

 The North County Times - Californian

Residents continue efforts to shed gang influences

OCEANSIDE: Eastside association surveys neighborhood

CIGI ROSS - For the North County Times | Posted: Saturday, August 29, 2009 7:00 pm

Lorena Acosta wants to make positive changes in her community.

That's why the lifelong resident of Oceanside's Eastside neighborhood spent Saturday morning canvassing her friends and neighbors.

Acosta, 26, and about 15 other members of the Eastside Neighborhood Association wanted to ask residents if life in the neighborhood has improved over the last two years and what concerns they still have.

The area known as Eastside is bordered by Interstate 5 on the west and Mission Avenue on the south. It is one of the city's three Latino neighborhoods and is nicknamed "Posole," Acosta said, after the Posole Locos gang that has earned the area its reputation for violence, drugs and prostitution.

"A lot of people, when they ask where I live they say, 'Oh, that's Posole, how can you live there?'" Acosta said. "But it's nothing like how it used to be."

Much of that change can be credited to Carmela Munoz, an employee of Vista Community Clinic, who began to recruit community activists in 2002 through a federal grant from the Drug Free Communities program.

"We initially started the Eastside Neighborhood Association to be more officially known," Munoz said. "There have been big issues in the community for years, especially drug problems."

Munoz said organizing residents was her biggest challenge. Many of the Eastside's large Latino population ---- about 75 percent - --- faced a language barrier. Most were unfamiliar with navigating city government and didn't trust the police.

"When I first came there was no trust between the residents and city officials and the police," Munoz said. "There was no relationship and they were blaming each other."

With Munoz's help, the Eastside Neighborhood Association has begun to overcome those barriers. The group has developed a program to train members how to become leaders and engage in local government to help make wanted changes in the neighborhood. Members have petitioned the Oceanside City Council for better street lighting and helped increase the police presence around Balderrama Park, where residents say gang activity is concentrated.

The group has conducted surveys every two years since 2003 to get resident feedback on their progress.

"When we first started, things were moving in a positive direction," said Maria Russell, an Eastside resident and president of the association. "Now we're backsliding a bit, I think because of the economy and other factors. There is still a percentage of youth that need an intervention."

Those surveyed were asked about their knowledge of the association and its events, what their biggest concerns for the community are and if they've seen any improvements in crime, drug and alcohol abuse and support from police and city officials over the past two years. Residents were also asked what strategies should be used to combat crime and drug use in the neighborhood.

The majority of those surveyed were positive about the changes, but it was clear that more can be done. Resident suggestions included extra police patrols around the park, increased lighting on streets and more community activities and opportunities for youths.

"People want to see changes fast, so when they don't see those changes immediately and they don't understand the process, they are frustrated," Munoz said. "It takes time. The problems have been here for so long, it's not something you're going to solve day to night."

Once information from the more than 100 surveys is gathered, Munoz said, the association will use it to plan activities and bring in resources or information that will help the community. It's also another way to encourage residents to help make the changes on their own.

"We have funding for the ENA this year, but next year who knows," she said.

"What we really want is to empower (residents) to become self-sufficient so they can continue the work after we leave."