

# BUILDING THE PLANE AS WE FLY IT:

## *The California Convergence's Shift in Governance*

Prepared by the Center for Community Health and Evaluation  
for the California Convergence

CALIFORNIA  
**CONVERGENCE**  
Working together to improve food and physical activity environments

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### INTRODUCTION

When renters and buyers seek a new place to live, they instinctively look for the most affordable option that offers a combination of physical safety, space, convenient access to stores and jobs, good schools, and perhaps parks or other options for recreation. The old real estate adage, “location, location, location,” turns out to be just another way of saying something that has become a core tenet of public health: **place matters**. Where we live, work, and play shapes our health and well-being, for better or for worse.

No matter where we can afford and choose to live, that place’s healthy or unhealthy attributes are largely determined by policies and environmental factors that surround and influence our individual actions. Does the corner store carry fresh fruits and vegetables? Is there a safe, well-lit place to jog or walk the dog in the evenings? Are there fast food restaurants and liquor stores near the high school? What kind of fare does the elementary school cafeteria serve up for lunch?

Over the past several decades, the role of policy and environmental change has gained prominence as a powerful lever for improving the health outcomes of individuals, neighborhoods, and entire populations. The tobacco control movement is just one testament to how focusing on policy-level changes (such as smoke-free workplaces and restaurants or increased cigarette taxes) can support and accelerate parallel changes in social norms and individual behavior.

In California, changing local and state policies that affect food and physical activity environments has been the focus of numerous initiatives, ranging from small local efforts to major investments by health departments and philanthropies. This is the story of how one attempt to coordinate, unify, and simplify these varied policy efforts across the state of California—the California Convergence—made a mid-course correction in its structure and approach.

By documenting the reasons behind the recent shift in California Convergence’s governance structure, we hope to provide useful lessons for the many other collaborative efforts across the country that are struggling with some of the same dilemmas that California Convergence has faced.

**Although California may be unique in its size and scope, the challenge that California Convergence faces is not unique: trying to simultaneously coordinate and amplify a more unified voice for policy change, while also giving local communities more access to and opportunities for influencing policy.**

## CALIFORNIA CONVERGENCE: PHASE I

California Convergence is a network of community leaders and partners collectively advancing health equity through policy and environmental change—change designed to create healthy, livable, sustainable communities where everyone thrives. Two major funders, The California Endowment (TCE) and Kaiser Permanente, launched the Convergence in 2007.

At the time, each funder was supporting community initiatives that shared similar goals and even similar names. In TCE's case, these were Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) projects and the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Project (CCROPP), while Kaiser's were Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) projects. To these funders, it made sense to join forces and collaborate more systematically on their shared goals. The argument was compelling to other funders active in California as well, and California Convergence soon expanded to include other funders and their grantees involved in place-based, multi-sector, policy and environmental change obesity prevention initiatives, including:

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Active Living by Design,
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Steps to a Healthier U.S.,
- California Department of Health Services Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (CX3), and
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation Food and Fitness Initiative.

As one funder described the interaction among these various grantees, "They wanted to share with each other what they were doing and what they were learning. They wanted to identify what they thought were important policy issues and see if they could be addressed more broadly at the state level. And they wanted to inform funders in a more directive way."

The funders saw value and potential in this as well.

**From this more coordinated, collective effort, Convergence funders hoped that a stronger, amplified policy voice would emerge—one that would be much more effective than pursuing multiple efforts in isolation, one community at a time.**

As local leaders and their counterparts across the state interacted more and pursued shared policy priorities, the funders also saw opportunities for synergies and efficiencies. For example, the Convergence brought together the different initiatives' communication experts and evaluators working with the various grantees, to stimulate more common messages and measures.

The initial iteration of California Convergence was a funder-led, but community-influenced, collaborative. To staff and manage the many administrative, coordinating, and communications tasks required for a statewide collaboration, the funders turned to the Public Health Institute's Partnership for the Public's Health (PPH), which continues to serve in this role as the coordinating office for California Convergence. The funders also supported policy advocacy organizations whose staff advised California Convergence and worked directly with local community

groups, providing technical assistance and guidance.

The overall goal of developing comprehensive, community-based policy interventions to improve food and physical activity environments across the state was pursued at three levels. First, California Convergence convened local community leaders and advocates to identify a **set of common, shared policy priorities** that could be pursued statewide. Convergence staff (based in PPH's offices in Oakland, CA) also created a **peer learning network** to support the work, including an electronic learning community and face-to-face convenings, and coordinated **technical assistance** through webinars, phone calls, and face-to-face visits.

