

25 Years of Citizen Activism and Construction ~ The New Grassroots Environmental Health Movement ~

The year 2003 marks the 25th anniversary of the Love Canal crisis. The Love Canal community's efforts successfully won the relocation of 900 working class families away from a leaking toxic waste dump and awoke a nation to the hazards of toxic chemicals in our environment. Overcoming powerful resistance from government and a multi-billion dollar company, Occidental Petroleum, this grassroots effort demonstrated how ordinary people can gain power through joining together to win their struggle. Love Canal sparked a new nationwide social justice movement concerned with links between health problems and the environment. Hand-in-hand with these concerns are questions about the rights of corporations to increase their profits through decisions that sacrifice the health of innocent families and the environment.

How the Meaning of Environmentalism Has Expanded to Include a New Grassroots Environmental Health Movement for the People

Traditional environmentalism in America has centered, in general, around protecting the natural environment through laws and regulations. Newer grassroots efforts, however, are as much about protecting public health as the environment. These efforts value the basic human right to have clean air, water, food and soil along with preserving our nation's natural resources. The grassroots leadership believes systemic change comes from the bottom up—people plus organization equals strength—the strength to influence policy and win protection of these basic rights, and the strength to counteract the money and pressure corporations bring to bear on elected representatives to oppose or weaken protective laws. As a result, the grassroots strategy is to build a stronghold at the local and state levels that can influence federal-level representatives and national policies.

Another difference between the two movements is their contrasting viewpoints on achieving the same overarching goals of protecting the environment and public health:

- ◆ ***Traditional environmentalism is focused on regulations and regulatory controls.*** It therefore inevitably winds up debating "How much pollution can be released into the air from an incinerator without causing an increased cancer risk to nearby residents? How many parts per million of dioxin can be in wastewater that a pulp mill releases into a river without killing off downstream fish populations?"
- ◆ ***Newer grassroots efforts are focused on prevention.*** Grassroots leaders are asking "Why do we have to burn our trash in an incinerator to begin with? Why do we allow dioxin-laced wastewater from a pulp mill's bleaching process to be discharged into our rivers when non-toxic alternatives exist?"

*“Those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it.”*

George Santayana

Neither approach is right or wrong, or is superior to the other. The overarching goal of protecting the environment and all living things is the same for both segments of the environmental movement. When operating on a parallel path, the two approaches together can make significant progress in protecting the environment and public health.

Who Represents the Grassroots Environmental Health Movement Today?

The grassroots environmental movement has a long history of success. One of its most important achievements has been building a broad and diversified base of support that includes:

- ✓ Workers, people of color, faith-based organizations, rural and urban families, and indigenous peoples living in today's society whose lives have been affected by environmental issues
- ✓ Parent-teacher organizations concerned about pesticides, asbestos, and schools built near pollution sources
- ✓ Doctors, nurses, and other health professionals working to transform the health care industry's handling and disposal of potentially harmful substances such as chlorinated plastics and mercury-containing materials
- ✓ People who make their living fishing or depend upon fish as a primary food in their diets who wish to ensure mercury and other toxins don't poison this important food source
- ✓ Many other people from all walks of life

There have been many extraordinary victories resulting from this new movement that reach from sea to shining sea:

- ⇒ Thousands of dumpsites have been cleaned up.
- ⇒ Polluting incinerators have been closed.
- ⇒ Our rivers no longer catch fire.
- ⇒ Our skies are not blackened with smoke.
- ⇒ Recycling waste is now the societal norm—in fact, the public frowns upon people who throw away recyclable bottles, cans and other materials.

Even the arguments over whether society must choose between jobs or protecting the environment have begun to take a positive turn. Both grassroots leaders and workers are demanding that industries follow practices that don't threaten worker or public health or the environment of surrounding neighborhoods. Where industries can't operate without polluting the environment, “just transition” programs are being developed to prepare the workforce for alternative jobs.

“Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, these ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.

Some see things that are, and ask why.

I dream of things that never were and ask why not.”

Robert F. Kennedy

2003: What are the Next Steps in Society’s Progression?

Step 1. We Have to Make Choices That Reflect the Lessons We’ve Learned.

Society—the human race—is at a turning point in history. We have an opportunity to choose between two very different paths as we move forward. Society can make this choice by either taking the lessons we’ve learned from our past and using them as a guide, or deciding to ignore them and conduct “business as usual.” If we use what we’ve learned, we can move forward and make informed decisions while being open to embracing new ideas, technologies, and priorities as a part of our growth as a people.

There is admittedly still much we have to learn (we can only be informed—not all-knowing) about chemicals and their effects on children, adults and our natural environment. Society still doesn’t fully understand the short- or long-term effects of everyday practices such as generating nuclear waste, clear-cutting our forests, or spewing out smokestack exhaust from our factories. Yet today we know more than in years and decades past, and sound scientific studies have shown that certain human activities are problematic or even irreversibly destructive to human health and the environment over the long term. What we do know is that there are situations for which we have enough information to make prudent and wise decisions regarding protecting public health and the environment and caring for our workforce rather than continuing to “likely cause harm.”

Polluters would have society believe that we should just keep on doing what we’ve been doing and maintain the status quo (and their profits). After all, they’d argue, we don’t know for sure that under “business as usual”:

- ⇒ Children are being harmed.
- ⇒ People are suffering from cancer due to exposures to chemicals.
- ⇒ Our economy has an unhealthy reliance on big businesses that pollute, or
- ⇒ Our natural environment may not be able to sustain the impacts of pollution.

