First 5 Contra Costa's Regional Groups

Building Power for Families

January 2025

FIRST 5
CONTRA COSTA

CENTRAL COUNTY
NAL DEL CENTRO DEL CONDAD
CENTRAL COUNTY REGIONAL GROUP

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 5

Executive Summary 7

Regional Groups Model 9

From an Idea to a Movement: A History of the Regional Groups' Evolution 12

Moving from Parent Education to Policy Advocacy 15

Health Promotion: Fostering Systems Change 17

Bringing the Voice of Families into Process to Improve Local Parks 20

Immigrant and Racial Justice: Supporting Sanctuary Policies & Coalition Building 23

Housing Stability: Bringing Family Voice to Housing Campaigns 24

Equitable Representation in Decision Making 27

Next Chapter 29

Profile of Regional Groups Members 31

Impact on Regional Groups Members 34

Appendix A: Regional Groups Staff 39

Appendix B: Regional Groups Partners 40

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to all the individuals, organizations, coalitions, partners and funders who contributed to the growth, successes and impact of the Regional Groups program for more than 20 years. We thank you all for contributing to our collective learning, power-building, inquiry, and successes. We especially would like to thank the Regional Groups members over the years who were the core of the program. Your hopes, dreams, aspirations, concerns, time, creativity, and dedication led to the beauty and strength of this effort, and we and the families throughout our county are deeply grateful for your leadership and determination. We would also like to recognize the First 5 Contra Costa staff and our First 5 Contra Costa Commission, who supported the Regional Groups as a pathway to parent leadership from the very beginning and who remain steadfastly committed to supporting parent leaders as a key driver for positive change.

We also appreciate all the individuals who were interviewed for this report including: 12 former Regional Groups members, First 5 Contra Costa Commissioners Gareth Ashley and John Jones; former First 5 Contra Costa staff including Rhea Elina Laughlin, Sean Casey, Walter Aab, and Tracy Irwin; current First 5 Contra Costa staff member Carolina Lopez; and Ali Uscilka, Program Director of Healthy & Active Before 5.

Several additional former First 5 Contra Costa staff and partner agencies were contacted for interviews, but were not available.

We would also like to thank the following individuals for their work on this report:

- Writing by Sarah Burke, Jamela Tandinco, and Sandra Naughton, First 5 Contra Costa
- Editing by: Nicole Lezin, consultant, and Jamela Tandinco, First 5 Contra Costa
- Data analysis and support provided by: Sarah Burke and Jamela Tandinco, First 5 Contra Costa, and Applied Survey Research
- Design by: Brian Kelley, First 5 Contra Costa

We hope you find this report insightful, as it documents the journey of the Regional Groups and demonstrates the importance of power-building for families.

In partnership,

Ruth Fernández, EdD
Executive Director

PARKS 4
KIDS

Regional Groups Mission Statement:

To make Contra Costa County healthy, safe, and equitable for children and families

Executive Summary

The Regional Groups program was a parent leadership, power building, and advocacy training program operated by First 5 Contra Costa for more than 20 years. This report offers a brief overview of the program, detailing its development and growth over time, showcasing its most prominent community-level accomplishments over the years, and summarizing its dedicated participants and the impact participating had on them. The Regional Groups program began as one of First 5 Contra Costa's initial efforts when it was a newly formed public entity, with the intent to gather input from community members and engage them in its work to strengthen the early childhood services in the county. Since its inception, the program evolved into a powerful advocacy partner to coalitions focused on health promotion, park and land use equity, equitable representation in public systems, housing stability, and immigrant justice campaigns. The program was based on principles of power building, peer leadership, empowerment, and advocacy. Community members volunteered to join one of three place-based groups: the Central County Regional Group, the East County Regional Group, or the West County Regional Group.

The Regional Groups contributed to and led many successful advocacy campaigns that resulted in long-standing improvements to underserved communities. Through community-action research, they helped direct $14.6 million in regional parks funding to the highest-need parks in cities and neighborhoods. They also piloted a process for local recreation departments on how to offer low-cost sports and recreation classes for young children in 8 cities and neighborhoods, which led to 6,720 children under age 6 participating in classes over 13 years. Starting in 2017 when violations of immigrants' rights dominated the local media, the Regional Groups helped contribute to the adoption of 10 sanctuary policies in cities or school districts. They also participated in coalitions that successfully advocated for policy changes to bolster housing security, including gathering surveys from more than 1,000 Antioch residents to highlight the challenges faced by renting families. Ultimately, the Regional Groups and partners succeeded in urging the cities of Antioch, Concord, and Richmond to adopt rent stabilization and other policies to support the housing stability of families.

The number of participants in each group varied each year, but during the last 10 years of the program more than 300 individuals—predominantly Latinx and from other marginalized communities—were involved and more than half participated for more than three years. In earlier years, the majority of participants were parents of children under age 6, and over time, that proportion declined. While individuals joined the Regional Groups program for various reasons and had different experiences based on when they participated and which group they were in, most reported to staff that they benefited from their participation. Interviews with 12 former participants revealed that the program fostered unity among community members, strengthened their understanding of government, and developed their skills, confidence, and community relationships.

After 20 years of refining the program model and having significant impact on participants and the community, the Regional Groups members and former program staff established a new organization in 2023 to expand their efforts. Operating as a nonprofit organization, the new effort called Rising Juntos has more opportunities to engage in direct advocacy and to broaden its scope and focus. First 5 Contra Costa plans to use the lessons learned from the Regional Groups program to continue its support for parent advocacy and power building through other strategies that leverage existing advocacy groups and that align with its three focus areas, which are early care and education, early intervention, and strengthening families.

Regional Groups Model

While First 5 Contra Costa adapted the Regional Groups program model over its more than 20-year history, some key program elements and approaches contributed to its lasting impact. The program was based on principles of power building, peer leadership, empowerment, action research, and advocacy. For most of the program's history, First 5 Contra Costa dedicated four full-time staff to operate and guide the program, and additional First 5 Contra Costa staff assisted with specific projects or aspects of the program, such as communications staff designing reports or outreach materials, and program staff sharing expertise on a particular issue area. First 5 Contra Costa also financially supported the program's operating costs and expenses related to projects or campaign efforts. The program was a significant investment of agency resources and a commitment of the First 5 Contra Costa Commission. Over the years, the Regional Groups program model also developed philanthropic partners from multiple foundations which provided financial support to the program's power building, housing security, and immigrant and racial justice efforts.

At its core, the Regional Groups model recruited and trained community members to learn and advocate on issues related to:

- Health promotion, including park and land use equity
- Immigrant and racial justice
- Equitable representation
- Housing stability

> "Community-led change requires time and deep investment... Meaningful change to systemic injustice requires following the authentic leadership, wisdom and power of the most impacted residents... How organizations engage that leadership and power is nuanced. Our model and uncompromising implementation was the key to our success."
>
> Rhea Elina Laughlin, former Community Engagement & Advocacy Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa

Regional Groups Model

There were three geographically based Regional Groups partnering with community members from corresponding local areas and engaging in advocacy efforts focused on one or more of the communities in the region. The groups were:

- Central County Regional Group
- East County Regional Group
- West County Regional Group

The Regional Groups model emphasized leadership development. Each Regional Group elected officers in June to serve in leadership roles the following year. These officers represented the Regional Groups with external parties and co-led meetings and planning activities in partnership with First 5 Contra Costa staff.

The Regional Groups developed bylaws outlining many of their policies and procedures. To be considered a voting Regional Group member, individuals attended an orientation for new members and at least three meetings each year.

The Regional Groups operated on an annual calendar that started in July and ended in June, and many participants continued their involvement for several years. Each group held monthly two-hour evening meetings. During monthly meetings, participants learned about the Regional Groups' volunteer roles, identified the community needs they wanted to focus on for the year, learned about relevant policies and public systems, and planned advocacy campaigns and other activities, typically in partnership with other coalitions. In between monthly meetings, participants were invited to participate in rallies, trainings led by

partner organizations, meetings with elected officials or campaign partners, and to deliver public testimony at public meetings. Regional Groups members wore their bright-colored Regional Groups T-shirts at external events. The program intentionally celebrated and recognized the Regional Groups members and their collective accomplishments. For example, every December there was a cross-Regional Groups celebration to honor individuals and accomplishments. There were intentional efforts to reduce barriers to participation, including offering child care, meals, language interpretation, and incentives.

Throughout the program, First 5 Contra Costa staff would check in one-on-one with individual members to ensure they had a positive experience in the program, and to connect them to information or services to address their individual or family's needs. Given the level of trust developed between staff and members, members would turn to First 5 Contra Costa staff for assistance in addressing family, legal, immigration, financial, and other needs.

