California’s San Joaquin Valley (SJV) is one of the most agriculturally rich regions in our nation, contributing over half of the state’s value in agriculture production.\(^1\) It is also home to some of the nation’s poorest communities; a 2010 study found the San Joaquin Valley’s 20\(^{th}\) congressional district to rank the lowest in the nation on resident well-being, based on an assessment of health, education, and income.\(^2\) Among the poorest and most isolated of these communities are places outside of city limits. These communities lack the most basic features of a safe, healthy, sustainable neighborhood—potable drinking water, sewer systems, safe housing, public transportation, parks, sidewalks, and streetlights. Governed by counties which were not set up to provide services to urban settlements, and lacking representation of a city council, they are systematically underserved in the overall allocation of public resources and are frequently left out of local decision making processes.

Despite having conditions comparable to those found in developing countries, many of these communities are entirely surrounded by, or immediately adjacent to, incorporated cities. The isolation of these “island” and “fringe” communities is stark: their neighbors within the city limits receive services that they do not. During the agricultural and industrial boom of the early and mid-twentieth century, communities developed on the edges of cities where industry was more affordable. As the cities grew, they annexed land around the unincorporated communities—avoiding and excluding communities of color and low-income communities. Decades of neglect and exclusion by cities and counties have been reinforced by the state’s counterproductive system of taxation and land use policies. These communities find themselves stuck between their neighboring city and county. The city does not want to invest in county territory, nor does the county wish to invest in a community which, once improved, will be more attractive for incorporation by a neighboring city.

A third category of low-income unincorporated communities exists in the San Joaquin Valley. While their conditions mirror those in island and fringe neighborhoods, these “legacy” communities are more remote and lie beyond the growth patterns of incorporated cities. Legacy communities started growing in the early to mid-twentieth century, principally due to the advent of industrialized agriculture. As demand for low-wage agricultural labor increased, these communities became home to workers from the American South, the Depression-era Dustbowl, and Mexico seeking work as farm laborers. Legacy communities grew close to the farms where workers labored, and over time, these communities have become stable, year-round residential areas, but without the investment to make them healthy and sustainable.

Concentrated poverty, institutional and individual racism, and California’s systems of public finance and land use have conspired to exacerbate the plight of disadvantaged legacy, fringe, and island communities and have contributed to their unacceptable conditions.

\(^1\) Great Valley Center, http://www.greatvalley.org/indicators/econ05/ag_prod.aspx.
\(^2\) Based on the Human Development Index of the Social Science Research Council: http://www.measureofamerica.org/maps/.
To respond to these conditions, the Community Equity Initiative (CEI) was established in 2007 as a partnership of California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc., California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, and PolicyLink. CEI staff convened San Joaquin Valley residents, policy and legal advocates, and researchers to identify the root causes of infrastructure and service deficits in unincorporated communities and ways to address those causes. Participants agreed that achieving service and infrastructure equity would require at least four primary strategies:

- Support and education for resident participation and leadership in governance and decision making.
- Reform of local and state policies.
- Legal representation of individuals and community-based groups.
- Research.

The Community Equity Initiative shares innovative and promising strategies with a wide array of stakeholders and advisors including: community-based organizations, policy advocates, lawmakers, government officials, and university-based researchers throughout California and the nation. Over time, CEI will have a cumulative effect on the well-being and livelihood of over a million residents throughout California and millions more in unincorporated areas across the nation who will benefit indirectly from what is learned through our work.

Support and Education for Residents

We work directly with residents and community leaders in disadvantaged communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley to develop their capacity to participate meaningfully in local, regional, and state decision-making processes. Through intensive educational curricula and regular community meetings, residents are encouraged and prepared to play an integral role in critical decisions such as the allocation of federal, state, and local funding, long- and short-term county and city land use planning, and other processes impacting infrastructure and community service provision. We are directly engaged in more than 10 communities in the San Joaquin Valley and provide technical assistance and capacity building in an additional 10. The initiative recently expanded to include work in the Coachella Valley in Southern California.

Reform of Existing Local, Regional, and Statewide Policies

CEI staff work with community leaders to reverse long-standing patterns of exclusion and neglect in their communities. CEI focuses on reforming policies that direct state and local infrastructure investment decisions and allocations, local electoral procedures, and planning processes at the state and local levels. For example, in Fresno County, CEI staff reversed decades of unfair and unlawful election practices by educating community members about pertinent election laws and requiring responsible government agencies to enforce and abide by said laws. The Community Equity Initiative also led efforts at the regional and statewide levels to raise awareness of, and develop consensus around, the importance of addressing infrastructure and service deficits in disadvantaged unincorporated communities. Through administrative and legislative advocacy, the CEI team has made concrete changes in law and policy and has created a dialogue regarding disadvantaged unincorporated communities. Our successes include designing and advocating for a 20 percent set-aside for economically disadvantaged communities (EDC’s) in the allocation of state planning grants for sustainable growth. This translated into over $12 million of grants to support targeted planning for EDC’s. In 2011, the CEI co-sponsored two bills that successfully passed: SB 244 that reforms planning and annexation practices as they relate to disadvantaged unincorporated communities and AB 516 that prioritizes disadvantaged communities in Safe Routes to School funding.
Legal Representation