The funders realized that such an effort would require their financial support and a degree of centralized staffing and coordination from an organization like PPH, but they were wary of committing to long-term support. More than a peer-learning network or exchange, they hoped that California Convergence would grow into an organization with its own independent momentum—and, eventually, with its own financing and support.

## THE EMERGENCE OF A SECOND PHASE

### The Context and Motivations for a Shift in Governance

By 2010, three years after California Convergence was launched, a series of face-to-face convenings had occurred, augmented by an online peer network and technical assistance “matchmaking.” The combination of convenings, peer networking, and technical assistance served an important function by connecting community groups to one another and to policy-relevant resources and strategies they may not have been able to access otherwise. However, the cross-pollinating role, while valued, fell short of the Convergence’s initial statewide policy goals.

**By mid-2010, each of the key players—funders, PPH staff, community leaders, and representatives of state policy advocacy organizations—was experiencing some degree of frustration and dissatisfaction with how California Convergence was unfolding.**

Everyone acknowledged the challenging backdrop, which was by no means unique to California or to California Convergence. The recession that began in 2008 had made state and local budget outlooks even bleaker, and many community groups were struggling to survive—leaving them little time or energy to participate actively in a new and time-consuming network.

The policy changes being sought were complex in and of themselves, and the goal of agreeing on a handful of priorities made the situation even more difficult. The PPH team supporting California Convergence convened meetings and tried to develop a fair, transparent process for selecting priorities, but funders and community groups became impatient with the emphasis on process, which some saw as coming at the expense of action. “It’s really hard to be strategic if you keep being pulled in millions of different directions,” commented a community leader. Others saw this as a generic shortcoming of public health, not just California Convergence and its organizers: “We tend to spend too much time on options, and not enough on winning a policy goal,” as another respondent described it.

California Convergence was conceived as a mechanism for a collective voice, representing many different groups and levels of policy work. While this goal resonated with many participants, it proved to be difficult to deliver in practice. Who really spoke for whom? At the end of the day, who was calling the shots? Was it the funders, the PPH staff coordinating Convergence, the community groups, or the policy leads? To insiders and outsiders alike, the set-up was confusing. It was unclear to many who really was in charge; to others, the entity calling the shots seemed to shift every few months. Some felt the Convergence program team at PPH was put in a difficult if not impossible position, accountable to funders as well as local community leaders—and therefore was resented as an added (and, to some, unnecessary) layer between the two. Some felt the community voice, filtered through Convergence, was not as strong as it could have been.

Adding to the confusion were consistent branding and identity issues. By design, Convergence tried to emphasize collaboration and partnerships, sometimes downplaying its and PPH's role in convening a meeting, sponsoring a Webinar, or "matchmaking" across counties and regions.

Against the backdrop of curtailed or disappearing funding, the flow of funds to PPH raised some eyebrows, especially among community leaders. Some wondered why the funders were investing in a centralized infrastructure to the degree that they were, feeling these funds might be more effective if deployed directly to those involved in local and state policy work (instead of supporting administrative and coordination functions).

Meanwhile, the funders began expressing growing impatience. They were investing significant funds in an infrastructure that didn't appear to be yielding the policy impact for which they'd hoped. Even though California Convergence appeared to be valued as a unique mechanism for connecting different individuals and groups to one another in ways that would not otherwise have occurred, this was not enough of an outcome to justify the investment, from the funders' perspective.

For community leaders, the equation was different and these connections were highly valued, at least by some. For example, at some of the Convergence meetings, local community leaders and advocates from neighboring counties had opportunities to meet and connect with one another—some for the first time—and began forming regional alliances and joint initiatives.

### **The Mechanics of Shifting to a New Structure**

During the summer of 2010, some of the community leaders combined their sense of frustration with their aspirations for a different model of organizing California Convergence and pitched a new approach to PPH and directly to the funders. The funders and PPH staff took these proposals seriously, supporting a planning phase to give everyone an opportunity to explore different, more effective strategies for achieving their original goals.

PPH staff convened and staffed four ad hoc Task Forces made up of community leaders and evaluation, communication, and policy partners. Each Task Force identified strategic recommendations for change in its specific area: Governance, Communications, Evaluation, and Peer-to-Peer Learning. Participants described one of the meetings as intense—"locked in a room for a couple of days until we figured it out," recalled one.

By late 2010, the Governance Task Force had proposed a new structure and created an initial draft charter that was approved by the Advisory Committee and became the basis for bylaws later adopted by the Convergence Steering Committee (a new entity described in greater detail below).

The charter and bylaws are available on the California Convergence's website, [www.californiaconvergence.org](http://www.californiaconvergence.org).

