

Creating Hope and Opportunity in Fresno

Clubs in public housing make community-wide impact

By Diane Carbray and Arlene Mendoza

Boys & Girls Clubs of Fresno County

ORGANIZATION PROFILE

Founded: 1949

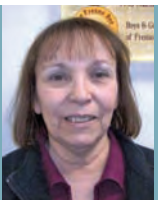
Budget: \$2.1 million

Facilities: 17 units

**Annual membership: 5,740 members;
12,580 youth served**



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For more than two decades, Boys & Girls Clubs have created a positive presence in some of the most challenging neighborhoods in our nation – public housing facilities. Today, there are some 440 Clubs located in public housing communities across the country. Our success in this area has been due to the generous support of friends like the William Randolph Hearst Foundation.

In 2010, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Fresno County will mark its 18th year of successful collaboration with the local housing authority. The Fresno organization is a stellar example of the positive, community-wide impact Boys & Girls Clubs can have in a public housing community.

Located in the heart of a large agricultural region, Fresno is three hours south of San Francisco and three hours north of Los Angeles. It is a culturally and ethnically diverse area, populated by Hmong and Laotian immigrants, migrant farm workers, multi-generational Hispanic families, African-Americans and Caucasians.

According to the Brookings Institution, the Fresno area has the dubious distinction of having the highest concentration of urban poverty in the country. Consider these alarming local demographics:

- The city is home to some 8,000 gang members.

- The dropout rate at city high schools is 51 percent.
- Some neighborhoods have unemployment rates as high as 32 percent.
- In Fresno County, 20 percent of births are to girls 19 years old and younger.

This dire combination of gangs, crime, lack of education, unemployment and premature parenting has led to a high poverty rate. Fresno's public housing complexes were similarly troubled.

Clubs Come to Complexes

In 1992, the Housing Authorities of the City and County of Fresno invited the Boys & Girls Clubs of Fresno County to participate in their Drug Elimination Funding by opening Clubs in three of their complexes. Because those Clubs brought positive change to their communities, the housing authority asked us to open more Clubs at some of their other sites. Today, although the Drug Elimination Funding has since been cut, we have nine Clubs that are either fully or partially funded by the housing authority. In the next year, they plan to include funding to open a Club in another complex.

Since establishing these Clubs, the Fresno housing authority has seen a reduction in the number of petty crimes, burglaries, graffiti and general chaos. At a rural complex in Del Rey, Calif., the sheriff told our unit director, "It was like the O.K. Corral every night" until the Boys & Girls Club opened.

Janie Reyna, property manager for the Del Rey complex, agrees. "When I lived in Del Rey, it was too dangerous to go out in the streets," she says. "Since the Club opened, the streets are much safer, and families can walk around at night."

Filling a Great Need

Housing authority commissioners and staff are steadfast in their commitment to making Clubs accessible to their residents. Our Club and housing authority staffs meet together regularly and have built trusting relationships.

The partnership between the Club and housing authority has put prevention and mentoring programs literally at the front door of children's homes. Three locations are full-facility buildings next to large housing complexes; the other six sites operate in vacant units – bedrooms are turned into libraries or computer labs and living rooms become games rooms.

Every year, Club staff track grades and school attendance for 10 members at each of the nine sites. Last year, all 90 Club members moved on to the next

grade level. At our Huron Club last June, 18 members graduated with their class, and one completed his GED. These Club teens represented approximately one-third of the 60 graduates from the area. The Club helped these young people set high expectations for their future.

Parents, Teens Get Involved

Getting parents involved has been an important part of this collaboration. Parents have found allies in Club staff; they trust staff who speak their language, help them with paperwork, refer them to services and talk to them about their children's education. Many parents have had limited schooling, and are pleased to see their children completing their homework.

Teens who were previously bullied or pressured into joining gangs have found a safe haven at the Club and now think of it as a cool place to hang out. They have special late hours or space just for them. They have a voice in their Club activities and plan events. They give back to their communities by cleaning up trash or serving at potluck dinners. They build their character and leadership skills through activities such as Keystone Club. Their lives are no longer filled with negative influences, but hope and opportunity.

"We have witnessed the direct impact of these valuable services," says Preston Prince, executive director of the Housing Authorities of the City and County of Fresno. "These kids have successfully left public housing in pursuit of higher education and employment opportunities."

Inspiring a Sense of Purpose

At age 13, José was a self-described alcoholic who lived in an East Fresno public housing complex. His home life was marred by domestic violence and alcoholism and he lived in constant fear. José tried to escape his reality by drinking and smoking pot. By the time he was 15, he was failing five out of seven classes and engaging in petty crimes.

One day his younger brother told him to stop by the Club, a place he had passed many times but never bothered to enter. A staff member welcomed him and talked about what teens were doing there. José's life changed almost instantly.

Finally, the teen felt needed, that he had something useful to offer. He stopped drinking and using drugs. José says the Club gave him a purpose in life and a sense of direction. It also helped him improve his grades and graduate high school on time. Without the Club, he says, he never could have accomplished his dream of becoming a U.S. Marine. Today at the age of 21, José is a leader in the Marines. The Fresno Club changed his life.

"Young people like José emphasize the importance of our partnership with the housing authority," says Kenneth Quenzer, the Fresno Club's president. "This collaboration saves young lives and gives them hope."

