

[Home / News & Media](#)

UC Irvine-community partnership honored for environmental justice work in Santa Ana

Recognized with the 2025 Exemplary Project Distinction by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Community Engagement Scholarship Awards

October 17, 2025



During Latinx Heritage Month, UC Irvine Joe C. Wen School of Population & Public Health celebrates a powerful example of community-driven research and action rooted in environmental justice. The project ¡Plo-NO! Santa Ana! (Lead-Free Santa Ana!), a collaboration between the [Orange County Environmental Justice Education Fund \(OCEJEF\)](#) and researchers Alana LeBrón and Jun Wu from Wen Public Health, has been recognized by the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) as an Exemplary Project through its Community Engagement Scholarship Awards program.

The award recognizes public universities that have made exemplary strides in building deep, reciprocal partnerships with their communities through teaching, research, and service. ¡Plo-NO! Santa Ana! exemplifies this mission and more, standing as a model for how academic institutions and community can co-develop knowledge and solutions to address complex public health challenges.

The collaboration was born from a 2017 investigative report that revealed alarming levels of lead contamination in Santa Ana's soil. What began as community concern quickly evolved into a powerful grassroots movement to reclaim environmental health and justice. Through a rigorous community-academic partnership, the ¡Plo-NO! Santa Ana! Collaborative engaged youth, residents, and students in systematically collecting over 1,500 soil samples across the City of Santa Ana, mapping soil lead concentrations in each Census tract, investigating potential sources of contamination, and organizing information sessions and advocacy campaigns to press for lead remediation.

“

Our data revealed that lead contamination was disproportionately concentrated in majority Latinx and low-income neighborhoods—areas where children are most vulnerable. These findings, combined with the community's unwavering advocacy, directly influenced the inclusion of soil lead mitigation strategies in Santa Ana's 2022 General Plan. It's a powerful example of how research and resident leadership can drive policy change.”

—Alana LeBrón, MS, PhD

“Our data revealed that lead contamination was disproportionately concentrated in majority Latinx and low-income neighborhoods—areas where children are most vulnerable,” said [Alana LeBrón, MS, PhD](#), associate professor of health, society, and behavior at Wen Public Health. “These findings, combined with the community's unwavering advocacy, directly influenced the inclusion of soil lead mitigation strategies in Santa Ana's 2022 General Plan. It's a powerful example of how research and resident leadership can drive policy change.”

At its heart, ¡Plo-NO! Santa Ana! is about more than data, it's about honoring and building community knowledge and power. Youth have played a critical role in the project, from motivating the study to learning to conduct soil testing and advocating for cleaner, safer neighborhoods. The soil lead study laid a foundation for the ¡Plo-NO! Santa Ana! partnership's next phase of work: understanding children's exposures to lead and developing a resident-driven vision for promoting a healthy environment and community.

Additional key community partners have included Jóvenes Cultivando Cambios (Youth Cultivating Changes) and Getting Residents Engaged in Empowering Neighborhoods – Madison Park Neighborhood Association (GREEN- MPNA). Together with UC Irvine Wen Public Health and Community Resilience, these partners have advanced soil testing, results dissemination, bioremediation, health assessments, and policy action, laying the groundwork for long-term environmental healing.

“

The success of this project shows what's possible when science is guided by community priorities. Together, we're advancing environmental justice, improving health outcomes, and protecting children from lead—a potent neurotoxin that can impair cognitive development. We're ensuring that the next generation inherits a healthier, safer Santa Ana.”

—Jun Wu, PhD

“The success of this project shows what's possible when science is guided by community priorities,” added [Jun Wu, PhD](#), professor of environmental & occupational health at Wen Public Health. “Together, we're advancing environmental justice, improving health outcomes, and protecting children from lead—a potent neurotoxin that can impair cognitive development. We're ensuring that the next generation inherits a healthier, safer Santa Ana.”

Partnerships, like ¡Plo-NO! Santa Ana!, continue to shape Wen Public Health's mission. They underscore the university's commitment to advancing health equity through authentic collaboration—where knowledge is shared, power is balanced, and communities lead the way toward a healthier future.



UC Irvine Vice Provost for Educational and Community Partnerships Stephanie Reyes-Tuccio (center) accepts the Exemplary Project Award on behalf of the research team.