The Regional Groups model was designed to uplift community voice and empower individuals to be leaders of change for their communities. Shared power was a pillar of the model – staff sharing power with participants, as well as working toward building more shared power in our local government institutions. Relationships were key – between and among Regional Group members, between members and staff, with the program's many coalition partners, with local decision makers, and with community members.

Ruth Fernández, EdD, Executive Director at First 5 Contra Costa

From an Idea to a Movement:
A History of the Regional Groups' Evolution

First 5 Contra Costa was formed as an organization in 1999 following the passage of the statewide Proposition 10, the Children and Families Act of 1998. Proposition 10, funded by taxes on cigarettes and other tobacco products, created funding for early childhood programs across California. Each county established an agency or department to oversee these state funds and address the specific needs of young children in their area. Since its inception, First 5 Contra Costa has evolved from primarily serving as a funder of direct services to broader roles essential to building and strengthening the systems that young children and their families interact with in Contra Costa County. The agency's evolution as a convener, advocate, and incubator is mirrored by the parallel evolution of the Regional Groups—a program developed and staffed by First 5 Contra Costa for more than 20 years.

As a new public entity in 1999, First 5 Contra Costa was eager to engage community members in its initial strategic planning process. Fortunately, the agency was selected to participate in a private philanthropic effort called Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families that helped bring community voices into the process. With seed funding from this effort, First 5 Contra Costa hired several staff dedicated to building relationships with community members. With this staff capacity, First 5 Contra Costa held a series of regional community meetings in the southern, western, central, and eastern parts of the county in June and July 2001. These community meetings centered on the question,

> "How can we make Contra Costa a better place for families with young children?"

First 5 Contra Costa staff and commissioners used the input gathered at these meetings to shape the agency's efforts and to inform the community about its goals. More than 150 people participated in four community meetings, including parents, grandparents, foster parents, service providers, child care providers, county department staff, and elected officials. While each region's meetings were unique, two common priorities surfaced across all four regions:

- Parent involvement and education: participants wanted First 5 Contra Costa to reach out to parents and encourage them to develop a political voice to work on community concerns.

- Lack of child care: participants voiced concerns about the insufficient number of quality child care programs in the county, low salaries for providers, and that public financial aid for child care did not adequately support working poor families.

Based on the input from these meetings, First 5 Contra Costa decided to create four Regional Groups composed of parents, business leaders, service providers, and community-based organizations. Each group would plan and conduct community events to address the issues identified at their community meetings.

First 5 Contra Costa hired two more staff dedicated to community engagement and in 2002 began coordinating monthly meetings of the four Regional Groups. Through these Regional Groups, First 5 Contra Costa staff and partners provided training on

> "We need to build a network of parents to share information with one another and advocate for the community's needs for our children."
>
> Community meeting participant in 2001

early childhood issues, leadership, grant writing, and outreach strategies. First 5 Contra Costa allocated up to $10,000 per year to each Regional Group to conduct a short-term project determined by its members. The projects had to focus on the needs of families with children prenatal to age 5 and have an educational component that would benefit the broader community.

Each group primarily focused on raising awareness of the importance of early childhood education by holding and participating in family festivals which reached hundreds of families. At these events, a variety of partner organizations shared information about local resources. For example, the East County Regional Group organized two outreach fairs to celebrate the Week of the Young Child in April 2002, with one event in Antioch and the other in Brentwood. Each event attracted about 300 people. Later that year, the West County Regional Group partnered with the City of Richmond and the Greater Richmond Interfaith Program to hold a Super Saturday Family Fest in October 2002, attracting about 400 attendees. In November 2003, the South County Regional Group organized a Family Literacy Fair in Danville that attracted more than 300 families.

During this initial phase of the Regional Groups that focused on parent education, the program experienced both successes and challenges. One success was implementing consensus-based decision-making during meetings, which provided all members with the opportunity to ask questions and discuss or challenge issues by vote. This tactic empowered Regional Groups members to take on more leadership responsibilities, resulting in an increase in volunteers to facilitate meetings. The diversity of Regional Groups members was also an asset and, at the same time, created challenges. Initially, First 5 Contra Costa staff found that conducting meetings simultaneously in English and Spanish was challenging for some participants and interpreters, particularly during interactive activities. Staff worked with members to address these challenges, and adapted the meeting structure and approach to ensure they could meet the needs of all members. During this initial phase, First 5 Contra Costa staff decided to discontinue the South County Regional Group and redirect its resources to communities with higher needs.

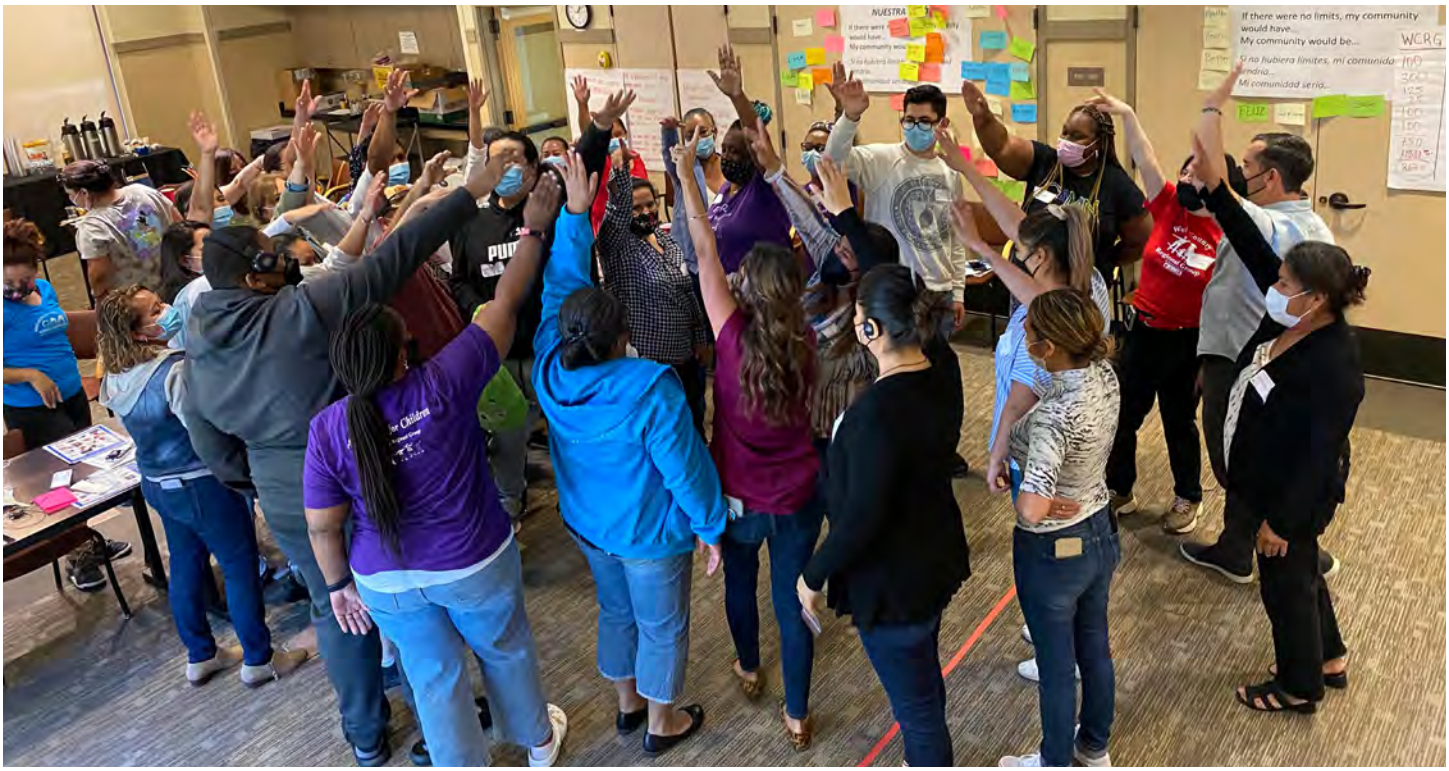
"I would describe [the Regional Groups] as a well-organized opportunity for community members to become engaged in their local decision-making and become more engaged in policymaking with the decisions that are made... I think for a lot of the members, this was their first introduction to community involvement. These were young families, a lot of them were new to their own communities. They didn't know how things happened."

