across the U.S. (n= 246) were operating, including their current strategic priorities, community outreach efforts, and funding preferences during March and April 2020. Most

notably, 49.4% of foundations surveyed were already seeking out expert guidance through community members on strategy and funding priorities during or after the COVID-19 pandemic, and 25.6% are planning to (Azevedo et al., 2021). Furthermore, 85% of respondents reported that they have contacted or planned to contact grant recipients to discuss the implications of COVID-19 for program/service delivery funded by the organization. These findings demonstrate the initial movement for community foundations to collaboratively identify strategic priorities with their community members and fund these services. However, this survey is not a generalization of how all community foundations are operating since there was no discussion of key differences between participating foundations, such as size of the foundation, and their available resources and capacities during the pandemic. Thus, there needs to be an examination of how local community foundations and their organizations are working through the pandemic, and how those offering relief funds are doing so equitably.

In order to address this gap, it would be advantageous to apply a community-engaged research approach. As the researcher, employing these processes of engagement would uplift democratic culture within the community that include values of inclusiveness, participation, and the reciprocity of public problem solving (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clay, 2009). Ultimately, by providing the community with the tools to build the capacity to learn and co-create knowledge, there is a shift of dependence on outside academic institutions for expertise to community members.

### **Methodology**

This community-engaged research project was in partnership with and met the needs of Rise Stockton, an independent coalition that works to collectively advocate for an environmentally just city of Stockton. We evaluated the 2019 SNP's influence on the coalition's



program development and strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A community-engaged approach was implemented throughout the process to gather essential community perspectives to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of this framework. First, a semi-systematic literature review was done to contextualize the impact of the pandemic on environmental justice programs, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify themes amongst the literature. Next, informational interviews were conducted to: 1) gather qualitative data on current projects from coalition partners to determine their capacity to support updating the 2019 SNP, and 2) evaluate the 2019 SNP's influence on their work during the pandemic and challenges encountered. Interviews were transcribed and subjected to qualitative analysis to determine support and/or contradictions to the proposed themes. Data gathered will be instrumental for further updating the 2019 SNP to reconfirm community needs and cultivate specific projects to address those priorities.

## **Background**

This community-engaged research project was in partnership with and served the needs of a local Stockton organization, Rise Stockton. Rise Stockton is an independent coalition of fifteen community organizations focused on building collective capacity, and advocating for an environmentally just city that is resilient to climate change, operates a robust green economy, and is sustainably planned (Rise Stockton, 2020). In November 2017, a \$170,000 Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) Planning Grant was awarded to the City of Stockton by the State of California's Strategic Growth Council, to support planning activities in the Downtown and South Stockton region (Rise Stockton, 2020). Prior to the award, coalition partners and community residents hosted workshops centered on environmental and health inequities in their communities, to outline their vision of community-led climate justice for City Hall.

From these collaborative efforts and City Hall's support of these visions, Rise Stockton was formed to continue to employ community-engaged research to develop the 2019 Sustainable Neighborhoods Plan (SNP) through the TCC Planning Grant. Briefly, the 2019 SNP is a framework for sustainable development in Stockton's most climate affected communities, in which community concerns and recommendations were translated into project priorities and policy proposals that both local government agencies and community organizations could adopt (Rise Stockton, 2019). Rise Stockton's success in developing the 2019 SNP and their level of community engagement led to the award of a \$10.8 million TCC Implementation Grant in June 2020 (Rise Stockton, 2020). Through this funding, Rise Stockton Coalition continues to align the programs of its various partners with their residents' values, advocate for policy that supports their partners' work, and source and direct funding where appropriate.

The purpose of this community-engaged research project was to evaluate the 2019 SNP's impact on environmental justice program development during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaborating with Rise Stockton Coalition to complete this project was advantageous, as both the coalition and its organizational members have developed critical reflexive trust through ongoing interactions within the community, and demonstrated reliable behavior and concern for their respective partners, community, and health issues (Wallerstein et al., 2018). Thus, through this partnership, we evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of their programs, from both the community and the coalition partners' perspectives. This is beneficial for developing strategic solutions for the community's needs.

