



## UC CalFresh Imperial County Empowering Youth as Leaders

### The Issue

Childhood obesity is a problem that affects many in the Imperial County - 40.9% of 5th graders and 45% of 7th graders are overweight or obese. Fitness levels are low- only 13.9% 5th graders and 23.6% of 7th graders meet all of the fitness standards (ED-Data, 2018). Imperial County is known for its desert location with little access to indoor recreational facilities and highly accessible fast food restaurants. Empowering youth as leaders to address the issues affecting the health of their families will create change in Imperial County.

### What Has ANR Done?

The UC CalFresh Nutrition Education Program in Imperial County and Meadows Union School District partnered on a pilot Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Project targeting middle school aged youth in the After-School Education & Safety Program (ASES). The Public Health Institute Center for Wellness and Nutrition and UC Davis Center for Regional Change provided ongoing technical assistance, documentation, and training throughout the project. Weekly meetings took place with a UC CalFresh Nutrition Educator, who was the adult ally leading 10 young people through the YPAR Stepping Stones curriculum. This process led to youth voice and empowerment. The group named themselves the Helping Hands, Active Knights (HHAK). HHAK identified problems that affected the health and wellness of their peers. The students chose to research the low physical activity levels of their 6th, 7th, and 8th- grade peers and then developed a nine-question survey. Sixty-one students participated in the survey. After analyzing the data, the group developed a power point presentation to showcase their findings to key stakeholders. Further, the HHAK students asked their administration for new physical activity equipment and a stencil project to help promote physical activity within Meadows Elementary School. The work has led to young people advocating for environmental change efforts within Meadows Elementary School.



HHAK on a field trip to the Imperial Valley Food Bank

### The Payoff

#### Youth-led Participatory Action Research led to positive changes in the school district

This was the first project in Imperial County that empowered youth to use policy, systems, and environmental change strategies to create change within their school district. The YPAR program has led to a strong partnership between UC CalFresh and Meadows School District. It has opened the door for a more comprehensive approach to healthy eating and active living strategies. Meadows now has eight teachers extending CATCH PE, nutrition education, and garden enhanced nutrition education. The stencil project was completed in February and is reaching 488 students. The stencil project supports the efforts of providing more access to physical activity and connecting with the Smarter Lunchrooms Movement.

### Clientele Testimonial

"I know now I have a voice." – Youth Researcher

"I learned about leadership." – Youth Researcher

### Contact

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Imperial County

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