**The charter described California Convergence's mission as "uniting community voices through a regionally organized, statewide network, to jointly advance policy that creates health equity in communities through improved food and physical activity environments."**

The new structure, which is described in more detail below, became the basis for a detailed 9-month transition plan; this won the support of funders for one additional year of financial support that was announced in February 2011.

## INITIAL RESULTS: A NEW CALIFORNIA CONVERGENCE

### Regional Networks

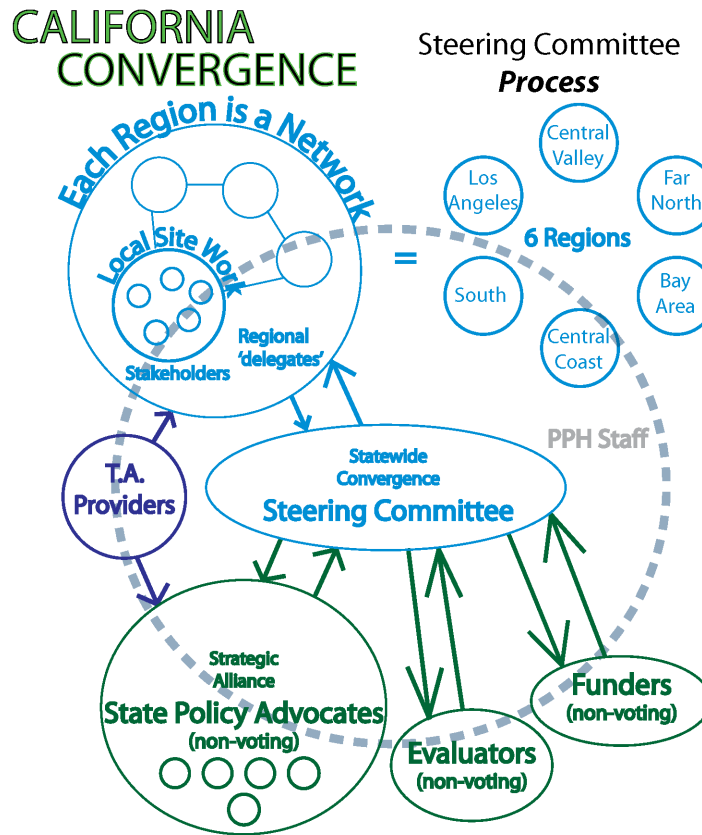
Building on one of the benefits that local community leaders had valued most from their interactions so far, the designers of the new California Convergence opted for a structure that revolved around six regional networks. This offered several advantages, including:

- It allowed California Convergence members to **build on common strengths and shared geographic and demographic similarities**, such as rural counties (although they recognized that these would be stronger in some regions than others and that some regions still covered very different locales and issues);
- It **carved a large, diverse state into more manageable geographic units**, making it easier for community leaders to connect with one another for peer learning, shared advocacy strategies, and to communicate with and involve residents across their communities;
- It created **strength in numbers**—natural allies who could be mobilized nearby, and more quickly and readily than for a massive state-wide effort; and
- It made it easier for local and regional groups to **approach and involve other potential allies**, such as regional transportation agencies, in the healthy places or "Health in All Policies" strategies.

### A New Steering Committee

Another major change was to create a statewide Community Leadership Steering Committee, made up of representatives from each of the six regions. Unlike the previous Advisory Committee, which the Steering Committee replaced, the new version explicitly has the authority to drive the work and priorities of Convergence. As several respondents described it, this constituted a "shift in the center of gravity" for Convergence, with the Steering Committee in a role that had previously been shared uneasily by PPH program staff and funders. The funders and policy leads remain active, but now have a non-voting role. Voting occurs by consensus among Steering Committee members. The Steering Committee transformed the charter

created by the previous Advisory Committee's Governance Task Force into bylaws that provide clear governance and detailed functions of not only the Steering Committee itself, but also the California Convergence network as a whole.



### Creating a Policy Advocacy System

Although everyone involved in the first iteration of California Convergence was committed to environmental and policy change, an ongoing frustration was how best to advance these types of changes and how to choose priorities among the many options. Some of the community leaders felt that the initial efforts, while well intentioned, were not effective because they tried to galvanize community groups in ways that did not make it easy to become involved. "It was more like the model of getting an e-mail blast that tells you to send a letter in to an elected official, tell them you want this and that, and by the way, you have to do this today or tomorrow," said one community leader. "I have to admit that I delete a lot of those e-mails," said another, describing the same situation. "Previously," this respondent continued, "the advocacy process [through Convergence] was shotgun, ad hoc, inefficient.