Wallerstein et al. (2018) reminds researchers about the importance of recognizing one's positionality and making this role transparent to have a better understanding of power differences within communities, which allows space for equal collaboration in research findings. As a fellow

Stocktonian, who has grown up with and continues to experience economic disinvestment and environmental injustices within my community, there could be opportunities for both connection and debate with my research participants. However, my identity as a UCLA student-researcher may impact the level of engagement with community members as they may be wary of sharing their opinions with an academic institution that is not familiar to the community.

I also recognize that the outcomes of this community-engaged research project could directly impact myself, my family, and my community. For instance, I played a role in the thematic analysis of the data collected, thus the conclusions made could directly influence the policies and programs recommended by the updated SNP. Additionally, I have previously interned and volunteered for a few of the organizations within Rise Stockton. This allows me to utilize proxy trust within the partnership, as one of the coalition members confirmed and promoted my reputation and shared community characteristics to the rest of the coalition. While this is beneficial for the partnership, as proxy trust decreases the time factor in cultivating trust (Wallerstein et al, 2018), my positionality within the project shifts to maintaining those positive interactions with my prior employers and building new ones with the other coalition partners that are not as familiar with my work style and other identities. Further, my positionality becomes one that parallels the community members we hope to engage with, as we share a cultural background. Due to these identities and previous experiences, it is important to remind myself as the researcher to remain open-minded and empathetic to the research participants, without letting my own personal experiences influence the discussion of theirs. I also ensured that I practiced objectivity as I evaluated the organizations I had worked for, to allow the findings to be valid.

Since my community partner is located in Stockton, CA, much of my involvement with the organization will be remote. Additionally, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many of

the community-engaged events are currently planned to be held in a hybrid manner; with some events being held on online platforms, and others being in-person with social distancing protocols. For the scope of this research project, my role was a consultant to Rise Stockton on their planning timeline for updating the 2019 SNP and participate in community outreach for data collection. I aimed to continue to build trust within the organization by sharing any relevant work completed through the Community Engagement and Social Change (CESC) Capstone 191AX/191BX seminars, such as drafts of the proposal, to provide my community partner the opportunity to provide any feedback throughout the project. I also committed to participating in the monthly Rise Stockton Coalition meetings.

### **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

This community-engaged research project acted as the initial stage towards updating the 2019 SNP. This project evaluated the 2019 SNP's impact on environmental justice program development and strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic through a semi-systematic literature review and informational interviews. To support data collection efforts, I also developed a one-page Study Information Sheet (Appendix A) that was provided to all research participants to: communicate transparency of the study's goals, ensure their understanding of participation, discuss anonymity of data collected, and describe how the data will be protected electronically and through the use of pseudonyms.

### ***Semi-systematic Literature Review***

A semi-systematic literature review was conducted to contextualize the impact of the pandemic on environmental justice program development, and provided case studies of how other organizations currently adapt their strategies. This type of literature review was useful compared to other methods, as it allowed for flexibility in our approach to collecting articles that

can be tailored to our specific project, while providing the opportunity to cover more areas and broader topics than a systematic review could handle (Snyder, 2019).

To identify all relevant research, a literature review framework was created on Microsoft Excel by Rise Stockton and I to abstract and code each study for specific keywords, including: environmental education, environmental justice, and green economy during COVID-19 (Appendix B). I also emphasized on identifying any academic or journal articles, published between 2020 to 2022, that investigated our population of interest, such as Stockton residents, San Joaquin County residents, and communities of color. Different combinations of keywords were entered into the Google Scholar search engine to compile multiple sources for the literature review (Appendix B).

I used a thematic analysis to identify and report patterns in the form of themes using Google Docs. I then followed this review with an overall qualitative analysis of my findings, with the intention to determine any knowledge gaps currently present and identify general themes between the literature review findings and the informational interviews.

### ***Informational Interviews***

Informational interviews were conducted on Zoom with coalition members to: 1) identify current programs their organization is providing, 2) gather evaluations of the 2019 SNP's influence on their work during the pandemic, 3) understand the pandemic's impact on local program development and implementation, and 4) determine their capacity to support updating the 2019 SNP with Rise Stockton. These informational interviews provided a starting point to identify which programs can be further evaluated through interviews of coalition members and community members in the future.

Rise Stockton and I collaborated on an interview guide with open-ended questions that addressed the previous objectives for new coalition members (Appendix C) and more familiar coalition members (Appendix D). Rise Stockton and I also sought permission to record participants via Zoom, and emphasized their option to pause the recording whenever needed.

