

# Stronger Together:

## Insights from the Best Babies Zone Castlemont Community Cafes



## **What is the Best Babies Zone?**

Health is much more than healthcare. It is the streets that we walk on, the air that we breathe, the people we connect with, the food we consume. Health is about a lifetime of opportunities and experiences that are driven by conditions where one lives. The Best Babies Zone (BBZ) project within the Alameda County Public Health Department's Building Blocks for Health Equity Unit is grounded in this understanding of health. Focused in a 12 by 7 block Zone in East Oakland – 82<sup>nd</sup> to 94<sup>th</sup>, MacArthur to Olive/Birch, the Castlemont Corridor – BBZ is about creating a vibrant, healthy community by uniting residents, business, and local organizations to bring new opportunities to the neighborhood. Since its inception in 2012, BBZ has worked with partners to understand key challenges and strengths in Castlemont community. Issues around safety & violence, local economy, community building, and education were consistently identified as top priorities. To further understand and engage with these areas, BBZ and partners planned the Castlemont Community Cafes.

## **The Castlemont Community Cafes**

On March 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the Best Babies Zone and partners, including First 5 Alameda County, Brighter Beginnings, Youth UpRising, and the Office of Supervisor Nate Miley hosted two Community Cafes at Youth UpRising. Building on the powerful work of organizations and residents in the Best Babies Zone, these Cafes brought together East Oakland residents to explore in depth the community experience of priority issues in Castlemont.

Over 40 individuals attended these Cafes and had the opportunity to participate in small group discussions, facilitated in English or Spanish by community volunteers, which focused on either safety & violence, community building, education, or local economy within Castlemont. The five group conversations provided unique insight into challenges and assets of the neighborhood within the three areas prioritized by participants.

## Key Insights from Café Small Group Discussions

### Safety & Violence

- Safety means that children and families can go out peacefully and without fear and feeling safe in the home, on public transportation, and in the neighborhood. Safety means protecting children, feeling comfortable, and feeling that you have the agency to move about freely. Violence evokes thoughts of big fences and dogs to protect ourselves. Violence includes a fear of being robbed, shootouts, gun fights, assault, and always having to be on alert.
- Issues with the police were identified as challenges to maintaining safety: police don't arrive quickly enough, don't communicate with the residents, don't prioritize calls from Castlemont (unless there is a body), and don't investigate enough cases of violence. Residents also do not report enough of what is happening. Violence is a neighborhood challenge – you have to watch your back, and there is a desire to actively remove children and young adults from the neighborhood because of fear. Your mobility is limited because of fear, the need to show registration at gun buy back may limit who gives up guns.
- Other challenges related to safety and violence include gang violence and a cycle of violence, loitering in front of stores tied to drug dealing, the black market reselling of stolen goods using stores as fronts (can sell stolen phones there), negative influences of video games and music, and the different experiences with violence of girls and boys in the neighborhood – violence and gang engagement become a measuring stick for men.
- Parent cafes, parks, activity centers, and support for drug addicts were highlighted as key resources for support safety, along with the opportunity to demand better services from the police. Resources like Youth UpRising were also highlighted. The fact that even in a “good home,” children can turn to a violent lifestyle because it is very present in the community was also discussed – “Either a victim of violence or a participant in violence”.
- Personal responsibility for maintaining a safe community included educating our children, reporting corruption, open communication with family, friends, and community, and motivating community building through resources such as block parties. Reporting the actions of police (good and bad) and calling out community representatives were also highlighted as actions to address issues of violence. Other actions included improved surveillance, listening to testimonials of those who have overcome a violent lifestyle, building community and connecting with other stakeholders, having an improved police force, and connecting with key stakeholders (Chief of Police) during events like community forums to ensure issues are heard.

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## Education

- Education begins before kindergarten, can be a foundation for success, and includes education of parents and children. Education means an ability to better one's life, improve as a person, understand what is good or bad, and provide more opportunities for work, regardless of what paper/degree you have. A focus on educating our children so that children and everyone can have a better future was also emphasized.
- Education in Castlemont faces challenges such as not looking at individual students, losing kids, broken homes and systems, and lack of choice and resources. Other challenges of education in Oakland include a lack of parent presence in schools (both for their children and for personal opportunities for growth), parents not knowing where their children go to study, the district not focusing enough on students and schools, teachers not having a relationship with parents, inequality and racism in schools that are majority Latino, safety issues in schools, and a lack of teaching practical skills or topics.
- The school District meeting was highlighted as a resource to help parents become better informed about what is going on. The library's resources for adult education were also highlighted as key resources. Participants highlighted taking personal responsibility to be better organized, get involved, and educate oneself as key actions to address education challenges. Attending events where there are resources and identifying more resources that parents can use to educate themselves were also highlighted.

