



A Center of the Public Health Institute

PROFILE 7 – Creating Organizational Structure

Cynthia Babich, Executive Director – Del Amo Action Committee
San Pedro, CA

Cynthia Babich founded the Del Amo Action Committee (DAAC) in 1994 shortly after developing a rash while digging up her backyard to put in an organic garden. When she noticed that neighbors were experiencing similar symptoms, Cynthia conducted research and found out that she was living on a Superfund site. Superfund is the federal government's program to clean up uncontrolled hazardous waste sites. After contacting several government agencies and receiving mixed messages about the health hazard posed by her immediate environment, Cynthia started the Del Amo Action Committee to educate the community and advocate for justice.

Cynthia described how she was at a turning point with her organization before participating in the ODS program. “We went through a soul-searching process because we lost our funding. We had to ask ourselves, are we done? Do we need to do something to move forward?” Along with Assistant Director, Cynthia Medina, Cynthia decided there was more work to be done. She added, “We had a mentor who helped us take what we were saying and put it into objectives and outcomes. The passion was there, but the structure was not. Eventually, we were able to secure three years of funding from The California Wellness Foundation and then we received information about the ODS program. One area that we needed to work on was our board. We were looking for someone who could help us give more structure to our board. Because of our mission, it was important to have a community-based board. Even though they had great faith in me, they needed to voice their thoughts too. The ODS program was very open and assured us that the space they would speak to us in was confidential. It was really helpful.”

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Cynthia recounted what was most valuable during her year of participation in the ODS program. “I talked to [my first technical support provider] a lot about my work. We talked about legacy and having a structure that people could plug into. He helped us think about what areas we were going to work on.” “[Our second technical support provider] was a phenomenal person. She really listened to what I had to say and sent resources. She also gave me sample resources and a sample executive director job description. By the time I ended up tracking my time, I realized that I was really worth my salary!” Another valuable component for Cynthia was the retreat for executive directors. “When I went to the ODS retreat, I talked with the ED of another organization and was glad to have my board.” Cynthia realized that a lot of other executive directors were working contrary to their boards. “It made me feel lucky with my board.”

A high point of the ODS program for Cynthia was her board retreat, facilitated by her second technical support provider. Cynthia said the retreat was very productive and successful. Their mini-grant also gave them the opportunity to hold the board retreat at an offsite location, away from their everyday work. “When the mini-grant came along, we were a ten-year organization, yet we hadn’t done anything with our board. We hadn’t celebrated our victories. [Our second technical support provider] looked at ways to help us acknowledge people. She helped us look into where our bylaws needed work without judging us. She helped us realize that we hadn’t done anything wrong; we just wanted to have more structure. We ended up with job descriptions for the executive director and other staff as well as for the board. We also looked at our bylaws and after we had agreements on our bylaws, she helped us find someone to review what we created. In the end, we came up with some really

strong bylaws. Also, we have our corporate notebook with all of our filings. Now things are documented. We're still grassroots, but we are pleased with our structure."

Cynthia shared how her participation in the ODS program changed her as a leader. "It allowed me to ask others to step up to the plate. It allowed me to realize that I don't have to do everything." She added, "I have a lot more confidence as an ED. I don't take things so personally and that has been really great. I realized that it's okay to get help and to have structure. There are safe places where you really can get the help you need. And it's not just for me, I'm grooming my assistant director for the future." Cynthia added that the ODS program also helped her personally. "The ODS program allowed me to have more of a life. I have more responsibility in my life, but I also have a way to evaluate what I need in my life, separate from my organization. I also learned that it's not always about me and environmental issues. Life happens. The children that you wanted to build the community park for are grown. Some community members don't believe that things will change, but it makes it all the more important to put things into place for the organization to keep going."

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Cynthia also explained how the ODS program impacted other parts of her organization. "The staff changed as well; more people stepped up to the plate. A steady funding stream also allowed us to have a structure where people knew what their responsibilities were. In turn, they felt confident to take on other tasks. We are still meeting the expectations around capacity-building from our funders. We are still trying to adapt to our community's needs, particularly the young leaders. We are also trying to create a safe space to find out from community members what issues are affecting their lives." Cynthia described how she views her organization's role in terms of working with the community. "I describe us as an arrow. We are the point and people can plug in at any point in the arrow."

Cynthia said that she found the ODS program to be incredibly valuable. "It's such a great resource. They were very easy to work with. I see a bunch of their programs that I would like to do, like working more with the *Sustainability Toolkit*. This was a program that was gifted to me. They really listened to what I wanted and helped me get there. I really appreciated that. I didn't have to put my guard up and justify anything or be embarrassed. We got the job done and it wasn't obtrusive at all."