John Jones, First 5 Contra Costa Commissioner

Moving from Parent Education to Policy Advocacy

In 2004, after more than a year of coordinating successful events and increasing participant leadership, new First 5 Contra Costa staff helped pivot the program to focus more on policy advocacy. First 5 Contra Costa staff believed that providing Regional Groups members with training and technical assistance in leadership, advocacy, and action research methods, while continuing to engage them in self-selected projects, would help them become advocates for family-friendly policies. Staff also recognized that to be most effective in policy advocacy, they would want to partner with other advocacy groups working on similar issues. Staff understood that this shift in approach would take a considerable amount of time and would likely occur slowly—and they were right. After three years of facilitated conversations with members about the key issues they thought were important to children and families, including reviewing data, community surveys and other research, the groups determined they wanted to focus on health promotion, including childhood obesity and diabetes prevention, and encouraging physical activity.

> "Even with the support and infrastructure coming from First 5 Contra Costa, there needed to be leadership among the members themselves. Each group selected a chair and officers and those people participated in leadership development work with staff so they could better develop agendas and lead and debrief meetings. From this, group members developed the capacity to meet with local officials and provide testimony to city councils and commissions."
>
> Sean Casey, former Executive Director at First 5 Contra Costa



During this period of transition, staff worked with the Regional Groups to develop additional structure and tools to guide the groups' work. Staff helped members formalize their mission and bylaws and job descriptions for elected officers to lead or co-lead group activities. Each group also developed promotional materials in multiple languages to recruit new members and created new member orientation packets.

This pivot toward policy advocacy also marked the beginning of a new set of partnerships for the Regional Groups. First 5 Contra Costa staff and Regional Groups members brokered new relationships with other advocacy groups, community organizers, and policy experts working on community issues. As a result of these partnerships, Regional Groups participants deepened their policy expertise, increased their knowledge of community organizing, and developed relationships with allies to help them champion solutions grounded in community experiences. These partners also benefited from the Regional Groups by gaining the voices and representation of parents with young children to expand their coalitions. (For a list of advocacy partners, please refer to Appendix B.)

"Our involvement in these coalitions was significant because, for one thing, Contra Costa often needed mobilization for state-level policies; second, often in these coalitions, we were the only group focused on children. We were instrumental in ensuring young children were considered in these policy efforts."

Rhea Elina Laughlin, former Community Engagement & Advocacy Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa

Health Promotion: Fostering Systems Change

In 2007, the Regional Groups began a multi-year advocacy effort to promote health and prevent childhood obesity among children under age 6. First 5 Contra Costa, Contra Costa Health Services, Kaiser Permanente, Families CAN, and CocoKids (the county's child care resource and referral agency) worked together to form a new countywide coalition called Healthy and Active Before 5 (HAB45). This coalition led many activities related to this cause and became an integral partner to the Regional Groups. The organizations rallied around new data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which documented that obesity in children in Contra Costa County between the ages of 2 and 5 had tripled over 30 years, particularly for low-income, African American/Black and Latinx children. The organizations in the coalition focused on root causes of these health disparities, and examined how land use, access to exercise and health care, messaging related to nutrition, and poverty factored into health outcomes. After gathering community input through surveys and community forums organized by the Regional Groups, HAB45 published an Action Plan to Reduce Childhood Obesity in Contra Costa County in 2008. The plan laid out eight recommendations for reducing obesity for children ages 0-5 in the county, including increasing "the availability and utilization of safe places to play and be physically active for all young children and their families."

First 5 Contra Costa and the Regional Groups took several actions related to that recommendation. Building on their success coordinating events, the Regional Groups partnered with other organizations to offer three annual "Healthy and Active" themed fairs in Richmond, Concord, and Pittsburg. More than 75 agencies participated in these events, which collectively attracted 4,050 children and 2,950 parents. The fairs featured activities such as relay races, games, art activities, cooking demonstrations, and healthy snacks.

Regional Groups members also heard from community members that there was no access to low-cost physical opportunities for young children. To address this need, the Regional Groups and other partners worked with 8 local recreation departments to pilot offering low-cost sports classes (such as dance, martial arts, soccer,

"Parents continually identified the need for low-cost sports programming. We served as a bridge with First 5 Contra Costa funds to offer these low-cost sports classes as pilot programs. We demonstrated the demand for such classes. Our vision was to ultimately hand them off to the cities to operate."

Rhea Elina Laughlin, former Community Engagement & Advocacy Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa

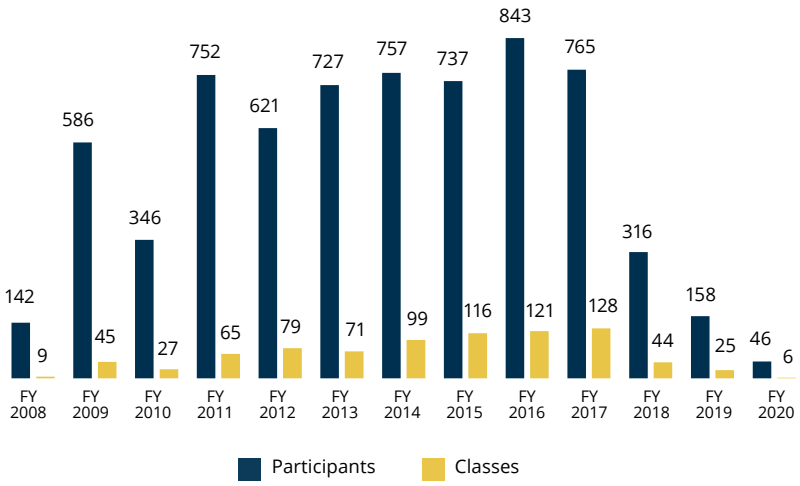
and swimming) to children under six years old. First 5 Contra Costa provided funding to the recreation agencies to cover the costs of the classes held at various public parks. The recreation agencies managed registration, hired the instructors, and handled class logistics. The Regional Groups conducted outreach to families, delivered brief educational talks on obesity prevention at the start of each class, and helped survey families to determine what they liked about the classes. The first set of classes in 2008 was offered through partnerships with the cities of Antioch, Pittsburg, and Oakley, and shortly thereafter, the pilot expanded to Concord, Richmond, and San Pablo. This pilot effort operated for more than 10 years and resulted in a total of 835 classes that encouraged 6,720 children to engage in physical activity. The majority of these children were Latinx (71%) and resided in East County.

Eventually with additional funders, the Regional Groups also developed low-cost physical activity opportunities for the parents of the children in the sports classes. For example, with support from Kaiser Permanente, they developed programs called Pittsburg PACE and Prosserville PACE in Antioch, which provided families with a weekly walking club as well as free yoga and Zumba classes. The Central County Regional Group members created the Concord PASOS program that offered a community-led walking club and free dance lessons. The Concord PASOS program endured the longest out of these efforts, holding its final session in June 2022.

First 5 Contra Costa staff also encouraged Regional Groups members to engage in policy advocacy related to obesity prevention and addressing root causes of health inequity. For example, the Regional Groups helped on a campaign to explore a soda tax in Concord, similar to the trailblazing effort in 2014 in the City of Berkeley that resulted in new fiscal resources aimed at reducing health disparities. Regional Groups members also participated in meetings with city or state policymakers to advocate for preserving recreation services, building a new recreation center, promoting menu labeling, conducting walkability studies, and incorporating health in cities' General Plans.

While mostly focused on community-level advocacy, the Regional Groups also adopted a Healthy Food

Number of Children Participants and Number of Sport Classes, FY 2008-FY 2020



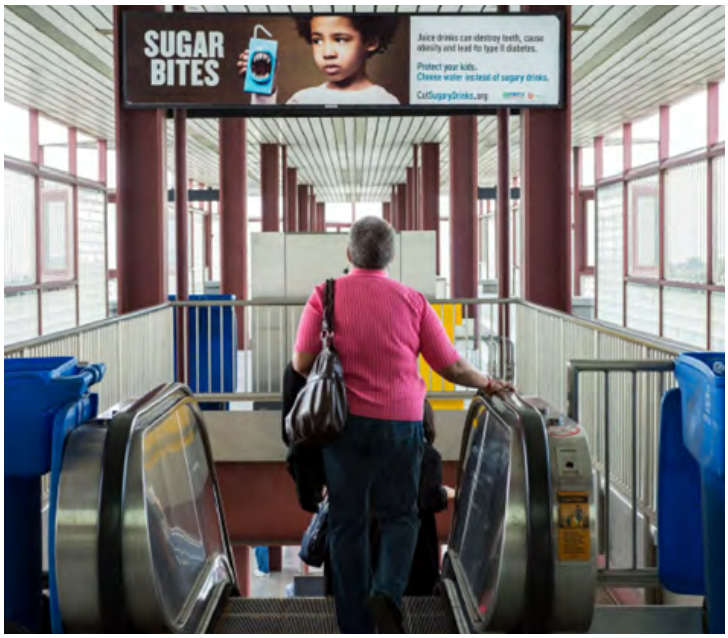
Source: Available First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Some children attended sport classes for multiple years so would be included in each year they attended a sport class. n = 6,750

