Community Coalition recently unveiled the findings for the Covid-19 Communities of Color Assessment, focusing on L.A. County residents in highest-needs communities. The effort was part of a national initiative led by Congressmember Karen Bass and Dr. Cheryl Grills of Loyola Marymount University here in Los Angeles. The purpose of the assessment is to help inform federal legislative priorities and local social justice campaigns on what is needed as it relates to recovery services, programs, and methods.

CoCo collected 2,500 surveys in zip codes of communities of color most impacted by COVID-19 throughout LA County (with greater emphasis in South LA). Those communities in zip codes most impacted by COVID-19 as defined by Race Counts include South LA, Southeast L.A., San Fernando Valley, Pomona, Santa Clarita, Palmdale, and Lancaster. With findings from the survey, Community Coalition hopes to inform policy and budget priorities for the next FY 2021-22 and develop its 3-year strategic plan. (Go to www.cocosoutla.org to see Dr. Grills’ presentation on the data gathered from the survey.)

The Prevention Network is an alliance of social service providers and community residents fighting to strengthen the social safety net of South LA to increase access to prevention and treatment services. The findings were shared with community members and service providers at the relaunch of CoCo’s Prevention Network on September 7th. The power of the Prevention Network is the ability to bring together service providers from across the Service Planning Area 6 (SPA 6) to shape our social services delivery landscape in order to create avenues of investment that South Los Angeles so richly deserves. More than 52 providers joined in to hear the Covid-19 Communities of Color Assessment presentation and became members of the newly reformed network.

HISTORY

Social service providers—people who work in human service organizations, such as homeless shelters, child health clinics, and drug treatment centers—were the first to see the fallout of the crack cocaine epidemic as they struggled to meet the needs of clients who poured into their agencies seeking resources to deal with unemployment and addiction. Frustrated by tough on crime policies that turned a public health epidemic—crack cocaine addiction—into an opportunity to move aggressively against communities...
Stories of South LA

Jason Foster is the President & Chief Operating Officer of Destination Crenshaw, the 1.3-mile stretch of Crenshaw Boulevard being transformed into a thriving commercial corridor due to long-deserved economic investment—in the 8th Council District. To learn more about it, follow them at @destinationcrenshaw and www.destinationcrenshaw.la

Here’s Jason’s Story:

“The permanence of Black people in South LA is the reason I’m at work.

I was studying finance at Howard when my parents lost their home in the recession. I saw displacement up close and it made me quickly understand that we’re all in need of some permanent solutions for our community. We need something we can rely on so that we can grow as a society.

A place should welcome us. It should be safe. It should engage us in all aspects of our lives like our work and pleasure and fun and love.

I knew Wall Street wasn’t for me. I didn’t know how the financial sector oriented around purposeful work, but I can see that now through Destination Crenshaw. We’re working on issues related to affordable housing, community development...just creating more access to resources. This is our neighborhood and it’s our home. The assets here should stay here with Black people and also be set up to grow so we can prosper for years to come.

I think my favorite part of living in South LA is knowing that I’m in a community surrounded by people who are intentional in creating the community that we all want to live in. The change here is constant--we can participate in it and shape it or we can sit out. It’s that relationship to change that I think we could all do better on and instead of pessimism, step into it and advocate for the direction it goes in.

And what we’re getting up to with Destination Crenshaw is directly related to shaping that change we want to see. We did a DC Thrive program in partnership with Council District 8 to get meals to senior programs. We started up “We Love Leimert,” a roundtable of 150 Black-owned businesses and artists coming together to share knowledge, build power, offer tech support, and more. We’re tackling that question of how to scale up these businesses and make them permanent mainstays.