But the truth is that scientific studies, economic analyses, and public health authorities are saying that harm *is* occurring, we need to change our current practices, and our timing is critical in reversing these negative trends.

*“Democracy is not so much a form of government
as a set of principles.”*

Woodrow T. Wilson

Step 2. We Have to be Willing to Reinvent the Concept of "Business as Usual."

In Washington, DC, the political jockeying continues over money, power and party politics, while families across the nation are increasingly concerned about their health. More and more people are developing allergies, cancers and other diseases likely attributable to their environment and chemicals in their food supplies. To make matters worse, as our nation's families struggle to cope with these illnesses, health care costs continue to skyrocket as benefits decrease or are unavailable to many.

The economic base of our country has changed over the past 25 years from steel mills and industrial complexes, to a range of high-tech and service industries. In order for our society to keep abreast of these changes and have a positive role in making the most of this new generation of businesses, governmental support is needed in the form of:

- Providing incentives for companies to create new businesses and jobs and subsidize adequate new job training for unemployed industrial workers
- Encouraging new industries that produce alternative energy products such as solar panels and minimize waste
- Investing in massive recycling industries instead of incinerators that burn wastes and pollute the environment
- Supporting organic and family farms instead of allowing huge corporate farms to spray tons of pesticides, or create mammoth lagoons for animal wastes that destroy rivers, groundwater and drinking water supplies

Over the past 25 years, we have also become aware that schools throughout the country pose environmental health hazards of their own to both our children and the faculty and staff. The average public school is over 43 years old, typically contained a variety of toxic materials such as asbestos and lead-based paint when it was built, and is in disrepair. In addition, mold, leaky roofs, and unhealthy indoor air made worse by the purchase and installation of products (such as synthetic carpeting and adhesives) that evaporate nervous system toxins into the air, are harming our children's ability to learn and grow. Attention deficit disorders, asthma, and learning disabilities are increasing yearly among our nation's children, yet the policymakers in Washington, DC only seem to take notice and acknowledge these serious problems during election years when they are expected to take a stand on current issues.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

2003: A New United Effort is Launched Linking Segments of the Movement Together

A group of 140 organizational leaders, in January 2003, started having conversations about how to move forward on a path towards building a healthier tomorrow in the face of our country's many challenging environmental and public health problems. Through a series of one-on-one conversations, conference calls, and group meetings, it was agreed that a collective effort must be undertaken in order to: (1) achieve change, (2) recreate a safe, healthy environment for people, animals, and wildlife, and (3) protect our natural environment for future generations. It became very clear during this process that, although each organization was doing extraordinary work of their own, each victory and each step forward with a single focus would only allow us to achieve limited success.

Like single patches of fabric connected together with many other patches to create a large, useful quilt, assembling all the organizations under a single call for change—or set of principles that the American people can stand behind—a powerful voice would be created. Through this unified voice, singing a chorus for prevention, protection and change—the verses representing each of the issues—a powerful choir would be heard by the American people. As more and more people join with this rising choir of voices, the potential to effect far-reaching and long-lasting change also will grow.

On the following page is a new set of principles drafted by organizational leaders to guide decision-making through the next decade. Practicing these principles is an attempt to avoid harm rather than assuming no harm will occur. With public support, leaders of organizations from all across the nation are optimistic that through this collective effort we can move our country forward.

Environmental Health Alliance

Blueprint Ensuring our Safety And Future Economy *BE SAFE*

In the 21st century, we envision a world in which our food, water and air are clean, and our children grow up healthy and thrive. Everyone needs a protected, safe community and workplace, and natural environment to enjoy. We can make this world vision a reality. The tools we bring to this work are prevention, safety, responsibility and democracy.

We choose a “better safe than sorry” approach motivated by caution and prevention. We endorse the common-sense approach outlined in the Blueprint’s four principles listed to the right.

Our goal is to prevent pollution and environmental destruction before it happens. We support this precautionary approach because it is preventive medicine for our environment and health it makes more sense to:

- Prevent pollution rather than spend millions of dollars to clean up the mess. Make polluters, not taxpayers, pay and assume responsibility for the damage they cause instead of burdening communities with health threats;
- Protect our children to avoid illness and suffering, rather than asking how much damage from chemical exposure is acceptable;
- Promote use of renewable, sustainable technologies, rather than deplete limited resources and use hazardous technologies such as nuclear power and fossil fuels - a cause of global warming;
- Provide a natural environment we can all enjoy with swimmable, fishable waters, rather than pollute our ocean, rivers and forests and harm our wildlife; and Provide stewardship for our national forests, rather than allow commercial logging and oil, gas and coal extraction.

BE SAFE’S FOUR PRINCIPLES

BE SAFE’S FOUR PRINCIPLES

HEED EARLY WARNINGS HEED EARLY WARNINGS

Government and industry have a duty to prevent harm, when there is credible evidence that harm is occurring or is likely to occur—even when the exact nature and full magnitude of the harm is not yet proven.

PUT SAFETY FIRST PUT SAFETY FIRST

Industry and government have a responsibility to thoroughly study the potential for harm from a new chemical or technology before it is used—rather than assume it is harmless until proven otherwise. We need to ensure it is safe now, instead of being sorry later. Research on impacts to workers and the public needs to be confirmed by independent third parties.