CEI staff represent individuals and community groups from disadvantaged communities through negotiation and litigation. We successfully represented community members in a breach of contract claim against the manager of the community services district, returning almost $30,000 in water user fees to the community. In the unincorporated community of Matheny Tract, CEI partnered with local residents to achieve an unprecedented planning decision by Tulare LAFCO which secured safe drinking water, facilitated the development of a sewer system, and institutionalized fair planning processes. We currently represent a coalition of 17 communities and several individuals in litigation against the State of California for its failure to prepare a mandated Drinking Water Plan, which would set out a plan to ensure safe drinking water to communities throughout the state. We are also representing several communities and individuals in matters regarding state and federal civil rights, fair housing, and environmental laws.

Research

Research supports all of the CEI strategies, from mapping and defining hundreds of small communities to surveying residents about local conditions and analyzing the impacts of prospective policies. The research activities, undertaken with the full engagement of the residents, build the case for positive change and create a collective understanding of the breadth and scale of infrastructure deficits and governance issues.

When communities are largely invisible, they stand little chance of being well represented or well served. Many of these unincorporated areas are not defined as distinct neighborhoods by the U.S. Census or county planning agencies. As a result, their needs are often unaccounted for, they are not acknowledged in planning processes, and they cannot compete for infrastructure investments on a level playing field. These mapping analyses are intended to identify the many places across the San Joaquin Valley which are unincorporated neighborhoods and home to low-income families.
Where are Disadvantaged Unincorporated Communities?

CEI mapping and analyses aim to understand more about disadvantaged unincorporated communities, especially those that have yet to be mapped or named by local or federal agencies. Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), CEI used three basic data for identifying communities:

1. **Unincorporated Status:** We used boundary shape files from cities, counties, or the Census to determine unincorporated status, (all areas that are not within city limits).

2. **Parcel Density:** We focused on identifying places that are closely settled with a large number of homes, rather than very spread out rural communities. From publicly available sources, we gathered the outlines of parcels (land that is subdivided into lots) and identified the areas with a density of at least 250 parcels per square mile. This is comparable to the density of Census Designated Places (unincorporated communities tracked by the Census).

3. **Low-Income Neighborhoods:** Many communities facing infrastructure challenges are also low-income and are of concern for the initiative. This research uses 2000 Census block group data to identify places of interest. Interested in comparing the income status of households relative to those across the state, we selected those block groups where the median household income was less than 80 percent of the median household income of the state. In 2000, the median household income of the state of California was $47,493, so any census block group with a median income of less than $37,994 is included.

**Findings: 525 Communities in Eight Counties**

These three characteristics, overlaid on one another, resulted in distinct areas that are unincorporated, dense, and low-income. The data is admittedly limited because the Census has historically undercounted minority and rural populations, and the income data is from 2000. We will be updating our research with more recent American Community Survey data. Further, while some unincorporated areas are low-income, they do not necessarily all have poor infrastructure and services. We are in the process of undertaking additional investigation to fully understand the challenges that these communities face.
However, using the approach outlined, 525 disadvantaged unincorporated communities were identified throughout the San Joaquin Valley, accounting for over 300,000 residents.

How CEI Will Use These Findings

For many communities, just having a name that is recognized and boundaries that are mapped are important first steps in organizing for resources and improved conditions. Cities and counties cannot plan for and serve communities that they do not even know exist. This analysis will support and further local efforts to plan for infrastructure improvements and for comprehensive regional planning. It will also help legislators and elected officials understand the scale and scope of issues within their jurisdiction.

The Community Equity Initiative worked with the U.S. Census staff to inform their process of naming Census Designated Places (CDPs). Typically, counties submit their recommendations for places to be added to the list of CDPs. The CEI staff shared these mapping findings and made recommendations for additional places to be named as CDPs. Having CDP status means that residents and local governments have more and better access to information about their communities and how they have changed over time. This is particularly important information when applying for grants and loans for infrastructure and services.

The initiative is currently sharing this information with researchers at the University of California, Davis to inform their study of how nitrate contaminations in groundwater are affecting communities in the Salinas Valley and Tulare Lake Basins. CEI is also partnering with the research team to highlight disadvantaged communities that may be particularly affected. This is the first of what will hopefully be many applications of this information about communities that can inform planning and resource allocation decisions across the state.

Another outcome has been increased interest from other groups in collecting and sharing data about unincorporated areas; these findings may also lead to information about many more disadvantaged communities. Ultimately, the Community Equity Initiative is committed to using the information that is gathered to empower residents in California and elsewhere as advocates for better, healthier communities.

For more information about the work of the Community Equity Initiative, our successes, and our research, visit: www.PolicyLink.org/communityequityinitiative or www.crla.org/community-equity-initiative. You may also contact Phoebe Seaton at California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. by email at pseaton@crla.org.
Support for the Community Equity Initiative has been provided by the James Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment, the Open Society Foundations, and the Women’s Foundation of California.

©2011 by PolicyLink and CRLA
All rights reserved.

Design: Leslie Yang

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: David Bacon Photography