All interviews were transcribed on Google Docs, and reviewed for quality control. Transcripts were revised to include pseudonyms for all member participants. Transcripts were then subjected to thematic analysis to determine support and/or contradictions to the proposed themes from the semi-systematic literature review. All recordings and transcripts will be kept on Rise Stockton's organizational Google Drive, and will individually be encrypted with their respective passcodes to further protect the participants and the perspectives they have shared.

### **Work Plan**

An adaptive work plan (Appendix D) was created between Rise Stockton and myself to develop deliverables, ensure accountability, and practice transparency on my progress during my research process. The work plan was created through Google Excel, and shared with my points of contact at Rise Stockton.

### **Results**

The purpose of this community-engaged project was aimed to evaluate the 2019 SNP's influence on the coalition's program development and strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to one on one informational interviews with coalition members, a semi-systematic literature review was conducted to contextualize the impact of the pandemic on the strengths and weaknesses of the SNP framework. Three key themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. First, the success of environmental justice(EJ) program development and implementation was dependent on the organization's level of community

engagement. Next, the pandemic limited access to resources for EJ organizations. Third, civic engagement ensures a strategic response to public health crises such as the pandemic.

### **Program Success Dependent on Community Engagement & Access to Resources**

Once both the literature review and informational interviews were coded for pre-determined key phrases from the literature review framework, themes were extracted based on the frequency of these terms across the data and general qualitative analysis that aimed to address the purpose of our research: how did the pandemic impact EJ program development. One of the main challenges EJ programs faced during the pandemic included successful community engagement outcomes and access to resources in order to implement their programs.

### ***Pandemic Limited Community Engagement Strategies***

One of the major actions taken during the COVID-19 pandemic was the implementation of social distancing guidelines and stay-at-home orders. Due to this, much of the current literature highlighted the consequences of this public health ordinance, including the closure of many businesses, schools, and parks (Janz, 2021; Cole, Anguelovski, Baró, García-Lamarca, Kotsila, Pérez del Pulgar, Shokry & Triguero-Mas, 2020; Montiel, Cantero, Montiel, Moon, & Nawaz, 2021). One study investigated how environmental education programs adapted their programming to meet these public health guidelines, and what challenges arose as a result. Janz (2021) surveyed 258 organizations, and found that while 41 provided no programming at all, almost all organizations altered and/or canceled many of their programs with synchronous virtual educational programs as the most successful, when considering high attendance rates, quality and content of programming, and low barriers to entry. Interestingly, creating a sense of community was not mentioned as a success factor for organizations. Additionally, organizations also described the following as challenges to program implementation: saturation of virtual

asynchronous content, programs were too long and too infrequent, marketing and funding challenges, and logistics of maintaining safe environments through sanitation practices and social distancing (Janz, 2021).

Interviews conducted with coalition members also described similar challenges with program implementation during the pandemic, especially community engagement and funding.

One interviewee explains:

For outreach, things are getting better. I mean, last year [2021] was horrible doing everything virtually. So now that we have been able to be in the field, we have been more successful at [community engagement]. We are now generating over 200 leads by conducting outreach in person.

### ***Pandemic Limited Access to Resources***

Some literature recommended federal and state funded grants to become available to address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on low socioeconomic communities of color (Njoku, 2021), as many non-profit organizations rely on grants and fundraising events to continue operations. However, there is currently no relief being created, nor mentioned in the studies from the literature review conducted, that try to address these impacts. In fact, one interviewee observed that grant opportunities were becoming less environmentally focused. They reflect that:

I felt the biggest selling point [of the organization] was energy and water conservation [programs]. However, since COVID...when we look into grants, there are more grants on workforce development than energy and water saving. So [we] pivoted towards [workforce development] models.



Nonetheless, the SNP continued to be a source of community priorities for its coalition members, and were essential for grant writing. For one interviewee, the city perceived the SNP as the voice of the Stockton community that proved the need for a specific grant, such as the TCC, to be awarded to the city. Another interviewee explains:

We would use these documents to see what the priorities listed were. There were some potential projects in [the SNP], and so we were looking at how we could adapt a project... Although we didn't follow through with it, it was a space for us to brainstorm ideas to see what was more realistic [to our capacities at the time].