EXERCISE DEMOCRACY EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Precautionary decisions place the highest priority on protecting health and the environment, and help develop cleaner technologies and industries with effective safeguards and enforcement. Government and industry decisions should be based on meaningful citizen input and mutual respect (the golden rule), with the highest regard for those whose health may be affected and for our irreplaceable natural resources—rather than those with financial interests. Uncompromised science should inform public policy.

CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION

Decision-making by government, industry and individuals must evaluate alternatives, and require use of the safest, technically feasible solution. We support innovation and promotion of technologies and solutions that create a healthy environment and economy, and protect our natural resources.

*“We, the generation that faces the next century, can add the solemn injunction:
If we don't do the impossible, We shall be faced with the unthinkable.”*

Petra Kelly

2003: Blueprint for a Solution

Preventative approaches are not out of the ordinary or a new concept for most people—they're basic common sense as are these everyday precautionary measures:

- ◆ Parents place gates across doorways to protect toddlers from falling down stairs
- ◆ People have annual physical exams to check up on their overall health even though they're not feeling sick, and exercise to prevent heart or other health problems
- ◆ Our doctors and health care providers take an oath to “First Do No Harm” before they begin their careers
- ◆ Industrial facilities have signs stating “Safety First”
- ◆ Schools have safety patrols, crossing guards, and other measures to protect young children from everyday threats to their health and well being

The time is long overdue for the American people to think and act preventatively to avoid and minimize environmental health risks by using such precautionary steps. Environmental and public health concerns range from climate change to pesticides, from persistent toxic chemicals in our food that end up accumulating in our bodies, to the devastation of entire forests, mountaintops and rivers for the extraction of natural resources. Wildlife, plant life, marine life and human lives are being placed at risk for profit and/or due to a lack of foresight. We are nearing the point where we can't go back, and we may be faced with “the unthinkable” as stated in the quote above if we continue business as usual. It will not be long before we cannot go back and reverse the harm.

It is time to come together and speak with a united voice to demand change. We must:

- ⇒ Take action
- ⇒ Contribute to this change by getting involved
- ⇒ Make wise purchasing and investment decisions and encourage others to do so
- ⇒ Participate in our democracy by voting for those who have a vision for the future—a vision that includes the concerns of everyday people and their families

*“Our environment, the world in which we live and work,
is a mirror of our attitudes and expectations.”*

Earl Nightingale

At the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, our hopes are that millions of people have already chosen—or are willing to choose—the precautionary approach to protect our health, environment, and economy for ourselves and for future generations. This set of principles is not new, and reflects the approach that grassroots groups have advocated for the past 25 years. What’s different is that organizational members and leaders will begin to circulate a “petition” representing these principles and will be asking average people, legislators, and decision-makers to sign on to these principles as an expression of their commitment to put the principles into practice where they live, work, and play.

To Move Forward—We Must Understand The History and Sacrifices of Others

As we move forward to prevent problems we must not forget those who brought us to this new understanding. As people begin to think and act in a preventative manner as individuals—and in their other roles as civic leaders, business men and women, farmers, ranchers, parents, students, workers and voters—together we must not forget the communities and families who have sacrificed the most. Oftentimes, these communities are chosen because of their lack of political and financial resources—and that is why CHEJ refers to them as "the chosen ones."

The Chosen Ones

At the base of the grassroots environmental struggles are the chosen ones—communities targeted by polluting industries and sacrificed in the name of economic growth and profits. Communities with significant environmental health impacts tend to be working class, low-income and/or communities of color. Leaders within these grassroots environmental organizations do not believe the environmental and public health threats they face are coincidental or due to the random placement of industrial complexes or waste disposal facilities in their neighborhoods. Communities at risk believe their neighborhoods are deliberately targeted because they are economically and politically weak. As a result, this grassroots movement is as much about justice and human rights as it is about public health and the environment.

Two written documents provide compelling evidence that some communities are in fact chosen for waste disposal sites or industrial plant locations based on demographic criteria and the assumption that these communities lack political clout:

- ◆ A report by Cerrell Associates completed for the State of California Solid Waste Division in 1984.
- ◆ A memo written in 1989 by Eply Associates for Chem-Nuclear Systems, Inc., who was hired by the North Carolina Low-Level Radioactive Waste Management Authority to assist in the site selection and operation of a regional low-level radioactive waste disposal facility.

*"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you,
then they fight you, then you win."*

Mahatma Gandhi

When the Center For Health, Environment and Justice first exposed the Cerrell report, government officials and corporate public relations people said it was a unique example and that it didn't represent the industry's normal approach to siting. According to the Cerrell report, the communities easiest to target appear to be southern, Midwestern and rural; are open to promises of economic benefits; contain residents on average older than middle age and with a high school education or less; are low-income; Catholics and are not involved in social issues.

Then, in 1993, the Eply memo was exposed in a report prepared by attorneys for the Chatham County (North Carolina) Board of Commissioners called the *Report On The Site Selection Process For The North Carolina "Low-Level" Radioactive Waste Disposal Facility*. As in the Cerrell report, the most important criteria for siting these types of facilities were demographic.

