

*Incinerator closure a victory for environmental justice*

## Where There's Smoke...

by Tarso Luís Ramos

**W**hen the Seattle Veterans Administration hospital shut down its medical waste incinerator last September, public relations director Jeri Rowe insisted that it was for economic reasons. She also denied that the facility posed any "significant risk to the community." Behind this smokescreen the hard facts were clear to anyone who bothered to look: The VA inciner-

ator had posed a dire health threat to the residents of Seattle's Beacon Hill (between 1996 and 1997 alone the Puget Sound Air Pollution Control Agency cited the facility three times for exceeding toxic emissions limits); and the incinerator was shut down in response to community pressure organized by the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ).

which are low-income recent immigrants. "Beacon Hill also has a high concentration of young children and new mothers, who are most vulnerable to the effects of dioxins," says Wong, who is also completing a Masters degree in Public Health. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, medical waste incinerators are a leading source of dioxin, one of the most carcinogenic substances known to humans. Dioxins are known to cause birth defects, cancer and immune and reproductive problems. This toxin is released in the burning of chlorinated paper and plastics in the medical waste regularly incinerated by hospitals. At the time it closed down, Seattle's VA incinerator was burning as much as 45 tons of medical waste weekly. And amazingly, VA constructed the incinerator in 1986 without ever getting a permit.

While it would be difficult to prove that the VA incinerator was directly responsible for health problems in the neighboring community, a 1997 study found hospitalization from respiratory disease in North Beacon Hill to be 24 percent higher than in Seattle overall. A community health survey of more than 200 area residents conducted by CCEJ revealed a host of other serious environmental health concerns.

Not surprisingly, the hospital's administration was unhappy with the attention CCEJ called to its operations. "When we first approached VA managers to discuss our concerns about the incinerator, they behaved as though they had no responsibility whatsoever to the people who live in that community and breathe that air," says CCEJ director Yalonda Sinde. "They were ignoring the concerns of the community, so we turned up the heat."

### Turning up the heat

CCEJ went door to door on Beacon Hill and organized local strategy meetings on the incinerator. With community input, they formulated two basic demands of the VA



CCEJ

CCEJ's Kristine Wong and Yalonda Sinde with Lois Gibbs of the Center for Health, Environment and Justice.

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It was a major victory for this young grassroots group. Founded in 1993, CCEJ hired its first staff person in 1996 and today gets by with only one full- and two part-time staff. But the group's goals are ambitious. "We are working to eliminate environmental racism," says CCEJ organizer Kristine Wong, "where communities of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards and toxic exposure." This objective naturally drew Wong and CCEJ to the VA hospital on Beacon Hill. Beacon Hill is home to Seattle's largest Asian-Pacific Islander community, many members of

hospital: immediate shutdown of the incinerator and community involvement in choosing an alternative waste disposal method.

While invited to community meetings, VA hospital CEO Timothy Williams refused to participate. Recalls Sinde, "I was shocked when some public officials argued that Williams had no responsibility to meet with us. We insisted that community accountability is a reasonable demand."

"Public officials and state and local agencies all told us that they didn't have jurisdiction over the VA's incinerator," says Wong, "and that it was someone else's problem. But we wouldn't let them pass the buck." Wong brought the various regulatory agencies together at a public meeting to face questions from concerned community members.

CCEJ kept the heat on by organizing protests outside the hospital, having local residents post campaign signs on their lawns, bringing community members to testify before an air pollution regulatory agency, calling media attention to the campaign and, with the help of allies Seattle Health Care Without Harm, securing a letter of support from Seattle City Council members.

Last September, the VA hospital suddenly announced that it would close down the incinerator within 60 days. With one of their two core demands met, CCEJ pressed for the other: community involvement in the hospital's waste disposal plans. Rather than adopt a less dangerous method of disposal, the VA hospital was planning to burn its waste at another incinerator, effectively poisoning a different community with its dioxins. However, that facility has since closed down as well, providing CCEJ with another opportunity to demand more environmentally-sound waste disposal.

Hospital CEO Williams finally broke down and met with CCEJ staff and leaders in November, after CCEJ informed VA of their legal obligation to meet with the public and announced plans to protest outside Williams' office. At the meeting Williams skirted the issue of waste disposal but pledged to involve the VA in community issues and, specifically, agreed to an open meeting with the commu-


nity sometime in the near future. Pleased with this commitment but unwilling to give up on the disposal issue, CCEJ is using the Freedom of Information Act to request the VA hospital's burn logs. "We're investigating exactly what they've put into Beacon Hill's air," says Kristine Wong, "and are calling for a health study of the area's residents." The group also plans to push for a state law banning medical waste incinerators, as well as a phase-out on the use of PVC plastics and mercury at the hospital.

### Measuring success

According to CCEJ's Yalonda Sinde and Kristine Wong, the incinerator campaign activated Beacon Hill community members around health issues. Some of these newly active leaders have come back to CCEJ with proposals for additional projects, such as a community disease registry, and documenting sources of pollution in South Seattle.

"We eliminated a major source of toxics for the entire community," says Wong, "and in the process developed a lot of relationships and a lot of credibility in the community. But we weren't as successful at using it to build our membership numbers. That's something we have to do better the next time around."

CCEJ remains the only Washington State organization dedicated exclusively to environmental justice issues. According to Sinde, "We were the first environmental justice organization in Seattle. Now that EJ has become a hot topic, it's frustrating to see lots of well-funded traditional environmental groups adding on little projects, but not working at the community level." She adds, "We're out here with only a couple of staff and a shoe-string budget taking on enormous challenges. To make a dent, we'll have to grow."

Sinde thinks a next step may be forming statewide and Northwest regional environmental and economic justice networks, "to coordinate activities, educate each other and aggregate our impact." CCEJ may be just the group to take on such an ambitious project. 

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*Hospitalization from respiratory disease was 24 percent higher in the largely Asian Beacon Hill area than in Seattle overall.*