**If we want to ratchet it up to become a system that is more efficient, effective, and forceful, then we've got to have people who are involved in the process talking to one another and reaching agreement about how we'll work together."**

Instead, new Steering Committee members explain, they are trying to create a policy system that offers a range of options—letters, petitions, mobilizing neighbors, in-person meetings with representatives—each with different levels

of success and significance. “If a handwritten letter comes in,” one advocate explained, “it’s worth 100 calls. People need to know that.” In this vision, California Convergence creates the conditions in which people can join policy change and advocacy efforts at many different levels. “You could select an option for advocacy that’s not only what you and your community members are willing and able to do, but also what offers the biggest bang for the buck for that issue.”

This still leaves the struggle that California Convergence faced all along: if there is to be strength and amplification from some sort of collective effort, then which issues should rise to the top?

Using the consensus process within the Steering Committee, the group selected three state-level policy priorities for 2011. As initial policy goals were accomplished, plans were made to add additional ones each year or even more frequently, and to continue to focus on the implementation of passed priority policies. For 2011, these were:

- **Soda Tax:** placing a 1-cent-per-fluid-ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. The \$1.7 billion this would raise would be dedicated to childhood obesity prevention programs, tilting heavily to community and school-based programs;
- **Healthy Food Financing:** establishing the Healthy Food Financing Initiative Fund to expand access to healthy foods in underserved communities, eventually setting up a system to help grocers and farmers’ markets open new locations in poor neighborhoods and helping existing corner stores expand to stock more fresh food;
- **Safe Routes to School:** requires the state to consider the benefit to disadvantaged communities as part of its criteria for awarding local grants for the construction of bicycle, pedestrian safety, and traffic calming projects.

Despite many economic obstacles and competing state priorities, two bills supported by California Convergence—Healthy Food Financing (AB 581) and Safe Routes to School (AB 516)—made it through the legislature and were signed into law by the Governor. Many organizations and individuals played significant roles

in the success of the passage of these two bills, including policy leads (e.g., PolicyLink for Healthy Food Financing; the California Rural Legal Assistance League Foundation, PolicyLink, and Transform for Safe Routes to School; and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA) for the soda tax).

Convergence members believe they contributed to the successes through



strong advocacy. The Convergence coordinating office collaborated with the policy leads and other policy organizations to share information (including bill-specific action alerts), provide training and tools, and mobilize community members to become more directly involved.

Connecting the dots between a policy success and the efforts of any particular group is complicated when so many different players are involved, which is typical of most policy shifts. Policy changes typically emerge from multiple, long-ranging efforts that have moved in fits and starts over years or decades. The different strands and layers of policy-related activity also make it difficult for California Convergence to make the case to its funders that its contributions to these successes represent a return on the funders' initial investments. Some feel that an emphasis on statewide policy impacts—while clearly worthwhile goals—may mask some other, intermediate policy successes, such as increasing advocacy capacity and leadership at local levels or strengthening and expanding existing coalitions. Others feel that these different views of policy achievements may be more than merely different points on a continuum, and are perhaps mutually exclusive. As one state policy lead suggested, “There’s a tension there—you can empower low-income residents, or you can reform the nutrition and physical activity environment quickly.”



Another challenge—and another emerging role for Convergence—has to do with what happens after a policy changes. Implementation and accountability are clearly determinants of success; no policy will lead to much change if its implementation is weak or not sustained over time.

Some of that pressure could come from local groups and some from above—such as the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. In concert, these two sources of pressure could make a bigger difference than either alone, a Convergence member speculated, but that pressure needs to be coordinated.

**An advocacy system—one that engages people in different ways, at different levels—could play a role in taking policies to scale. For example, if a joint use policy has been adopted by a few schools or districts in an area, why not all?**

## LOOKING BACK: LESSONS LEARNED

What lessons have participants drawn from “building the plane as we’re flying it,” as several respondents described Convergence’s transition?

**Expect and tolerate organizational growing pains.** The governance shift that occurred in late 2010 could be characterized as one response to the growing pains typical for a new, complicated, and ambitious organization. Expecting and tolerating these types of changes—and greeting them with patience and persistence—was one lesson learned. Several respondents also noted the stress caused by uncertainty, staffing changes, and the sustained level of effort required to get a new organization off the ground and meet multiple—and sometimes conflicting—expectations.