The Chatham County report reviewed internal documents obtained during litigation and concluded, *"There is ample evidence that the site selection process involved a concerted effort to locate potentially receptive and politically palatable potential site areas rather than seek the most technically suitable sites, as the rules require. This plan was backed by a public relations effort to monitor local reactions and convince people in the site areas to accept the site."*

This report described the site selection process implemented by Chem-Nuclear following the advice of the Eply memo. At what was described as "perhaps the most critical site selection meeting," a small group of people discussed what had been learned regarding each of the possible 21 sites for the disposal of low-level nuclear wastes. The following is an excerpt from a description of that meeting.

"...there were numerous discussions of non-technical matters such as: degree of economic distress, past activity as to environmental issues, likely degree of opposition, race, influence and attitudes of local officials, troublesome land use characteristics (for example, chicken farmers were thought to be strongly opposed to the siting of such facilities...) and potential resistance from corporations with nearby operations."

The following are several examples from a chart generated at this meeting where many sites were eliminated from consideration. The listed factors were "at least a partial basis" for the decisions made that day.

Location	Factors Considered	Deposition
Coleridge	"Houses fairly wealthy"	out
Snow Camp	"Fairly affluent"	out
Cherry Grove	"Residences of site-minority owned"	in
Gold Hill 3	"Very depressed area"	in
Ghio	"Trailers everywhere; foreclosures then resells; distressed county"	in

(Farren, 1992)

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

The Cerrell and Eply reports provide clear evidence that the siting system works against certain communities. When permitting a facility that poses human health risks, economic decisions are made that violate human rights and are not scientifically based. Decision-makers are determining who will take the health and environmental risks and who will receive the benefits. Not surprisingly, it turns out that people of color and low-income communities are being forced to take the risks.

More recently, in the summer of 2002, New York City’s mayor, Mike Bloomberg, spoke bluntly about building new incinerators in poorer areas of the city. *“If you were to put an incinerator on Park Avenue,”* the mayor explained, *“you would drive away the revenue base that supports this city. The fact of the matter is that where you tend to site things, unfortunately, tends to be in areas that are also in proximity to people who are just starting their ways up the economic ladder.”*

Other Choices Exist

Polluting the communities of working class and poor people as well as people of color is not the only alternative, nor is it right. Instead of exposing “people who are just starting their way up the ladder” to potential contamination as Mayor Bloomberg said, we must take a step back and look at all the possible ways of addressing the problem and consider new, alternative, and innovative solutions instead of applying presumptive remedies and off-the-shelf technologies. For instance:

- ◆ Instead of presuming an incinerator must be built to burn an overflow of garbage, shouldn't a recycling and separation plant also be looked at during the initial stages of considering various options?
- ◆ Instead of building a new plastics plant to meet the demand for plastic products, shouldn't society demand that plastics that use chlorine in their manufacturing process (such as PVC) be eliminated from use and disposal because of the health hazards this type of processing poses to workers and the surrounding environment?

These are the preventative approaches that grassroots leaders in the “chosen communities” are proposing. Although they have little in worldly goods and formal education, they are fighting hard for themselves and for all our futures. Most of these community efforts have been successful. What many elected representatives, corporate decision-makers, and corporate foot soldiers within government agencies all failed to anticipate is that, although targeted communities may have little formal education and lack financial resources, they are willing to put everything, including their lives, on the line to stop the poisoning of our people and the environment. The families in “chosen communities” are unwilling to accept or tolerate that some communities are worthy of a safe environment for their families while others are not.

“The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just.”

Abraham Lincoln

Families in these communities have everything at stake; their homes represent a lifetime of investment and their children are their lives. For these reasons, community groups have waged determined, persistent, public battles, and have won far more than they've lost. Families in the mostly low-income, African-American community of Warren County, North Carolina, lay down in the middle of the street to stop trucks from dumping PCBs in their neighborhood. The community lost that phase of the struggle and the PCBs were buried in 1984. Unwilling and unable to give up, because doing so meant the destruction of their families and their community, neighbors continued to oppose the dump. Years of pressure paid off and in 2001—17 years later—the state began to clean up the site using non-incineration technology. Millions of taxpayer dollars would have been saved if the state had used that technology from the start rather than building a dump, contaminating pristine land, and then digging the waste back up again to finally be handled properly.

Community after community has carried signs, held marches, distributed leaflets at candidates' fundraisers, and undertaken civil disobedience when necessary to protect their children, their homes, and their neighborhoods. If someone were to ask the protesters if they could have pictured themselves carrying signs before the issue surfaced, they would likely answer, “Absolutely not.” Law-abiding, tax-paying citizens are forced to move from the anonymity of their homes out into the streets, a difficult step for anyone, and a big leap for most.

Grassroots leaders would agree with Frederick Douglass' description of how change happens: *“He who wants change without struggle is like the farmer who wants crops without plowing.”* History has shown us that to win justice, people cannot work only within the system, but at times they must work outside the system as well.

Public Involvement = Control, Confusion and Conflict

Groups trying to work within the system to influence the decision-making process for an unhealthy proposal face enormous obstacles, beginning with a public participation process that seems to be designed to inhibit—instead of promote—public involvement. Communities often want to believe that the system of public participation is open and honest. Leaders and citizens want to fully participate in public hearings or meetings to discuss a proposal that local families believe will harm their health and environment.