Data Snapshot:

One year, Regional Groups members collectively interviewed 75 caregivers/parents who participated in the sports classes because they were interested to see if participating led to behavioral changes for children. They found:

- 60% of respondents credited the sports classes with increased physical activity habits among their children
- Many respondents shared that classes provided their children with physical activity opportunities they would not otherwise have been able to afford

Policy for their own meetings beginning in 2013. The policy changed the types of food and drinks served at Regional Groups meetings, with no juice or soda and more water with fruit. Following the adoption of this policy, the Regional Groups supported the creation of a local social marketing campaign called Sugar Bites, launched by First 5 Contra Costa, Kaiser Permanente, and Healthy & Active Before 5. The campaign goal was to prevent childhood obesity by decreasing the consumption of sugary drinks, particularly among low-income African American and Latino parents of children ages 0-5 in Richmond, Concord, Pittsburg, and Bay Point. Posters and brochures in English and Spanish appeared on BART, in convenience stores, and other community locations. Both the campaign and the Regional Groups' Healthy Food Policy received community recognition. For example, in 2015, HAB45 presented the Central County Regional Group with an award for adopting the Healthy Food Policy for their meetings and events. The Regional Groups received numerous awards over the years from legislators, funders, and the California Park and Recreation Society for their health promotion efforts.



"It was a slow process to build a community advocacy approach. Eventually, staff were able to gently steer the focus toward the broader picture of what's important for young children, and that's when it moved into looking at health, specifically childhood obesity. Even that took two to three years as the group members came to grips with their own food choices and barriers to access to healthy foods."

Sean Casey, former Executive Director at First 5 Contra Costa

To view hyperlink, visit socialmarketing.com/campaign/sugar_bites

Bringing the Voice of Families into Process to Improve Local Parks

In addition to promoting physical activity and healthy eating, Regional Groups partnered with HAB45 and other organizations to bring parents' voices into the process of determining how new funding for park improvements would be used. This effort aimed to make sure that the new $117 million approved by voters for park improvements in Contra Costa and Alameda counties was informed by the needs of families with young children. The new funding was a result of Measure WW passing in 2008. The measure provided $500 million in bonds for the East Bay Regional Park system to expand regional parks and trails. The measure required setting aside $117 million to be spent on a per capital basis by cities, local park districts, and the county for park improvements.

To influence how cities, the county, and park districts spent the funds in our county, First 5 Contra Costa staff and Regional Groups members worked with other partners to assess parks, share their findings with elected officials, and advocate for family-friendly improvements in the highest need parks. During this phase, Regional Groups members learned about community-action research methods, how city governments work, and how to engage with elected officials and staff at the municipal level.

In 2013 through 2019, the Regional Groups partnered with other advocacy groups to assess parks in Antioch, Bay Point, Concord, Pittsburg, San Pablo, and Richmond, producing reports that rated each park for child-friendliness. Regional Groups members designed surveys and canvassed for parent input. They worked with partners to map parks located in high poverty areas and where there was a concentration of children under 5, and also examined data related to home and car ownership, and crime. They compiled results, identified parks in greatest need of improvements, and advocated for city councils, city staff, and park oversight bodies to use these recommendations for prioritizing Measure WW funding and to secure municipal, philanthropic and bond funding to address needs. More than 100 parks were

"I am excited to be a vital asset to speak and lift my voice for my grandchildren and my neighborhood children. I am excited about this park project and hope it continues. This is the way to get it done. It is not one-sided. We are a team."

A West County Regional Group member

"It took about five years from doing a park assessment to getting a park renovated. HAB45 partnered with Regional Groups and mapped parks as part of the initial assessment and First 5 Contra Costa layered demographics. The Regional Groups designed surveys and HAB45 would help collect data and write a report together."

Ali Uscilka, Program Director of Healthy & Active Before 5

To view hyperlink, visit ebparks.org/government-affairs/measures/ww/local-grant-program

assessed, with more than half identified as needing improvements. Typically, the parks in the worst condition were in the lowest-income neighborhoods.

Over time, progress was made in almost every city where the Regional Groups and their partners made recommendations, with more than $14.6 million dedicated to park improvements. It often took years before the improvements were made in the parks due to city and county approval, procurement, and construction processes. Each year, staff helped new Regional Groups members understand prior efforts and guided their advocacy to city leaders to invest and improve the highest need parks. Below are some highlights of park-related victories the Regional Groups contributed to over the years.

Accomplishments: Regional Groups Contributed to these Park-Related Victories

Central County

- In 2015, through advocacy with the Monument HEAL Zone park partners which included Monument Impact, HAB45, and Contra Costa Health Services, the Central County Regional Group worked with the city of Concord staff to identify and budget $840,000 for park improvement recommendations for Ellis Lake and Meadow Homes parks that were identified through a parks assessment. The HEAL (Healthy Eating Active Living) Zones initiative was initiated by Kaiser Permanente as a $10 million effort in Northern California to help communities make healthy choices accessible to more people in underserved communities.
- October 2015 – Monument Impact awarded the Central County Regional Group and First 5 Contra Costa with the Community Champion Award for their leadership in promoting park equity and health in Concord.

East County

- Fall 2017 – Recommendations to improve Ambrose and Lynbrook parks in Bay Point neighborhoods with high poverty and crime rates led to $240,000 in improvements, including an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) play structure and restroom upgrades.
- July 2021 – Responding to advocacy from the Regional Group, other HAB45 partners, and Kaiser Permanente, the City of Pittsburg completed park improvements at DeAnza Park that included a new all-purpose path and four fitness stations for diverse ages and abilities. The Regional Group also led a collaborative Kaboom! construction project in which members, Kaiser Permanente employees, and the City of Pittsburg staff built a brand new play area at City Park.
- 2021 – The City of Antioch passed a policy for "Inclusion in Parks and Recreation Programs for People of All Abilities," responding to advocacy from the East County Regional Group. The policy codifies park standards beyond ADA requirements and led to more inclusive structures, multi-sensory play, and accessibility, including programs for people with disabilities and a new annual event called "All Abilities Day."

West County

- 2018 – West County Regional Group members celebrated improvements at Davis Park in San Pablo, the result of their long-standing advocacy on park equity.
- July 2022 – West County Regional Group and First 5 Contra Costa staff hosted a Community Design Day for Richmond children and families to make the final touches on the new Boorman Park renovation plans, featuring a new athletic/soccer field, multi-use trail, skate park, basketball court, parkour area, children's play area, community gathering space, and other improvements. The $8M project, to be completed in 2025, was the result of the group's park research, advocacy, and partnership with the city of Richmond and HAB45.

Similar to their park assessments, the Regional Groups began partnering with organizations to conduct walkability audits in the cities of San Pablo, Richmond, and Concord to identify improvements that would encourage safe walking and biking along streets. The audits were conducted in collaboration with city staff, elected officials, the county health department, and HAB45 partners. Regional Groups members, serving as the only resident volunteers in the projects, provided a voice for families with young children in identifying and drafting the final recommendations. For example, one of the projects involved bicycle and pedestrian improvements along Detroit Avenue in the Meadow Home Park neighborhood of Concord. Regional Groups members attended city council meetings and offered public comments to advocate for the approval of a bicycle, pedestrian, and safe transit plan. Their efforts paid off when, in the fall of 2016, the Regional Groups, Monument Impact staff, other community partners, and community residents gathered to celebrate with more than 500 people the completion of the Detroit Avenue street project, which enhanced pedestrian and bicycle access.

"A lot of people in [policy] work count on folks not speaking up. And the Regional Groups always came in mass, took their three minutes at the podium, and would say what was on their mind. I think that had a strong impact. It was hard to argue with some of their points—they just wanted stronger communities. They wanted a healthier community for their kids. It's hard to argue against what they were asking for. "

John Jones, First 5 Contra Costa Commissioner

"The Regional Groups had great success diverting money to high-needs parks. They realized there were regional parks funds that could be directed to parks in cities. They had success in one city, then they used that to go to the next city and raise awareness and get buy-in at the city's parks and recreation department level, and then the city council level—and that was free money that otherwise would not have been spent on those specific parks... [With the successes in park campaigns] I really started to realize these efforts were having very real impacts—they were diverting millions of dollars to efforts that further First 5's goals."

