



Roles for Community Groups in LSL Replacement Efforts

Case Example from Clean Water Fund in Chelsea, Massachusetts

Community advocate and organizing groups can play a pivotal, dynamic role in accelerating LSL replacement, as was the case for Clean Water Fund (CWF) in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Maureo Fernández y Mora, Associate State Director for CWF, described how CWF served as both an ally to the Department of Public Works in Chelsea, helping it design and fund an LSL replacement program, and as an advocate for and bridge to the community.

Chelsea -- with a large immigrant population, diverse communities of color, a high number of renters, and a history of environmental justice issues -- has a longstanding, strong community organizing culture. Drawing on this asset, CWF channeled community energy to elevate LSL replacement as a city priority, understand the barriers to implementing an LSL replacement program, and help overcome them. As in many communities, funding was a key barrier for Chelsea. CWF recruited relevant stakeholders and worked with the Department of Public Works to develop and budget for a replacement plan. This included providing technical assistance to the city to help access a 10-year loan offered through the Massachusetts Water Authority. CWF leveraged its state-level relationships and experience in other communities to help Chelsea navigate the application process and strengthen its proposal. Ultimately, the city received \$100,000 in 2018.

“We had a dedicated Department of Public Works and a community used to advocating for itself,” Fernández y Mora said. “With the funding, we had everything we needed. I see our role as creating momentum. We helped the city see this was doable.”

On the community side, CWF helped navigate two other key barriers: public awareness and public trust. Advocates and leaders with the grassroots group Chelsea Greenroots communicated that many residents of Chelsea might not be comfortable answering the door and interacting with government officials due to ongoing ICE raids. So, working with Chelsea Greenroots, CWF organized local public information sessions about LSL replacement, and began training community members to do door-to-door neighborhood outreach. “We treated this like any canvassing training,” Fernández y Mora said, “lead with the basic information – why is this important, what are the risks – and end with what they can do about it.” Drawing on materials from the LSLR Collaborative, CWF also developed guidance for how residents could identify LSLs in their homes and who to contact if they found one. This was particularly useful for reaching rental properties, Fernández y Mora explained, because once notified by a tenant the city could contact the landlord with firm evidence an LSL was present in the property. While Chelsea’s program covers the full cost of replacement for all residents, CWF began its public outreach campaign in Chelsea’s lowest income areas to ensure dollars were directed where most needed. Between 2017 and 2020 Chelsea replaced 400 LSLs.

Q&A with Maureo Fernández y Mora, Associate State Director for CWF

Are there other examples of specific strategies you’ve tried that you think other communities should know about?

Language translation has proven super valuable for us. We translated our canvassing materials into Spanish and offer translation services at our community learning meetings. Even when

not many people show up who need the services, it sends a powerful message about partnership. We got appreciation from several key community leaders, and we're using those relationships to create new channels of communication that will help us bridge equity gaps.

What's an example of a challenge you encountered, and how did you address it (or how are you)?

"Rental properties continue to be a challenge. For CWF and many NGOs our work is about prioritizing environmental justice communities. These communities often have large renter populations. We often encounter absentee landlords with little motivation or incentive to replace lead service lines. There is also fear among tenants to raise issues with their landlords in the first place. That's one reason we used a multi-step process in Chelsea. People were able to self identify LSLs and contact the city who then contacted the landlords. It provides a level of separation and more safety for tenants."

Is there anything else you've learned about LSL replacement that you want your peers or counterparts in other communities to know?

"One, a big part of the work a community group can do is change community lore around what is and is not possible, especially in environmental justice communities. That starts with building trust. While we had very specific information we wanted to get out about LSLs, you also have to acknowledge and comfort people who have been exposed to environmental harm. We trained our community outreach teams to do that, but it came instinctually because they share that experience."

"Two, there's a misperception that the relationships between community advocacy groups and public works/ water departments must be adversarial. There's a sense that environmental issues have to be someone fault, and we're here to assign blame. And that's not true. We really try to reframe that. The problem is the problem, not one organization or person. We work with utilities to build trust in communities. We encourage them to take credit for successes and to be transparent about issues. The more openly problems are discussed in a community, the more motivation there is to address them as quickly as possible."