*“It is only through labor and painful effort,
by grim energy and resolute courage,
that we move on to better things.”*

John F. Kennedy

Community leaders begin with the belief that when the truth is exposed, the right thing will happen. It is this belief that motivates grassroots leaders to work for days, weeks or months doing research, identifying experts to testify on their behalf, and preparing for the hearing.

In fact, public participation hearings to determine the soundness of a proposed new facility, a proposal to clean up a site, the clear cutting of an old growth forest, the release of persistent toxic chemicals into our air or water, etc., are primarily a means to control the public, defend a predetermined decision, and present a false sense of public involvement and open decision making. It generally only takes one experience attending a hearing for community leaders to understand that the information they so desperately wanted to share—and hoped would be heard—was not taken seriously.

The entire public participation process seems designed to exclude the people who are most directly affected by such decisions. The hearings are generally scheduled at inconvenient times for working people—either during a weekday or late into the evening, creating childcare difficulties. Usually the corporation or government experts speaking in favor of the proposal speak first. Often these individuals are allowed more time to present their comments than the local community representatives. Men and women whose lives and community are at risk are given three to five minutes to speak and usually only after the proponents of the proposal have finished. Experts from both sides of the proposal control the discussion for the first two hours, while the local residents and their families sit in the audience, confused, bored, and angry. The anger builds as they wait with overtired children while paid professionals speak. When they are finally allowed to speak, their lay testimony is often dismissed as “unsupported” or “unscientific.”

Community leaders know that their community wasn’t chosen based on science, or because it had great soil structure, or isolated aquifers, or the right wind patterns. Intellectually they know that the proposal has more to do with demographics, power, and money than science—yet they are forced to address the scientific flaws of the proposal.

Absolute Proof of Harm or Proof Beyond A Reasonable Doubt

Another obstacle that is next to impossible for grassroots groups to overcome is *proving* that they are sick from chemical exposures in terms of “absolutes”—not just beyond a reasonable doubt. When it comes to those who want to pollute, the operating principle is that toxic chemicals are presumed innocent of harming human health and our natural environment until proven guilty. However, it is unfair to demand absolutes or declare chemicals innocent of harm until proven otherwise. In our criminal justice system, juries are not asked to be absolutely certain. Juries are asked to convict when there is enough evidence to convince them beyond a reasonable doubt. Placing the burden of proof on communities instead of the polluters is unjust and serves corporate interests at the expense of protecting public health.

*“The significant problems we face cannot be solved
at the same level of thinking we were at
when we created them.”*

Albert Einstein

Although having to prove that exposure to chemicals has harmed people is an unfair burden, grassroots groups have become sophisticated health investigators who use common sense as their guide. Grassroots groups’ most valuable assets are people and common sense. Since resources are limited, they often can’t hire scientists and legal expertise, but they do understand what they see around them. They know when something is wrong. They can see dead vegetation and fish kills, smell chemical odors, taste the foulness of tainted drinking water, and observe an increase in disease.

In almost every instance, “professionals” have later confirmed the hypotheses or conclusions made by local lay-people. If this lay-science reaches the public at all, it generally does so through the media. The public demands a level of proof only beyond a reasonable doubt. It is public opinion that forces government scientists to undertake further studies.

For example, it was the mothers in Woburn, Massachusetts who in 1979 discovered a cluster of leukemia cases among neighborhood children who were drinking from the same well water. When health authorities from the state and federal agencies investigated, they concluded that there was no connection between the drinking water and the clustering of disease.

Nonetheless, the Woburn parents persevered, making maps that showed the clustering of leukemia cases along pipelines from a particular contaminated drinking water well. Local parents took these maps to health officials, politicians, and journalists, who they thought would help them. It wasn’t until years later that the Massachusetts Department of Health confirmed the connection of disease to the water supply and closed the drinking water well. These efforts, like those at Love Canal, opened the eyes of the public, educating people and helping the movement grow.

“Society is indeed a contract. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”

Edmund Burke

In San Jose, California, mothers sharing conversation at a local playground discovered that many children in their neighborhood were born with identical heart birth defects. They too believed it was connected to the water supply. As was the case at Woburn, it took years of pushing and fighting with the health department and presenting maps of disease patterns to the media to confirm their findings and finally shut down the contaminated well.

In Brownsville, Texas it was again parents who discovered the cluster of children in their community who were being born with their brains outside instead of inside their skulls. And, in Tucson, Arizona and Elmira, New York, it was the citizens who uncovered a large number of young boys in the same school with testicular cancers.

In each of these situations, parents brought the issues to the attention of the proper authorities only to be dismissed. When this happened, they were often described as “hysterical women or housewives” in an attempt to belittle those who drew the links between exposure to chemicals and adverse health effects. Despite being dismissed, belittled, and facing accusations that somehow parents were responsible rather than toxic chemicals, community leaders stand their ground and continue to push for action. Angela Days, a mother from Fairhaven, Massachusetts who has a son with leukemia said it well in one of her speeches: “We are like mother bears protecting our cubs . . . We are standing on our hind legs . . . our claws exposed and prepared to fight to the finish.”

Communities Link—A Chorus of Voices Emerge

As more and more communities began to connect and share stories, the pattern became very familiar, and they came to understand how the system controlled them and how to fight back. Taking the battle to the streets was outside their normal behavior, but they recognized that it was the only way to get the government to respond to their concerns and to obtain help.