From the framework, this organization from the coalition began and continues to host a Climate Careers program, in which youth are employed to address climate change by providing energy efficiency services to over 55,000 Northern California residences. This acted as a way to meet grant expectations and continue to address community priorities.

### **Civic Engagement and Trust Ensures Strategic Response to Pandemic**

The overall thematic analysis also found that civic engagement was a common strategy in the literature review, and aspects of this strategy, such as trust and politics, were referenced in the informational interview. Civic engagement is widely defined, but will be referred to in this paper as individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern (American Psychological Association, 2022). At a local level, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a critical strategy to developing and implementing equity-centered rapid response efforts, disseminating information, and advocating for policies that mitigate COVID risk in communities of color, such as worker protections and local rent moratoriums (Montiel et al., 2021).

Few studies have created connections between social, health, and environmental justice through interdisciplinary approaches to science, social studies, and environmental education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, one study (Caras, Promon, Manus, & Lejano, 2021) crafted civic empowerment workshops in which community members gain COVID-19 risk communication and translate it within their communities. This strategy arose as the pandemic has caused community organizations to reconsider what just approaches look like during crises, as members manage with authorities with varying degrees of trustworthiness, and emergent knowledge in real time.

However, the success of civic engagement can be influenced by local political agendas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the San Joaquin Valley, and California as a whole, it is well documented that the oil and gas industry and industrial agriculture influence legislation in many arenas, such as the environment and economy (Cha, Pastor, Moreno, & Philips, 2021; Chandrasekaran, 2021; Flores-Landeros, Pells, Campos-Martinez, Fernandez-Bou, Ortiz-Partida, & Medellín-Azuara, 2021). The Just Transition report highlights how the pandemic caused a decrease in the public's access to decision makers and their difficulty to participate in democratic processes (Cha et al., 2021).

Agencies are particularly powerful in California as they have the capacity to build strong working relationships with the community and meet regularly with staff to build trust. In the case of Rise Stockton though, one interviewee describes how their representation of the city made it difficult to build on relationships prior to COVID:

When I jumped in for the [TCC] implementation grant, there was very little trust and to a larger extent, I think there still is not a lot of trust [between the community and city of Stockton]. I represented the bridge between city and partners...But the partners felt really

strongly about holding onto the Rise Stockton identity and...they didn't want the city to have control over the messaging... Initially, I intentionally did not go to the meetings because it felt very much like it wasn't a space for "city folk," or they wanted it to be community driven. They didn't want to feel like there were other forces at play.

For this reason, the SNP was not utilized by the city of Stockton, only as a source of evidence of community needs for grant writing purposes. The lack of trust building occurring between community partners and the city caused the framework's significance to weaken on a local legislative scale during the pandemic, as the interviewee reported that the SNP lacked a "unique strategy" for the city, as it generally echoed much of what the city's program services provide. The interviewee also adds that:

Outside the context of [the TCC grant], we have never really used [the SNP]. For a brief explanation: it was a strategic document that was tied to the previous mayor. So when the mayor lost re-election...The manager's office is a very political office, and we have to be very responsive to the new mayor. And [the SNP] was lumped into all of the prior administration stuff, so we kind of had to distance a little bit and do other things."

This demonstrates how a lack of community trust building and civic engagement between community partners and local government causes any social and environmental work done to be at the will of political events, such as changes in leadership. Thus, there is a lack of commitment from the city as a whole to continue to address identified, researched community issues.

### **Discussion**

This community-engaged project, in partnership with and serving the needs of Rise Stockton Coalition, aimed to evaluate the 2019 SNP's influence on the coalition's program development and strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through one on one

informational interviews with coalition members, and contextualized with a semi-systematic literature review, three key themes emerged from this evaluation. First, the level of success for many environmental justice programs was dependent on the presence of strong community engagement. Second, the pandemic limited environmental justice organizations' access to resources, especially funding. Third, active civic engagement ensures a strategic, collaborative response to public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Implications**