It matters a lot to me knowing that there are people all over South LA who want to be a benefit to this community. That, to me, is what we could always use more of.
Community Coalition has worked throughout the pandemic to keep our community informed about COVID-19. To address hesitancy around getting vaccinated against the virus, CoCo committed to working with Facebook on a campaign to increase immunization rates and connect people with credible information about COVID-19 vaccines. Through the Community Vaccination Art Program, we endeavored to remind and inspire people to get vaccinated. CoCo helped spread the message through public art murals that have come to life in 12 cities across the US and Canada, including Chicago, Detroit, Edmonton, Jacksonville, Los Angeles, Mesa, Montreal, Ottawa, San Bernardino, San Antonio, Seattle, and Washington, DC. The murals were positioned in community gardens, parks, and community businesses throughout the summer and fall of 2021. They will be accompanied by a digital social media campaign to help spread the message.

Facebook, with Amplifier, launched this vaccine public art campaign where artists from across the country have created original artwork to help promote the COVID-19 vaccine in areas that have seen low participation rates. The art installations featured a QR code that directs viewers to Facebook’s COVID Information Center. The Center makes it easier for people to access up-to-date health information by sharing the COVID-19 Information Center on Facebook and Instagram.

Amplifier is a nonprofit design lab that builds art and media experiments to amplify the most important movements of our time. Together with social change partners in both the for-profit and nonprofit worlds, they create media campaigns that shift culture and change the national narrative. Since 2015, Amplifier has commissioned over 400 artists, distributed tens of millions of art pieces, and sent free artwork to hundreds of thousands of students across the United States.

For this campaign, Facebook Open Arts and Amplifier commissioned local artists in various cities to create artwork in neighborhoods with lower vaccine uptake rates. CoCo’s mural artist is Gabby Gonzales, a queer illustrator and painter living in Los Angeles. Her art focuses on themes of longing and desire, love and decay. Her creativity is framed between still-life and fantasy in which Gonzales filters modern temptations through classical and queer lenses. Her works are rendered in a clean, linear style reminiscent of greek pottery painting, similarly providing insight into the culture and environment of her time.

CoCo’s mural is on the exterior wall on 81st Street and was accompanied by a digital social media campaign to help spread the message.
Ms. Vanessa Bailey, a hula hooper extraordinaire, reflected on creating joy during the past 18 months. When the pandemic hit, it closed the doors to her dance studio, Vanessa’s Positive Energy. Although she was not able to share her hula hooping joy in person, she quickly moved her practice to a virtual environment.

“It’s been a very powerful [time] for me. Initially, I started doing it at home, with nowhere to go. I have a business which was closed in the pandemic. I couldn’t go and be with the people. I dance and hula-hoop because it takes me to another place … to a happy place where I can release and feel joy. It’s not about just surviving, but thriving and doing something good. I believe what you’re focused on is what grows -- good or bad,” says Ms. Vanessa.

During her time of isolation, she leaned into her skill set as a retired teacher and began filming her hula hooping sessions. The result was “Vanessa’s Hula Hoop Chronicles which contains more than 500 videos that keep the body active, the mind stress free and the heart pounding.

“It’s a way for me to connect and keep in touch and make sure everyone is doing okay. Now I have people reaching out to me asking where to buy these hula hoops,” she says with a laugh.

When asked what’s the secret to her joy, she says, “Think about something you’ve always wanted to do, but didn’t have the time to do before. Something that makes you happy. When you take the focus off the negative and you put it on what makes you happy, pretty soon you’re thinking more and more about what brings you joy.”

Andie Walok and her family have been members of Community Coalition for over five years. Andie is currently a 5th grader who has participated in CoCo’s summer programs since she was in 3rd grade. Andie’s mother, Katrina, is also a dedicated CoCo member and is active in the parent-led campaign fighting for educational equity in South LA schools.

This summer Andie returned to CoCo’s 6-week hybrid Summer Academic Program focused on mitigating learning loss, improving students’ socio/emotional wellbeing, and on promoting tech literacy. Andie’s academic courses focused on project-based learning with three weeks of English and three weeks of math. In her English class, Andie learned about food deserts and how a lack of access to healthy foods affects residents of South LA. In her math class, she designed her own restaurant featuring healthy food options such as salad, fruits, and grilled chicken.