Gareth Ashley, First 5 Contra Costa Commissioner

Immigrant and Racial Justice: Supporting Sanctuary Policies & Coalition Building

As the Regional Groups began focusing more on policy advocacy in promoting health, they also explored issues related to immigrant and racial justice. In 2008, for the first time, Regional Groups members attended the statewide Immigrant Advocacy Day in Sacramento to discuss the needs and concerns of low-income children of immigrant families with elected officials. According to First 5 Contra Costa staff, the Regional Groups members were the only group who spoke directly to the needs of young children at these events. Regional Groups members attended the event every subsequent year.

The Regional Groups' work on immigrant issues intensified in 2017 due to local and national events that created fear and threats to family cohesion for many Regional Groups members. On the national level, the federal administration's "zero tolerance" immigration enforcement policy created a sense of fear and concern across the country. Within Contra Costa County, immigrant detainees wrote letters documenting their mistreatment at the West County Detention Facility, which received a lot of press coverage. In response, all three Regional Groups were among the 1,000 participants at the Contra Costa County Racial Justice rally at the facility in June 2018 to protest discriminatory and racist practices. After months of protests, the Sheriff's Department severed its contract with the federal government to house immigration detainees in the West County Detention Facility.

The Regional Groups were one of many countywide partners who supported the 2017 formation of the Contra Costa Immigrant Rights Alliance (CCIRA), which is sponsored by Monument Impact. The alliance is a coalition of community, faith, advocacy and immigrant-led organizations that works to advance the efforts to make our county one that welcomes, honors and protects the rights of immigrant members. This Alliance and its many partners advocated for the creation of the Stand Together Contra Costa program, a rapid response, legal services, and community education program to support safety and justice for immigrants. The program resulted from advocacy by many community groups who successfully sought county funding from the Board of Supervisors to match the philanthropic support they had garnered for the effort. The public-private partnership was developed to provide culturally competent, no-cost services countywide. The creation of both of these coalitions marked significant shifts within the county to enhance the services and structures aimed to support immigrants.

Throughout 2017 and 2018, Regional Groups members advocated with city councils and school districts about the importance of sanctuary policies throughout Contra Costa County. Members of the West County Regional Group gave public comment at a City Council meeting in San Pablo advocating for the passage of a sanctuary resolution. Central County Regional Group members advocated for the Mount Diablo School District to adopt a safe haven resolution, and the East County Regional Group attended a school board meeting to advocate for a safe haven resolution for the Antioch Unified School District, which ultimately passed. Overall, across the years, the Regional Groups contributed to the adoption of ten sanctuary policies.

"Housing advocacy grew out of park advocacy. HAB45 was a larger part of an effort to get bike/pedestrian walkways (Meadow Homes/Monument Corridor) and these improvements affected rents because the neighborhood became nicer. Families spoke about not being able to afford their rent and now housing insecurity was their top priority."

Ali Uscilka, Program Director of Healthy & Active Before 5

Housing Stability: Bringing Family Voice to Housing Campaigns

Starting in 2016, Regional Groups began learning about and advocating for affordable, safe housing in Contra Costa County. Since that time, the Regional Groups helped contribute to the adoption of 11 municipal or county policies aimed at protecting tenants, including Concord's Tenant Anti-Harassment Policy and Antioch's Rent Stabilization Ordinance, both enacted in 2022. Central County Regional Group members worked with residents and the Raise the Roof housing coalition to share their experiences with rent issues, advocate for those in need, and explore possible solutions. In 2017, West County Regional Group members participated in the Richmond Citywide Housing Symposium, where they learned about the current housing market in Richmond and provided input on strategies to help increase housing stability and affordability for families with young children. In 2021, Regional Groups participants also attended a regional tenant conference to exchange information with community leaders and build more regional power for housing equity. The conference provided an opportunity for members to inform housing advocates about the impact of housing insecurity on early childhood and to learn effective advocacy practices for housing justice.

The Regional Groups applied the same community-driven policy change strategies that had been successful in their park campaigns to their housing insecurity efforts. Their housing efforts began in Concord with a community-based participatory assessment of housing needs. The Regional Groups worked with East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE) and the Raise the Roof Coalition to produce a report on their findings and launch an advocacy campaign. The East County Regional Group embarked on a similar effort in 2021 with a community-based participatory research project that became known as Antioch CHANGE (Community

"It's very sad to hear how much families are suffering. They tell you their stories and you realize it's not just you. We're all out here struggling to stay in our homes."

An East County Regional Group member

Housing Assessment of Needs, Gaps, and Equity) through a partnership with HAB45 and Urban Habitat. Over 1,000 Antioch families participated in a survey to understand their housing challenges. The findings revealed that "more than four in five renters and homeowners wanted the city of Antioch to take action to limit annual rent increases, prevent unjust evictions, create pathways to homeownership, and build more affordable housing." In response to the Antioch CHANGE survey findings, the Regional Group participated in numerous housing advocacy events, including co-hosting: a town hall for families to create their vision for housing; a community housing policy forum with panel presentations by tenant attorneys and housing policy experts; and a press event. Members also participated in Antioch City Council study sessions and Housing Element community meetings. The Antioch CHANGE Report was released in June 2022, with a housing demonstration bringing attention to its findings. Its priority policy recommendations—rent control, just cause for evictions, and anti-harassment protections—formed the foundation of the advocacy campaign. The following month, landlords responded to the community mobilization and rescinded the planned $700 rent increases, saving over 150 families from displacement. In August 2022, the Antioch City Council passed a rent stabilization policy that included renters' and the Antioch CHANGE recommendations, capping rent increases at 60% of Consumer Price Index or 3% and covered low-income housing buildings. The Antioch CHANGE coalition succeeded in strengthening the policy by rolling back its effective date to protect more families before it went into effect in November 2022. Regional Groups members and partners attended the signing ceremony for the new policies.

Beyond their work in Antioch, the Regional Groups also worked on similar campaigns and efforts to influence the housing elements of cities' General Plans in Concord and Richmond. The Regional Groups collectively engaged more than 60 parents to understand the plans and to voice the housing needs of families. Below are just a few highlights of some of the housing victories the Regional Groups contributed to in partnership with other coalitions over the years.

Accomplishments: Regional Groups Contributed to these Housing Victories

Central County

- In 2017-18, Regional Group members launched a Concord housing survey that helped document housing instability, including skyrocketing rents and unjust evictions, displacing residents. They engaged more than 700 families in advocating for stronger local and statewide tenant protections.
- In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to lost jobs and missed rental payments, as rent prices increased. The Concord Housing and Economic Committee recommended citywide anti-harassment protections for renters to the City Council, responding in part to Regional Group tenant advocacy that later included compelling testimony from dozens of Regional Group members at City Council meetings.
- In 2022, the advocacy efforts by Regional Group members and the Raise the Roof Coalition led to the Concord City Council's passage of the Residential Tenant Anti-Harassment Program. The ordinance prevents landlords and their representatives from harassing their tenants, encourages landlords to follow the law and uphold their responsibility to provide habitable rental properties, and gives tenants legal recourse through the adopted ordinance when they are subjected to harassment by owners.

West County

- In April 2020, Regional Group members virtually attended Richmond and San Pablo City Council meetings where they submitted their testimonies in order to urge council members to pass a moratorium on evictions and rent increases during the COVID-19 pandemic.

East County

- In February 2023, tenants, supported by the Regional Group and Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, rallied at Delta Pines Apartments in Antioch to demand the city pass tenant-rights measures to protect them and hold landlords accountable. They highlighted unlivable conditions and discriminatory behavior by property management towards tenants. In July 2023, their ongoing efforts led to the Antioch City Council granting preliminary approval to an anti-harassment ordinance prohibiting retaliation and harassment against residential tenants.

To view hyperlink, visit cityofconcord.org/DocumentCenter/View/10298/Affordable-Housing-Fact-Sheet-October-2022

Equitable Representation in Decision Making

Since their inception, the Regional Groups focused on building leadership and advocacy skills for people most underrepresented in public decision making. First 5 Contra Costa staff connected Regional Groups members with training opportunities and forums specifically focused on lifting up under-represented voices.

The Regional Groups were very involved with campaigns related to changing city elections from at-large elections to district elections in Antioch and Concord. In 2018, the Regional Groups partnered with the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE), Raise the Roof Coalition, and HAB45 on these campaigns. The Antioch campaign's focus was ensuring that the northernmost neighborhoods of Antioch—which were predominantly composed of lower income families and families of color compared to other neighborhoods in Antioch—were designated as their own district, and therefore, had a representative from those neighborhoods sitting on City Council. The campaign was successful and in 2018, Antioch adopted four election districts that would be used in the 2020 election. The northernmost neighborhoods the Regional Groups had advocated for became District 1 of Antioch. Before the 2020 election, the Regional Groups partnered with others to hold the first candidates' forum for the community for those running as candidates for the District 1 seat on Antioch's City Council. Similarly, the Central County Regional Group worked with the Monument neighborhood in Concord to advocate for it to become its own district in the city's change from at-large elections to five districts starting with the November 2018 election.