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## Community Building

- Community building includes knowing your neighbors and guiding young people to their passions. Community building means working as a team and reaching out to neighbors to create a safe and loving community.
- Communities face challenges when businesses move due to lack of safety; lack of safety also makes it hard for youth to learn effectively. The decision makers for the community also do not necessarily live in the community and do not support small business. Other challenges to community building in the Castlemont neighborhood include fear of talking to neighbors, being fenced in, lack of interest, feeling that you have nothing to contribute, people focusing on self-interest, people feeling socially isolated and angry, abandoned homes, squatters, and lack of cleanliness, and police being unresponsive and not protecting the community (difference noted between police response to homeowners versus apartment renters).
- A number of resources were highlighted, including the Center for Hope Church, BEAT meetings and NCPCs, Youth UpRising, community clean ups, Castlemont Garden, Castlemont Community Market, the Oakland Libraries, Play Groups, SeeClickFix (take photos of damage/trash and have it seen by county), Nixle (updates from OPD/highway patrol).
- Actions include inviting people to community building groups and events, having a community phone book, using social media, hosting block parties or BBQs, creating a resource map of the neighborhood, publicizing BEAT meetings, and knowing your police officers.



## Participant Feedback

All participants and community facilitators were asked to complete a feedback questionnaire at the end of the Cafés to share what they learned, offer ideas for future work, and identify ways to stay involved in the future. Eighteen (18) people attended the first café, and 26 people attended the second café. Twenty-eight (28) unique participants completed 31 surveys about their experiences (3 participants completed surveys for both days). **All respondents met someone new!**

**Respondents heard about the Cafés** through a variety of sources:

Source	#	Source	#
Church	2	Public Health	2
Flyer/the street	2	Town Hall Meeting	2
Mariela	4	Word of mouth	5
Nate Miley	2	Youth UpRising	4
Parent Café	5	Repeat respondent	3

**Respondents were motivated to attend** because they were interested in the topics and wanted to:

- Participate in and contribute to their neighborhood
- Learn more about what is happening in their neighborhood

### Discussion Topics:

- Community Building
- Education
- Education and Community Building combined
- Safety & Violence

About half of the respondents participated in a discussion in Spanish.

**"I learned a lot and built relationships with community members"**

**"I thought it was great to have the opportunity to talk openly about community concerns"**

**Most (19) surveys rated the Community Café as "great."** The average rating was between "good" and "great." Two participants said it was "okay."

**Respondents liked:** Interesting conversation and the sharing of ideas and information.

### Respondents suggested:

- More outreach to get more participants: Church, social media, youth, young men, "targeted communities", and "other Oakland schools" were specifically mentioned
- More attention to "action" and implementation of ideas
- Including activities related to the topics
- Starting on time
- Encouraging participants to bring flyers about community events
- Having more Community Cafés!

### Respondents want to stay involved:

Most respondents (25) requested follow up on at least 2 items. One (1) respondent didn't want follow up on anything.

Follow up requested about:	#
Other community events	24
Outcomes of the Cafés	13
Help plan future events	11
East Oakland Innovators application	10
Mini Grant Advisor application	7
Castlemont Community Market	4
Other	3

**"[There was] a lot of good information from the teens in the group"**

**"[It is] great to meet people of all ages who have similar ideas on making East Oakland shine"**

## Moving Forward

The insights from the Community Cafes are the foundation for two Best Babies Zone efforts in the Castlemont Corridor – the **East Oakland Innovators** and the **Best Babies Zone Mini-Grants**.

The **East Oakland Innovators (EOIs)** are a team of East Oakland residents living in or around the Castlemont Corridor. Over an 8-month period, the team will move through an innovative Design Thinking process to understand, brainstorm, and ultimately implement projects around issues around safety & violence, education, community building, and/or local economy. Several of the EOIs participated in the Community Cafes, learning about and applying for the opportunity after their experiences. The information from the Cafes will serve as one piece of the puzzle to delving deeper into the assets and challenges of Castlemont to further strengthen its capacity to thrive.

The **Best Babies Zone Mini-Grants** are an opportunity to fund community projects that have a direct impact on the Castlemont Neighborhood, strive to improve community conditions, and empower individuals. Grants will support work for a 5-month period (July-Dec 2014). Proposed projects must address at least one of the community-identified priority areas and be rooted in the Castlemont Neighborhood. Information from the Cafes will help guide applicants as they consider the realities of the community priority areas and will also support the Mini-Grant Advisory Group of residents and partners as they select which projects are awarded grants.

In addition, BBZ and partners will continue to work in partnership with the neighborhood to explore and address the issues raised during the Cafes. For instance, the Castlemont Community Market, a partnership among Castlemont High School, Youth UpRising, and the Best Babies Zone, builds community while offering an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to grow their businesses. Room to Bloom, an early childhood hub project located in Castlemont High School, continues to expand its support for the education, safety, and wellbeing of East Oakland children and parents through its partnerships with Lotus Bloom, Youth UpRising, the Best Babies Zone, and First 5 Alameda County. Together, resident and organizational partners will continue to strengthen the Zone and create a community where all people can thrive.

### For more information about...

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- **The East Oakland Innovators:** Rachel Berkowitz ([Rachel.berkowitz@acgov.org](mailto:Rachel.berkowitz@acgov.org))
- **The BBZ Mini-Grants:** Leah Tarran ([ltarran@brighter-beginnings.org](mailto:ltarran@brighter-beginnings.org))
- **The Castlemont Community Market:** Mariela Uribe ([mariela.uribe@acgov.org](mailto:mariela.uribe@acgov.org))

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**Photographs** on the cover taken with permission of Community Cafes participants in Youth UpRising. Photos show group conversations as well as opening words by Supervisor Nate Miley during the March 20<sup>th</sup> Café.



# **BEST BABIES** **ZONE**

**WHERE COMMUNITIES THRIVE & BABIES ARE HEALTHY**