### ***Pandemic Limited Community Engagement Strategies***

Previous literature and our findings confer that communities of color are still facing exacerbated health and environmental disparities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Green et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2020; Montiel et al., 2021), and they would benefit from community organizations engaging with the community through their immediate relief efforts. Previous literature has emphasized how community foundations would be required to adapt their strategies for program implementation as a result of COVID-19 pandemic (Azevedo et al., 2021). Indeed, our findings concluded that meeting COVID-19 public health guidelines, such as social distancing protocols and stay-at-home orders, posed a great challenge for the implementation of environmental justice programs during the pandemic (Janz, 2021; Cole et al., 2020; Montiel et al., 2021). As a result, environmental focused organizations, including Rise Stockton, were found to have altered their program to include synchronous virtual education strategies, which were found to be the most successful when considering high attendance rates, quality and content of programming, and low barriers to entry (Janz, 2021). Additionally, informational interviews revealed how previous “door-to-door” engagement strategies and asynchronous virtual events were not successful during the pandemic based on low community participation.

It should be noted that criteria for what constitutes a “successful program” is dependent on the individual organization’s goals. Participants in the informational interview and case studies found from the literature review findings largely determined program success based on attendance rates, which can reflect outreach efforts. However, previous literature emphasizes these organization’s role to act as community mobilizers that spearhead immediate relief efforts locally during a public health crises (Azevedo et al., 2021), which can successfully be done if they maintain high levels of community engagement. Therefore, including “creating a sense of community” as a success factor would be beneficial to evaluate the quality of these community engagement strategies and programming content.

### ***Pandemic Impacted Organization’s Access to Resources***

Through qualitative analysis, the second theme was that environmental justice program success was dependent on the organization’s access to resources during the pandemic. Our results, from the literature review as an output, identified challenges to program implementation to include infrequency of programs, funding, low community engagement and participation, and logistics of maintaining safe environments through sanitation practices and social distancing (Janz, 2021; Njoku, 2021). In regards to specific challenges around funding, one interviewee reflected that grant opportunities since the beginning of the pandemic are prioritizing workforce development over energy and water conservation, and caused the organization to pivot its program’s focus in order to receive funding. This finding disagrees with the previously identified community priorities outlined in the 2019 SNP, as energy and water constitute two of the seven outlined priorities and currently does not include workforce development (Stockton Rise, 2019). While this organization adapted their programming by offering workforce development within energy efficiency services, this pattern highlights the problematic issue of a lack of federal and

state funded grants that address the impact of COVID-19 on low socioeconomic communities of color (Njoku, 2021).

If policy was passed to provide such funding, many of the identified, current challenges for environmental justice program implementation could be overcome as it would increase the organization's capacity to address community identified needs. This could include increasing the frequency of their programs, investing in larger marketing tactics, and employing synchronous virtual programs as a strategy. Overall, by recognizing the successful adaptations and challenges that environmental programs encountered, these results address the knowledge gap of how community foundations and their organizations are operating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Civic Engagement and Trust Ensures Strategic Response to Pandemic***

The third theme that arose from the qualitative analysis was that civic engagement and trust ensures a strategic response to public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, from the literature review findings, one study (Caras et al., 2021) held civic engagement workshops in which the community gained COVID-19 risk communication and translated it within their communities. This strategy arose as a result of organizations needing to reconsider communication strategies as their members managed with authorities with varying degrees of trustworthiness and emergent knowledge in real time during the pandemic. This finding provides further support for uplifting community recommendations presented in the 2019 SNP, which include civic engagement strategies, local capacity building, and accountability (Rise Stockton, 2019) as a method for building resilient communities.

However, findings from the informational interviews demonstrate that these strategies and recommendations from the 2019 SNP were not utilized during the pandemic by coalition partners. On a state level, our findings from the literature review as an output for this project,

discussed how the pandemic caused a decrease in the public's access to decision makers and their difficulty to participate in democratic processes (Cha et al., 2021). On a local scale, informational interviews revealed that the 2019 SNP was underutilized by the city at the beginning of the pandemic, except as a source of evidence for grant writing purposes, due to very little trust and civic engagement between the community and the city government. In fact, this lack of trust caused the framework's significance as a community-led document to decrease within the local political arena, and was solely seen as a strategic document from the previous mayor. As a result, when this mayor lost re-election, the city manager's office further distanced themselves from this framework and the environmental justice work it represented throughout the pandemic. This demonstrates how a lack of community trust building and civic engagement between local organizations and local government, which are both strategies recommended by the 2019 SNP, leads to a lack of commitment to address identified community priorities even in the midst of a public health crisis.