*“To accomplish great things we must first dream,
then visualize, then plan... believe... act!”*

Alfred A. Montapert

The grassroots environmental health movement continued to grow as more and more communities began connecting with each other, sharing lessons learned, and offering support. Workshops and meetings were held to discuss how to do a health survey, and what type of environmental testing was needed to define links between contamination and adverse health effects. The media began covering stories about Woburn, Tucson, and other places where children were suffering from environmental chemical exposures. This new attention by the mass media helped to educate the public and helped to strengthen the nationwide network.

This new nationwide effort has established itself as a serious organized network whose leadership is mostly women. The network is designed differently from most national movements. It has no single office in Washington, DC that sets the agenda and is central to the nationwide effort. Nor does it have a single national leader. Instead the groups in the grassroots environmental health struggle are connected to each other through a loose network that is more like a spider web, with no resemblance to the traditional pyramid corporate structure. The strength in this structure is that it builds a strong base and encourages the development of new leaders, independence, and autonomy. This model also is more difficult for opponents to disrupt because there are thousands of groups instead of a single group and small number of leaders. Additionally, if you believe the grassroots perspective on how systemic change happens, this is the model that builds that base to create lasting change—all politics are local.

Accomplishments

Armed with a willingness to do whatever it takes to win, the grassroots environmental movement has achieved a great deal over the past two and a half decades:

- ✓ Significant laws have been passed, such as “Superfund,” which provides a pool of government funds earmarked for clean up of hazardous waste sites.
- ✓ A community grants program was established that provides up to \$50,000 per Superfund site for community groups to hire their own technical expertise.
- ✓ Recycling has become a household norm, whereas in the past, it was thought to be something only “hippies” did on campus.
- ✓ Over 1,000 landfills have been closed, either because they couldn’t meet new stronger regulations that grassroots organizations helped pass, or because citizens blocked the expansion construction.

*“Success is not measured by what you accomplish,
but by the opposition you have encountered,
and the courage with which you have maintained the struggle against
overwhelming odds.”*

Orison Swett Marden

Siting New Hazardous Waste Landfills—A Thing of the Past

In 1982, grassroots leaders came together at a roundtable discussion meeting to develop a strategy to stop the landfilling of hazardous waste. The strategy was to force industries to abandon landfilling by making it more expensive to bury waste than to reduce and reuse materials or substitute less hazardous chemicals. To accomplish this, leaders realized that they must close existing landfills, stop new landfills from being built, and increase transportation costs for shipping waste. Grassroots leaders joined together wherever proposals for new commercial facilities sprang up.

Since the beginning of the campaign, every new proposal for a hazardous waste landfill in this country that CHEJ is aware of has been beaten with the exception of one in Colorado. Most of the existing commercial landfills were closed, which left only a few commercial disposal facilities open nationwide. This means that most producers of hazardous waste have to ship their waste long distances if they want to use this disposal alternative, causing transportation costs and the associated accident insurance costs to skyrocket. Today, the commercial landfilling of toxic/hazardous wastes has virtually come to a standstill, and waste reduction, reuse, and chemical substitution are now commonplace in the industry. There is no federal law that prohibits the burial of toxic/hazardous waste—it is the people who won't allow it to happen.

Right-To-Know Legislation Passes

Another major accomplishment has been the passage of "right-to-know" legislation, which has reduced waste and toxic chemical usage. The strategy for passing this legislation was locally based but nationally effective. Right-to-know legislation began as a worker issue. Workers in industrial plants wanted to know what they were working with and what was stored and transported to and from the plant. Labor organized to get this information. Later they formed a coalition with non-labor organizations and passed city-specific right-to-know laws. Soon, more cities were being organized around this issue and corporations began to worry, not only about releasing the information to the public but also about having to fill out a different form for each city for each of their facilities. Eventually, the corporations' lobbyists in Washington, DC began applying pressure to standardize the paperwork and minimize the information they had to reveal. In 1986, the federal Community Right-to-Know law was passed as part of the Superfund legislation to clean up toxic dumpsites.

*“I hope that my achievements in life shall be these –
that I will have fought for what was right and fair,
that I will have risked for that which mattered,
and that I will have given help to those who were in need,
that I will have left the earth a better place for what I've done and who I've been.”*

C. Hoppe

McToxics Campaign – Successful Styrofoam Campaign

The nationwide grassroots network has used this same strategy on other issues. For example, in 1987, a campaign was designed to stop the use of Styrofoam packaging. Styrofoam was symbolic of a toxic wasteful product, used by the consumer for only minutes that could easily be eliminated. In the manufacturing, use, and disposal of Styrofoam toxic chemicals are released. McDonalds Corporation was chosen because it is a high-profile company vulnerable to public opinion. Grassroots leaders believed that if they could get enough consumers to push McDonalds to stop using foam sandwich boxes, other fast food restaurants would follow their lead, decreasing the demand for Styrofoam. The campaign, launched in Vermont, involved children, schools, religious institutions, county governments, and those faced with the potential siting of an incinerator or landfill in their community. This was a broad-based effort that greatly expanded the nationwide networks. Soon, school children everywhere joined the campaign, and in restaurants across the country people were saying “No” to Styrofoam. On November 1, 1990, McDonalds announced that it would no longer use Styrofoam sandwich packaging. McDonalds’ decision wasn’t the only victory; entire counties, churches, and statehouses banned the use of Styrofoam. Elementary and high school groups who came together around this issue continue to work on environmental issues within their schools and community.