The Regional Groups worked on improving equitable representation in other ways as well. In 2023, Regional Groups members received training through Urban Habitat's Board and Commission Leadership Institute, a six-month program designed to educate participants about policy issues and how boards and commissions operate. After the training, Urban Habitat staff

helped participants get appointed to serve on a public board or commission. In addition, all three Regional Groups assisted in various Get Out the Vote campaigns over the years. They distributed voting information to potential voting families with young children, particularly low-income families and families of color, in Richmond, Concord, and Antioch. In 2020, 11,000 underrepresented families were reached with messages to encourage voting. Other examples of this type of work included hosting forums for candidates running for local elections, supporting Regional Groups members to take on leadership positions with public agencies or nonprofits, and supporting Census outreach efforts. Below are just a few highlights of some of the accomplishments related to equitable representation the Regional Groups contributed to over the years.

"Obtaining new electoral districts in Concord and Antioch was a pathway for more parents of young children to be represented in government. City elections were at-large and the elected representatives in place tended to be more affluent and White... With the system designed the way it was, we didn't have a chance. How could candidates representing young children be successful? Instead of hitting our head against a wall year after year, we had to change the system, so we advocated for district elections."

Rhea Elina Laughlin, former Community Engagement & Advocacy Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa

Accomplishments: Regional Groups Contributed to these Equitable Representation Victories

Across All Regional Groups

- In 2019, the Regional Groups and HAB45 led a year-long project to assess community needs and promote the 2020 Census with door-to-door and phone interviews. This community-action research project focused primarily on the municipal District 2 in Concord, the municipal District 5 in Richmond, and Bay Point. The effort culminated in more than 1,500 surveys completed by community members which identified the quality of parks and safe streets as their top priority, followed by affordable housing, good jobs, and immigrant safety and rights.

East County

- In 2022, the Regional Group co-hosted the first North Antioch candidates' forum to explore candidates' positions on issues important to children and families. Together with HAB45 and Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, the Regional Group hosted 75 attendees to hear from candidates about their views on housing stability, public safety, park equity, recreation programming, and child care. The Regional Group was recognized for this trailblazing effort when they received the 2022 ChangeMaker award at the East Bay Leadership Council's 12th Annual Philanthropy Awards Ceremony.

West County

- In May 2023, a community leader and long-time Regional Group member was appointed to the City of Richmond's Rent Board. She's the first monolingual Spanish speaker to hold such a position. In this new role, the former Regional Group member was giving voice to thousands of Spanish-speaking renting families and using an important platform to shape housing equity for low-income families of color. This appointment was the result of decades of Regional Group power building and organizing to increase representation and access for Spanish-speaking families.

Next Chapter

In June 2023, First 5 Contra Costa adopted its new three-year Strategic Plan. The new Strategic Plan included a goal to explore existing and new strategies to support parent advocacy that are aligned strategically with the agency's three focus areas: early care and education, early intervention, and strengthening families. A month later, First 5 Contra Costa paused its Regional Groups programming when Regional Groups members and former program staff established a new organization to expand their efforts. Operating as a nonprofit, the new organization, called Rising Juntos, has more opportunities to engage in direct advocacy and to broaden its scope and focus.

During this transition, the elected officers from the three Regional Groups shared in writing their gratitude and appreciation to First 5 Contra Costa for the support, partnership, and significant investment in parent leadership and advocacy for more than two decades. First 5 Contra Costa acknowledged that their decision to join the efforts of an independent nonprofit organization would provide them with broader opportunities for advocacy and grassroots organizing than being housed as a program of a public entity. First 5 Contra Costa thanked all active Regional Groups members for their contributions to the program and to the community and extended an invitation to continue to explore ways to partner together in the future.

For several years prior to this transition, First 5 Contra Costa staff had discussed how the program being operated by a public agency constrained some participants' desires to engage in some types of direct advocacy. First 5 Contra Costa is happy that through this new organization, former Regional Groups participants are continuing to work to strengthen their communities and uplift the voices of those often not included in public decision-making. The formation of Rising Juntos honors the strength and momentum gained by Regional Groups participants over two decades which prepared them for this transition.

Excerpt of letter from First 5 Contra Costa to all Regional Group members in July 2023:

...First 5 Contra Costa's objective in supporting the Regional Groups over the last 20 years has been to provide learning and coaching opportunities for parents to develop leadership skills and knowledge of community organizing, program planning, collaboration building, problem solving, and advocacy. We have seen such growth in all Regional Groups members over the years and have watched you evolve into strong community leaders. We celebrate your continued growth, evolution, and ongoing efforts to advocate for families and the community on issues affecting the well-being of the neighborhoods you live in. Our hope is to remain allies with all of you and stay in solidarity on behalf of young children and their families.

From an Idea to a Movement

In August 2023, First 5 Contra Costa initiated an internal, cross-disciplinary work group charged with reflecting on the agency's past and existing advocacy efforts that engage parents and service providers. After reflection analysis and conducting research on other entities engaged in advocacy related to its three focus areas, staff proposed several recommendations to its governing body, the First 5 Contra Costa Commission. One key recommendation was to discontinue the Regional Groups program. The work group's research identified 23 active policy advocacy efforts in the county that engage parents and caregivers directly on the issues First 5 Contra Costa champions. Staff suggested that First 5 Contra Costa instead launch a new training series and mini-grant opportunity to support existing advocacy efforts that align with agency priorities. The work group also recommended forming a Parent Advisory Group to provide input on the needs impacting families with children under age 6, which would inform agency-wide decision-making. The Parent Advisory Group launched in the fall of 2024, and First 5 Contra Costa aims to launch the mini-grants and training in the near future. First 5 Contra Costa plans to use the lessons learned from the Regional Groups program and to continue its support for parent advocacy and power building through other strategies that leverage existing advocacy groups and that align with its three focus areas, which are early care and education, early intervention, and strengthening families.

To view hyperlink, visit bit.ly/2024-advocacy-efforts-directory

Profile of Regional Groups Members

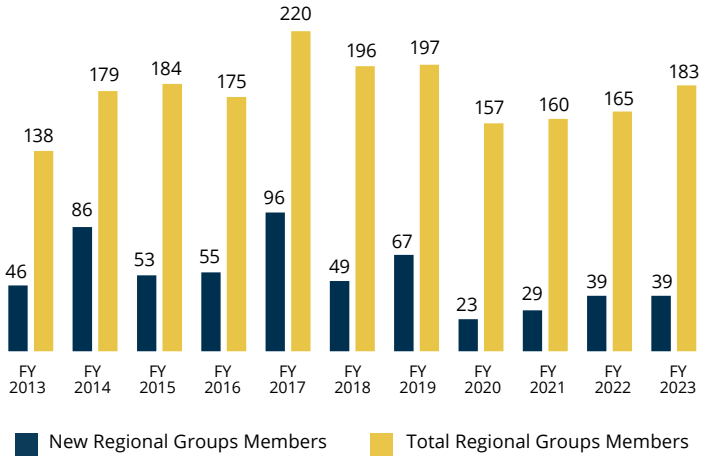
Since the Regional Groups program started more than 20 years ago, it attracted new participants over time. What began as loose coalitions of parents and community members back in 2002, grew into stable, tight-knit groups of about 60 members per year. As the table of available data shows to the right, there was a relatively steady increase in the number of participants over time.

Community members joined the Regional Groups program for a variety of reasons. Based on interviews with 12 former Regional Groups participants, the majority said they were motivated by the program's mission to improve the communities and enhance the well-being of children living within them. Most interviewees emphasized the program's role in enhancing the conditions of parks and cities, expressing a strong desire to contribute to the planning and execution of these improvements. Others highlighted the potential for advocacy work, as their involvement in the program provided a platform to champion important causes, such as advocating for rent control policies to benefit the community.

While they may have been drawn to the program for different reasons, many participants enjoyed the experience so much that they participated for several consecutive years. Between FY 2013 and FY 2023, 84% of Regional Groups members participated for one year or more and more than a third participated for more than 5 years.