This disagreement in findings may be due to the fact that the 2019 SNP was created in a political environment that strongly supported environmental justice and sustainability efforts, whereas current Stockton leadership holds priorities elsewhere. Additionally, coalition members with programs in civic engagement and environmental justice have yet to be interviewed, and could provide more information on the current relationship between themselves and city government. Nonetheless, this project calls attention to the current lack of trust present between the Rise Stockton coalition and the city government, which could hinder civic engagement efforts and are detrimental for ensuring commitment to equity-centered rapid response efforts and building resilient communities.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations to this study was that two interviews were conducted in my absence, and were moderated by the Rise Stockton Engagement Coordinator due to conflicting schedules. Therefore, the current data collected from these interviews are limited as there are some areas in which I would have liked for the interviewees to further explain their opinions, which could have provided a better understanding of the presented themes in a local context. However, I recognize that participants conversed with a moderator they were familiar and comfortable with, which could also strengthen the trustworthiness of their responses to the interview questions. I also received permission to contact them with any follow up questions, but this data could be questionable as the communication style via email is different than in person.

Another limitation is that a limited number of coalition members have been interviewed thus far due to conflicting schedules. Also, the evaluation of the coalition members' programs were done from an administrative perspective. Thus this evaluation is not fully representative of the successes and challenges of the environmental justice programs offered by coalition partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Future Research**

Now that programs have been identified by coalition members that were somewhat influenced by the 2019 SNP, direct evaluation of these past and/or current programs can be implemented. Rise Stockton could provide a third party evaluation of its members' programming, and survey with program participants to provide a holistic evaluation of the program's success and limitations along with noting areas of growth for the program. This project was also essential in engaging with coalition members to determine their organization's capacity to collaborate in updating the 2019 SNP over the next year. Now that specific



organizations have been identified, a core team can be developed to begin preparing a research framework and plan to re-engage with the Central and South Stockton communities to reaffirm their priorities post-pandemic. Additionally, this core team can apply the feedback of the 2019 SNP limitations to the updated framework to ensure that it is accessible to the community members and is tailored to better support the coalition member's program development strategies. Finally, this core team should strategize engagement and trust building efforts with their local government to ensure that there is a commitment from the city to address identified community issues highlighted in the future SNP.

### **Conclusion**

For the city of Stockton, this community engaged research project has provided an evaluation of the 2019 SNP they had previously adopted, and highlighted successful areas of the framework for coalition members and limitations to its usefulness. Identification of these limitations, such as data collection methods and vague policy recommendations, allow for these areas to be revised while Rise Stockton prepares to update the framework. Furthermore, a semi-systematic literature review was conducted to contextualize the success and challenges of environmental justice program development, and application of the 2019 SNP, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This particular research further adds to the understanding of how community foundations and organizations are operating and adapting amidst local public health ordinances, giving rise to successful strategies that can be adopted in future program implementation as society continues to navigate through this pandemic. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate that there is a need for federal and state grant funding that directly aims to address the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on low socioeconomic communities of color, in order to better equip the organizations that serve them. Finally, these findings stress the

importance of civic engagement and trust building between communities and its local government to promote strategic responses to future public health and environmental crises, and ultimately develop climate resilient communities.

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Finally, I'd like to dedicate my work to my late grandmother, Francine Flores, who passed away at the beginning of this quarter, and continues to inspire me all the work I do to serve and uplift my hometown Stockton, CA.

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## Appendix A



# EVALUATING THE 2019 SNP WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN STOCKTON, CA



**Community-Engaged Capstone Research Project  
in collaboration with Rise Stockton Coalition and  
UCLA undergraduate Alanis Colón**

## At A Glance

### Challenges

- Seven of the top ten census tracts with the highest CalEnviroScreen score, thus higher pollution burden, are located in CA's Central Valley.
- The COVID-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate the health and environmental disparities present in the Central Valley.

### Benefits

- Evaluating strategies and programs proposed by the 2019 SNP within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is pertinent to understanding the community's current health status and needs.
- Applying a community engaged research approach uplifts democratic culture within the community, such as inclusiveness and reciprocity of public problem solving

## Rise Stockton Coalition

Rise Stockton is an independent coalition of 15 community organizations that focus on creating an environmentally just city that is resilient to climate change, operates a robust green economy, and is sustainably planned. Rise Stockton continues to align its coalition partners' programs with their residents' values and direct funding where appropriate.