**Start with a theory of change.** In retrospect, several participants in both the original and revised versions of California Convergence wished they had started with a more explicit theory of change and specific benchmarks or milestones related to policy change expectations. There were early efforts to produce logic models and action plans and to reach consensus on these, but many felt they were too abstract to guide specific actions. Also, as the organization was perceived to be investing too much time, effort, and resources in the process of choosing priorities (as opposed to acting on or pursuing them), there was reluctance to return to these types of tasks. A related lesson was the recognition that many aspects of the policy environment critically affect the work of groups like California Convergence, yet are not in Convergence’s control.

**Value, promote, and document Convergence’s “cross-pollination” role.**

Convergence was envisioned as a way to bring together individuals and groups working separately on similar issues. Some of this occurred through face-to-face meetings in which community leaders interacted directly with one another—some, as noted above, meeting as a group for the first time even though they were from adjacent counties in a particular region. In other cases, Convergence played a highly valued “matchmaking” role, connecting individuals and groups working on or interested in similar issues, either with each other or with technical assistance providers and state policy advocates. Convergence’s “cross-pollination” role is an aspect of Convergence that was difficult to capture or quantify, but was central to how many participants viewed the organization’s value and drove continued participation.

**Build evaluation in from the beginning.** A related lesson to making a theory of change more explicit was to match benchmarks and milestones with an evaluation framework. California Convergence was the subject of a process evaluation in 2009 and an outcome evaluation in 2011, but neither was built in from the beginning or designed to measure the specific interventions. Both evaluations relied heavily on retrospection and recall instead of being able to capture at least some real-time changes and achievements.

**Assess and respond to communication needs.** Initially, California Convergence tried to involve participants in an electronic network that would serve as a conduit for routine communications, alerts, webinars, peer-to-peer connections, and other updates (using a Ning portal as the vehicle). Although some participants used the system regularly, it did not become the electronic hub that Convergence's program team had hoped for. In part, this had less to do with the system's design or the topics it covered; people were already feeling overwhelmed with e-mails and information overload and didn't want to add one more stream to their crowded in-boxes and bookmark lists. Some feel this was a missed opportunity early on, but that it's not too late to capitalize on the networks and shared interests that Convergence represents. Without a strong communication network that is valued by participants, it is difficult for groups like Convergence to fulfill their potential as the hub or central nervous system of geographically dispersed members working on related but distinct issues.

## LOOKING AHEAD: EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It is too early to tell exactly how California Convergence's shift in governance will affect the organization's prospects. A key challenge is sustainable and longer-term funding, especially for the regional approach and structure (which currently is not supported financially by the funders, except for supporting travel and other meeting costs for Steering Committee members from each region through the Coordinating Office's budget). If Convergence is valued by its members, some suggested, it would make sense to allocate small portions of other grant budgets to support participation (covering time and travel), dispersing the costs more broadly in smaller increments. If the soda tax legislation passes and creates a childhood obesity prevention fund, a portion of this could help support Convergence and Convergence-related activities of its members.

Other than stable funding, what would success look like as California Convergence moves into its next phase? Markers include:

- A stable, engaged Steering Committee with consistent regional representation from all six regions;
- A policy advocacy system in which policy-relevant resources and assistance are easily accessed (and widely known to be available), offering many different options for communities and regions to engage in policy work with a clear understanding of where and how their engagement would be most effective for a given issue;
- As a result of more access, training, options, and experience, local and regional capacity and engagement in policy and advocacy increases significantly;
- Convergence members see themselves as the drivers and "owners" of Convergence;
- Convergence gains a more visible, valued role as it becomes a useful, "go-to" framework that many different policy issues fit into;
- The Convergence network informs state policy and represents an approach of comprehensive, community-driven environmental and policy change;

- Policy wins occur in priority areas supported by Convergence members (as well as intermediate steps that may fall short of an actual policy win, but still constitute progress);
- Convergence members play a role in policy implementation and in holding agencies and elected officials accountable, after policy wins are achieved.



*Photo by Tim Wagner/HEAC*

Like many new entities, California Convergence has struggled with defining a niche and identity for itself in a complex policy environment, selecting and pursuing priorities, adding value for many different constituents, and communicating what it does. Through the shift to a more regional structure and a Steering Committee that is truly steering, rather than advising, Convergence’s supporters hope it will have found a formula for increasing engagement in this work and for being more responsive to the needs of its members.

The end product of that work is not just better policies—those that promote health equity and improve food and physical activity environments—but a movement for change that lasts far into the future and is not dependent on funding or specific structures.

**“What California Convergence does is to help the field connect with itself and know itself, being able to work collaboratively in order to get policies passed,” said one Steering Committee member. “Nobody else is doing that at this point ... that’s the niche they could fill that no one else does.”**

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