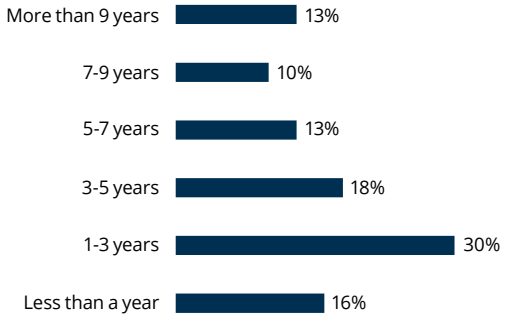
Regional Groups members contributed a significant amount of their personal time to the program. Over the 10-year period from FY 2013 to FY 2023, for which detailed participation data is available, 656 individuals collectively volunteered 61,641 hours of their time to attend monthly meetings and engage in other program activities. By comparison, one person working a full-time job would need to work almost 30 years to generate that many hours. The average active Regional Groups member who participated in the program between FY 2013 and FY 2023 dedicated 188 hours to the program.

Number of New and Total Regional Groups Members, FY 2013-FY 2023



Source: Available First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Note: Individual-level data is only available starting in FY 2013 and may be under-reported during the COVID-19 pandemic. n = 656 as this includes anyone who attended even just one Regional Groups event.

Length of Time Regional Groups Members Participated, FY 2013-FY 2023

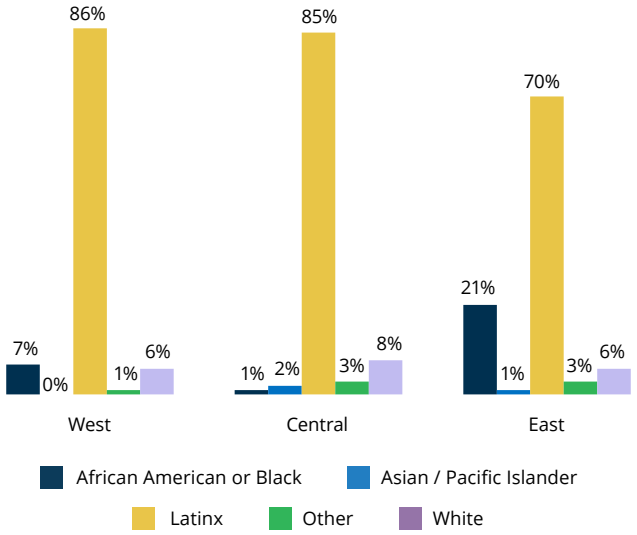


Source: First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Note: Individual-level data is only available starting in FY 2013. This table includes Regional Groups members who met the FY 2022 definition of a voting Regional Groups member, which included those who attended a new member orientation and attended at least three meetings a year. n = 304.

Demographic Description of Regional Groups Members

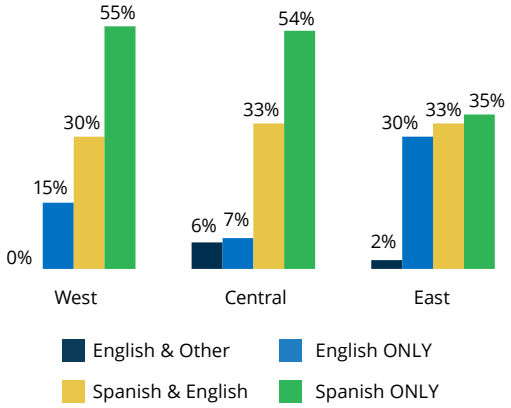
Since their inception, the membership of each Regional Group was predominantly Latinx, with a significant portion of monolingual Spanish speakers. As illustrated in the chart below, approximately 80% of participants overall were Latinx, followed by African Americans, who made up about 10% of the membership. There were differences in racial/ethnic composition and languages spoken between each of the three Regional Groups. For example, about 21% of the East County Regional Group identified as African American or Black, while only 7% in West County and about 1% in Central County. Also, there were more Spanish-speaking members in Central County (54%) and West County (55%) than in East County (35%).

Ethnicity & Race of Active Members by Regional Groups, FY 2013-FY 2023



Source: First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Note: Individual-level data is only available starting in FY 2013. This table includes Regional Groups members who met the FY 2022 definition of a voting Regional Groups member, which included those who attended a new member orientation and attended at least three meetings a year. n = 304.

Languages Spoken of Active Members by Regional Groups, FY 2013-FY 2023



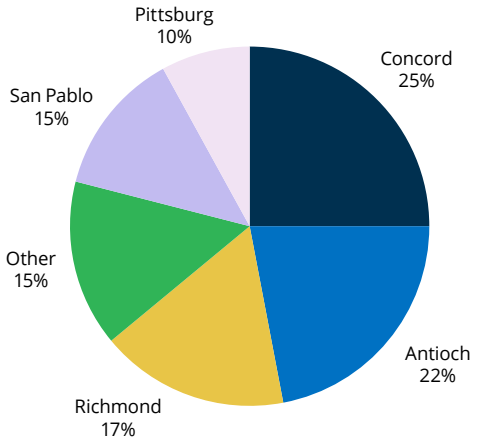
Source: First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Note: Individual-level data is only available starting in FY 2013. This table includes Regional Groups members who met the FY 2022 definition of a voting Regional Groups member, which included those who attended a new member orientation and attended at least three meetings a year. n = 304.

Profile of Regional Groups Members

Over the 10-year span between FY 2013 and FY 2023, about a third of the members lived in each region represented: 37% in West County, 34% in East County, and 29% in Central County. As shown to the right, the greatest number of members lived in Concord, followed by Antioch, Richmond, San Pablo, and Pittsburg.

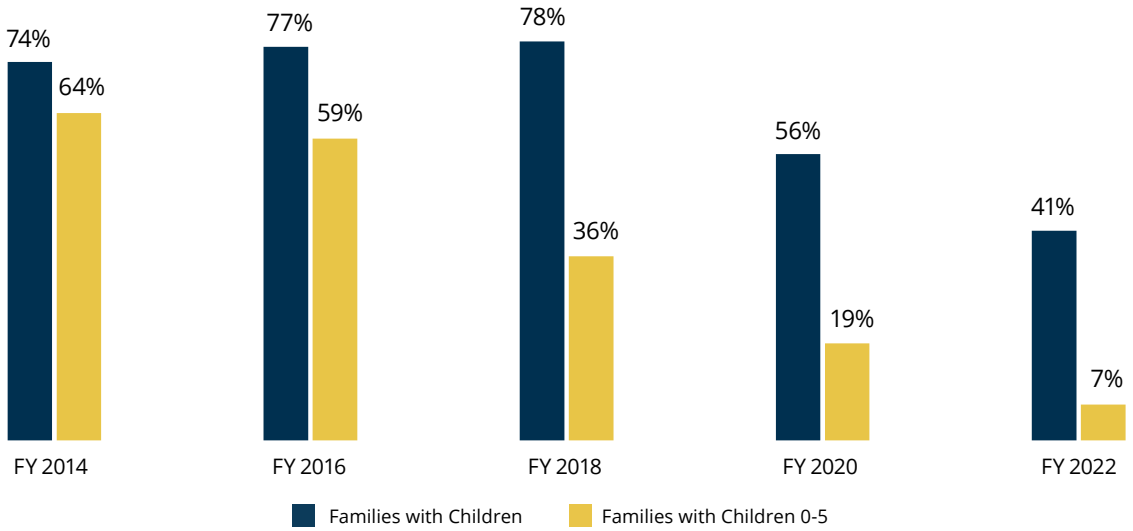
First 5 Contra Costa's data indicates that between FY 2013 and FY 2023, the percentage of Regional Groups members who were parents, specifically parents of children prenatal to age 5, significantly declined. While the pandemic interrupted the timeliness of updating member records, which may account for some of the decline, another factor may be some members participating for several consecutive years while their children aged out of early childhood. The chart below shows the percentage of families with children hovered around 75% between FY 2013 and FY 2016, with the vast majority of those having children under age 6. Starting in FY 2018, the portion of families with children under age 6 dropped below half, with only 7% in FY 2022.

Active Regional Groups Members' City of Residence, FY 2013-FY 2023



Source: First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Note: Individual-level data is only available starting in FY 2013. This table includes Regional Groups members who attended three meetings a year and participated in a new member orientation. n = 304.

Regional Groups Families with Children, FY 2014-FY 2022



Source: First 5 Contra Costa administrative data. Note: Family information is only available between FY 2014 and FY 2022. Regional Groups members who participated for several years are included in each year they were active and the age of their child in that year is reflected accordingly. FY 2014 n = 137 families, 101 families with children, 87 families with children 0-5; FY 2016 n = 142 families, 110 families with children, 84 families with children 0-5; FY 2018 n = 202 families, 158 families with children, 73 families with children 0-5; FY 2020 n = 149 families, 84 families with children, 29 families with children 0-5; FY 2022 n = 166 families, 68 families with children, 12 families with children 0-5.