## Community Engaged Research Project Summary

This community-engaged research project will be in partnership with and meet the needs of Rise Stockton Coalition to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted environmental justice(EJ) program development and strategies in Stockton, CA. Our goal is to update Rise Stockton's 2019 Sustainable Neighborhood Plan(SNP), and include:

- The impact of the pandemic on EJ program development and strategies
- An evaluation of the 2019 SNP's influence on the coalition's program development

## Methodology and Ethical Research Practices

We will utilize a qualitative methods approach. First, we will conduct a semi-systematic literature review to contextualize the impact of COVID-19 on EJ program development and provide insight on how organizations adapted during the pandemic. Informational interviews with coalition partners will be conducted to evaluate the 2019 SNP's influence on their work, and identify their capacity to support updating the 2019 SNP.

Rise Stockton and I are committed to ethical research practices, and plan to protect privacy and confidentiality of study participants by securely storing all transcripts of interviews and findings in encrypted files, and utilize pseudonyms. We are committed to a community-engaged research approach that allows all aspects of the study to be directed and supported by the Stockton community.



## Appendix B

Purpose:	Investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on program development, specifically EJ focused		
Key Words			
<b>Possible Populations of Interest</b>	<b>Location of Interest</b>	<b>Sectors of Interest</b>	<b>Terms</b>
Low-income	Central Valley	Green economy development	COVID.-19 pandemic
People of color	San Joaquin County	Civic engagement	Program development
Hispanic	Stockton, CA	community engagement	advocacy
African-American	California	Environmental justice	pollution burdens
Asian	West Coast United States	Public Policy	climate resilience
Low socioeconomic		Public Health	environmental education
Coalitions		Community health	medically underserved
impoverished		Social Determinants of Health	Urban Development
marginalized			Sustainability Planning
ethnic			
non-profits			
organizations			
Caucasian/White			
Middle-Income			
Question: should I include age demographic in my search?			
<b>Entered Phrases for Gogole Scholar Search Engine</b>	<b>For all searches, narrowed year range between 2020-2022</b>		
impact of COVID-19 on environmental justice program development			
"marginalized" AND "California" AND "program development" AND "pandemic"			
impact of "COVID-19" in "California Central Valley" on "program development"			
impact of "COVID-19" in "California" AND "Central Valley" on "program development"			
"green economy" AND "Stockton" OR "California" AND "non-profits" AND "pandemic"			
Challenges with Environmental Justice program development during the pandemic in California			

## Appendix C

- No Contact/Limited Contact Before
  - Introduction to AC (5 minutes)
    - Vision for Rise Stockton, overall philosophy on the work
    - Background
  - Tell me about yourself, your role, and your organization (30 minutes)
    - What projects are they excited for within their organization/the community?
    - How does their org mission/vision align with this work?
    - Do they want to collaborate with other partners?
    - Tell me about the organization's structure, who else is on your team? Are you solo? (Are they a decision maker within their organization? If not, who is that person and to what extent are they involved in this?)
    - Attitude/vibe check
  - Explain the reason for this particular outreach - Thanks for sharing more about yourself and your work with me, I'd like to share more about my role and the upcoming work I am doing with the Sustainable Neighborhood Plan (SNP) (15 min)
    - Overview the 4 Priorities of my role within Rise Stockton: Coordinate, Communicate, Educate, Advocate
    - SNP - why do we want to update the document in the first place?
    - How we envision partners, coalition members being part of that process: ways that they can get involved (joining core team, participating in 1:1s/focus groups, reviewing drafts)
  - Understand their familiarity with the SNP (15 min)
    - Have they seen the 2019 SNP? Do they use it?
    - Do they see their organization's work (current or potential) reflected in that document? If not, why? If so, how?
    - What's your level of interest in this particular project?
      - If interested, how involved potentially could you (and your organization) be in updating the Sustainable Neighborhood Plan (SNP)? When would be an appropriate time to check in about making a commitment?
  - Closing out + next steps (10 min)
    - Follow ups and timeline
  - Debrief Internally (15-30 minutes)
    - Overall vibe
    - First impressions - collaboration? similarities to other partners? how they/their org fits into the whole?
    - What went well? Not so well?
    - Note taking and action items

