

CAC-Community Engagement Success Story

Ruben Arroyo and Gustavo Aguirre



Ruben and Gustavo worked together for 9 years when Ruben was the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner (CAC). Gustavo is the Director of Organizing at [The Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment](#) in Delano, CA.

How did you begin developing a working relationship with each other?

Gustavo: Ruben's willingness to meet with residents in our own community environment helped us build a relationship. Ruben wasn't afraid to join us at our community meetings. Cesar Chavez used to say that if someone allows me into their home, that's the most relevant step. People recognize and respect when you make the effort to meet the community where they are. Even if CACs don't have the answers to all of our issues, it still is helpful because it makes us feel like we are important to them.

Ruben: As a new commissioner in an area, something I've always appreciated is someone like Gustavo who came up and introduced himself to me. Gustavo came and asked me questions, but also explained what was going on in his community—both what his organization did and what they needed help with. By inviting me to his community meetings, I was able to share what I do as a CAC and see where we can work together. Often community priorities are not just about pesticides. Pesticides are one of 15 programs CACs work on, and there may be other opportunities to collaborate.

After the first meeting, how did you continue to engage?

Gustavo: After Ruben came to our meeting and expressed his interest in helping us, that encouraged us to go to his office. At that point, we knew that Ruben knew our names, and that we would be heard if we made a call or visit in person. Ideally, this real connection and relationship starts by meeting face to face and getting to know each other.

Ruben: After I attended their meeting, I invited community leaders to come to my office. I think that initial "let me come to you and then you come to me" is how you can start trust building. Once you have established a relationship with folks, it's easier to share more specific details and discuss topics monthly with a few people. Then, after a year or so, our meetings switched to being as needed.

What is an example of how you collaborated with each other?

Gustavo: One topic we shared with Ruben was the need for pesticide buffer zones around schools to protect our kids. There was already a buffer zone in Tulare County, and we explained why we wanted this in Kern County too. Ruben thought that this was a fair request and that we could come up with a solution together. On our end, he said that he needed us to show that there was a strong community need and desire for this, and on his end, he could start talking to growers and their organizations.

Ruben: By hearing what the community wanted in our local area, I was able to be that bridge and bring this idea to our growers. In these meetings with growers, I shared that we all want to protect our students, and many growers were already avoiding schools in practice. I explained that this type of buffer zone wouldn't have a big effect on operations, and that it would be a win-win to have these buffer zones around schools as permit conditions.

Gustavo: By having Ruben be the liaison, no large growers or organizations expressed any opposition during the hearing for this to get passed. It was much smoother having this be a CAC-community partnership, and it shows how powerful this type of local relationship can be with trust and respect.

How else did you partner with each other?

Ruben: Because of our established relationship, we were able to work together on other topics even beyond pesticides. When there was community interest in topics that weren't related to CAC roles but were still within the county jurisdiction (such as potholes on county roads or illegal dumping), I would connect Gustavo with the appropriate county department, either by sharing the right phone number or sending an introductory email.

Gustavo: Ruben helped us solve many different issues. One time it was making sure that sites for refilling propane tanks were giving us the appropriate amount, another time it was making sure a local store no longer sold us outdated food. By knowing our rights, we were able to demand that we were given the correct quality and quantity of products, and Ruben supported us and made this happen as the CAC. Even on issues that weren't his responsibility, like sidewalk maintenance, he was able to back us up in the county system because he listened to our requests.

What advice would you give to CACs?

Ruben: Find out who the point people of local CBOs are, give them your name and number, and express interest in coming out with staff to let the public know what CACs do. The sooner you reach out, the sooner you can build trust and work together with local organizations on solutions. By putting myself out there and listening to the community, I found that there were a few things we could improve in our office, but I was also able to explain my role and connect community members with other agencies when needed.

Gustavo: It is safe for CACs to listen to and work with their communities. Although we will likely have more requests than what you can do in your role as a CAC, creating that bridge with the community can help you both in the short and long term. If there is trust, we can help identify potential issues that can be inspected, whether it is about pesticides or other CAC programs. There is also going to be less pressure from our community groups in the long run if there is ongoing, active communication with you and your office. Be proactive about outreaching to different community groups and invite them to work together with you for a win-win relationship. The CAC is in a very powerful position, and open-minded CACs can help the community accomplish a lot, in part by being a liaison with growers, County Board of Supervisors, and other groups that CACs already have positive relationships with.

What advice would you give to communities?

Ruben: At the initial outset, CACs might not know there's a need for something unless a community member comes to them and says it's needed. There are lots of organizations in a county; having a 30-second pitch about what your organization does in the community and what you do will help the commissioner get to know you.