Andie also really enjoyed the wellness sessions where she created a coping toolbox filled with fidget spinners, Playdough, slime and other tactile items. Andie was a stellar student. She had consistent attendance and always came ready to learn and participate. Andie accumulated over 300 points in the summer program, ranking in the top 20. At graduation, she redeemed her points for gift cards, board games, movie tickets, etc. The Walok family are integral members of CoCo and we thank them for their trust and commitment.
Community Coalition had a major responsibility to create a virtual learning experience in order to curb learning loss, support families, and kick off the 2021-2022 school year in a way that empowered our students and parents. To do that, CoCo put together the Summer Academic Program (SAP) for 90 young scholars ages 8-18 from across South LA. It was an opportunity for families and their children to become reengaged with all aspects of in-person learning: from waking up on time to being transported to the learning environment to a full day out of the house and interacting with fellow students.

The entire program was informed by surveys filled out by parents and students. The focus groups revealed that parents were deeply concerned about student learning loss in addition to students’ socio-emotional health due to increased isolation and family deaths. Parents also expressed frustration with their students’ schools due to a lack of communication and transparency about the 2021-22 school year. Lastly, parents voiced a strong desire for the SAP to include prosocial extracurricular activities that would foster positive student development.

The SAP’s focus was on project based learning where each classroom focused on a different creative theme like developing an idea for a restaurant, brainstorming how to bring more healthy food into South LA, and photojournalism. At several points, scholars got to present and answer questions from their peers. There were also gardening activities and interactive financial literacy and political education sessions.

Community Coalition conducted the Summer Academic Program (SAP) for 90 young scholars ages 8-18 from across L.A.

Mental health and wellness were also at the core of the program given the impacts of the pandemic. Youth were given space to share how they felt about going back to school, what happened in their world during the pandemic, and any losses they experienced. Then, trained staff members led sessions offering coping strategies and mechanisms to utilize. The strategies focused on building healthy relationships and resilience, stress management, and strong communication.

Overall, the program engaged students five days a week for seven weeks. Three of the five days were in person while the other two days were virtual learning days. Families were given an option to enroll in the five-day hybrid program or only attend on virtual days. These options were created to accommodate families who remained hesitant about in-person interactions. Community Coalition hired a culturally knowledgeable and sensitive academic team consisting of six instructors and seven student engagement facilitators. All academic instructors were/are South LA educators who have experience working with Black and Brown families.

Community Coalition congratulates the amazing instructors who created a dynamic learning environment that definitely had a positive impact on participants. A huge thank you goes to Colin Kaepernick’s Know Your Rights Camp for their very generous donation of school supplies, backpacks, and other essential goods and services for Black & Brown families navigating this pandemic.
Leslie Cooper Johnson, Vice President of Organizational Development at CoCo, is currently leading the work at Community Coalition to end pretextual stops used by the Los Angeles Police Department to initiate searches and racially profile the city’s Black and Brown residents. Recently, The Movement interviewed her about the work.

Was there any one thing that sparked the organization’s attention regarding the problem of driving while Black?

In October of 2019, the Los Angeles Times published a major data-driven story revealing that LAPD officers search Black & Latinx drivers at rates of more than four to one and three to one compared to white drivers, despite finding higher rates of contraband among white drivers. Many of these searches are happening during traffic stops on the pretext the driver had a minor equipment violation.

The paper’s investigation revealed that across Los Angeles, 24% of black drivers and passengers were searched, compared with 16% of Latinos and 5% of whites, during a recent 10-month period. Blacks make up less than 9% of the city’s population. The article also found that 270 Metro officers—about 2% of the LAPD—have been deployed for hot-spot policing primarily in communities of color and have been making 60,000 vehicle stops per year (11% of LAPD’s total stops). Many of these searches happened after stops for minor equipment violations.

See Traffic Stops on Page 8
of color, South LA providers worked to identify solutions that addressed the root causes of addiction and crime in local neighborhoods.

In 1990, South LA providers convened a conference entitled “Crack: Crisis in the African American Community,” and Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment was born. A few years later, the Coalition formally launched the Prevention Network—an alliance of South L.A. social service agencies providing drug treatment, transitional housing, mental health, and other services in the community.