First National People Of Color Leadership Summit

Environmental justice and human rights have been a constant theme at each level of growth of the grassroots environmental health movement. In October 1991, a powerful event took place that propelled the issues of justice and human rights onto the doorsteps of the president and congressional leaders. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit brought together many diverse cultures and communities for political and spiritual growth. A set of principles was agreed upon, and newly formed coalitions began their collective work. Over the years, these webs of connection have grown and become stronger. A second Summit was held in October 2002.

In February 1994, President Bill Clinton signed an executive order on environmental justice issues. The president was responding to the powerful organized efforts of groups such as the Indigenous Environmental Network, Southern Organizing Committee, Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, United Church of Christ, and others. The environmental justice executive order begins to acknowledge the obvious—that communities of color and low-income communities have more than their fair share of polluting industries and waste sites.

*“Everyone has to learn to think differently, bigger,
to open to possibilities.”*

Oprah Winfrey

Clinton's executive order provides guidance for federal and state agencies to examine whether communities of color or low-income areas are being deliberately targeted by polluting industries over alternative sites. It also suggests reviewing whether the cleanup process is different in communities of color or low-income communities than it is in other communities. Although there is little legal and financial power behind the order, organizations have used it to stop many potentially dangerous facilities from being built in communities across the country.

From Someone Else's Backyard—to Everyone's Backyard

At one time, people believed that Love Canal was an isolated event. But in 1980, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency took a closer look, they found 30,000 other potential Love Canals. Then the public heard that communities of color and low-income communities were being specifically targeted by polluting industries. However, most people still felt safe—as long as they didn't live near a “Love Canal” or were not in a “chosen” community.

This presumption of safety ended in September 1994, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released a draft report on the health effects of dioxin. Dioxin comes primarily from the combustion of chlorine. According to many scientific papers, dioxin depresses the immune system and causes cancer, endometriosis, infertility, skin disorders and more. Dioxin also crosses the placenta and has been linked to birth defects and developmental problems such as learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder.

The EPA acknowledged that, on average, Americans had accumulated enough dioxin in their bodies so that any additional exposure could cause adverse health effects in some people. The general public receives continual, low-level exposure to dioxin through our food, so no one is safe. Every time parents give their children milk, cheese, beef, and fish, they are feeding them dioxin. As mothers breastfeed their infants, they transfer their body's accumulation of dioxin to their child.

The exposure of the entire U.S. population to dioxin offered grassroots groups an opportunity to reach a broader public, providing common ground with all Americans, not just those living near a toxic discharge site. A new effort, the Alliance For Safe Alternatives (formerly the Stop Dioxin Exposure campaign), was launched in April 1995. The campaign's main goal is to create a sustainable society in which there is no dioxin in our food or breastmilk because there is no dioxin formation, discharge, or exposure in our country.

The campaign is working with a diverse array of people, including nurses, parent-teacher organizations, organized workers, physicians, religious groups, organic farmers, and organizations of people living near toxic discharge sites. In March of 1996, more than five hundred people came together at the Third Citizens Conference on Dioxin to define and refine strategies for the campaign. Working groups were established and coalitions were built, broadening and deepening the movement.

“We become just by performing just action, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave action.”

Aristotle

Forming Alliances and Coalitions

Several very powerful coalition efforts have proven to be a good model for both broadening the effort and deepening its impact.

Children’s Health and Environmental Chemical Hazards

On April 21, 1997, in response to the growing public concern about involuntary exposure of children to pesticides, dioxin and other toxic chemicals, President Bill Clinton issued another executive order. This order, entitled “*Protection of Children from Environmental Health Risks and Safety Risks*,” states: “*A growing body of scientific knowledge demonstrates that children may suffer disproportionately from environmental health risks and safety risks.*” The order asks federal agencies to make it a high priority to identify and assess environmental health risks and safety risks that may disproportionately affect children. Again, while there are few teeth in this executive order, it provides a tool to educate and mobilize the public around issues of human health and environmental chemical exposures.

Child Proofing Our Communities

Children are especially vulnerable to exposure to toxic chemicals. After hundreds of contacts from parents concerned about their children’s health in schools because the school was built on a dumpsite, or near a polluting facility, or because the indoor air was contaminated with chemicals, molds, or diesel fumes from idling buses, CHEJ developed a children’s health project called “Child Proofing Our Communities.”

The project has begun by focusing on schools. During a critical period of their growth and development, children spend a large part of their day at school. To needlessly place them in settings that heighten their risk of disease or hyperactivity or lower IQ is therefore irresponsible, especially in light of recent health statistics that document increased incidence of childhood cancer and disease.

While laws compel children to attend school, there are—astoundingly—no guidelines or laws in place that compel school districts to locate school buildings on property that will protect the school population from environmental health and safety risks. California is the only state that has some regulations and an assessment process for the building of new schools. Consequently, some parents are forced to send their children to schools that pose a threat to their children’s health and ability to learn.

*“As soils are depleted, human health, vitality
and intelligence go with them.”*

Louis Bromfield

A nationwide effort was formed to eliminate practices that place children at risk from chemicals in their environment—particularly schools, parks, and playgrounds. The Child Proofing Our Communities campaign is the beginning of a long-term collaborative venture among many groups concerned about children’s environmental health to eliminate, where possible, chemical exposure in schools and our communities, and to provide a safe and healthy environment to learn and play in.