## Appendix D

- Yes Contact Before/Comfortable with this partner
  - Check-in (5 minutes)
    - How have you been? What's on your mind? How are you coming into this space?
  - Remind me about yourself, your role, and your organization (30-45 minutes) "I need you to be honest plz..."
    - I know we've met before, we know each other, but a lot has changed and I'm wondering if/how things have changed for you?
    - How are you feeling about being part of this coalition? Do you feel supported? Are you getting/giving what you want from/to the coalition?
    - Roses and thorns
    - What projects are they excited for within their organization/the community?
      - Would these programs benefit from further support through the coalition? If so, in which capacity?
    - Has your org's mission/vision/focus changed as a result of the pandemic or other factors? Do they want to collaborate with other partners?
    - What's changed within your org structure, who else is on your team? Are you solo? (Are they a decision maker within their organization? If not, who is that person and to what extent are they involved in this?)
    - Attitude/vibe check
  - Explain the reason for this particular outreach - Thanks for sharing more about yourself and your work with me, I'd like to share more about my role and the upcoming work I am doing with the Sustainable Neighborhood Plan (SNP) (5 min)
    - Overview the 4 Priorities of my role within Rise Stockton: Coordinate, Communicate, Educate, Advocate
    - SNP - [why we want](#) to update the document in the first place?
    - How we envision partners, coalition members being part of that process: ways that they can get involved (joining core team, participating in 1:1s/focus groups, reviewing drafts)
  - Understand their familiarity with the SNP (15 min)
    - Have they seen the 2019 SNP? Do they use it?
      - Possible follow up to second question: If so, has the 2019 SNP influenced previous programs and/or initiatives? How? How about current programs?
      - If they have **not**: what were some limitations to implementing the 2019 SNP as a framework to past and current programs?
    - Do they see their organization's work (current or potential) reflected in that document? If not, why? If so, how?
    - What's your level of interest in this particular project?
  - Closing out + next steps (5 min)
    - Follow ups and timeline
  - Debrief Internally (15-30 minutes)

## Appendix E

Phase 1 - Jan/February 2022				
Status	Timeline	Task	Links / Resources	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	1/26	Revise 2019 SNP Implementation Survey & Send out		
<input type="checkbox"/>	2/18	Familiarize myself with Taguette; determine if there is other data analysis software that could be better if there is trouble		
<input type="checkbox"/>	2/18	Review Method Section with Alejandro + Jasmine		
<input type="checkbox"/>	2/23	Close 2019 SNP Implementation Survey		
Phase 2 - March 2022				
✓	Timeline	Task	Links / Resources	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	3/4	Review and Analyze Feedback from 2019 Implementation Survey w/ Google Sheets		
<input type="checkbox"/>	3/11	Follow up with Partners about filling out survey		
<input type="checkbox"/>	3/20	Create key words and phrases for Lit Review		
Phase 3 - April 2022				
✓	Timeline	Task	Links / Resources	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/1	Meeting w/Alejandro		Reconnect and readjusting work project deliverables and approach. Instead of surveys, going to host informational interviews with partners.
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/4	Adjust one-page Study information Sheet		
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/4	Draft Interview Question Guide		
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/8	Feedback on Lit Review Frameworks + Interview Guide		
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/15	Find and annotate 5 literature sources		
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/20	Find and annotate 5 literature sources		

Phase 4 - May 2022				
✓	Timeline	Task	Links / Resources	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/2	Send SIS to Alejandro		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/3	Interview w/ 1 participant		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/3	Interview w/ 1 participant		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/4 - 5/8	Draft Lit Review + Identify Themes		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/9	Transcribe interviews		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/12	Results Draft DUE		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/16	Send Results to Jasmine +Alejandro		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/18	Draft Discussion due		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/20	Feedback for Results		
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/23-5/27/2022	UCLA's Undergraduate Research Week	<a href="https://sciences.ugresearch.ucla.edu/research-week/">https://sciences.ugresearch.ucla.edu/research-week/</a>	Will be presenting our research project and findings up until this point.
Phase 5 - June 2022				
✓	Timeline	Task	Links / Resources	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/3	Send third follow up to partners for informational interview		
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/9	Send draft of Literature Review		
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/16	Feedback on Lit Review		