“We believed that social service providers were critical agents in stabilizing vulnerable families as populations, who get involved in broader community organizing efforts, including public policy and advocacy work, once stabilized.”

– Congressmember Karen Bass, CoCo’s Founder.

Over the last 30 years, social service providers in the Prevention Network identified key issues that drove decisive campaigns in Community Coalition’s history, including “Rebuild South Central Without Liquor Stores”, which resulted in the closure of 150 liquor stores in South L.A. after the 1992 civil unrest.

In 2000, South L.A. providers launched the “Family Care Not Foster Care Campaign” to shift resources from private foster care agencies to extended family members caring for children no longer living with their biological parents; and the Ex-Offender Taskforce to address the unmet needs of residents returning home after incarceration and remove barriers to housing, employment and education for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Most recently, network members organized to defeat the “Community Care Facilities Ordinance” that would reduce the availability of drug and mental health treatment and affordable housing for poor and working families. The Prevention Network also led local and regional efforts to pass California’s Proposition 47, a historic bill that stopped the use of excessive prison sentences for minor crimes and invested prison spending savings into prevention and treatment services.

**MOVING FORWARD**

The Prevention Network continues to direct policy initiatives and resource distribution according to the real human needs they see and address on a daily basis. In September 2021, the PN officially relaunched with a kickoff event featuring over two dozen service providers. The work takes on all the more importance as we strive to recover from the pandemic which exacerbated the public health and economic crisis plaguing Black & Brown families throughout South LA.

THE HIERARCHY OF SOUTH LA NEEDS—The Prevention Network continues to direct policy initiatives and resource distribution according to the real human needs they see and address on a daily basis. In September 2021, the PN officially relaunched with a kickoff event featuring over two dozen service providers. The work takes on all the more importance as we strive to recover from the pandemic which exacerbated the public health and economic crisis plaguing Black & Brown families throughout South LA.
Why is this work so important?

Each day in LA, mental and physical violence happens to Black drivers during traffic stops by LAPD personnel. Taking law enforcement out of traffic stops could literally save lives like Bryant’s, a Black husband and father of three who was pulled over for a moving violation. With his entire family in the car, he was forcibly removed from his vehicle, thrown to the ground, and handcuffed while his wife and children watched in horror. The officer suspected he had drugs or a gun. He had neither.

Traffic stops are the most common way that residents come into contact with law enforcement. Time and time again, across the nation, we have seen Black men and women lose their lives for what would have been a routine traffic ticket for others. The most recent incident of this is the tragic death of Daunte Wright who was stopped for having expired plates and lost his life when the officer involved shot and killed him after she drew her weapon which she allegedly thought was her taser.

How are you working to combat racial disparities in traffic stops?

Shortly after the data came out from the investigation, CoCo joined with 14 other groups to form Promoting Unity Safety and Health in Los Angeles (PUSH LA). This cross-sector coalition consists of base building, advocacy, religious/interfaith, and labor organizations that have come together to demand an end to the racial profiling that has gone on for decades in our communities. As a collective, we are also trying to find viable solutions that remove armed police officers from traffic duties. We believe one way to do that is to use unarmed, civilian employees from the Department of Transportation (LADOT) to conduct traffic stops instead of LAPD. We are currently working with LA’s City Council to research this possibility.

If you could snap your fingers and resolve the problem today, what would that look like?

The LAPD would publicly admit to racial profiling and apologize to all South LA residents who have been unjustly stopped and searched. Monetary and other reparations would be delivered to these victims and their families.

Those officers who engage in unwarranted pretextual stops, who have patterns demonstrative of racial profiling or who engage in misconduct and abuse would be disciplined, criminally prosecuted and where appropriate be removed from our communities or the overall field of law enforcement.

That “to protect and serve” would extend to everyone in Los Angeles. And that our community members in South LA—and other overpoliced communities—would no longer be terrified of being pulled over by LAPD for minor traffic infringements.