In the report *Creating Safe Learning Zones: Invisible Threats and Visible Actions*, the campaign looked closely at five states—New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Michigan and California—in order to identify how many schools were built within a half-mile of a known toxic or hazardous waste site. Over one thousand public schools housing over 600,000 students were identified. The report provided guidance for evaluating the impact on a school located on or near a known high hazard site including site assessment and cleanup processes that need to be taken by school decision makers before a school is permitted to open to children and personnel.

Health Care Without Harm

Health Care Without Harm is another example of a powerful coalition effort that has broadened the larger grassroots environmental health movement and deepened its impact. This coalition works together with local, state, national, and international organizations to transform the health care industry's practices and purchases to eliminate pollution without compromising safety or care. Each organization, at each of the various levels of work, plays a critical role in the strategy to accomplish this overarching goal.

For example, the coalition sought to have the health care industry replace its toxic products with safe alternatives that either pose no public health and environmental chemical risks or are less damaging through their lifecycles. The coalition identified the largest purchaser of health care products in the U.S.—Kaiser Permanente—and pressured them to commit to change their purchasing practices. The coalition believed that if you can change the largest purchaser, as was accomplished by pressuring McDonalds to stop using Styrofoam, the smaller purchasers will also be inclined to find safer products that become more available at reasonable prices due to the demand created by the larger targeted corporations.

While one segment of the coalition worked to secure a meeting with high-level corporate executives, other segments worked to identify potentially toxic or harmful products and alternatives products, and to build a base of pressure. At the base, local grassroots groups worked to close down medical waste incinerators and to pass local ordinances and laws prohibiting or controlling the production of dioxin. Hospitals across the country began to see groups carrying signs that urged the closure of the incinerators and demanded that doctors fulfill their oath to "First Do No Harm."

“Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”

John F. Kennedy

Dioxin resolutions aimed at eliminating dioxin discharges or products that contain or cause dioxin releases throughout their lifecycles were introduced in towns, cities, and counties across the country. Berkeley, California (home of Kaiser's corporate offices) passed a strong ordinance after an extensive public debate. When Kaiser finally met with representatives of the Health Care Without Harm coalition, the company agreed to phase out the use of plastics with chlorine (PVC) due to the strong public opposition generated by the public debate and the city ordinance. This decision by Kaiser will have a significant impact on health care purchases and limit the associated toxic waste streams. Health Care Without Harm is working with groups all across the globe to stop the use and disposal of chlorinated products.

2003 and Beyond: Broaden the Reach, Deepen the Impact

The grassroots environmental health movement has grown as different segments of our population have recognized the health risks from exposure to chemicals in the environment:

- Workers knew they were being placed at risk in their workplace and fought for years for protective health and safety programs.
- Vietnam Veterans spoke out for years about how they had been harmed by the dioxin in Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.
- When Love Canal brought the issue of hazardous waste to the attention of the American public, the public learned how low-income communities and communities of color were being targeted by polluting industries.

Although the public sympathetically supported each of these groups, there was no massive outcry for justice or for change on a larger scale.

*“Each of you, for himself, by himself and on his own responsibility, must speak.
And it is a solemn and weighty responsibility,
and not lightly to be flung aside at the bullying of pulpit, press, government, or the
empty catchphrases of politicians.*

*Each must for himself alone decide what is right and what is wrong,
and which course is patriotic and which isn't. You cannot shirk this and be a man.
To decide against your convictions is to be an unqualified and inexcusable traitor,
both to yourself and to your country, let man label you as they may.*

*If you alone of all the nation shall decide one way, and that way be the right way
according to your convictions of the right, you have done your duty by yourself and
by your country—hold up your head! You have nothing to be ashamed of.”*

Mark Twain

Over the past five years, with the realization that dioxin and other widespread toxic chemicals are posing serious health risks to children and others a chorus of voices has finally begun to rise up, sounding the call for change. Every man, woman, and child is at risk without their consent or knowledge—and it will likely take every man, woman, and child to move society from corporate domination in which industry's rights to pollute and profit and damage health and the environment supersede the public's right to live, work, and play in a safe environment. Society is in desperate need of this grassroots environmental health movement to lead the work that must be done to strengthen and broaden our capacity to win this crucial political fight.

To advance this new alliance—a chorus of unified voices and coordinated actions—CHEJ is launching a massive effort to link groups together to begin to call for action at the local, state and federal levels to protect all living things. The Blueprint Ensuring our Safety and Economy (BESAFE) project is the first step in this process. This is a unique effort that involves scientists, PTA members, youth, physicians, environmental activists, faith-based organizations, labor, voter education groups, parents, women, men, farmers, and more.

Everyone has a place and a voice in this effort. CHEJ would like to hear from you. Go to our website at www.chej.org, and click on BESAFE to find out more. There are over 40 issue brochures that you can read or download and share with others. Please also take a moment to sign the petition. We will be delivering signed petitions to the White House in January 2005 during the first 100 days of the next administration. Or, get involved by writing a letter, hosting an educational event or party, or engaging in one of many other creative options that will add momentum to this important movement. If you don't have access to a computer to get information on-line, call or write us and we'll send you materials through the mail.

Thank you for your years of support and your on-going efforts. If you are not yet a member of CHEJ, we hope that you will join. Together we can change the world.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"