Impact on Regional Groups Members

While individuals joined the Regional Groups Program for various reasons and had different experiences based on the group they joined, when they participated, and the campaigns they focused on, most participants reported to staff that they benefited from their involvement. Below are some perspectives on the impact the Regional Groups program had on individual participants.

From the Participants

To delve deeper into understanding some of these benefits, First 5 Contra Costa contracted with a research firm to conduct 12 interviews in English or Spanish with former Regional Groups members in the fall 2023. Below are the themes based on those interviews.

Fostered Unity Among Community Members

Regional Groups participants consistently highlighted the development of strong community connections and reciprocal community support of some of the most lasting impacts of their involvement. They reflected that their participation in the program fostered unity among community members of diverse backgrounds. Despite differences in demographics, individuals came together with a shared goal of enhancing their community, forging connections and realizing their commonality.

"I feel proud to participate in the group and I made friendships that I didn't think I would have, and I still have. I met new people from different cultures, and I got to know them, and I connected with them, and I have never done that before. I always surrounded myself with my Latin community, but now I socialize with everyone from different ethnicities and races."

A West County Regional Group participant of 13 years

"I liked the community. It wasn't like friends; it was more like a family, and you can't say that a lot about a group."

A West County Regional Group participant of 10 years

Strengthened Their Understanding of Government

Participation in the program strengthened members' understanding of government processes and civic engagement. Many individuals were initially motivated to join these groups to become effective advocates within their communities. Through their involvement, members gained valuable insights into how local government functions and how to influence policymaking.

The Regional Groups provided a platform for members to champion important causes. This hands-on experience in advocacy not only empowered members to get engaged, but also cultivated a deeper appreciation for civic participation and nurtured new advocates working to address community needs.

"The work of recruiting was challenging. For example, we called so many people and would go door to door to recruit them for a march to renovate the parks. And on the day of, I didn't expect people to come because it was a day in the week, and it was hot. But it was very rewarding to see so many people show up to march."

A Central County Regional Group participant of 14 years

"I attended a council meeting for the first time. I also wrote letters to the sheriff so that the pandemic money would go to the community. Without this knowledge that I learned here, there wouldn't be activists in the community... [I wanted to] be more involved so I informed myself on how I could hold a presidential position in the group, such as what kind of qualities were needed to be nominated for the position. And I did become president for 2 terms."

A West County Regional Group participant of 12 years

Developed Their Skills, Confidence, and Community Relationships

Through their participation, Regional Groups members developed leadership and advocacy skills, confidence, and relationships with community leaders. Members developed a deeper understanding of government planning and policy procedures, as well as insights into the inner workings of various city departments.

Their regular meetings with prominent figures, such as the city mayors and council members, fueled their enthusiasm and sharpened their public speaking and leadership abilities. These encounters not only bolstered their confidence, but also created valuable opportunities for further advocacy work, empowering them to effectively champion community causes and drive meaningful change.

"I liked what we did, I liked helping my community. Everyone in the group decided what and how we would help the community, and they would listen to our voices. We would decide what we were going to do, not someone telling us what to do. I really valued that my voice was listened to."

A Central County Regional Group participant of 14 years

Other Stakeholders' Perspectives

First 5 Contra Costa interviewed several former and current staff, First 5 Contra Costa Commissioners and partners to gather their insights about how the Regional Groups program impacted individual participants. Below are some of their perspectives.

- "The Regional Groups were immensely successful at engaging parents and other community members in being part of the solutions to the challenges they witnessed and experienced in their communities. The program was designed to help parents and caregivers of young children have more of a voice in what was happening in their communities. Through community-action research, leadership and advocacy training, creative community-building strategies, and lots of partnerships with other coalitions, the program was very successful. Participants gained skills and experiences that not only transformed their own lives, but also transformed aspects of their communities. The Regional Groups were a key power-building movement in our county and helped begin the shift of local leaders really appreciating and leaning into the voices of those most impacted by issues in their community. We have more work to do to uplift the needs of young children and their families in our county, but we have made significant progress because of the dedication of the Regional Groups."

  Ruth Fernández, EdD, Executive Director of First 5 Contra Costa

- "We consistently found that parents increased leadership skills and a broader understanding of systems, history, the role of government, increased empowerment and confidence… We saw increased mental health in tandem with an increased sense of community connection to resources. We often were the entry point to a system of care because of the trusted relationships we had with families. Oftentimes, this was the first time they had volunteered, first time they had voted, and first time they had attended a city council meeting. Our program increased their participation in public decision-making."

  Rhea Elina Laughlin, former Community Engagement & Advocacy Program Officer at First 5 Contra Costa

- "It seems like the largest benefit for individuals who participated in the Regional Groups was to be a part of meaningful change in their communities. [The] staff was extremely helpful in keeping residents engaged in campaigns for 5-6 years… it's important to keep people hopeful and engaged during the process. It was beneficial for Regional Groups to be a part of making a change which is transformative and affects the entire community."

  Ali Uscilka, Program Director of Healthy & Active Before 5

The accomplishments of the Regional Groups emphasize the transformative power of community-driven advocacy in promoting social equity, fostering community resilience, and driving change. Through collaborative efforts, the Regional Groups had many accomplishments in their efforts and campaigns that improved the lives of families and other community members of underserved areas. Their efforts have had a lasting impact on the lives of children and families across Contra Costa County.

Key Milestones in Trajectory of Regional Groups

1999	First 5 Contra Costa established
2001	First 5 Contra Costa holds community meetings in each region
2002	Regional Groups start meeting monthly
2004	First 5 Contra Costa hires new staff to lead Regional Groups and model pivots to advocacy
2007	Regional Groups focus on health promotion
2012	Regional Groups begin focus on park equity
2016	Regional Groups begin participating in housing stability campaigns
2017	Regional Groups' involvement in county-level immigration efforts intensifies
2018	Regional Groups engage in equitable representation efforts, including district municipal elections
2023	First 5 Contra Costa adopts new strategies to engage parents in advocacy

Appendix A

Regional Groups Staff (listed alphabetically by last name)

Former First 5 Contra Costa Staff Dedicated to the Regional Groups Program:

Walter Aab – Community Engagement Program Assistant

Juan Alvarado – Community Engagement Program Assistant

Sheila (Reverend) Cook – West County Community Liaison

Tracy Irwin – Civic Engagement Manager

Sandra Gutierrez – West County Community Liaison

Rhea Elina Laughlin – Community Engagement & Advocacy Program Officer

Carolina López-Flores – Community Engagement Program Assistant*

Yoally Muñoz – West and Central County Community Liaison

Jose Orta – West County Community Liaison

Jacqueline "Jackie" Palma – Community Engagement Program Assistant

Cecilia Pérez-Mejía – West, East, and Central County Community Liaison

Alejandra Plascencia – East and Central County Community Liaison

Gabi Rivas – Community Engagement Program Coordinator

*Carolina continues to work at First 5 Contra Costa in a new capacity.

Appendix B
Regional Groups Partners

As with all community-driven efforts, the partnerships with individuals, organizations, coalitions, and agencies were essential to the success of the Regional Groups. Thank you all for your partnership.

Given the many partners of the Regional Groups over their 20-year history, it would be nearly impossible to list them all. Below are some of the Regional Groups' partners from the most recent years.

Some Advocacy Partners:

Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)

Ambrose Recreation & Park District

Antioch Unified School District

Brighter Beginnings

California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC)

Centro Legal de la Raza

City of Antioch

City of Concord

City of Pittsburg

City of Richmond

City of San Pablo

Concilio Latino

CocoKids

Contra Costa County Department of Conservation & Development

Contra Costa County Census 2020 Complete Count Committee

Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services

Contra Costa Crisis Center

Contra Costa Health Services

East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE)

East Bay Housing Organizations (EBHO)

Faith in Action

Faith Alliance for a Moral Economy (FAME)

Families CAN

Family Justice Center

Healthy & Active Before 5 (HAB45)

Lift Up Contra Costa

Mount Diablo Unified School District

Monument Impact

Raise the Roof (RTR) Coalition

San Mateo Health System

San Pablo Childhood Obesity Prevention Task Force

Tenants Together

The Latina Center

The Partnership for Working Families

United Way of the Bay Area

Urban Habitat

YES Nature to Neighborhoods

YMCA of the East Bay

Funders:

Bay Area Census Funder Collaborative

City of Richmond

The California Endowment

Contra Costa County

East Bay Community Foundation

East Contra Costa STRONG Nonprofits Fund

John Muir Health

Kaiser Permanente

San Francisco Foundation

Sunlight Giving

Y&H Soda Foundation